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NABOKOV'S ADA AND THE TEXTURE OF TIME

By

Dwight A. Yates

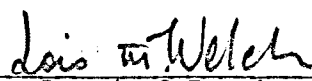
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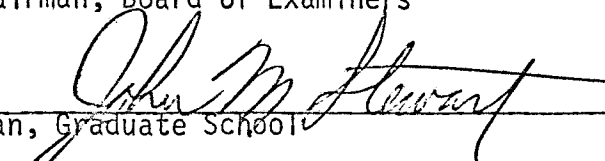
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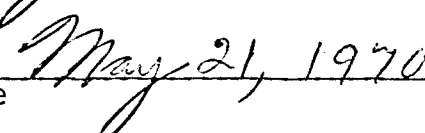
Master of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1970


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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER	
I. The Flight of Mnemosyne.....	3
II. The Syncopated Clock.....	14
III. Time and Eros.....	24
IV. Chronicle and Spiral.....	36
V. The Chronicle Self.....	44
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	48

I think it is really all a matter of love: the more you love a memory, the stronger and stranger it is.

-Vladimir Nabokov

(I measure time by how a body sways).

-Theodore Roethke

INTRODUCTION

In his seventieth year, Vladimir Nabokov has completed a novel in long landscape dimensions. Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle is the memoir of the incestuous but durable romance of Ada and Van Veen. This love story remains the nucleus of the novel, despite the parodic, anachronistic and even antiterrestrial liberties inflicted upon "chronicle". The landscape is also interior in its thematic focus on time; one probable relationship of this theme to the love story is explained by Van, the memoirist, late in the novel:

My aim was to compose a kind of novella in the form of a treatise on the Texture of Time, an investigation of its veily substance, with illustrative metaphors gradually increasing, very gradually building up a logical love story, going from past to present, blossoming as a concrete story, and just as gradually reversing analogies and disintegrating again into bland abstraction.¹

The novella referred to is "The Texture of Time", a book within the book - a favorite Nabokov gambit to underscore the extreme extensions

1. New York, 1969, p. 562f. All references are to this edition. Henceforth, quotations from Ada will not be footnoted, but page numbers will be placed after quotations.

implicit in any reader's point of view. The reader of Ada is looking over the editor's shoulder. The editor is next in line behind Ada who comments on a memoir by Van which includes part of his treatise on time, and Nabokov, of course, circumscribes all. However, the intention to write a "*logical love story*" illustrative of time's "*veily substance*" is realized in the form of the family chronicle. The chronicle, most simply described, is a love story in examined time.

My purpose is to investigate the thematic statement that emerges from a close analysis of the relationship of time and the love story, and speculate on the significance of this statement in Nabokov's fiction.

The investigation will necessarily begin in Nabokov's earlier works, wherein he has frequently juggled the vicissitudes and deceptions of time. Secondly, the derivations of the variety of aesthetic and philosophic criteria informing "Veen's Time" must be examined in order to determine which prior theories are being endorsed or rejected and what new departures, if any, are being charted.

At this point the clarified speculations on time in Ada can be examined in their relation to the "*logical love story*" to reveal the unified thematic statement of the novel.

CHAPTER I
THE FLIGHT OF MNEMOSYNE

Speak Memory, the revised edition of Nabokov's autobiography, contains two sketch maps of the Nabokov lands in the St. Petersburg region. The maps adorn the inside covers, and both are faced on the opposite flaps by sketches of the butterfly parnassius mnemosyne. For Nabokov, art and memory of a capsule past have always been as contiguous and inextricable as they are here, caught in a butterfly's name. In Speak Memory, he confesses that

Initially, I was unaware that time, so boundless at first blush, was a prison. In probing my childhood (which is the next best thing to probing one's eternity) I see the awakening of consciousness as a series of spaced flashes, with the interval between them gradually diminishing until bright blocks of perception are formed, affording memory a slippery hold... All this is as it should be according to the theory of re-capitulation; the beginning of reflective consciousness in the brain of our remotest ancestors must surely have coincided with the dawning of the sense of time.²

2. New York, 1966, p. 20f.

Time, then, exists only in a personal, reflective consciousness and is subject to every whim of that consciousness. This flexibility of time is inevitably necessary if one is to write, as Nabokov always has, about the tenuous appearance of "reality" - a word he insists must always wear quotation marks. Andrew Field points to an appropriate illustration of this in Nabokov's The Gift. Commenting on the main character, Field writes:

*Another clue to the loosened reality of the scene is the brief swim Fyodor takes in which time is both magnified and mocked: 'He swam for a long time, half an hour, five hours, twenty-four, a week, another. Finally, on the twenty-eighth of June around three p.m. he came out on the other shore.'*³

Time past also provides a delicate refuge which remains idyllically suspended for Nabokov. Because he is unable and unwilling to return to Russia, the image of the past is free from probable alteration. His description of this sense of the past is almost too precious:

*A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die.*⁴

There is nothing exceptional about this confession of nostalgia,

3. Nabokov: His Life in Art (Boston, 1967), p. 245.

4. Speak Memory, p. 77.

yet the stress on the vivid proximity of the recollected past will receive considerable elaboration in Ada. And that these vivid recollections can be culled productively is also made explicit: "*I witness with pleasure the supreme achievement of memory, which is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past.*"⁵

Reflective consciousness at play in a boundless field of memory is liberated from an inflexible priority of succession, and so Nabokov can conclude in Speak Memory that "...I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to super-impose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip."⁶

An early and quizzical foray into time games appears in the 1944 short story, "Time and Ebb". The story is hardly memorable, but intriguing for what it leaves unexplained (invariably a characteristic of only the best science fiction). The story consists of a future narrator's quaint reminiscences of the mid-twentieth century prior to "*the staggering discoveries of the seventies*"⁷ which apparently rendered aircraft obsolete. One puzzling section of the story touches on electricity and is reflected later in Ada. The memoirist in "Time and Ebb" states that

5. Speak Memory, p. 170.

6. Ibid., p. 139.

7. Nabokov's Dozen (Garden City, N.Y., 1958), p. 162.

*Our denominations of time would have seemed to them 'telephone' numbers. They played with electricity in various ways without having the slightest notion of what it really was - and no wonder the chance revelation of its true nature came as a most hideous surprise...*⁸

Telephones and electricity are nonexistent on Ada's Antiterra, a convenience which keeps the strident ringing and bright lights out of the pastoral Tolstoy, Chekhov and Chateaubriand setting of Ardis Park. The contrived explanation for this convenience is a part of Antiterra cosmogony and will be considered later. Let it suffice to note the implication in the above quotation that time is essentially malleable and prone to misinterpretation.

Also in this early short story appears the seed for the idea of psychological geography - the other authorial convenience characteristic of Antiterra and persistent reminder of time's triumph over space. The memoirist in "Time and Ebb" writes that "...the personality of the very old man I am may seem divided, like those little European towns one half of which is in France and the other in Russia."⁹ And the narrator of "The Visit to the Museum" underscores the insignificance of space by visiting a European museum and leaving by a back door which opens upon a Russian street. Spatial relationships are not the poet's concern, as Nabokov's anagrammatical friend in Speak Memory so succinctly points out: "*Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical friend of*

8. *Ibid.*, p. 157f.

9. *Nabokov's Dozen*, p. 163.

*mine, in later years, used to say that while the scientists sees everything in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time."*¹⁰

In Nabokov's 1947 novel Bend Sinister, the protagonist-philosopher Adam Krug objects to time misconceived in spatial terms, a caviil crucial to the argument in Ada. Krug muses that

*Certain mind pictures have become so adulterated by the concept of 'time' that we have come to believe in the actual existence of a permanently moving bright fissure (the point of perception) between our retrospective eternity which we cannot recall and the prospective one which we cannot know.*¹¹

The conceptual problems presented by the inevitable space-time juxtaposition do not appear to be Nabokov's real concern. Again and again his vantage is that of the poet feeling one point of time. He uses the image of the spiral to illustrate a proposed liberation from this problem, touching a metaphysical note in the process - although not without a qualifying nod to the abyss of circularity and infinite regress. The passage is from Speak Memory:

...for every dimension presupposes a medium within which it can act, and if, in the spiral unwinding of things, space warps into something akin to time, and time, in its turn, warps into something akin to thought, then, surely, another

10. p. 218.

11. London, 1960, p. 153.

*dimension follows - a special space maybe, not the old one, we trust, unless spirals become vicious circles again.*¹²

It is "another dimension" that remains to be worked out - or rejected.

The short story "Lance" is another thrust into science fiction, with two qualifications. First of all, the narrator announces his disgust for science fiction, and secondly, the story is written with an eye more for the past than the future. Lance (Lancelot) is a space traveler whose journey is seen in terms of Arthurian Romance and the imagery of a "Pass Perilous". The narrator's substantiates this approach more by provocation than explanation:

*Now if one is perfectly honest with oneself, there is nothing extraordinary in the tendency to give to the manners and clothes of a distant day (which happens to be placed in the future) an old-fashioned tinge, a badly pressed, badly groomed, dusty something, since the terms 'out of date', 'not of our age', and so on are in the long run the only ones in which we are able to imagine and express a strangeness no amount of research can foresee. The future is but the obsolete in reverse.*¹³

Lance's gamboling in space is viewed by his patient parents in images of an alpine ascent, illustrating how memory images control our understanding of unique, present experience; these memories may even overpower that experience, as the narrator of Lance's story speculates:

12. p. 218.

13. Nabokov's Dozen, p. 202.

*Deep in the human mind, the concept of dying is synonymous with that of leaving the earth. To escape its gravity means to transcend the grave, and a man upon finding himself on another planet has really no way of proving to himself that he is not dead -- that the naive old myth has not come true.*¹⁴

Like his earlier fiction, Nabokov's recent fiction is replete with specific and general thematic references to time and memory. Carl Proffer, in his Keys to Lolita, emphasizes this dominant involvement with time past. Proffer writes that

*Mnemosyne is the heroine of most of Nabokov's work, and time, the quest and remembrance of time past, is one of the main themes of Lolita. As Nabokov-Humbert recreates and re-evokes time in his memoir the reader should observe and consider the role of cyclicity in the hero's life, the way certain basic elements are repeated, in different forms throughout his life. And there are moments of shock for Humbert when in a blinding flash he becomes aware of these uncannily recurring actions, characters, and events. The feeling of déjà vu overwhelms him.*¹⁵

Like Van Veen in Ada, Humbert Humbert is consumed by an obsessive, passionate love, a love that designs the full tapestry of his memory. Humbert Humbert refers obliquely to this subject when commenting on his essay "Mimir and Memory":

...I suggested among other things that seemed original and important to that splendid review's benevolent readers, a theory of perceptual time

14. Ibid., p. 208f.

15. Bloomington, Ind., 1968, p. 42.

*based on the circulation of the blood and conceptually depending (to fill up this nutshell) on the mind's being conscious not only of matter but also of its own self, thus creating a continuous spanning of two points (the storable future and the stored past).*¹⁶

This is palpably nonsense, but not unlike the speculations that Van Veen examines and dismisses. More to the point is Humbert Humbert's admission, which echoes Nabokov's own in Speak Memory, that *"It will be marked that I substitute time terms for spatial ones."*¹⁷

Pnin, too, offers some corroboration of Nabokov's persisting concern with time. In his discourse on Anna Karenina Pnin remarks *"that there is a significant difference between Lyovin's spiritual time and Vronski's physical one."*¹⁸ And he goes on to demonstrate why the novel is the *"best example of relativity in literature that is known to me."*¹⁹ Significantly, the first sentence of Ada is a reconstruction of the first line of Anna Karenina. Again in Pnin, a casual conversation touches significantly on an unnamed author. *"But don't you think...that what he is trying to do...practically in all his novels...is to express the fantastic recurrence of certain situations?"*²⁰ A clear example of recurrent situations is found in

16. Lolita (New York, 1955), p. 237.

17. Ibid., p. 18

18. New York, 1966, p. 129.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., p. 159.

The Defense in which Nabokov combines recurrent patterns with chess imagery to lead the hero to a checkmated suicide. Recurrence is crucial to the structure of Ada and additionally significant if considered as the constant infusion of the present with images of the past.

If one follows Mary McCarthy, it appears that nearly every possible literary theme and reference can be found in Pale Fire, but the most explicit discussion of time is in relation to Shade's thoughts on death. He writes, "*For we die every day; oblivion thrives/ Not on dry thighbones but on blood-ripe lives.*"²¹ It necessarily follows that we must also be reborn every day; hence we again encounter another tacit denial of the future as a conceptual reality. This point will figure significantly in the argument of Ada. Miss McCarthy's comments on the geography of the poem are doubly interesting now that Terra and Antiterra have emerged:

*"Pale Fire", a reflective poem, is also a prism of reflections. Zembla, the land of seeming, now governed by the Extremists, is the antipodes of Appalachia, in real homespun democratic America, but it is also the semblable, the twin, as seen in a distorting glass. Semblance becomes resemblance.*²²

In a 1966 interview with Alfred Appel, Nabokov volunteered that

21. *New York*, 1966,, p. 37.

22. Encounter, XIX (October, 1962), p. 72.

his Texture of Time was "only the central rose-web of a much ampler and richer novel, entitled Ada, about passionate, hopeless, rapturous sunset love, with swallows darting beyond the stained window and that radiant shiver..."²³ He also volunteered that imagination is entirely dependent upon the well of memory which imagination combines with more recent recollections and inventions to negate time:

*I would say that imagination is a form of memory. Down, Plato, down, good dog. An image depends on the power of association, and association is supplied and prompted by memory. When we speak of a vivid individual recollection we are paying a compliment not to our capacity of retention but to Mnemosyne's mysterious foresight in having stored up this or that element which creative imagination may use when combining it with later recollections and inventions. In this sense, both memory and imagination are a negation of time.*²⁴

The preceding citations attest to an artistic concern with time that Nabokov has quite consistently maintained. He has examined time as both text and texture.

In summary, Nabokov has established the following vantage points on time in work prior to Ada:

1. Awareness of time is entirely limited to personal reflective consciousness.

23. Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, VIII (Spring, 1947), 191.

24. Wisconsin Studies, 140.

2. Nabokov's recollection is precise, vivid, precious, and denies any necessary allegiance to strict chronology.

3. For the poet, space is time's debtor.

4. The future is only an impoverished frame of reference.

5. Time past infuses time present in the shape of recurrence.

6. Memory is crystallized in emotional circumstance: *Lolita* is the vehicle of Humbert Humbert's memory.

7. In the creative moment, memory and imagination negate time.

L. L. Lee has proved to be an insightful and prophetic Nabokov critic, for long before the appearance of Ada, Lee noted Nabokov's concentration on time:

*It is timelessness that he is praising; the purpose, the structure, and the texture of his novels are searches for timelessness, not just for time past, but for all time now. Timelessness is unity.*²⁵

Timelessness is a most nebulous idea. To approach it one must, as Nabokov has, first investigate various modes of existence of time.

25. "Vladimir Nabokov's Great Spiral of Being", Western Humanities Review, XVIII, 227.

CHAPTER II

THE SYNCOPATED CLOCK

Nabokov's immersion in the literature of time is reflected in the numerous literary and philosophical references in Ada which bear upon Van Veen's developing theory of time. A brief consideration of the pertinent points of these references should provide the understanding that Ada often assumes.

George Poulet's Studies in Human Time locates in French Romanticism a strain which appears to influence and clarify the setting of Nabokov's sentiments. The wishful attempt to preserve the ecstatic moment is a constant romantic symptom; in Chateaubriand, a Nabokov favorite and frequenter of Ada's pages, the attempt is made to examine a single moment as stratified, the moment crowded with memories of different pasts. Poulet's discussion of the romantics exposes a convincing source for the cosmogony of Ada. The precedents, even if not full blown, are numerous. First of all, the transmission of light through interstellar space assured the romantics that images of the past are preserved; secondly, Mesmer's experiment with hypnotism publicized the unconscious, which the romantics were eager to regard

as a possible ground of communication connecting every reach of the universe, thus providing a connection, however indirect, with the past. Hugo and Renan were intrigued with such speculations, and, in Cousin Pons, Balzac describes what sounds like the fullest extension of this sentiment:

Just as bodies actually project themselves through the atmosphere, and leave extant there the spectrum caught by the daguerreotype which arrests it in its flight, so ideas, creations that are real and active, imprint themselves upon what must be called the atmosphere of the spiritual world, produce effects upon it, live there spectrally...and consequently certain creatures endowed with rare faculties can perceive perfectly these forms or signs of ideas.²⁶

The following confession of Nabokov's (if not tongue in cheek) is further proof of this brand of romanticism:

I do think that in my case it is true that the entire book, before it is written, seems to be ready ideally in some other other, now transparent, now dimming, dimension, and my job is to take down as much of it as I can make out and as precisely as I am humanly able to. ²⁷

These particular romantic predilections, coupled with the modern physics of antimatter, help to explain the premise of Ada's Antiterra, and underscore the very romantic milieu of the novel (without dipping into the Byronic parallels, another possible related investigation).

26. Quoted by Poulet, Studies in Human Time (New York, 1959), p. 31.

27. Appel, 132f.

Assuming these two worlds, the next question is which world is "real". The proposition that reality is as likely to be a dream as dreams are likely to be reality is the ultimate romanticism which can be ascribed to the structure of *Ada*. Matthew Hodgart, in one of the more astute reviews of *Ada*, points out that there must be both a "phenomenal" and a "real" world in the Platonic sense, but that Nabokov delights in avoiding a choice between them. Is Antiterra a dream world, the fictional fantasy we all share, or, on the contrary, is that world of Art the dreaming power that embodies Terra?²⁸ The theoretical question remains elusive, but in terms of the writer's craft, it would seem that, like Nabokov's vivid recollection in *Speak Memory*, Antiterra is a palpable image of Terra recollected, hence nothing has died in Time, hence memory and imagination have defeated Time.

The seminal philosopher of time is, of course, Bergson, and his ideas influence *Ada* considerably. Most important is his contention that the present moment is the scene of time's creation, that this is the sole sense in which "futurity" can have meaning. Thus, determinism is avoided and free will established. Van Veen is in complete accord with this and predominantly interested in the palpable present - the "nowness" that we are aware of as arrested but not yet past - a concept very similar to Bergson's duration as defined in *Time and Free Will*: *"Pure duration is the form which the succession of*

28. "Happy Families", *The New York Review of Books*, XII (May 22, 1969), 3.

*our conscious state assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present states from its former states."*²⁹

The aesthetic affinities shared by Nabokov and Proust strike even the most casual reader, and Nabokov certainly makes no mystery of the fact; Proust is referred to in Sebastian Knight, Lolita, and Pale Fire, and constantly trips in and out of Ada. Poulet's comments on Proust admirably illustrate this affinity, for his remarks would be equally applicable to Ada:

*The Proustian world is a world anachronistic in itself without a home, wandering in duration as well as extent, a world to which the mind must precisely assign a certain place in duration and space, by imposing its own attitude upon it, by realizing oneself in the face of it.*³⁰

The term "*imposing*" may give the wrong sense of process, for Proust was unconcerned with voluntary memory, insisting that one has no control over the resurrection of any significant past impression.

References in Ada to Jorge Luis Borges and J. W. Dunne can be connected once one discovers that Borges is a close reader and commentator of Dunne. Luckily, Dunne is something of a seminal figure and does not send us scurrying to yet another source. Let us consider this English philosopher first.

29. New York, 1960, p. 100. Translated by F. L. Pogson.

30. Poulet, p. 293.

Dunne's major work is An Experiment With Time. Late in his life he wrote a distilled summation of his theories entitled Nothing Dies, published posthumously. His studies originated in his rather alarming experiences with premonitory dreams and his success in recording the premonitory dreams of others, all of which led to suspect preexistent future. According to Dunne, the past and future flowing together in our dreams constitute eternity. This conception incurs certain difficulties that Borges is quick to point out. If the future already exists and we must move to it, we have placed time in space and space resides in yet a second time and so on, to the infinite regress Dunne so hoped to avoid.³¹ Dunne is guilty of the practice Bergson denounces - conceiving of time as a fourth dimension of space. Of course, postulating a pre-existent future implies a determinism disclosing Dunne's metaphysical bent and contradicting Bergson's substantiation for free will and continuous creation. Despite these objections and the frustrations involved in attempting to follow Dunne's diagrammatic substantiation of his theory, the disturbing evidence of premonitory dreams (indeed all clairvoyant experiences) keeps asserting itself so that even the skeptical Borges remains captivated.

To a degree, Veen also follows Dunne who is, however, only passingly mentioned in Ada. Premonitory dreams figure in the novel and it is difficult to explain them in context. On shipboard, Van's

31. Borges, "Time and J. W. Dunne", in Other Inquisitions (New York, 1966), p. 20f.

dream of the aquatic peacock is premonitory in regard to Lucette's drowning, and the nightmare prefiguring Marina's death (p. 451) is later referred to by Van as "premonitory" (p. 583). Another example involves Ada's wedding, here described by Lucette.

'Oh, you must,' she rejoined, 'hotya bi potomu (if only because) one of her shafer's (bachelors who take turns holding the wedding crown over the bride's head) looked momentarily,, in impassive profile and impertinent attitude (he kept raising the heavy metallic venets too high, too athletically high as if trying on purpose to keep it as far as possible from her head), exactly like you, like a pale, ill-shaven twin, delegated by you from wherever you were.'

At a place nicely called Agony, in Terra del Fuego. He felt an uncanny tingle as he recalled that when he received there the invitation to the wedding (airmailed by the groom's sinister sister) he was haunted for several nights by dream after dream, growing fainter each time (much as her movie he was to pursue from flick-house to flick-house at a later stage of his life) of his holding that crown over her. (p. 480f).

Lucette's drowning is described in terms of infinite regress and composite memory - her death her life again in toto - which sound entirely like Dunne:

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. (p. 494).

Unlike Borges, Van Veen finds no solace in such a proposed afterlife of recapitulation. According to Van, "The transportation of all our remembered relationships into an Elysian life inevitably turns into a second-rate continuation of our marvelous mortality." (p. 586).

Borges' first appearance in Ada is rather uncomplimentary. (The "Sirine" in the passage must be intended to evoke "Sirin" - Nabokov's émigré nom de plume):

Herr Mispel, who liked to air his authors, discerned in Letters from Terra the influence of Osberg (Spanish writer of pretentious fairy tales and mystico-allegoric anecdotes, highly esteemed by short-shift thesialists) as well as that of an obscene ancient Arab, expounder of anagrammatic dreams, Ben Sirine... (p. 344).

Borges and Nabokov are remarkably similar, however, in their thematic concerns and literary preferences. It would certainly tax the commentators to find any more appropriate categories for Nabokov's work than those set out by Borges as "*the basic devices of all fantastic literature: the work within the work, the contamination of reality by dream, the voyage in time, and the double.*"³² Field and others have analysed at great length Nabokov's döppelgänger motif; in Ada "*the double*" theme necessarily follows, as it did with the French romantics, from the extrapolation of time. The alterations in Antiterra's mirror image of Terra conveniently keep the raucous telephone out of Ardis Park and comfortably establish Russian aristocracy in North America. The theory that supports these alterations is possibly traceable to Borges' short story, "The Garden of Forking Paths". The following passage from that story would seem to apply to the architect of Ada's universe:

32. Labyrinths (New York, 1962), p. xviii.

He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel lines. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces all possibilities of time. We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others I, and not you; in others both of us...³³

There are three distinct references to this concept in Ada. The first involves Van's thoughts on disabling Kim *"There are other possible forkings and continuations that occur to the dream-mind, but these will do."* [p. 446]. The second concerns a casually curt remark to a tourist in the hotel lobby:

His reply was inept, and the whole episode had a faint paramnesic tang - and next instant Van was shot dead from behind (such things happen, some tourists are very unbalanced) and stepped into his next phase of existence. (p. 510).

Time forks and reforks in dejected Van's images of how things might have been had Ada not returned to the ailing Andrey.

It seems certain, then, that Borges' influence is at work, and this is further confirmed in Borges' essay "A New Refutation of Time". The basic argument of the essay is traced to the idealism of Berkeley, Hume, and Shopenhauer, but the refinements are all Borges' own. He concurs with the idealists' denial of matter and spirit, and in the same manner proceeds to a denial of time. He first denies the

33. Ibid., p. 197.

existence of an absolute time in which all things are linked as in a chain, hence denying both the successive and the contemporary. Each moment in time does indeed exist, but the combination of these moments is imaginary. This is not entirely satisfactory, however, because we continue to be aware of succession as something other than a mere delusion, so Borges draws a tenuous distinction between sense experience and intellectual experience. He writes that "*time, which is easily refutable in sense experience, is not so in the intellectual, from whose essence the concept of succession seems inseparable.*"³⁴ In the face of this contradiction, Borges concludes in the contradictory language of mysticism:

*Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river that carries me away, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, alas, is real; I, alas, am Borges.*³⁵

The foregoing brief summaries are included here because they bear upon the theory of time developed in Ada, and because each theorist is referred to in Nabokov's novel. Tracing influences on Nabokov can be helpful; it cannot be precise or exhaustive. This much, in sum, seems safe to attribute:

1. Ada's cosmogony has some likely ancestors in French romantic literature.
2. Bergson's durée is the logical foundation from which a theory

34. Other Inquisitions, p. 190.

35. Ibid., p. 197.

of time is elaborated in Ada.

3. Proust's sensibility of time past is closely akin to Van Veen's.

4. The thought of J. W. Dunne appears to corroborate the unexplained mystery, the extra-logical residue of the Texture of Time.

5. Borges' reduction of the concept of time to a subjective, tangential "now" is nearly identical with the substance of Van Veen's theory in Ada.

CHAPTER III

TIME AND EROS

Early in Ada, the young Van Veen is

*...tackling, in still vague and idle fashion,
the science that was to obsess his mature
years - problems of space and time, space
versus time, time twisted space, space as
time, time as space - and space breaking away
from time in the final tragic triumph of
human cogitation: I am because I die. (p. 153).*

And later, at the outset of the essay on time (Part Four of Ada), Van writes that, *"The unwillingness to acknowledge the future is simply an unwillingness to die."* (p. 535). Van's fear, or perhaps more accurately, his disgust with mortality reflects his extreme sensuality, a sensuality well detailed in his sexual adventures. Although Van's control is better than Demon's (whose girls get increasingly younger), there is little mitigation of sexual energy until his seventies. *"Rakes never reform. They burn, sputter a few last green sparks, and go out,"* writes the venerable Van. (p. 577).

Inflated sensuality, therefore, is a mark of our philosopher's constitution and is a source of explanation for his extra-logical prejudices. Van's orientation is quite obviously to time felt, for

he writes, *"I delight sensually in time, in the fall of its folds, in the very impalpability of its grayish gauze, in the coolness of its continuum."* (p. 537). Such an attachment makes for a rather desperate dialectic; for example, it is necessary to accept the *"organic decline natural to all things, but this can be without an acceptance of future time,"* (p. 535) presumably because one can only witness this decay in the present. He further argues that we can speak of man's future from our present conception of it, but as homo sapien evolves, so does his orientation to the concept homo sapien. Hence, we cannot, with any assurance, admit evidence as static (this seems to be a reflection of Bergson's *"creative evolution"*). Yet considerations of mankind are not really crucial, for if Van's foundation is in sensuality, his first premise is solipsism: the choral past is only substantiated by one's present consciousness of it. Life dates from first memory. And this idealist prejudice renders him more and more isolated. Van writes,

I can listen to Time only between stresses, for a brief concave moment warily and worridly, 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. (p. 538).

This recalls Borges' mystical phrasing of his sense of time as well as Shopenhauer's dictum in The World as Will and Idea, that what one knows is not a sun and an earth, but only an eye that sees a sun, a hand that feels the earth. Van quotes from Nabokov's John Shade -- *"Space is a*

swarming in the eyes, and Time a singing in the ears" (p. 542) again underlining this sentiment. The only escape from this mounting solipsism is, as we shall witness, that offered by Ada.

The stated purpose of The Texture of Time is to arrive at a purified notion of time, not to concentrate on lapse, but on essence, "*I wish to caress Time,*" writes the sensualist Van (p. 536). Approaching time in this manner certainly brings to mind Ada, for she is the locus of his memory: she is the motivating incarnation of his knowledge of time past and present. "*I wish to do something about it; to indulge in a simulacrum of possession...*" (p. 537). Again the reference to possession carries the flavor of sensual desperation. "*I am also aware that Time is a fluid medium for the culture of metaphors.*" (p. 537). Clearly, it is difficult to speak of time, which envelops us like a circus tent, without reference to metaphor, to some embodiment of awareness of time -- hence the novel, which is the love story of Van and Ada. This relationship between principle and demonstration is explicitly stated later in the essay:

My aim was to compose a kind of novella in the form of a treatise on the Texture of Time, an investigation of its veily substance with illustrative metaphors gradually increasing, very gradually building up a logical love story, going from past to present, blossoming as a concrete story, and just as gradually reversing analogies and disintegrating into bland abstraction. (p. 562f).

There is, however, no novella, but instead the whole chronicle

fulfills this function. The essay, then, is the watershed into bland abstraction, but never as bland or abstract as this intention indicates, for its divorce from the love story can never be fully realized. A further critical examination of the essay's essential content should make this clear. Witness Van's second point: he will love time into clarity, and further his contention that time is rhythm (already he is obliged to begin culturing metaphors). The time between rhythmic clicks is not measurement but time's abode, there in the interval, the pit -- but he must stop for space has corrupted the attempts. He decides to take another tack:

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 ampitheatric and altogether grand, like ragged night and jagged mountains around a small, twinkling, satisfied hamlet. (p. 538f).

The relation of a conception of a direction of time to the essence of time is as absurd as the relation of writing from left to right to one's direction of thought, agrees Van. Granted, our awareness of time is realized in instants of attention, and there is no reason for conceiving these instants in a linear relation, yet it seems futile to speculate on what our view of time might have been had our organs not been asymmetrical. The problem is difficult enough to construe empirically without introducing hypothetical proposals. As our

cognitive apparatus is constituted, we cannot help but witness succession; Van, however, continues to delve for an essential meaning of time, free of anthropomorphism.

If time is devoid of direction, it is also devoid of motion, and without motion, it is free of *"content, context, and running commentary."* (p. 539). In fact, time is free to assume any content, context, or commentary. And further,

The idea that Time 'flows' as naturally as an apple and thuds down on a garden table implies that it flows in and through something else and if we take that 'something' to be space then we have only a metaphor flowing along a yardstick. (p. 542).

Space is palpable and time is impalpable; there is no explaining one in terms of the other. *"Space is a swarming in the eyes, and Time a singing in the ears."* (p. 542). For example, the swarming, visual richness of Ada, in spite of the contortions of palpable space, can be sifted and selected, compressed and collected at any brief now, singing in our ears.

"I cannot imagine space without time, but I can very well imagine time without space," continues Van, in only an apparent profundity. (p. 543). He then insists upon denouncing relativity, for time, he asserts, *"...is the most rational element of life."* (p. 543). It cannot be subjugated to the tyranny of velocity. This notion is quite comprehensible, since he has previously denied that motion is an attribute of time and furthermore what is at issue in this instance is

energy transformation, not time. This section of the essay is helpful in sorting out more of the chaff in the time theories which have appeared in the novel to this point.

The next axiom reflects both Dunne and Borges: *"Perceived events can be regarded as simultaneous when they belong to the same span of attention..."* (p. 543). An example of a perceived event might be Ada's light and shade games on a sunny morning, or, on a sunny morning the recollection of those delightful games; in either case the experience of the games is rendered simultaneous with the sunny morning. Memory, then, is utterly plastic.

The loose organization of Van's argument is apparent in the next pronouncement which, although precise and important, is repetitious: *"The 'passage of time' is merely a figment of the mind with no objective counterpart, but with easy spatial analogies."* (p. 544). *"Spatial analogies"* seem an acknowledgement of the very relativity he has denounced; nor do they differ greatly from *"the culture of metaphor"*. But regardless of the criticism we must levy at the organization of the essay, it is easy to concur that the essence of time's meaning is not found in the illusion of its passage.

The example of the reconstructed city of Zembre tends to reinforce the point that the past is as palpable as the present, and reinforce the contention that simultaneous awareness nullifies space.

Van's next point illustrates that succession is only a significant

aspect of time when attention is clear and immediate. The example of used razor blades is most appropriate to the observation that *"Our perception of the Past is not marked by the link of succession to as strong a degree as is the perception of the Present..."* (p. 547).

Attention, sober or transfixed, is crucial to our receptivity to an experience of time. Often, our inattention or other-attention may necessitate a compressed recall of any event, e.g., engaged in threading a needle when the clock tower chimes sound, we may not *"hear"* the first two strokes, but upon registering an awareness of the chime at the third chiming we recall *"hearing"* the first two. Here the past slips into the present but is no less a true past. Therefore - as if it needed to be stressed again - Van reasserts the immobility of perceptual time.

The next point introduces Van's idea of *"nowness"* which, although not original, is the focus of the essay's original emphasis. Van writes,

Thus, in a quite literal sense we may say that conscious human life lasts always only one moment, for at any moment of deliberate attention to our flow of consciousness we cannot know if that moment will be followed by another.
(p. 550).

Nowness has the potential of eternity and hence an experiential triumph over time, if the incredible is realized: *"To be eternal the Present must depend on the conscious spanning of an infinite expansure."* (p. 551). The concept is not just Nabokov's, as Page Stegner's

comment on and citation from Speak Memory illustrate:

The fleeting moment, the fragmented and unregenerate world of the impressionist, becomes for Nabokov a world in which all phenomena are thematically linked in a spiral relation to time, and which he attempts to represent by extending the 'arms of consciousness' as far as possible to encompass a single point in time.

*...a car (New York license plate) passes along the road, a child bangs the screen door of a neighboring porch, an old man yawns in a misty Turkestan orchard, a granule of cindergray sand is rolled by the wind on Venus, a Doctor Jacques Hirsch in Grenoble puts on his reading glasses, and trillions of other such trifles occur - all forming an instantaneous and transparent organism of events, of which the poet (sitting in a lawn chair, at Ithaca, N.Y.) is the nucleus.*³⁴

Certainly, in Ada's own terms, the infinite expansure of light years to Terra have been spanned in Aqua's mind, and Van has striven to discern the essence of this phenomena in his patients. But at this point the essay's speculations are suspended while Ada's arrival is awaited, suspended dramatically as her telephone call to Van congeals the presentation of nowness into a realization almost akin to epiphany:

The 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. (p. 556).

34. Nabokov's Congeries, New York, 1968, p. xxx.

Every realization of Ada's incarnation of their love is the embodiment of pure-time. This is surely corroborated early in the novel, obliquely and directly. Ada embodies Veen's time as she wears Van's watch in a scene rich with time-memory puns on "forget":

...Van in turned up dungarees, who was searching for his wristwatch that he thought had dropped among the forget-me-nots (but which Ada, he forgot, was wearing). (p. 143).

And, in addition, we find Ada proudly asserting her role in the success of Texture of Time:

That work, she said, always reminded her in some odd delicate way, of the sun and shade games she used to play as a child in the secluded avenues of Ardis Park. She said she had somehow been responsible for the metamorphoses of the lovely larvae that had woven the silk of 'Veen's Time'... (p. 579).

(Van alludes to this memory when, referring to the Past in the essay, he comments that "...we can indulge in an easier game with the light and shade of its avenues." (p. 547). Ada's reminiscence takes us back to Chapter Eight where she coyly strings the erotic tension from the sunny avenues to the moist lavarium. The first game with goblets of light is curiously like an hourglass imitation, a creating and mastering of the time image. If the breeze eclipses a fleck, time forks. The explanation for the second game remains incomplete, but it seems to approximate a sundial dance:

"...You outline my shadow behind me on the sand. I move. You outline me again. Then you mark

out the next boundary (handing him the stick)
If I now move back -

"You know," said Van, throwing the stick
away, "personally I think these are the most
boring and stupid games anybody has ever
invented, anywhere, anytime, A.M. or P.M."
(p. 52).

The lovely larvae close the chapter as Ada demonstrates how to mate them, "*male in your left hand, female in your right, or vice versa, with the tips of their abdomens touching, but they must be quite fresh and soaked in their favorite violet's reek.*" (p. 57). And again Van's essay carries an allusion to this image: "*Has there ever been a 'primitive' form of Time in which, say, the Past was not yet clearly differentiated from the Present, so that past shadows and shapes showed through the still soft, long, larval 'now'?*" (p. 539 *italics mine*).

The tangible "*nowness*" that Van so triumphantly arrives at - the *nowness* that strives to span an infinite expansure - must surely be closely related, if not synonymous, with the supreme reality Van experiences through Ada and to which he confesses in Chapter 35, Part I:

What, then, was it that raised the animal act to a level higher than even that of the most exact arts or the wildest flights of pure science? It would not be sufficient to say that in his love-making with Ada he discovered the pang, the ogon, the agony of supreme 'reality'. Reality, better say, lost the quotes it wore like claws - in a world where independent and original minds must cling to things or pull things apart in order to ward off madness or death (which is the master madness). For one spasm or two he was safe. The new naked reality needed

no tentacle or anchor; it lasted a moment, but could be repeated as often as he and she were physically able to make love. The color and fire of that instant reality depended solely on Ada's identity as perceived by him. (p. 219f).

Loving Ada, he defies death and finds a brief freedom from time's tentacles and anchors. With this in mind, let us examine the scene at Mont Ruex, the scene just following their sexual reunion, and consider the description's bearing on the essay on time it concludes:

When, 'a little later', Van, kneeling and clearing his throat, was kissing her dear cold hands, gratefully, gratefully, in full defiance of death, with bad fate routed and her dreamy afterglow bending over him, she asked... (p. 562).

The old cliché and euphemism "a little later" is a timely pun here, the ultimate comment on "duration". And death has been defied once again, for coitus - as throughout the story - is the clearest experience of nowness, the ecstatic present filled with the welling past, the infinite expansure of the instant.³⁵ The ensuing conversation indicates that Ada is aware of the sexual entendre of the recondite essay, as she banters over a suggestive passage in Texture of Time.

35. No less redoubtable researchers than the staffers of Time (May 23, 1969) provide the following pearl: "In their old age, however, Van and Ada reunite and mate - now in a highly figurative way - molding into an unbeing that Nabokov calls Vaniada. Licensed allusion hunters will find that Vanadis is an epithet for Freya, the popular Swedish sex goddess who was also close to her brother." Accepting Ada as a sex goddess also facilitates an analysis of the novel's structure in terms of cycles of regeneration (see Chapter IV).

Van appears to object archly, but has also joined in the parody, for this time when we consider his abstract for the novella we note its coital rhythm. Ada brings the whole disputation to a climax, denying the knowledge of an abstract "time", denying that it must be approached as a Platonic Form and then she breaks off with "It is like -". Time is its simile; its simile is the love story we are led back to as Van's sexual energy interrupts her sentence. Here is the entire passage:

She confessed that on coming back in the middle of the night she had taken to her room from the hotel bookcase (the night porter, an avid reader, had the key) the British Encyclopedia volume, here it was, with this article on Space-Time: "'Space' (it says here, rather suggestively) 'denotes the property, you are my property, in virtue of which, you are my virtue, rigid bodies can occupy different positions' Nice? Nice."

"Don't laugh, my Ada, at our philosophic prose," remonstrated her lover. "All that matters just now is that I have given new life to Time by cutting off Siamese Space and the false future. My aim was to compose a kind of novella in the form of a treatise on the Texture of Time, an investigation of its veily substance, with illustrative metaphors gradually increasing, very gradually building up a logical love story, going from past to present, blossoming as a concrete story, and just as gradually reversing analogies and disintegrating again into bland abstraction."

"I wonder," said Ada, "I wonder if the attempt to discover those things is worth the stained glass. We can know the time, we can know a time. We can never know Time. Our senses are simply not meant to perceive it. It is like -" (p. 562f).

If the theory of time and the love story are related in the particularly inextricable way suggested here, then further reflection of this unity should be evident in the structure of the novel, and it clearly is.

CHAPTER IV

CHRONICLE AND SPIRAL

Recurrence is of crucial significance to Van's delineation of "nowness", for a recurring event ties the infinite expansure together, completing the circuit. The clues to this motif are set out early in the chronicle. When Ada directs Van's initial tour of Ardis Hall, he sees candlesticks, or seems to ("*A pair of candlesticks, mere phantoms of metal and tallow, stood, or seemed to stand, on the broad window ledge.*" [p. 41f]), and two paragraphs later the youngsters come upon the following:

A round looking-glass above it was ornamented with gilt gesso grapes; a satanic snake encircled the porcelain basin (twin of the one in the girls' washroom across the passage). An elbow chair with a high back and a bedside stool supporting a brass candlestick with a greasepan and handle (whose double he had seemed to have seen mirrored a moment ago - where?) completed the worst and main part of the humble equipment. (p. 42).

In another instance Van notices a tortoise shell comb in Blanche's hair [p. 48] and on the same morning, or a couple of mornings later - the memoirist isn't clear - he remarks again on the recurring subject:

"As we all are at that age", said Van and stooped to pick up a curved tortoise-shell comb - the kind that girls use to hold up their hair behind; he had seen one, exactly like that, quite recently, but when, in whose hairdo? (p. 53).

Of course, Van's second summer at Ardis follows the pattern of the first, but recurrence is only consciously considered on the return from the picnic when Lucette occupies Van's lap as Ada had four years before: *"...but it was that other picnic which he now relived and it was Ada's soft haunches which he now held as if she were present in duplicate, in two different color prints."* (p. 280). Here, then, is a recurrence with some alteration - a microcosm, it would seem, for the Terra-Antiterra cosmogony. Successive meetings with Ada invariably evoke, in minor details, aspects of recurrence; for example, when the family dog, Dack, runs loose with a slipper, his previous transgressions are evoked and *"Both children experienced a chill of déjà-vu (a twofold déjà-vu, in fact, when contemplated in artistic retrospect)"* (p. 248). This leitmotif is even present at the novel's outset when the spurned Dan makes identical itinerary, counter-Fogg repeated trips around the globe.

Let us also consider recurrence in the shape of repeated cycles in the book. The novel begins with the frantic and confusing assignations of Dan and Demon, Aqua and Marina. For mad Aqua, the unloved one, time is out of joint, but her madness is also her unique vision - the hell that is the anguish of living in time and trying to probe eternity. Her suicide is reported at the close of Chapter Three,

and in Chapter Four the adolescent Van's amorous adventures begin, prefaced by this comment on the events that structure recollection:

When, in the middle of the twentieth century, Van started to reconstruct his deepest past, he soon noticed that such details of his infancy as really mattered (for the special purpose the reconstruction pursued) could be best treated, could not seldom be only treated, when reappearing at various later stages of his boyhood and youth, as sudden juxtapositions that revived the part while vivifying the whole. This is why his first love has precedence here over his first bad hurt or bad dream. (p. 31).

The reappearance of love, then, fleshes out chronology, beginning with Van's infatuation with Mrs. Tapirov's daughter, "*(a domestic item among those for sale)*", who had placed the real rose among artificial ones. As this incident adumbrates Ada's aquarelle of an imaginary but possible flower created from real prototypes, we recognize the first reappearing details that he remembers. Following the infatuation with Mrs. Tapirov's daughter, the young Van observes with disgust the boarding school boys' pederasty and then becomes involved with "*a more natural though heartless divertissement*" (p. 53). - the fussy pink whorelet whom he shares with his comrades.³⁶ The cycle of smitten love, observed depravity, and heartless divertissement is then repeated with the first summer at Ardis, the meeting with Cordula and Ada, and the introduction in Chapter 28 to the Villa Venus Club.

36. The description of that involvement - "...the last of some forty convulsions had come and gone in the ordinary course of collapsing time..." (p. 33) - attests that in heartless divertissement the sense of time is painfully banal.

Again this sequence is repeated: the second summer with Ada, the disclosure of her lovers, the heartless *divertissement* with Cordula and the Villa Venus. And again: the reunion in Manhattan followed by the demonic debauch à trois with Lucette, and following the discovery by Demon, Van's nameless string of girls culminating again with Cordula. Finally, the cycle runs a last time with Ada and Andrey's visit to Mont Roux. The reunion of Ada and Van is followed by Ada's decision to stay with the incapacitated Andrey while Van is left to wander. Perhaps the parallel snares a bit here, unless we view Andrey's tuberculosis in the same light as the depravities and the cursed, diseased life of Demonica.

In addition to this cyclical motif that weaves through the story, rendering chronicle, in the main, a cardiograph of passion, two other incidents locate in Ada the presence of time's conception. The film Don Juan's Last Fling allows only 11 minutes of Ada, but this is enough to form "*a perfect compendium of her 1884 and 1888 and 1892 looks.*" (p. 489). And the first reunion in Mont Roux evokes a similar analysis:

Her solitary and precipitate advance consumed in reverse all the years of their separation as she changed from a dark-glittering stranger with the high hair-do in fashion to the pale armed girl in black who had always belonged to him. (p. 510f).

Certainly this is a "now" flushed out of all the meaningful past. But a chance meeting with Lucette, whose love Van can never accept, produces an estrangement of time: "*It was a queer feeling - as of something replayed by mistake, part of a sentence misplaced on the proof sheet,*

a scene run prematurely, a repeated blemish, a wrong turn of time."
(p. 460).

The all embracing cycle is, of course, the one proposed at the beginning of Part Five, the proposal that Part Five is really the introduction, turning us back to sylvan Ardis Park to defeat the "*ardis of time*" which has been inherent in our approach to chronicle but is no longer an obstacle in the recollecting mind of Van Veen. For Van Veen it seems that the ideal structure of the memoir is a flexible anagram running a circular course, as in Ada's quip - "*insect, scient, nicest, incest.*" Quite clearly the structure and style are related in their anagrammatical magic and are both inextricable from the concept of a resplendant "*now*". Let us consider two sections which comment most openly on style.

The gambling sequence in Chapter 28 intimates how Van Veen's sleight of hand humiliates the shoddy trickster, whose gimmickry insults a noble tradition. Van's opponent relies upon a variety of mirrors and reflecting surfaces "*dissimulated like female fireflies in the undergrowth*" and is eventually humiliated by Van's deft palming of the joker and "*doctoring*" of the deck. Van's style surpasses the laborious detection of the facts as a means to deceive, and proceeds to the manipulation of deception. And it is in this manner that he approaches that arch deceiver, time.

The Mascodagama chapter is entirely explicit in its comment on style:

The essence of the satisfaction belonged rather to the same order as the one he later derived from self-imposed, extravagantly difficult, seemingly absurd tasks when V. V. sought to express something, which until expressed had only a twilight being (or even none at all - nothing but the illusion of the backward shadow of its imminent expression). It was Ada's castle of cards. It was the standing of 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 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. (p. 184f).

The reference to Ada's castle of cards specifically evokes her "fingertips `stalking gravity" and generally evokes the erotic tension of that incident - as potentially explosive as Mascodagama's performance. Furthermore, the hand-dancing act is comparable to his union with Ada, for in both he experiences insight into a supreme reality which serves to define his special awareness of time. Acrobatic wonders with figures of speech are the means by which a victory over time is achieved. The poet infuses the present with the vitality of poetic imagery - or not at all.

The best image to encompass the structure of Ada, the best graphic overlay, is the spiral; the initial evidence for adopting this image is found in Speak Memory:

The spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free. I thought this up when I was a schoolboy, and I also discovered that Hegel's triadic series (so popular in old Russia) expressed merely the essential spirality of all things in their relation to time. Twirl follows twirl, and every synthesis is the thesis of the next series. If we consider the simple spiral, three stages may be distinguished in it, corresponding to those of the triad: We can call 'thetic' the small curve or arc that initiates the convolution central; 'antithetic' the larger arc that faces the first in the process of continuing it; and 'synthetic' the still ampler arc that continues the second while following the first along the outer side. And so on.

*A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life.*³⁷

And the following, as quoted previously, is also from Speak Memory:

*...and if, in the spiral unwinding of things, space warps into something akin to time, and time in its turn, warps into something akin to thought, then, surely, another dimension follows - a special space maybe, not the old one, we trust, unless spirals become vicious circles again.*³⁸

Van Veen has warped time into thought in the other dimension, the special space - Antiterra - where the geography includes an "*Arctic no longer vicious Circle*". (p. 17).

L. L. Lee's study of the spiral structure in Pnin, Lolita, and Pale Fire is quite convincing and the impetus for my application of

37. P. 275.

38. P. 301. Quoted previously in Chapter One.

the image here. His analysis of the spiral seems even more applicable to Ada than to the other three novels. Lee writes,

*For the spiral is like the circle, but less exact, less rigid; it is time recurring and yet not quite; events that are repeated but only partially; mirror images that are of necessity distorted because they exist at different moments. The spiral is the figure of space and time unified, but a figure that allows multiplicity in its unity.*³⁹

The recurrent cycles previously described are related and liberated through the ascending spiral. Van and Ada progress from Ardis to Mont Roux in a widening gyre. The "*thetic*" Van and his "*antithetic*" sister twirl to a synthesis, then twirl apart again until the final synthesis, Vaniada; the word sounds like a Hindu diety and this may be an intentional reverberation: if the self is no longer felt as separate from the other, the spatial impediments to a sense of timelessness begin to fall away. For Van Veen every synthesis with Ada gives to time essential value; time is, in every sense of the word, synthetic.

39. P. 225.

CHAPTER V

THE CHRONICLE SELF

In his review of Lolita, Lionel Trilling emphasized that, above all Nabokov had written a love story in the great tradition of Provençal passion: in the sense that the social union of Humbert and Lolita is fraught with impediments it is as impossible as the union of Lancelot and Guinevere.⁴⁰ Clearly neither Humbert nor Lolita have the power and stature to broach comparison with these archetypes, yet it does seem fruitful to consider possibilities in this manner, the manner that calls Willy Loman tragic in an attempt to explore tragedy's boundaries. The incestuous impediments in Ada function to similar purpose with characters more credible to the part, for by their own admission Van and Ada are "*a unique superimperial couple.*" (p. 71). The incest factor allows Nabokov to write about love ostensibly profane and antiterrestrial (as opposed to most novels of love profane and terrestrial) and to resolve in the chronicle of this love his consciousness of time, also considered in the grand style.

40. "The Last Lover: Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita," Encounter, Vol. XI, No. 4, 9-19.

The demonic tone and coloring of the entire novel are quite consistent with Nabokov's literary vision throughout his works. No faith in ideology or abstract ethics characterizes his writing. Nature is prized for her deceptive genius, and art for the same reason.⁴¹ It is in man's capacity to respond to and be motivated by beauty and the dancing intellect that Nabokov's core of value and honesty lies. Life in the demonic world is an anguish of time, bracketed by the nothingness of our pre-consciousness and the nothingness of our pitiful death. In this precious meantime one can live in hell if, as Dostoevsky observed, one has lost the ability to love. Van and Ada are able to love, but periodically they lose the opportunity. And all their separations, in the last analysis, probably fan desire's flames.

Separation is also conducive to imaginative reconstruction and a synthetic sense of time, especially when this separation is more precisely exile, for it is exile that Demon imposes on his two children and exile that has defined the situation of nearly every protagonist in Nabokov's fiction, as it has his own life. There is no returning to the ardors and arbors of Ardis, which comprise the timeless Eden of adolescence until Ada falls prey to randy snakes in the grass.

41. Nabokov on the birth of literature: "It was not," Nabokov says, "when a boy saw an animal in a clearing and said: 'That is a wolf.' That was not the birth of literature. It was when a boy cried: 'Wolf...Wolf...Wolf.' And there was no wolf That was the Birth of Literature." John G. Hayman, "A Conversation with Vladimir Nabokov - With Digressions." *Twentieth Century*, CLXVI, 449.

Anguish only exists in time, and Van finds both anguish and time when he abandons Ardis. Only love and the memory of love reside in timelessness, and Van finds both love and timelessness when he again finds Ada.

Ada ends with more affirmation than we have come to expect from Nabokov, but even that affirmation is sternly qualified by the pitiful deaths of Aqua, Dan and Lucette, indirect victims of the violent, uncompromising passions of Demon, Marina, Ada and Van. This family chronicle attests that the grand passion, the great hero and the great artist require innocent victims. Don Juan and Lord Byron lurk throughout Ada and amplify this point - but that is another study.

Referring to Nabokov's comment in Speak Memory on the "*prison of time*," Elizabeth Janeway remarks that his art "... *is an instrument of inquiring into reality, into the nature of the prison which holds us and of the creature which bruises its fists against those prison walls. His tricks are not an attempt to obscure reality, but to* ⁴² *determine its nature by imitating it.*" Hence, to determine the nature of time, it is necessary to write an imitation of time: to wit, Ada, A Family Chronicle. And inseparable from an inquiry into time is an inquiry into identity, as Miss Janeway astutely observes in her discussion of Pale Fire:

42. "Nabokov the Magician", Atlantic, July, 1967, p. 71.

*Under the guise of a study of death and immortality, it is an inquiry into identity. Who are we? it asks. What is that 'I' which each of us feels to endure through the passage of time and change? The study of this problem has been a lifelong task not only for Shade but for Nabokov himself.*⁴³

It is an easy critical response to posit a concern with identity in modern literature, but it is invariably correct as an embracing framework in which to discern the solutions offered by one writer's sensibility, for he creates to discover himself. Ada appears to be Nabokov's most complete attempt to investigate the individual's sense of his self's history. The tempering conclusion is that this self, however noble, is but a paltry witness of now, salvaged by the grace of intermittent memory, loved into clarity.

43. "Nabokov the Magician," p. 71.

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