Nabokov’s Watermarks
The Significance of Perceptual Time and Memory in Three Selected Novels

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Introduction

Terrible? Wrong? She was absolutely perfect, and strange, and poignantly familiar. By some stroke of art, by some enchantment of chance, the few brief scenes she was given formed a perfect compendium of her 1884 and 1888 and 1892 looks.

The *gitanilla* bends her head over the live table of Leporello’s servile back to trace on a scrap of parchment a rough map of the way to the castle. Her neck shows white through her long black hair separated by the motion of her shoulder. It is no longer another man’s Dolores, but a little girl twisting an aquarelle brush in the paint of Van’s blood, and Donna Anna’s castle is now a bog flower.

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*

Vladimir Nabokov, having worked as a film extra to earn some money during the long period of his life when money was scarce, knew well the odd sensation of having a copy of oneself moving on a screen, existing within a story that is not one’s own. By the time *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* was published in 1969, Nabokov had already moved from struggling émigré to critically acclaimed author, with enough financial security to quit his university teaching position at Cornell and move to Switzerland where he would devote his time to writing and lepidopterology.

These were Nabokov’s personal and artistic circumstances at the time of the publication of *Ada*, which takes the form of one Van Veen’s memoir of his lifelong love affair with his sister, after whom the novel is named. Written in Van’s old age, the family chronicle is organized into five parts, from idyllic childhood to Van’s and Ada’s deaths. The remembrances are recounted primarily in the first three parts, with Part One taking up slightly more than half of the novel and the length of each subsequent part half of the one before, in accordance to the decreasing vividness of Van’s memories. In my epigraph above, Ada the *gitanilla* appearing to
Van not only as the remembered image of his childhood love painting a bog flower but as a composite of Adas—at twelve, sixteen, and twenty—is the poetic companion to Van’s Proustian theory of memory and perceptual time,¹ which is presented as a dense philosophical treatise in Part Four.

Like many of Nabokov’s novels, the basic plot of Ada can be summarized in a flippant word or sentence. In a bit of rich irony that Nabokov himself might have appreciated, an issue of the now-defunct girls’ magazine YM recommended Lolita as summer reading to its audience thus (approximately): “An older man falls in love and becomes obsessed with a 12-year-old girl.” It is not a bad summary, but Lolita is hardly about pedophilia per se, just as Ada is not simply about incest or The Real Life of Sebastian Knight about a man unraveling the mystery around his brother’s identity. The idea of perceptual time is much more central to Ada than incest, and I will argue that this concept of time has been with Nabokov since his first novel, Mary.

In his autobiography Speak, Memory, Nabokov compares the combination of perception and reality to “Find What the Sailor Has Hidden,” the popular game that could double as an invitation to readers of Nabokov. The lover of anagrams and allusions, who was once described rather understatedly by close acquaintance Edmund Wilson as having a “slight propensity” for punning, grew up in a trilingual, aristocratic, and highly educated household in St. Petersburg around the time of the Bolshevik Revolution. Of artistic, literary, mythological material for purposes of allusion Nabokov had aplenty. When an interviewer asked what he read as a child, Nabokov responded: “Between the ages of ten and fifteen in St. Petersburg, I must have read more fiction and poetry—English, Russian, and French—than in any other five-year period of

¹ Vladimir Nabokov admired the French novelist Marcel Proust, in particular his notions on time. In The Magician’s Doubts, Michael Wood describes Nabokov’s “rebellion against time” as “echoing Proust” and anticipating what Van Veen calls the “texture of time” (84).
my life. I relished especially the works of Wells, Poe, Browning, Keats, Flaubert, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Alexander Blok” (SO 42-3).

So wide-ranging and numerous are the allusions present in Nabokov’s novels that finding them has become the work of a generation of Nabokov scholars. The endnotes in Alfred Appel, Jr.’s The Annotated Lolita take up more than 130 pages. Appel writes in his preface that “the reader of Lolita attempts to arrive at some sense of its overall ‘meaning,’ while at the same time having to struggle, often page by page, with the difficulties posed by the recondite materials and rich, elaborate verbal textures. The main purpose of this edition is to solve such local problems and to show how they contribute to the total design of the novel” (xi), a novel that, it should be noted, is little more than three hundred pages.

In this essay, I will instead focus on another “hidden” element of Nabokov’s work—the themes of time and memory as intrinsically linked with the author’s ideas on ethics and morality. My primary focus will be on the theory of perceptual time presented in Part Four of Ada, but I will also argue that this philosophy is present, albeit in a much less developed form, in Nabokov’s earlier works, particularly Lolita and Mary, the two other novels I will discuss. Mary, first written in Russian and published as Mashen’ka under the pseudonym V. Sirin, was Nabokov’s earliest novel. The protagonist, Ganin, is a Russian émigré living in Berlin alongside fellow Russian émigrés. By chance, he is shown a photograph of the wife of another pensioner and recognizes in her his former love, Mary. I picked these three novels in part because they are evenly spread out in terms of date of first publication and in part because their protagonists hold a similar attitude towards time, namely that plodding, chronological time is less real, and less important, than the perceived, often gleefully anachronistic time markers of individual memory.
Nabokov is an author whose body of work can truly be read as a collective whole, where novels allude to one another and share certain main themes. In the case of a good novel, knowing how it ends should not diminish the experience of reading the beginning. As for Nabokov, his later novels tend to enrich the experience of reading the earlier ones. Looking for patterns across a particular author’s novels is not unlike Nabokov the memoirist delighting in the sight of the same butterfly in Russia and in Colorado, some forty years in between. Van’s concept of “Perceptual Time” makes an earlier cameo in *Lolita*, where the exact phrase appears in the title of one of Humbert’s papers and nothing more. I choose to discuss these three novels in backwards order of publication date for the reason that as we move from *Ada* (1969) to *Lolita* (1955) to *Mary* (1926), we see Nabokov’s ideas on time and ethics in reverse bloom. Were we then to circle back to *Ada*, we see nothing less than the triumph of an author and his philosophy, the long-held suspicions regarding the nature of Time now fully developed and discussed, celebrated and criticized in the longest and most Nabokovian of his novels.

In my analysis, I have relied greatly on the work of Brian Boyd, Julian W. Connolly, Alexander Dolinin, Christoph Henry-Thommes, D. Barton Johnson, and Nancy Ann Zeller. I draw on *Speak, Memory* and *Strong Opinions* for the sake of contrasting Nabokov’s own views on perceptual time against Van Veen’s to see how they differ, and my conclusion is that the issue of ethics lies in these slight differences. Nabokov was often coy and occasionally disparaging towards the question of deeper meaning that readers of serious literature like to go on about. Conversely, in a 1971 interview published in *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov predicted that “one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel—and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride” (193). Reappraisers are not necessarily correct, and there
is a good distance between the frivolous firebird and the rigid moralist, neither of which accurately describes an author who actively distanced himself from the vulgarity of the frivolous masquerading as the serious. It seems as though Nabokov delighted in the opposite, adhering to his principle of art for art’s sake and keeping morals implicit.

For Van Veen, Humbert Humbert, and Lev Glebovich Ganin, perceptual time goes beyond philosophical ideas on a page and becomes the justification for their idiosyncratic memories and for preserving the essence of their childhood loves in the present. I will argue that the major ethical blunders committed by each of the three central characters result from their allowing perceptual time to descend into solipsism. Nabokov’s famous declaration that “Lolita has no moral in tow” (emphasis added) should not be interpreted as the author’s exoneration of Humbert’s cruelty towards Lolita. Rather, it is a comment on the role of art and whether didactic literature truly counts as literature. This is why Bobbie Ann Mason is off-mark in her argument that the issue of ethics in Ada revolves around the inherent unnaturalness of the central characters’ incestuous love affair. Incest is beside the point, and even pedophilia is beside the point. Ethical transgression is present not in the scene that takes place after Van and Ada are left conveniently alone on the night of the burning barn but in Van’s rapturous recollection of the carriage ride during which he holds Lucette and imagines her to be Ada’s color print duplicate.
Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle, 1969

(i)

Time, memory, ethics, love, patterns, solipsism, philistinism, and the blurred line between life and art all are central themes in Ada, which, perhaps more so than any other novel by Nabokov, brims with literary and non-literary allusions. Composed late in Nabokov’s career, Ada is the author’s most indulgent work in the sense that it contains many of the ideas and themes in which Nabokov took an especial interest over the span of his writing career. Though referred to as a family chronicle, the novel is more accurately the memoir of one Van Veen and his account of his lifelong love affair with his sister Ada Veen.

Nabokov initially planned to begin Ada with an essay on Time, which was then to develop into a concrete story. He later reconsidered and placed the philosophical essay right after the death of Ada’s husband Andrei Vinelander and before Van’s and Ada’s final reunion in Part Five, the novel’s last chapter. The result is Part Four, part long and meandering treatise on Time, part straightforward account of Van driving into Mont Roux to reunite with Ada. In this chapter, I will try to show that the placement of Van’s treatise, which may seem odd for its interruption of the last major plot event, not only supports Part Four as the crux of the novel but also cannot be otherwise. The treatise is centered upon the idea that time is mainly a matter of perception, especially in regards to memory. It is an idea that Nabokov seems to have long suspected, and here in Ada it is given a prominent part in the story.

(ii) “The Texture of Time”

Before analyzing the treatise’s role in Ada and its significance in retrospect for Nabokov’s earlier novels, it is necessary to break down the main ideas the treatise contains. In his philosophical
work-in-progress titled “The Texture of Time,” Van sets forth to refute the traditional view of Time with its three partitions of Past, Present, and Future in favor of individualized, perceived time. For Van, the Past is “a constant accumulation of images. It can be easily contemplated and listened to, tested and tasted at random, so that it ceases to mean the orderly alternation of linked events that it does in the large theoretical sense” (545). Nabokov’s biographer Brian Boyd writes that “despite all these complications of expression… the essay’s ideas are quite straightforward” (NA 166). By renouncing the visualization of Time as a succession of events in material Space and only concerning himself with time that is “stopped” and “closely attended to,” Van defends his recollections as his own, individual reality. His theory of perceived time allows for a highly individualistic construction and interpretation of the past, essentially making the past and one’s recollection of the past the same thing. The past only exists, according to Van, in the individual’s memory.

In the beginning of “The Texture of Time,” Van provides his first example of the link between individual consciousness and time. His first recollection having taken place when he was seven months old, the 52-year-and-195-day-old Van argues that this memory marks the beginning of his own consciousness. The 195 days preceding the event can thus be disregarded as they are “indistinguishable from infinite unconsciousness” (536), the same unconsciousness that is experienced before birth and after death. A critical element in Van’s argument is his rejection of what he calls Space-Time. Van states that he cannot imagine Space without Time. However, not only is Time without Space possible, Time in fact achieves its truest, purest form when divorced from Space. To appreciate this pure Time, which is “free of content, context, and running commentary” (539), Van deems it necessary to do away with “an immemorial habit of
speech,” the result of which is that “we end up by being unable to speak of Time without speaking of physical motion” (540). For Van, Time is perpetual and unmoving, not linear.

Considering that for Van, Time is perpetual and unmoving rather than linear, it is ironic that Part Four weaves together Van’s philosophical rejection of Space-Time and his journey into Switzerland to meet Ada. It is precisely the coupling of Time and physical motion that Van denounces. After all, one of the best and most commonly used examples of Space-Time is travel: as time passes, the individual changes his position in space. Yet Van places travel under the category of Space, stating that a lover of Space can appreciate “speed, the smoothness and sword-swish of speed; the aquiline glory of ruling velocity; the joy cry of the curve” (537). But what is speed without time? Speed as movement is an aspect of Space, but speed also depends on the changing of physical position (Space) within a specific duration (Time).

Moreover, Van includes in his essay several references to his physical journey. One example is what he writes immediately following a digression on Aurelius Augustinus: “Lost again. Where was I? Where am I? Mud road. Stopped car” (537). One can reasonably assume that Van is referring to the digression having distracted him from the progression of his thoughts, but then he adds markers (“mud road,” “stopped car”) that make the mental digression parallel the physical detour. Lest we think that the “lost again” refers solely to being physically lost, a couple paragraphs later Van asks, “What nudged, what comforted me, a few minutes ago at the stop of a thought?” (538).

However, Van is more concerned with perceptual time as it pertains to the past and memory. This is the crucial argument as it acts as the philosophical basis of Van’s family chronicle. There are two main parts to Van’s argument. The first is Time’s motionlessness, which disposes with the horizontal line model of Time in favor of vertical layers or an upward
spiral. The present then incorporates and builds on the past, and one is able to live in both the present and the past. The second part of Van’s argument involves individualized time and recollection. “The Time I am concerned with is only the Time stopped by me and closely attended to by my tense-willed mind,” he writes, a statement that justifies in one bold stroke Ada, or Ardor as Van’s version of the past, as well as any unreliable narration that comes attached. It recalls a disagreement in the marginal notes between Van and Ada over Van’s account of the first time they make love: “I wonder, Van, why you are doing your best to transform our poetical and unique past into a dirty farce?” “Oh, I am honest, that’s how it went… if people remembered the same they would not be different people. That’s-how-it-went” (120):

The Past, then, is a constant accumulation of images. It can be easily contemplated and listened to, tested and tasted at random, so that it ceases to mean the orderly alternation of linked events that it does in the large theoretical sense. It is now a generous chaos out of which the genius of total recall, summoned on this summer morning in 1922, can pick anything he pleases: diamonds scattered all over the parquet in 1888; a russet black-hatted beauty at a Parisian bar in 1901; a humid red rose among artificial ones in 1883; the pensive half-smile of a young English governess, in 1880, neatly reclosing her charge’s prepuce after the bedtime treat; a little girl, in 1884, licking the breakfast honey off the badly bitten nails of her spread fingers; the same, at thirty-three, confessing, rather late in the day, that she did not like flowers in vases; the awful pain striking him in the side while two children with a basket of mushrooms looked on in the merrily burning pine forest; and the startled quonk of a Belgian car, which he had overtaken and passed yesterday on a blind bend of the alpine highway. (545-6)

This passage exemplifies Van’s approach to his memoir. He hits upon an absolute fact: recollection rarely, if ever, takes a linear form. It does not even necessarily correspond with chronological time. Repetition of past activities is one of the best devices for recalling the past. The sight of the two children and the burning forest immediately and reflexively brings to Van’s mind the childhood memory of the Burning Barn, a memory so vivid that it causes that “awful pain striking him in the side” (546). It is a sign of the past emerging through the present. Van regards the Past as “an accumulation of sensa, not as the dissolution of Time” (544). If the Past is
an accumulation, then the Present includes everything one currently sees and thinks, as well as elements of the Past that come to mind.

Having defined the Past and Present, Van moves on to the Future and dismisses it as “the idea of a hypothetical present based on our experience of succession, on our faith in logic and habit. Actually, of course, our hopes can no more bring it into existence than our regrets change the Past… the future remains aloof from our fancies and feelings. At every moment it is an infinity of branching possibilities” (560-1). It should be noted that this dismissal of the “popular triptych” (559) of Time comes after Van’s and Ada’s disappointing reunion in Mont Roux. They have not seen each other for seventeen years, and each is surprised and disappointed to find that the other has aged significantly. Unlike their previous meetings, this time there is no sexual desire between Van and Ada. This desire, which had allowed “life to pick up by and by,” is no longer available to smooth over the most recent separation, and “now they were on their own” (557). Van’s disappointment is likely intensified by the fact that the reunion with Ada does not follow the expected pattern.

Nabokov himself was fond of seeking these kinds of patterns. His disregard for where a series of recalled images stands on the traditional time continuum allows for superimposed time, and the result is the extraordinary feeling of living simultaneously in the present and the past. Nabokov recounts in his memoir *Speak, Memory* an incident in childhood of seeing a rare butterfly, which the Nabokovs’ janitor managed to catch for him. The butterfly escaped, but Nabokov came across this exact species again forty years later, in Colorado. Similar instances abound in Nabokov’s memoir. The sight of identical butterflies across a forty-year span is pure coincidence, an example of the “negation of time” that Nabokov considers imagination and memory to be (*SO* 78). In other cases, Nabokov intentionally seeks out coincidences that are less
noticeable. His fondness for patterns and belief that “the following of such thematic designs through one’s life should be… the true purpose of autobiography” (27) cause him to be extra aware of coincidences. The memory of playing with matches with a family friend becomes remarkable for Nabokov due to its “special sequel,” in which fifteen years later, the same family friend runs into Nabokov’s father and asks him for a light (27). It is a weak coincidence, but still delightful enough for Nabokov to recount in his memoir.

Van’s “The Texture of Time” incorporates many of Nabokov’s own views on the topic. But the author and his fictional character do not share one set of views, as Nancy Anne Zeller claims.² It is crucial to differentiate between the two. What Part Four of *Ada* conspicuously lacks is a conclusive statement on the nature of Time. Van explains what Time is not but never explicitly states what it is. Nabokov is certainly fascinated with Time, and his anecdotes from *Speak, Memory* show that he delights in minor time manipulations—but Van lives by his philosophy of perceived time. Therefore a more plausible relationship between Nabokov’s views and Van’s is that the latter takes Nabokov’s lighthearted games to an extreme, raising ethical questions that do not encumber Nabokov’s butterflies and matches. Perhaps the only irrefutable interpretation is given by Ada, which concludes Part Four: “We can never know Time. Our senses are simply not meant to perceive it. It is like—” (563).

*Ada* is not really a “family chronicle,” as it is billed. The word “chronicle” connotes balance and objectivity, and Van’s memoir is anything but. However, the philosophy presented in Part Four justifies this. Its placement towards the end of the novel allows the reader to see Van’s philosophical ideas as they evolve. The concept of perceptual time likely comes to Van in his middle age, and it is also presented at the point of the novel when Van reaches middle age. In

² In her essay “The Spiral of Time in *Ada*,” Zeller writes: “Since Van Veen (V.V. = V.V. Nabokov) is clearly meant to be Nabokov’s spokesman in *Ada*, we can take his views on time as presented in the essay to be those of Nabokov himself” (283).
this sense, the final word belongs to Nabokov after all. Van dies before the family chronicle is edited and polished, not having been able to philosophize his way out of death.

(iii) Time, Patterns, and “a Mermaid’s Message”
In this novel, time is closely intertwined with patterns, as it is through patterns that the present is able to build on the past. Much has been written on the intricate patterns in Ada. But how many are true coincidence, and how many, like Nabokov’s story of the matches, require some fancy on Van’s part? The spiral of time is one of the patterns he labors the most in preserving and emphasizing. Nabokov himself expounds on this spiral in Speak, Memory, describing it as a “spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious: it has been set free” (203). The spiral is really an idealized form of Time. With each passing time cycle or coil of the spiral, the Present builds on corresponding points in the Past and evolves to a higher plane.

In rejecting the existence of a Future Time, Van argues against the idea that our future is already decided and laid out. After his initially disappointing reunion with Ada, Van returns to his work on the concept of Future Time. At best, he argues, the Future is a blank void where anything could happen, “aloof from our fancies and feelings” (560). It seems to bear no connection to the memories and patterns of the past. Van’s description of the Future as endless “branching possibilities” seems to contain the bitter implication that the Future may, and does, branch off to ridiculous and terrible ends. However, Van’s earlier complete rejection of the notion of a Future wipes out these grim possibilities. If we were to take the present as always being the newest layer of time, with no hypothetical future, the branching possibilities would apply as well to the present. As the present builds on the past, the “infinite branching
possibilities” would to an extent always be limited to an already set starting point. Therefore, the spiral still holds.

Zeller notes that save for one, all of Van and Ada’s separations span a period of four years or a multiple of four (287). Their affair begins in the summer of 1884 and resumes four years later, in 1888. Van is informed of Ada’s infidelity, and they do not reunite until the winter of 1892-1893, another four years later. The next reunion comes in 1905, after a twelve-year separation. This pattern is broken only when Van and Ada reunite, seventeen years later, following the death of Andrey Vinelander. Just prior to this final reunion in 1922, Van speaks on the phone to Ada, whose “telephone voice, by resurrecting the past and linking it up with the present… formed the centerpiece in his deepest perception of tangible time, the glittering ‘now’ that was the only reality of Time’s texture” (556). However, their first face-to-face meeting is a disappointment. Both have changed significantly in appearance, and even their conversation lacks natural flow. Their shared birthmark, which “had got lost among the freckles of age” (558), and Ada’s new hair color and other various details all add up to an impression of things being out of place. Van blames the duration of the separation, stating that “had they lived together these seventeen wretched years, they would have been spared the shock and the humiliation; their aging would have been a gradual adjustment, as imperceptible as Time itself” (558). However, Zeller makes the convincing argument that the problem is not duration but neglect of the established pattern of duration. This is further supported by the scene that takes place the following morning, when Van sees Ada standing on the hotel balcony one floor below him. He then leaves his balcony and runs down a “short spiral staircase to the fourth floor” (562). By “retreating back down the spiral,” Zeller writes, “the seventeen-year separation is turned into sixteen; rhythm is restored” (289).
There are two ways of interpreting patterns that especially pertain to *Ada*. One is to fit them within the determinist philosophy, and the other is retrospective analysis. The latter is what Nabokov does in his autobiography. Van’s and Nabokov’s notions of Time reject determinism outright. Ironically, patterns unintended by Van arguably provide the novel’s structure. These unintentional patterns—that is, intended by Nabokov but mostly hidden from his characters’ knowledge—should be seen as the truest patterns, which do not require deliberate action by a character to create. D. Barton Johnson puts forth an interesting theory in his essay “The Labyrinth of Incest in *Ada*” on the repeat of incest in the Veen family tree. He presents an extensive amount of textual evidence, which suggest that the Van-Ada-Lucette triangle of incest was in fact played out in the previous generation of Aqua, Marina, Dan, and Demon (125-9). This theory would certainly fit well with Van’s impotence, a trait that by itself seems too artistically convenient.³ By making Van and Ada unable to have children, Nabokov clears in one stroke the only ethical dilemma directly linked to incest.

Another major pattern in the novel involves Lucette and the events leading up to her death. Allusions to Lucette’s eventual suicide abound throughout *Ada*. Some are unmistakable and straightforward. In the family tree at the very beginning of the book, we learn that Lucette dies at the age of twenty-five. Boyd points out other details, more subtle and more sinister, that also seem to foreshadow Lucette’s death. In a much earlier scene that takes place during the first Ardis summer, Lucette plays with a rubber doll that “managed to get swept away by the current” (143), which, as Boyd notes, “ghoulishly foreshadows Lucette’s drowning” (97).

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³ If Van’s impotence can be attributed in part to the supposedly widespread incest in the Veen-Zemski family tree, the whole matter makes for an amusing parallel to one of Van’s flippant anecdotes on this “disastrous caprice of nature” and its potential dangers: “Somewhere in Tartary fifty generations of ever woollier and woollier sheep had recently ended abruptly in one hairless, five-legged, impotent little lamb” (134).
Lucette is also associated with Aqua and Dan, who are likewise eclipsed by their siblings. Both Aqua and Lucette commit suicide. Aqua kills herself by taking hundreds of sleeping pills, and Lucette, after swallowing five seasickness pills and a few “Cossack ponies” of vodka, dies by drowning. Aqua’s yellow slacks and black bolero are reproduced in Lucette’s black slacks and lemon shirt. Shortly before his death, Dan experiences the grotesque hallucination that “a devil combining the characteristics of a frog and a rodent desired to straddle him and ride him to the torture house of eternity” (435). This devil is “black, pale-bellied, with a black dorsal buckler shining like a dung beetle’s back” (435), a Kafkaesque creature that, as Johnson and Gerard de Vries point out, is taken from Bosch’s depiction of Hell (156). In a discomfiting way, the black, pale, beetle-like characteristics also recall Ada, who describes herself as “crazy about everything that crawls” (54).

These subtle references to Lucette’s eventual death could indicate her lingering influence on Van from the afterlife. After all, the afterlife is a subject pervasive in Nabokov’s work. Vera Nabokov considers it his “main theme”—the ultimate hidden idea that unites Nabokov’s body of work and gives him his “imperturbable joie de vivre.” It is also possible that Lucette’s death pattern is put in by Van alone. This could then be interpreted as his acknowledgement of guilt or, quite the opposite, a determinist argument for the inevitability of Lucette’s death. I agree with Boyd’s argument that “Van has clearly highlighted [the anticipations of Lucette’s death] out of his own real remorse” (96-7). By the time Van starts writing the family chronicle, his attitude

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4 Vera Nabokov writes, in the foreword to Стихи: “Теперь, посылая этот сборник в печать, хочу обратить внимание читателя на главную тему Набокова. Она, кажется, не была никем отмечена, а между тем ею пропитано все, что он писал; она, как некий водяной знак, символизирует все его творчество. Я говорю о «потусторонности»… Этой тайне он был причастен много лет, почти не осознавая ее, и это она давала ему его невозмутимую жизнерадостность и ясность даже при самых тяжелых переживаниях и делала его совершенно неуязвимым для всяких самых глупых или злостных нападок” (3).
towards Lucette and his and Ada’s treatment of their half-sibling has changed, as I will show in the next section.

(iv) Questions of Ethics

In the introduction to *Worlds in Regression*, Johnson writes, “Nabokov’s work does, of course, have a moral dimension, although it is happily latent rather than explicit” (3). In *Ada*, that long novel overflowing with lush descriptions of love and nature, the moral dimension is even more hidden than in, for example, *Lolita*, but it is certainly there. Before examining the ethical questions in *Ada*, it is necessary to separate Van from his creator. Van is a brilliant character, without doubt. On the surface, Nabokov seems only to reward Van for his rakishness and admirable arrogance. Boyd aptly sums up the particular reader reaction intended by Nabokov:

*Ada* seems at once a jubilant experience—because its two central characters tingle with such intellectual, emotional, and physical vitality and because the love that develops between them with such speed and force eventually proves more durable than even young ardor could expect… There are those who feel that since he [Nabokov] has endowed his central characters with so much intelligence and lively self-awareness and that since Van depicts his and Ada’s love as a resounding triumph, Nabokov therefore cannot sense what might seem distasteful in the two Veens. (NA 93)

But as Boyd astutely notes, nothing could be further from the truth. It is more likely that Nabokov wants us to be swept off our feet by Van’s brilliance and vitality. The ultimate triumph of the central characters’ love affair does not prevent Nabokov from sensing any distastefulness in the Veens. If anything, it only prevents Van from perceiving his own ethical wrongdoings for the majority of the novel. But even Van is eventually haunted by his own suspicions that his love affair with Ada came at a terrible cost—primarily to Lucette and in a smaller degree to Andrey Vinelander. Van’s slow realization is revealed when his letter to Ada, sent shortly after Lucette’s
suicide, is compared with a much later exchange regarding Lucette that takes place in Van’s and Ada’s old age. Van writes:

*Impersonally I believe she would have died in her bed, gray and serene, had V. loved her; but since he did not really love the wretched little virgin, and since no amount of carnal tenderness could or can pass for true love, and since, above all, the fatal Andalusian wench who had come, I repeat, into the picture, was unforgettable, I am bound to arrive, dear Ada and dear Andrey, at the conclusion that whatever the miserable man could have thought up, she would have pokonchila soboy (‘put an end to herself’) all the same. In other more deeply moral worlds than this pellet of muck, there might exist restraints, principles, transcendental consolations, and even a certain pride in making happy someone does not really love; but on this planet Lucettes are doomed.* (497-8)

However, those restraints and principles do exist on Van’s Antiterra. Boyd, in his argument for Lucette as the novel’s “moral center,” points out that “solicitude for someone else even when it costs what we most dearly crave and most urgently need is as difficult as it is admirable, but at the climax of *Ada* Lucette instinctively manages exactly this” (*NA* 125). Knowing that Van would be sailing on the *Tobakoff*, Lucette books a voyage in hopes of at last seducing him, as “long ago she had made up her mind that by forcing the man whom she absurdly but irrevocably loved to have intercourse with her, even once, she would, somehow, with the help of some prodigious act of nature, transform a brief tactile event into an eternal spiritual tie” (485). Lucette was convinced that if she could not seduce him by the first night, their relationship would slip back into familiar limbo-like pattern. Despite Van’s unwillingness, Lucette is nearly successful. As they sit in the dark cinema of the ship, about to watch *Don Juan’s Last Fling*, Van “suddenly thought: after all, why not? Tonight? Tonight” (488). However, the unexpected appearance of Ada on the screen jolts Van into leaving the cinema. Instead of following Van, Lucette stays with Robert and Rachel Robinson, “old bores of the family” (475). Lucette, Boyd writes, “sacrifices the crucial and precarious hold she has won over her brother in order not to bruise, even lightly, someone else’s sensitivity” (*NA* 125).
The “fatal Andalusian wench” to whom Van refers is, of course, Ada. Van reasons that there was nothing he could have done since his love was what Lucette wanted and also exactly what cannot be forced. Much later, not long before Van’s and Ada’s deaths, Lucette’s fate comes up again in a conversation on the logicality of an afterlife. Ada exclaims, a bit late, that Van should have married Lucette and then all three of them would have lived together in Ardis:

“Oh, Van, oh Van, we did not love her enough. That’s whom you should have married, the one sitting feet up, in ballerina black, on the stone balustrade, and then everything would have been all right—I would have stayed with you both in Ardis Hall, and instead of that happiness, handed out gratis, instead of all that we teased her to death!” (586)

Interestingly, this had been the arrangement that Lucette once suggested, proposing to Van that he marry her and thus inherit Ardis:

“We live there, you write there. I keep melting into the background, never bothering you. We invite Ada—alone, of course—to stay for a while on her estate, for I had always expected mother to leave Ardis to her. While she’s there, I go to Aspen or Gstaad, or Schittau, and you live with her in solid crystal with snow falling as if forever all around pendant que je shee in Aspenis. Then I come back like a shot, but she can stay on, she’s welcome, I’ll hang around in case you two want me.” (466)

Van’s practice of perceptual time extends to reproducing Ada in Lucette, an act that is solipsistic in nature. In some ways, Lucette becomes reduced to Van’s perception of her. On the carriage ride back after the picnic on Ada’s sixteenth birthday, Lucette sits on Van’s lap and Ada sits next to Van. Lucette is four years younger than Ada. During this second Ardis summer, Lucette is the age Ada was during the first summer of Van’s and Ada’s romance. During the carriage ride from that first summer’s picnic, Ada sits on Van’s lap. The set-up is perfect for Van to live both summers simultaneously, and “it was Ada’s soft haunches which he now held as if she were present in duplicate, in two different color prints” (280). Van, who has successfully solipsized Lucette, “closed his eyes in order better to concentrate on the golden flood of swelling joy” (281). This joy, however, is not shared by either Lucette or Ada. Ada hides her jealousy by
pretending to read, and Lucette, confused and on edge, is immobile and “glistening with sweat” (281).

In sharp contrast is Nabokov’s example of the “highest enjoyment of timelessness.” The author notes the experience of standing “among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy… It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love” (139). The author’s own example comes closer to true perceptual time than Van’s, for Lucette cannot be perceived into becoming the twelve-year-old version of Ada. Van’s error lies in using Lucette as a substitute for Ada by capitalizing on his half-sister’s infatuation. In their last meeting before setting sail on the Tobakoff, Van impulsively kisses Lucette, who “tasted exactly as Ada at Ardis” (467). By this point, Lucette had begun imitating Ada in dress and mannerisms, only to remind Van that the only girl he can love is the original, Ada.

(v)

In the story-arc sense, Van’s chronicle comes to an end after Part Four, though the thread of Lucette’s influence continues through to Part Five and through Van’s and Ada’s final, permanent reunion. Many of the characters present in the earlier chapters are dead, and the elderly Van and Ada are free to live as a married couple. Part Five of the book is presented as a vaguely disorganized postscript. We are introduced to Van’s editor, Ronald Oranger, as well as to his typist Violet Knox. This last part shows that Van’s family chronicle is a manuscript that has not undergone final edits. It is unclear whether it is Van or Ada who is in pain in the very last chapter and wondering if it is “time for the morphine.” The narrator for these final pages tells us that “if our time-racked, flat-lying couple ever intended to die they would die, as it were, into the finished book, into Eden or Hades, into the prose of the book or the poetry of its blurb” (587).
With their impending deaths also comes the gradual death of Van’s prose. Van’s guilt over Lucette’s fate has been established in earlier chapters, and it briefly resurfaces in these last few pages. However, Van finds that physical pain has made it impossible for him to dwell on anything else, even his treatment of Lucette. He describes this indifference as “rather amusing,” then questions his own word choice, but it seems that by then Van no longer has the capacity to go back and edit. Ada concludes with what sounds like an advertisement’s recapitulation of the plot, self-parodying in its attempt to entice the reader and smooth over unpleasant incidents. In the most discomforting sentence among these paragraphs, we are told that Lucette’s “tragic destiny constitutes one of the highlights of this delightful book” (588). Even Van at his most insensitive would have hardly made such a remark, and certainly not elderly Van, who was plagued with the thought that his idyllic final years with Ada came at the cost of Lucette’s life. Therefore, Bobbie Ann Mason’s accusation that Van “still attempts to obscure the real issues, treat them decoratively, euphemistically, or metaphorically” and “tries to make the story ‘pretty,’ even in the final passage” (114) is unfounded. Nabokov’s inclusion of Van’s dictations to his secretary and his editor’s notes should make clear that family chronicle is unfinished. The abrupt change in tone and style also suggests that the ending passage is likely written by Van’s editor.

Nabokov’s central characters certainly come to doubt the ethics of their actions, albeit too late. It is important to keep in mind that the overall structure of the book and the chronology of the chapters are Nabokov’s, not Van’s. The first three parts of the novel support Van’s ideas on Time in Part Four. However, those very ideas begin to fray in Part Four and more so in the next and last part. Physical pain, “thick, steady, solid duration of I-can’t-bear-it pain; nothing gray-gauzy about it, solid as a black bole” (587), challenges Van’s theory of Time without measurement. The neuralgia that causes intense pain for long, irregular intervals causes time to
be perceived as a “black beat” after all and not as a grey “Tender Interval” (538), as few things are more effective than physical pain in making a person forget philosophy and live completely in the plodding present.

Nabokov’s and Van’s basic notions of time are more or less the same. It is in practice that Van’s philosophy differs from Nabokov’s and veers into solipsism. Nabokov’s famous statement from Speak, Memory, “I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another” (139), is similar to but not the same as what Van declares in his treatise—“The Time I am concerned with is only the Time stopped by me and closely attended to by my tense-willed mind” (539). In a 1969 interview with Time magazine, Nabokov says, “In his study of time my creature [i.e. Van] distinguishes between text and texture, between the contents of time and its almost tangible essence. I ignored that distinction in my Speak, Memory and was mainly concerned with being faithful to the patterns of the past” (SO 121). Patterns of the past can only be noticed retrospectively, when the past can no longer be changed. Van is interested in patterns too, but his philosophy of time put in practice is much more ethically questionable. In the same Time interview, Nabokov dissociates himself from Van: “The more gifted and talkative one’s characters are, the greater the chances of their resembling the author in tone or tint of mind. It is a familiar embarrassment that I face with very faint qualms, particularly since I am not really aware of any special similarities—just as one is not aware of sharing mannerisms with a detestable kinsman. I loathe Van Veen.”

While taking into account the fact that this is the same author who also claims to have no interest in doppelgängers, we can still trust the kernel of Nabokov’s statement, that Van’s complete devotion to his own subjective memory turns him into a solipsist. Nabokov understood
the minutiae of cruelty, both the intentional and the unintentional. Cruelty is present in the
background of Ada and is only somewhat less concealed in Nabokov’s most famous novel,
Lolita.
Lolita, 1955

(i)
The commercial and critical success of Lolita arguably helped afford Nabokov the ability to produce Ada some fifteen years later. The two novels share a few basic commonalities. Both take the form of memoirs. In Lolita’s set-up, Humbert Humbert sits in prison, awaiting trial for his murder of Quilty, and it is during this period of imprisonment that Humbert writes Lolita, an autobiography whose material comes solely from his own memory. Like Van, like many of Nabokov’s main characters, and like Nabokov himself, Humbert is highly learned and erudite.

In contrast to Van, who uses philosophy as justification of solipsism, Humbert’s time manipulations arise from practical and artistic motives, not from any particular philosophical belief. Whereas Van uses his memory to superimpose time, Humbert seeks to freeze time altogether in order to defeat it and put himself in a god-like role. Humbert spends much of the novel deliberately ignoring the impossibility of a flesh-and-blood person acting according to his artistic ideal. At the end of the novel, however, Humbert at last admits to the futility of his efforts at solipsizing Lolita.

(ii) Reincarnation and Stopped Time

An important aspect of Humbert’s treatment of time is his various mental reincarnations of one girl into another, willing these links into existence if only in the imagination. The reason Humbert gives for his infatuation with Lolita is the existence of a “precursor,” and he seems to insinuate that his love of nymphets is also rooted in “a certain initial girl-child,” (9) whom Humbert loved in his youth. The prototype of Humbert’s nymphet is Annabel Leigh, whose name immediately recalls Annabel Lee, the dead, beloved subject of Edgar Allan Poe’s poem.
By having a literary counterpart, Humbert’s Annabel already achieves some sort of artistic immortality. Humbert does not have a clear memory of Annabel’s physical features, describing her in “general terms as: ‘honey-colored skin,’ ‘thin arms,’ ‘brown bobbed hair,’ ‘long lashes,’ ‘big bright mouth’” (11). Thus, we readers also see Annabel as a vague and distant memory. She is endowed with the mysteriousness and frailty that are hallmarks of Humbert’s definition of a nymphet.

Nymphets are young girls between the ages of nine and fourteen who are not necessarily conventionally pretty but have “certain mysterious characteristics, the fey grace, the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm” (17). They are wholly Humbert’s creation. The true nature of these girls, Humbert writes, is “not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as ‘nymphets’” (16). Humbert begins to seek Annabel’s likeliness in subsequent girls. He finally finds her in Lolita, who, upon first sight, appeared to be “the same child—the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair.” Overjoyed, Humbert declares that “the twenty-five years I had lived since then, tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished” (39). Here we see Van’s concept of Perceptual Time experienced by Humbert, who does not simply link Lolita with the Annabel Leigh from his memory but views her as a continuation of the earlier girl. In the very first chapter, Humbert stresses the three syllables of Lolita’s name, spelling it as “Lo-lee-ta” (9) and suggesting an intrinsic likeliness to Poe’s heroine. Later in the novel, when Humbert and Lolita are on their first long road trip, Humbert looks for a proper beach to reenact, or rectify, his interrupted tryst with Annabel. Lolita and Annabel Leigh are lyrically morphed by Humbert into one, into “Annabel Haze, alias Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta” (167).
However, Humbert’s vision of making love in the wilderness does not translate well into reality, a misfortune he attributes to the “poisonous plants,” “nameless insects,” and “crablike seeds of ferocious flowers” (168) that make American wilderness not conducive to lovemaking. This is one of many passages in the novel where Nabokov pokes fun at Humbert’s futile attempts to make the real Lolita align with his mental creation. As Lolita enters her teenage years, Humbert finds that she embodies less and less his idea of a nymphet. At one point, he realizes “all at once with a sickening qualm how much she had changed” in two years.

Her complexion was now that of any vulgar untidy highschool girl who applies shared cosmetics with grubby fingers to an unwashed face and does not mind what soiled texture, what postulate epidermis comes in contact with her skin. Its smooth tender bloom had been so lovely in former days, so bright with tears, when I used to roll, in play, her tousled head on my knee. A coarse flush had now replaced that innocent fluorescence. What was locally known as a ‘rabbit cold’ had painted with flaming pink the edges of her contemptuous nostrils. As in terror I lowered my gaze, it mechanically slid along the underside of her tensely stretched bare thigh—how polished and muscular her legs had grown! (204)

The image of the nymphet, which Humbert had foisted on Lolita and labored to maintain, is unraveling. One crucial difference between Annabel Leigh and Lolita is that the former had been obliging and, being about the same age as Humbert, was on equal footing with him. As Lolita matures, she becomes less and less willing to participate in the quasi-incestuous arrangement with Humbert and becomes a “cruel negotiator” in his view. A power struggle begins to develop between Humbert and Lolita. Humbert, “because of the very nature of love’s languor” (184), cannot force Lolita’s affection. This is Humbert dealing with the real Lolita, rather than an image. It reveals his problematic and unattainable desire to control time, as no matter what, Annabel Leigh and Lolita are not the same person and do not even know of the other’s existence. Any similarities are entirely coincidental, and to Humbert’s eventual realization and dismay,
ephemeral. I agree with Christoph Henry-Thommes, who notes that “Humbert’s problem… is that he sees linkages, where, in fact, there are none” (RMI 289).

It takes Humbert significant effort to create and see these linkages. He admits that he has even “cast an appraiser’s cold eye at Charlotte’s coral lips and bronze hair and dangerously low neckline, and had vaguely tried to fit her into a plausible daydream” (70), presumably to little success. Humbert marries Charlotte mainly to keep Lolita in his vicinity, but in the meantime he also tries to find elements of Lolita in her mother. With the help of a few drinks, Humbert manages to “evoke the child while caressing the mother,” convincing himself that Charlotte’s dyed hair “acquired at certain lamplit moments in the poster bed the tinge, if not the texture, of Lolita’s curls” (76). A few times Humbert refers to Charlotte as Lotte, but photographs of young Charlotte show only a “dim first version of Lolita’s outline,” and the comically ridiculous “Lottelita, Lolitchen” (76) requires a level of imagination that even Humbert is unable to sustain.

Humbert’s views on time change over the two years with Lolita. In the beginning, when he has just moved to Ramsdale, he prides himself on the ease of “solipsizing” Lolita, of blending memory, fantasy, and present circumstances to create a reality of which Lolita is unaware, despite her starring role. After Humbert accepts the fact that she has left for good, he finds himself seeking, out of old habit, the “flash of a nymphet’s limbs, the sly tokens of Lolita’s handmaids and rosegirls” (257). This shows two interesting new developments in Humbert. By this point, Lolita has completely eclipsed Annabel Leigh and become the nymphet prototype. And yet, Humbert no longer intends to reincarnate Lolita in a new “little maiden, specific or synthetic” and indeed never does. His next affair with Rita, who is twice Lolita’s age, is motivated by practical reasons of avoiding solitude and satisfying “certain habits of lust” (257).
While Humbert never discusses Time at length, he does mention two essays he has written on this topic. Humbert writes the first one during his student days in Paris. He gives us the title of this essay—“The Proustian theme in a letter from Keats to Benjamin Bailey”—but does not say more about its content, other than that it was “chuckled over by the six or seven scholars who read it” (16). Humbert revisits the topic of time and memory after Lolita’s departure. In this second essay, titled “Mimir and Memory,” Humbert introduces “a theory of perceptual time 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)” (260).

William Anderson argues that Nabokov has Humbert referring to a particular letter among the ten in John Keats’s collected letters that are addressed to Bailey. The most likely candidate, according to Anderson, is a November 22, 1817 letter in which Keats addresses the influence of imagination on memory. Anderson writes that “Keats describes the imagination’s power to revivify a past moment, to retrieve and even more ecstatically to cause the mind to relive an earlier experience when stimulated by an ‘old melody’” (TM 364). In the same letter, Keats remarks that “what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth.”

Henry-Thommes expounds further on Keats’s influence on Humbert’s treatment of time by pointing to the poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and arguing that “the image of the two lovers represented on the urn might have appealed to Humbert” (RMI 286). The poem’s narrator tells the lover depicted on the urn, “do not grieve: She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss.” I agree with Henry-Thommes’s argument that this combination of unfulfilled desire and perpetual beauty and fidelity, which can only exist in art, is how Humbert has chosen to recall his
childhood love for Annabel Leigh. Art is Humbert’s method of attaining immortality, the ultimate form of timelessness and arguably the defeat of time.

These two essays are Nabokov’s parody of academic papers, and as Keats and Bailey predate Marcel Proust, the “Proustian theme” is an anachronism. However, as Henry-Thommes notes, Nabokov was an admirer of Proust and especially took interest in his theories on time and memory. Proust’s concept of involuntary memory appears in a number of Nabokov’s works, including Ada. In Lolita, we see it intruding on Humbert’s solipsism, as a purely individual reality is as fragile as a purely objective one. In one instance from Humbert’s pre-Lolita life, he notices a “lighted window across the street and what looked like a nymphet in the act of undressing before a co-operative mirror. Thus isolated, thus removed, the vision acquired an especially keen charm… But abruptly, fiendishly, the tender pattern of nudity I had adored would be transformed into the disgusting lamp-lit bare arm of a man in his underclothes reading his paper by the open window in the hot, damp, hopeless summer night” (20). This is one of Humbert’s involuntary sights, something that once seen cannot be unseen, just as “other smothered memories, now unfolding themselves into limbless monsters of pain” (284) present themselves to Humbert once the right circumstances, such as a crowd of normal, happy children, come along.

(iii) “Botticelli’s Venus”

Questions of ethics arise when Humbert moves from the artistic idealization of the dead Annabel Leigh to the living Lolita. Lolita’s voice, as it appears in the novel, is filtered through Humbert’s memory. Unlike Ada, whose marginal notes accompany Van’s chronicle and occasionally dispute the accuracy of his recollections, Lolita has no say in the novel that is named after her.
Humbert, assuming that Lolita will outlive him by many years, specifies that the book be published only after her death. The “refuge of art,” Humbert writes, is the “only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (309). The possessive article is apt, since the immortal Lolita is based less on the real Lolita than on Humbert’s perception of her. After Humbert’s first sexual contact with Lolita, he exalts the fact that she seems unaware of what had just occurred. He recounts that what he “had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own.” (62)

In fact, it is plausible to argue that up until their final meeting at the end of the novel, Humbert is so entrenched in his solipsistic view that he never truly sees Lolita other than in artistic and literary terms. At one point in the narrative, Humbert addresses Lolita directly: “Oh Lolita, you are my girl, as Vee was Poe’s and Bea Dante’s” (107). This poetic comparison takes on a more sinister overtone considering that Poe’s first wife, Virginia, was thirteen at the time of their marriage and died at twenty-four. Dante purportedly first met Beatrice when he was nine and she eight. Like Virginia, Beatrice died young, at the age of twenty-four, and this pattern seems to prefigure Lolita’s early death. As Dante’s lifelong literary muse and embodiment of beauty, Beatrice occupied a role somewhat similar to Annabel Leigh’s in Humbert’s life, at least up until Lolita becomes the “original” nymphet.

But unlike Beatrice and unlike Annabel Leigh, the spell of Lolita the nymphet is broken before her death. Humbert sees Lolita one final time after he receives a letter from the newly married and pregnant Dolly Schiller, asking for “three or four hundred” dollars to help finance a move. Seventeen-year-old Dolly—Lolita’s name at this point—is “frankly and hugely pregnant.” Her “pale-freckled cheeks were hollowed, and her bare shins and arms had lost all
their tan, so that the little hairs showed. She wore a brown, sleeveless cotton dress and sloppy felt slippers” (269). She has acquired the new habit of smoking cigarettes, along with various gestures that she makes “exactly as her mother used to do” (275). As Humbert gazes at her, his solipsism and obsession with nymphetts, which had served as a thread linking preceding parts of the narrative, seem to vanish.

Somewhere beyond Bill’s shack an afterwork radio had begun singing of folly and fate, and there she was with her ruined looks and her adult, rope-veined narrow hands and her gooseflesh white arms, and her shallow ears, and her unkempt armpits, there she was (my Lolita!), hopelessly worn at seventeen, with that baby, dreaming already in her of becoming a big shot and retiring around 2020 A.D.—and I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else. She was only the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet I had rolled myself upon with such cries in the past; an echo on the brink of a russet ravine, with a far wood under a white sky, and brown leaves choking the brook, and one last cricket in the crisp weeds… but thank God it was not that echo alone that I worshipped. (277-8)

This is the first time that Humbert describes Lolita’s physical appearance not in comparison to Annabel Leigh or to the memory of his first glimpse of her in Ramsdale, an American reincarnation of his Riviera love “in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees” (39). Humbert’s tone as he notes Lolita’s “ruined looks” and “unkempt armpits” is more contemplative than critical. Dolinin writes that “only after having suffered a miserable defeat in this uneven battle, having lost Lolita forever, does Humbert Humbert begin to replay in his mind the pattern of his life, trying to break the vicious circle” (TD 24-5). This would suggest that Humbert writes his autobiography out of guilt over his treatment of Lolita, as well as in hopes of finding redemption through art. Such an interpretation calls to mind Boyd’s theory of Lucette, from beyond the grave, inspiring Van to write his family chronicle. Anderson also comments on the vicious circle of Humbert’s life. Humbert’s error, Anderson writes, is in “making memory a full substitute for present time” (TM 375).
Compare this with Nabokov’s spiral form of Time, in which the Past is allowed to evolve, and Humbert appears to have trapped himself in the prison of time with his futile desire to freeze it.

Humbert finally breaks the vicious circle when he becomes able to love Lolita the nonnymphet. Dolinin argues that Humbert’s escape and belated acceptance of present time is in fact yet another form of time manipulation. As his real past is “too ugly, mean and meaningless for ‘Proustianization,’ he cannot just indulge in the Proustian art of memory. What he also needs to find for himself and for Lolita as literary characters is an aesthetically perfect future, the finale of his book” (34).

(iv) “Dolorès Disparue”

Unreliable narration is a possibility in any novel that like Lolita is filtered through one character’s retrospective imagination and memory. The unreliability of Humbert’s account results largely from his deliberate ignoring of “reality” in favor of his own and possibly predetermined succession of events. Nabokov allows readers occasional glimpses of objective reality but mainly in the background of more dazzling prose. In Humbert’s lament over Lolita’s teenage appearance, he recalls with nostalgia that her skin’s “smooth tender bloom had been so lovely in former days, so bright with tears, when I used to roll, in play” (204). Humbert mentions in passing Lolita’s “sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep” (176) but does not try to discern its cause. To do so would be to violate what Humbert later in the novel calls the “mental hygiene of noninterference” (287), that is, noninterference with subjective reality and memory.
In light of Humbert’s tendency towards deliberate unreliable narration, several critics have argued that Humbert’s account of the last chapters—his meeting with Dolly, killing Quilty—could be pure artistic fabrication. *Lolita* is subtitled “Confessions of a white widowed male,” which might suggest a stream-of-consciousness narrative. As Dolinin points out though, “the structure of Lolita is overwhelmingly sophisticated, with its multiple masks, thematic patterns intricate intertextuality and, most importantly, the self-metadesccriptions which permeate every chapter of the book” (TD 29). Humbert knows about Quilty, of course, when he sets out to write his confession. Yet this confession, with its elements of a detective novel, is carefully crafted for readers so that at the intended time, everything does fall “into order, into the pattern of branches that [Humbert has] woven throughout this memoir with the express purpose of having the ripe fruit fall at the right moment” (272).

The argument for interpreting Humbert’s meeting with Lolita as his fabrication is compelling, but when the events immediately preceding and following the meeting are also presumed to be fictional, this argument begins to unravel. This interpretation has its most “solid” evidence in the discrepancy between the dates given by John Ray, Jr. and those given by Humbert. Dolinin notes that Humbert receives Lolita’s letter on September 22, kills Quilty on September 25, and dies in prison on November 16, having finished the manuscript of *Lolita*:

Thus we know that the earliest day that Humbert Humbert could have started working on his book is the 25th of September, and therefore he could not have worked on it longer than *fifty-three* days. However, at the end of his “confession,” he reports that he began writing Lolita exactly *fifty-six* days ago. (TD 30)

If we were to trust Nabokov’s fictional John Ray, Jr. to provide the correct timeline of events, then everything else in the foreword should also be taken as true in the context of the novel, including the brief run-down of characters’ fates that John Ray provides. We learn that “Mrs. ‘Richard F. Schiller’” dies in childbirth on Christmas Day and that Humbert dies “in legal
captivity, of coronary thrombosis” (3). The letter Humbert receives from Dolly states that she is pregnant and the baby is due around Christmas. Chances are slim that Humbert could have learned of this from any source other than Dolly, which means that the letter is unlikely to be Humbert’s fabrication.

It is also unlikely that Humbert’s murder of Quilty does not take place and is simply Humbert’s version of poetic justice. John Ray tells us that Humbert’s crime “may be looked up by the inquisitive in the daily papers for September-October 1952; its cause and purpose would have continued to remain a complete mystery, had not this memoir been permitted to come under my reading lamp” (4). Both Humbert’s and John Ray’s accounts state that Humbert commits a crime and is imprisoned while awaiting trial. In fact, the dates are the only discrepancy between the two accounts that otherwise match up. Dolinin warns against dismissing this discrepancy as the unwitting error of a “confused protagonist,” noting that “in the second part of Lolita Humbert Humbert is absolutely precise in terms of chronology” (TD 30). As Dolinin points out, Humbert correctly identifies the day of Lolita’s disappearance as a Monday and calculates that the next day she would turn five thousand three hundred days old. This calculation appears only in the poem that Humbert composes during the winter and spring of 1950, suggesting that for Humbert, Lolita’s age stops on July 5, 1949, the day after her escape. In a footnote, Dolinin mentions the interpretation put forth by Anne Berggren, then a graduate student in his Nabokov class, that this stopped age “leads one to suspect that Humbert is hiding the fact of Lolita’s death in the Elphinstone hospital” (TD 30).

Such an early death for Lolita would in fact make the novel fall apart. Quilty’s chase becomes rather meaningless. At this point, as far as Lolita is concerned, Quilty is still not “guilty” of anything. To have Lolita die before she escapes nymphethood would be too easy
punishment for Humbert and perhaps a not-unwelcome way out for Lolita, thus making much of the novel’s ethical component irrelevant. It would also mean that Humbert succeeds at his time manipulations, and like Annabel Leigh, Lolita would never advance out of the nymphet mold. Perhaps, then, the discrepancy of the dates is only Humbert’s error arising from the “daily headache in the opaque air of this tombal jail” (109), or as Boyd suggests, Nabokov’s own oversight. Humbert’s mid-novel admission that his “calendar is getting confused” (109) adds to the possibility that the dates are a matter of careless mistake and not indicative of a grander plot. Finally, we have Nabokov’s Afterword “On a Book Entitled Lolita,” in which the author picks out the scene of “pale, pregnant, beloved, irretrievable Dolly Schiller dying in Gray Star” as among the “nerves of the novel… these are the secret points, the subliminal co-ordinates by means of which the book is plotted” (316).

(v)

Renouncing his earlier solipsistic views is Humbert’s only chance at any kind of moral redemption. That Humbert has realized his greatest crime was disregarding Lolita’s personhood is most believable at the end of the novel when he writes: “I thought I would use these notes in toto at my trial, to save not my head, of course, but my soul. In mid-composition, however, I realized that I could not parade living Lolita” (308).

Just as it is dangerous to read naively, taking everything at literal value, having one’s judgment clouded by excessive skepticism is also a very real possibility. With Humbert’s decision not to “parade living Lolita” in mind, a literal reading of Humbert’s last meeting with Lolita shows the strong likelihood of his sincerity in his professed love for the real, non-nymphet Dolly: “I insist the world know how much I loved my Lolita, this Lolita, pale and polluted, and
big with another’s child, but still gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond, still Carmencita, still mine” (278).
In *Ada and Lolita*, Nabokov links perceptual time and memory to the desire to hold on to a past love. This connection is presented in its simplest form in *Mary*, Nabokov’s first novel. Lev Glebovich Ganin, a Russian émigré in Berlin, mentally relives a love affair he had in his youth. The events of the novel take place in 1924, from Sunday, March 30 to Saturday, April 5. Ganin’s prolonged reverie, which lasts four days, is triggered by chance, after Ganin’s neighbor at the pension shows him a photo of his wife, who is the same Mary with whom Ganin had fallen in love and out of love when both lived in Russia. Surrounded by fellow displaced dreamers, Ganin begins to ignore his physical surroundings completely and live within his recollections of Mary. Ironically, this daydream state is what finally propels Ganin to leave Berlin behind and seek a new life—the only one of the pensioners able to do so.

Like Van and Humbert, Ganin is acutely aware of the past, and his memory is the main tool he has to bring the past into the present. However, there is no spiral of time for Ganin the émigré, who is cut off from his past and unable to revisit it. For Ganin and the rest of the pensioners, the past and Russia are virtually synonymous. Both seem more real than the present, and yet, both are unattainable. Berlin for the émigrés becomes a sort of limbo, where dreaming and living in the past is the norm.

Podtyagin, the elderly pensioner who had been a poet, dreams of moving to Paris but is set back by Germany’s bureaucratic system, which he does not try to understand. Klara, another pensioner, is a young woman languishing in her job as a typist and in her unrequited love for Ganin. She worries that her youth is passing by, but she is helpless to change her circumstances. Alfyorov, who shows Ganin the photo of Mary and inadvertently reignites his love for her, can...
only think and talk about the arrival of his wife, to the point of being mocked by other pensioners. The pension doors, numbered April 1-6 with leaves torn from a year-old calendar, underscore the sluggishness of time for the émigrés. The passing of time has become meaningless, and the émigrés find themselves trapped in a sinister timelessness.

(ii) A Symbol of Lost Russia

On the first day of his reverie, Ganin wanders around Berlin, so deeply entrenched in his memories that he bumps into passersby and is nearly hit by a car. But Ganin is unaffected by all of this, fancying himself “a god, re-creating a world that had perished” (33). Ganin’s treatment of time differs from that of Van’s and Humbert’s in that he does not merge memory with the present, which he appears to disdain along with Berlin. Unlike Van, Ganin does not try to superimpose old memories on the present but rather to immerse himself in the past completely:

Gradually he resurrected that world, to please the girl whom he did not dare to place in it until it was absolutely complete. But her image, her presence, the shadow of her memory demanded that in the end he must resurrect her too—and he intentionally thrust away her image, as he wanted to approach it gradually, step by step, just as he had done nine years before. (33)

This shows that Ganin is not immune to solipsistic thinking. His mental love affair with Mary launches him back into life and takes him from passive to dynamic, sometimes verging on brusque. Berlin initially causes him to fall into idleness. Formerly strong and always “burning with the urge to do something” (8), Ganin finds himself “dull and gloomy” and suffering from insomnia. On the morning of the day he would see Mary’s photo, he sits, “appalled by the thought that today was another day and that he would have to put on shirt, trousers, socks” (8). Ganin cannot bring himself to leave Berlin because it would mean ending his love affair with a woman named Lyudmila, which he also cannot do. Even though Ganin is repulsed by Lyudmila,
his inertia makes any action apart from the norm impossibly difficult. This all changes after he learns that Mary is arriving in Berlin on Saturday, April 5. On the next morning, the first day of April, Ganin jumps out of bed and shaves, feeling like he has “become exactly nine years younger” (28). Then he “very calmly” goes to see Lyudmila and bluntly tells her that he is in love with someone else.

For Ganin, his mental reliving of the past becomes much more interesting and even more real to him than his physical existence. This may owe less to the émigré experience in Berlin than to Ganin’s own preference for reality at a distance and in a form over which he has imaginative control. I agree with Julian W. Connolly’s characterization of Ganin as a “consummate dreamer” whose entire existence is “a kind of extended semi-slumber” (33). Connolly notes that Ganin’s initial fascination with Lyudmila lasts only until the first time they make love, after which she becomes irrevocably and unbearably solid and real. Ganin prefers to keep his own identity hazy as well. He has a Russian passport but chooses to use a forged Polish one, which is “quite convenient and rather fun” (81). Even “Ganin” is a pseudonym.

Ganin takes a similar view towards women, finding the distant and mysterious to be much more seductive than up-close reality. In his student days, Ganin had started a rumor about having a society lady as a mistress, when in fact he was “absurdly chaste and felt none the worse for it either,” viewing with distaste his schoolmates who “used foul language and panted at the very word ‘woman’” for being “all so spotty and dirty, with sweaty palms” (41). This distaste has remained with Ganin into his adulthood. Lyudmila repulses him with the “unpleasantly familiar smell of her perfume” (20). In contrast, Mary is at her most alluring when she is only a mental image. Ganin cannot picture his first meeting with Mary, which is due to the fact that he first falls in love with the idea of her:
The fact was that he had been waiting for her with such longing, had thought so much about her during those blissful days after the typhus, that he had fashioned her unique image long before he actually saw her. Now, many years later, he felt that their imaginary meeting and the meeting which took place in reality had blended and merged imperceptibly into one another, since as a living person she was only an uninterrupted continuation of the image which had foreshadowed her. (44)

Like Lolita, Mary has her own prototype. However, this prototype, being purely Ganin’s fancy, is even less based in reality than Humbert’s Annabel Leigh. Rather than being a sign of solipsism on Ganin’s part, this imagined Mary is more akin to Lolita’s posters of blue-eyed movie stars, an idealized childhood crush. Ganin is sixteen years old when he recuperates from typhus, and he meets fifteen-year-old Mary a month later. Their love affair takes place nine years prior to the novel’s narration, which means that Ganin is about twenty-five years old in 1924. It is important to note that Ganin’s “present” age is still youthful, which would seem to give him greater ability to leave the Berlin pension.

Nostalgia, when it operates as part of Nabokov’s time spiral, enriches the present by connecting it to meaningful experiences in the past. Without these connections to the present, nostalgia leads to the “semi-slumber” that Connolly describes, a dangerous kind of inertia. Ganin’s nostalgia for Mary is often expressed alongside his nostalgia for his youth. The scheduled arrival of Mary becomes, in Ganin’s mind, synonymous with returning to him “all his youth, his Russia” (102). This raises the question of whether Ganin simply yearns for Mary to return, or, perhaps, he has endowed the affair with more significance than it really contains, turning Mary into a symbol of all that he has lost.

Connolly suggests that “Ganin’s longing for Mary may grow in direct proportion to the physical distance that exists between them” (36). Indeed, Ganin’s tendency to recall Mary when she is far away is not a new development but rather an ingrained part of his character. When he arrives in Istanbul after leaving Russia for good, he experiences a “clear, piercing sense of how
far he was from the warm mass of his own country and from Mary, whom he loved forever” (102). It appears that over the course of their affair, Ganin falls in and out of love with Mary several times, with these crests and dips of his affection generally corresponding to the couple’s separations and reunions. Connolly notes that during the disappointing winter that Ganin and Mary spend in St. Petersburg, their first reunion following their first autumn together, Ganin pines for the autumn that has passed, a time when they did not “have to deal with the reality of everyday life—constraints on privacy, difficulty in arranging meetings, and so on” (36). The reality of lovemaking, which Ganin initially looks forward to, also proves a disappointment as the “chill and the hardness of the stone slab hurt his bare knees; and Mary lay there too submissive, too still” (73).

(iii) The Downward Spiral of Time

The danger of Ganin’s predilection for dreaming comes into sharper focus when compared to Podtyagin, who laments that he “put everything into [his] poetry that [he] should have put into [his] life” (41). Interestingly, Nabokov chooses to make Podtyagin and Alfyorov fringe players in Mary’s and Ganin’s love affair, providing weak but nevertheless existing ties between Ganin’s past and present. Therefore, Ganin’s present existence in Berlin is not completely cut off from his past. These links do not enrich the present, however, and in fact cast a shadow on Ganin’s romanticized memories by suggesting that the past was not as idyllic as he remembers.

In one of Mary’s letters to Ganin, she tells him about the attention paid to her by “a very amusing man with a little yellow beard” (92). This man is likely Alfyorov, who is described in the beginning of the novel as having a “little golden beard” (4). Podtyagin’s presence is clearer. In the same letter, Mary quotes two lines of Podtyagin’s verse. When Ganin recites the lines back
to the poet, Podtyagin asks if he had found it in an old calendar, explaining that “they were very fond of printing my poetry on calendar leaves. On the underside, above the recipe of the day” (98).

Podtyagin’s descent from poet to involuntary émigré and prisoner of bureaucracy is emblematic of the general downward spiral of time experienced by the pensioners. Far from evolving to a higher plane, Ganin’s love affair with Mary shows the symptoms of deterioration to meaninglessness. Hana Pichová suggests that Mary’s letters to Ganin, in which she laments that “today it’s so boring, boring” (92), show “a lack of intellect, emotional depth, and even close affinity to Alfyorov through the misuse of the same word” (27). Mary’s letters are in effect mistaken by Podtyagin to be an old calendar, as that is where he is accustomed to finding his poetry. In this novel, old calendars carry somewhat ominous connotations, as they are associated with stagnation and with elements of the past that have no purpose in the present. The same can be said of Mary’s letters and Ganin’s recollections of their affair.

Connolly argues that Ganin awakens “to authentic physical life” at the very end of his novel, as he goes to the train station to wait for Mary. Ganin notices construction workers building a house, whose “yellow sheen of fresh timber was more alive than the most lifelike dream of the past” (114). According to Connolly, this shows that Ganin has perhaps absorbed Podtyagin’s words about the peril of putting into dreams what one should put into life:

As Ganin looked up at the skeletal roof in the ethereal sky he realized with merciless clarity that his affair with Mary was ended forever. It had lasted no more than four days—four days which were perhaps the happiest days of his life. But now he had exhausted his memories, was sated by them, and the image of Mary, together with that of the old dying poet, now remained in the house of ghosts, which itself was already a memory.

Other than that image no Mary existed, nor could exist. (114)
This realization at last ends Ganin’s slumbering state, for the present at least. Remark ing on the four days being “perhaps the happiest days” of Ganin’s life, Connolly poses the question: “Is it possible that this cerebral activity may have given the dreamer more pleasure than the original experience itself?” (233). It seems likely. Ganin’s “cerebral” version of the affair is an intensified, idealized one, in which “his memory did not take account of every moment and skipped over the blank unmemorable stretches, only illuminating those connected with Mary” (55). It then does not seem improbable that Ganin’s mental affair should end as abruptly as it begins. As Connolly writes, “although the scenes Ganin re-creates are meant to represent actual experience, the manner in which they are stitched together seems suspiciously polished and refined, more like a calculated work of art than the raw flow of personal memory” (39). It is improbable that this time the reality of Mary’s arrival in Berlin would again merge imperceptibly into Ganin’s fantasy.

(iv) Time, Memory, and Ethics

As in *Ada* and *Lolita*, the ethical aspect of *Mary* is closely tied to Ganin’s approach to memory and time. Brian Boyd notes in his biography of Nabokov that the author did not consider Ganin to be particularly likeable, though “amongst the others there are very sweet people” (*RY*, 244). Connolly finds Ganin’s indifference to the feelings of others “disturbing,” writing that Ganin’s “devotion to his inner creative designs renders him insensitive to the needs and weaknesses of others” (43). The same could be said of Van, of Humbert. These three protagonists are all highly intelligent and aware of their own intelligence. As shown in the three novels, placing great importance in one’s own thoughts
is often the precursor to solipsistic thinking, which in turn quickly descends to casual indifference and cruelty.

Ganin acts cruelly towards Lyudmila and condescendingly towards Alfyorov, the dancers, and the city of Berlin. However, despite his occasional disappointments with the reality of Mary, Ganin does not try to alter the person so that she fits into his imagined ideal. In *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov differentiates between the good memoirist and the bad, asserting that the latter “re-touches his past, and the result is a blue-tinted or pink-shaded photograph taken by a stranger to console sentimental bereavement. The good memoirist, on the other hand, does his best to preserve the utmost truth of the detail” (186). The crucial difference is the purpose of the memoirist. In Ganin’s reverie, the past becomes sentimentalized and precious. What Ganin seems to realize at the end of the novel is that try as one might, it is impossible, and likely unethical, to bend the world according to one’s imagination.
Afterword

Given Nabokov’s utter disdain towards critics who dare suggest that his novels shed light into the life of their author, it seems foolhardy to note that Ganin is the same age as Nabokov—both about twenty-five in 1924—and insinuate that it holds significance. Nabokov wrote *Mary* while living in Berlin. Like Ganin, Nabokov rather disliked his adopted city and socialized primarily within Russian émigré circles. But as far as plot goes, nothing in *Mary* particularly resembles Nabokov’s life.

But this does not mean that we cannot learn anything about the author by reading his works. An autobiography containing various personal details is no more telling than one that shows the minor thoughts and changes in thinking that eventually constructs a person's general philosophy. Nabokov’s work taken as a whole reveals enduring themes—or “watermarks,” as noted by Véra Nabokov—and perceptual time in relation to memory and ethics is but one. Nabokov’s works are not autobiographical in the dictionary definition of the word, but they reveal the sustained interests and ideas of the author. Those who interpret the words “death of a writer” as meaning either literal death or the end of writing ability might agree that Nabokov’s novels are, paradoxically, autobiographical without relating at all to his personal life. In other words, these novels show nascent ideas and their arc of development. The existence of an afterlife may be Nabokov’s ultimate main theme, but it is safe to say that perceptual time comes in second or third in the list of elements making up Nabokov’s metaphysics.

There are authors who, by the time of their death, have already stopped writing for some time. Others, perhaps due to a sense of time running out, become more prolific. In the last years of his life, Nabokov worked nonstop. One of his last projects was a French translation of *Ada*, which left inadequate time for him to finish writing *The Original of Laura (Dying Is Fun).*
Despite Nabokov’s firm instructions to destroy any work unfinished at the time of his death, neither Véra nor Dmitri Nabokov was willing to take the irreversible step of destroying the unfinished manuscript of a novel that Nabokov had already completed in his head.\textsuperscript{5} The only physical evidence of The Original of Laura lay in numbered index cards, and it was in that form that the “novel in fragments” was published in 2009.

The publication of the unfinished novel was highly anticipated and, not surprisingly, prompted a flurry of reviews. Aleksandar Hemon, in a review for Slate, gives a run-down of the main characters and plot:

The central character is Philip Wild, a morbidly obese intellectual deteriorating in the obtuse corner of a love triangle (not unlike those in Nabokov’s early Russian-language novels) while his young wife, Flora, and someone named, possibly, Eric occupy the other two corners. Eric was one of Flora's many lovers, who then distinguished himself from the lurid crowd by writing a novel called My Laura, which described their affair in detail.\textsuperscript{6}

Hemon suggests that Flora may be the original of Laura. “Or is she? The confusing game of negotiating reality is played yet again, as it was, pleasantly, in many a Nabokov work,” Hemon writes. It doesn’t matter too much who Flora really is. Even in its unfinished state, The Original of Laura contains the unmistakable marks that distinguish Nabokov’s work. It, too, is stamped with the “watermark” of Nabokov’s “ultimate main theme.” We can only speculate, of course, but had Nabokov lived a few years longer, perhaps Flora would have joined the list of unforgettable fictional heroines.

Nabokov’s Laura is also a novel about dying. Philip Wild attempts death by self-obliteration, willing himself out of existence bit by bit. Here, the dying author’s work and life

\textsuperscript{5} In an essay published in The American Scholar, Brian Boyd writes that “a sense of personal honor” led Nabokov to redo the French translation of Ada after the original translator had a breakdown. A workday for Nabokov, then 76, started at 5 o’clock in the morning. Boyd suggests that the intense schedule, along with various “severe falls, operations, and infections” contributed to the author’s death two years later.

\textsuperscript{6} Slate Magazine published Hemon’s review, titled “Hands Off Nabokov,” on November 10, 2009.
achieve a flimsy parallel once more. Van’s theory of perceptual time, the isolation of Ganin and his fellow émigrés, the lush visual details of Humbert’s and Lolita’s cross-country road trip, and Van’s fondness for boiled eggs are rooted in Nabokov’s personal experiences. But as for the characters themselves, Nabokov is much more likely to criticize than to condone.

In closing, I would like to suggest a non-autobiographical explanation for the identical age—namely, that it was mostly a matter of convenience. The young Nabokov would have known quite well the muscles and joints of an athletic young man of twenty-five, just like the author of *Ada*, aging and prone to insomnia like Van, would have been in a supreme position to describe with dignity and compassionate humor the pains, physical and psychological, of old age.
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