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MAGICAL REALISM IN THE WORKS OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV: COMPETING  
REALITIES IN *PALE FIRE* AND *ADA*

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## ABSTRACT

Vladimir Nabokov incorporates into many of his fictional English-language works elements of magic or fantasy, though many of these works also possess characteristics of realism. This paradox—the contradiction between the qualities of the fantastic and of the real—can cause readers trouble, and critics have attempted to address these problems. However, very little has been said regarding the status of Nabokov’s works in relation to the genre of magical realism, a framework that could eliminate or at least alleviate the difficulty readers experience when they encounter such issues. Ato Quayson’s definition of magical realism serves this analysis of two of Nabokov’s fictional English language works, *Pale Fire* and *Ada*. Quayson claims that the central characteristic of magical realism is the “scrupulous equivalence” of the fantastic and of the real and describes four characteristics that signal the presence of this equivalence. He notes that these four qualities—boundary blurring, the intentional manipulation of language, the altered presentation of space and time, and the act of subverting the historical—all function as modes by which the fantastic and the realistic are granted equal legitimacy. Using a magical realist framework helps to illuminate the enigmatic aspects of Nabokov’s works, and additionally offers suggestions for ways to clarify definitions of magical realism.

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## Introduction

The often confusing worlds presented by Vladimir Nabokov in his works of fiction have received much attention from the critics who have attempted to unravel them. The body of criticism regarding Nabokov's English-language novels has addressed some of the most enigmatic aspects of the worlds within these works, including the magical or fantastic elements of Nabokov's writing, elements that are in part responsible for the difficulty readers experience when reading his works. Considering that Nabokov frequently incorporates fairy tales and fantasy into his novels, and that he discusses these themes while simultaneously writing realistically, I propose to examine Nabokov's works using a magical realist framework—one that is characterized by the coexistence of both fantastic and realistic elements. Little has been said regarding the relationship of Nabokov's works to magical realism, though Lois Parkinson Zamora, one of the editors of the collection of essays *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, does note in her discussion of self-reflexive literature that “not all self-reflective fiction is magical realist: [authors like Nabokov] and many others question the conventions of literary realism without necessarily engaging magical realist modes of narration” (Zamora 501). Zamora explicitly excludes Nabokov from the magical realist tradition, and in doing so connects him to it only by separating him from it.

Yet definitions of magical realism vary widely: other essays in Zamora and Faris's collection and other definitions of magical realism identify narrative functions of the genre that, I argue, Nabokov employs in his fictional English-language works. I further claim that examining

Nabokov's novels with a magical realist lens provides readers with a tool that allows them to better understand and grapple with the contradictory, co-existent components of both fantasy and realism in these works. Stephen Slemon acknowledges in his essay "Magical Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse" that "the term magical realism is an oxymoron, one that suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly, of fantasy" (Slemon 409). Though Slemon notes that worlds of fantasy and worlds realism are ultimately incompatible, the genre of magical realism permits both to exist. Magical realism inherently involves what Ato Quayson, in his essay "Fecundities of the Unexpected: Magical Realism, Narrative, and History," calls a "scrupulous equivalence between the two domains [ie, fantasy and realism]" (Quayson 728). Quayson defines the relationship between these two domains as "interplay," preferring his term to Slemon's descriptions of a "battle" between the domains. Quayson claims that referring to the relationship between fantasy and realism as a "battle" presents the relationship between fantasy and realism as a conflict that precludes equivalence.

Indeed, I argue that Quayson's comments about the equivalence of fantasy and realism, as well as his ideas about the interplay between these two domains that makes equivalence possible, capture the sentiment of much of the criticism that attempts to define magical realism. As early on as 1925, Franz Roh, who coined the name of the genre, discusses in his essay "Magical Realism: Post Expressionism" the clash of true and apparent realities, and emphasizes the importance of individual perception in describing or creating a reality. Alejo Carpentier, author of "On the Marvelous Real in America," writes that the marvelous—or the fantastic—"begins to be unmistakably marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality" (Carpentier 86). Carpentier therefore establishes the need for an objective reality, one

which fantasy (“the marvelous”) amends based on the individualized perception of the person interpreting the reality. Though the objective reality exists, a new “fantastic” reality emerges as the result of this process of interpretation; both realities possess equal legitimacy.

Magical realism, by equating the legitimacies of realism and fantasy in fictional literature, emphasizes that the construction of a reality relies more on the process of individual perception and interpretation rather than collective agreement about the objective qualities of an artistic subject. Roh laments that many kinds of art were limited to “extrinsic imitation” of an object or reality (Roh 24); similarly, Amaryll Chanady argues that fiction was once restricted to “the imitation of an external reality in accordance with the precepts of hegemonic rational paradigms” (Chanady 125). In other words, fictional works—at least, those that were expected to succeed commercially—were once limited to expressing that which was accepted by the community in which those works would be read. Quayson acknowledges the power and predominance of rational thinking in works of fiction, specifically citing the Enlightenment rationality, “one of whose central impulses was to privilege rationality above all else and to dismiss anything that was not clearly submissible to the discourse of reason” (727). Magical realist works, Quayson continues, disrupt the rationality of Enlightenment thinking, which he suggests has pervaded, and indeed has historically dictated, realistic fiction.

Theo L. D’haen argues that magical realism diverts the focus of the novel from the tenets of the governing hegemony—the “center”—and effectively “de-centers” the novel in order to draw attention to the margins. Doing so “implies dis-placing [a] discourse” that appears to have issued from a “privileged center” (D’haen 195), and I adopt Quayson’s stance as I argue that the discourses at the heart of this discussion about magical realism (and especially the discourses that Nabokov addresses) are those that favor rational, Enlightenment thinking in

literature. D'haen's essay, "Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers" seems to necessitate a discussion of the overlap between magical realism and postmodernism. If both genres can explain this phenomenon of "de-centering," then what is the difference between them? D'haen cites Geert Lernout, who writes on Canadian postmodern fiction, and who actually includes Nabokov among his list of magical realist writers; Lernout writes that "a hierarchical relation is established between postmodernism and magic realism, whereby the latter comes to denote a particular strain of the contemporary movement covered by the former" (194). If magical realism is, then, a "strain" of postmodernism, what characteristics distinguish one from the other?

D'haen himself attempts to tease out the differences of the two genres. He provides a list of characteristics common to postmodern fiction, including qualities like "self-reflexiveness, metafiction...discontinuity...the erasure of boundaries, and the destabilization of the reader" (193). Though he notes that these qualities are particular to postmodernism, he provides a definition of magical realism that involves "infusing the ordinary with a sense of mystery" (191) and concedes that this definition could also describe many works of postmodernism. The difference he observes concerns the mode by which individual works within these genres transcend the ordinary. While postmodern works narrate "ex-centrally"—that is, they narrate on behalf of those who reside at the margins—works of magical realism instead "[correct] so-called existing reality...[righting] the wrongs this 'reality' depends upon" (195). Postmodern works, D'haen argues, transcend the dominant views of the "center" by writing from the margins, but still ground the realities of those margins upon hegemonic definitions of the qualities that qualify them as marginal. Magical realist authors instead "invade and take over



dominant discourse(s)” (195), altering *how* these discourses define centers and margins, and doing so by incorporating fantastic elements into the new worlds that they create.

As I have noted, Quayson concludes that these worlds assign equal legitimacy to the realms of both realism and fantasy. However, it is important to distinguish between the fantastic elements characteristic of magical realism and those qualities that denote the separate genre of fairy tales and fantasy. In her essay, Chanady discusses the differences between magical realism and what she calls the “marvelous domain of fairy tales, where the laws of logic and verisimilitude are constantly infringed without affecting our ‘normal’ perception of reality, in a temporary suspension of disbelief” (Chanady 130). While fairy tales do create new worlds, the rules of these new worlds are not based on those of our “real,” living world, and as Chanady suggests, these stories ask readers to suspend their knowledge of the norms of the “real” world in favor of those that demarcate fantasy. Consider especially, along these lines, Chanady’s comment that fairy tales do not affect our “normal” perception of reality; conversely, this is one of the main goals of magical realism. Magical realist texts intentionally “[challenge] realistic representation” (130), perhaps in order to address and amend the dominant discourses, as D’haen theorizes.

Quayson clarifies this distinction, noting that as a result of Enlightenment thinking, the magical in literature often “operates...either behind, after, beneath, anterior to, or generally in a relation of secondariness to reality” (727). We can observe this in Chanady’s description of fairy tales and fantasy: the worlds that these texts present are understood to be only a *temporary* diversion from reality, and do not possess much legitimacy when compared to the “normal,” everyday world of our lives—a world that works of realism attempt to portray. As such, because fairy tales don’t fit accepted literary norms (except perhaps those within their own genre), their

magical elements are relegated to a position of inferiority. Though “it is not that magical realism does not share elements of the fantastic with other genres” (Quayson 728), the genre separates itself from other forms of fairy tale and fantasy by granting a “scrupulous equivalence” to both the fantastic elements and the realistic elements. Here, we return to our starting point, namely a discussion of these opposing, yet coexisting elements as the primary characteristics of magical realist texts.

I find that much of the criticism that attempts to define magical realism, especially that which is included in the collection of essays edited by Zamora and Faris, provides theories about the genre that Quayson also touches upon in his essay. In *Fecundities of the Unexpected*, Quayson comments (perhaps unintentionally) on many of the most important observations made by other essayists writing about magical realism, including topics that I have discussed (for example, the tendency of magical realists to “decenter” the focus of their texts away from dominant discourses). Though I do not claim that Quayson’s writing about magical realism is the most comprehensive of its kind, I do adopt for my own analysis the quality of these texts that he argues is the most central characteristic of this genre: the equivalence between the domains of realism and fantasy. I think that this quality serves as a simple, powerful, and accurate tool that helps to distinguish magical realist works from other works of fiction.

Accordingly, I look to Quayson’s theory for guidance concerning what kinds of literary patterns function to convey the equivalence of the realms of the fantastic and the real. Quayson identifies four “issue clusters,” areas in which he finds there are “narrative problems” within the genre of magical realism (734). I understand these “issue clusters” to be not simply areas that cause problems for the reader of a magical realist text, but also those that draw the reader’s attention to the text and distinguish it from non-magical realist works. Consequently, in my

analysis, I seek to identify the presence of these “issue clusters” in Nabokov’s novels *Ada* and *Pale Fire*, and do so by searching for those patterns or practices (ie, those consistent with particular “issue clusters”) that Quayson describes. I consider the presence of any of these four “issue clusters” to be evidence that some kind of magical realist work is taking place.

The first of these clusters involves what Quayson calls “boundary blurring.” Though perhaps in part self-explanatory, Quayson clarifies the content of this issue cluster by providing specific examples from authors Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, whose works are generally considered to be in the tradition of magical realism. Quayson cites the subjectively organized systems of categorization in Borges’s essay “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” as well as the dizzying repetition of names in the generations of the Buendia family in Marquez’s novel *100 Years of Solitude*. Both examples highlight the highly arbitrary nature of the labels that we assign to people and events, and more generally Quayson explains how these blurrings “indicate how tenuous our grasp is on what we call reality” and “[enjoin] a regular renegotiation of meanings” (735). Boundary blurring, as a function of magical realism, calls attention to the subjective nature of accepted truths: can we, for example, really distinguish between the members of the Buendia family if, as matriarch Ursula suggests, the repetition of names makes it seem “as if time had turned around and we were back at the beginning” (Marquez 162)? In Nabokov’s novels, I search for instances where boundaries are blurred between characters in the works; between the reader and the text; and between accepted notions of truth and those fantastic elements that serve to substitute for reality.

Perhaps language—names and labels, for instance—blurs these boundaries, Quayson seems to suggest, and in fact focuses on language and metaphor in his second “issue cluster.” He refers to the content of this issue as “metaphorical-literality chains,” and though much of what he

describes in this section concerns the importance of specific linguistic operations, such as metaphor formation and code switching, I understand Quayson's point to be more generally about the role of language in creating realities. He draws an interesting example from the Disney movie *Aladdin*, recounting a scene in which the Genie performs metaphors as quickly as he invents them in his conversation with Aladdin. Quayson observes that the "rapid literalizations of the metaphorical...stand-in for the frenetic collapse of foreground and background, the literal and the metaphorical" (741). *Aladdin's* Genie better helps us to understand the power of language, because though authors cannot "literalize" their written creations in the same way that the Genie does, their words do create their worlds. Readers have only the author's words at their disposal as they formulate their understanding of a novel; that which is written becomes real in the world of a fictional work. Consequently, language provides the possibility of granting reality to magical entities.

Language allows authors to control other forces in their novels, including how the reader perceives space and the passage of time. Quayson refers to this third issue as "the representation of space, time, and space-time," and notes how authors can manipulate these elements to create a sense of magic or enchantment, specifically by generating questions about "our sense of consensual realism...temporality itself becomes part of a system of value and emphasis" (744). Quayson argues that the way in which an author handles space and time reveals the systems or hegemonies of which they are a part; but the ability to manipulate space and time allows them to question these accepted systems or hegemonies by devoting attention to both magical and realistic situations. Paying attention to both kinds of moments lead to a sense of equivalence more generally between magic and realism, Quayson suggests. I find that the pattern is particular to the examples he uses to explain it, and suspect that it may not necessarily

hold true for all magical realist works. However, I include it in anticipation of the event that I find evidence of this pattern in Nabokov's works.

Quayson, in his discussion of his fourth and final "issue cluster," describes how magical realist fiction "incorporates and assimilates historical data in order to simultaneously affirm and subvert the historical" (749). He observes how, rather than verifying history, magical realist texts demonstrate the difficulty in proving historical factuality with accuracy. History, Quayson seems to suggest, is shaped by those who tell the story; interpretations of the same event can vary widely in their details. Magical realist texts offer alternative versions of historical events, and change how those events are perceived by describing them in ways that involve magic or fantasy. Because these events feature elements of both fantasy and realism, we can better understand the role of individual perception in recounting a historical occurrence. Quayson writes that history becomes the product of individual consciousness, though it is "a consciousness refusing to acquiesce in history's imposed linearities, thus transcending its limitations to be able to imagine a future not dictated by it" (753). Magical realism is a mode that acknowledges that individuals creatively retell history—often by telling stories—in order to include themselves within it.

I hope to find in Nabokov's novels evidence that these four "issues" seem to be occurring. Again, I note that the use of the word "issue" is misleading; it implies that there is a problem that needs to be resolved. The "problems" that magical realism apparently generates are, I think, simply phenomena that we, as readers, can observe and interpret. Further, I think that these issues serve to intentionally stimulate exploration; they function to create a space in which, Quayson suggests, we are invited to question the norms of accepted realities or truths. And while questions of what is "real" and what is not may often be (frustratingly)

unanswerable, these questions need not necessarily be answered. Magical realism is a valuable tool simply because it raises these questions via the interplay of fantasy and realism. As I intend to prove, interpreting Nabokov's fictional English-language texts, specifically his novels *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Pale Fire*, as magical realist works makes it easier for us to identify those truths that Nabokov questions—or, perhaps, those that he asks readers to question.

## Part 1

### *Pale Fire*

“An act of selection...is already an act of creation,” Franz Roh writes in what is believed to be the earliest discussion of magical realism (Roh 16). Interpretation inherently involves a choice to decide what is important about a subject, and as I analyze Nabokov’s novel *Pale Fire*, a work in which magically-driven uncertainty reigns at nearly every level, the reader becomes the exclusive bearer of the responsibility to decide upon the novel’s “truths.” Charles Kinbote, the self-proclaimed ex-king of a country called Zembla, writes the commentary to a poem called “Pale Fire,” which was written by an apparently legendary American poet named John Shade. According to Kinbote, the two men developed a friendship during the time in which they lived in “adjacent castles” (216) in the ambiguously titled town of New Wye. Kinbote uses the opportunity he finds in writing the commentary to tell the story of his escape from Zembla, which included a journey through a “secret passage” (125) in Kinbote’s former castle (in Zembla) which eventually lead the commentator to Shade’s residence on, where nearby stands a “sad cypress from Illyria” (291). Kinbote often refers to his home in Shade’s town as “Arcady” (158), and Kinbote’s mystical thoughts even seep into the anecdotes that he delivers concerning Shade’s less-than-extraordinary life.

Kinbote discusses the events of his and Shade’s lives that take place in locations that do not exist, but which resemble places that do, and places the two alongside each other. Discussing locations that exist outside of the text, for example noting Gradus’s various travels through cities like Paris and New York, Kinbote also mentions fictitious American-esque regions. Kinbote writes the “Foreword” from Cedarn, Utana (Nabokov 29), a mythical combination of the names of two American states—Utah and Montana. Kinbote lists the late

John Shade's former residence as New Wye, Appalachia, U.S.A. (13), explicitly recognizing the location as part of the United States and perhaps even identifying the city in which Shade resided. Wye, if equated with the letter Y, would suggest that Shade lived somewhere in "New Y" (NY, or New York). But the true location is masked by the ambiguity of the term Appalachia, which merely suggests a green, mountainous area located somewhere in the Eastern United States.

We might consider again Quayson's comments regarding the "status of the real" in magical realist texts. Like the example that Quayson finds in Borges, Nabokov's example blurs the boundaries between which are "real" places in *Pale Fire*, and which are not, and the lack of distinction between the two "indicate[s] how tenuous our grasp is on what we call reality" (Quayson 735). Though New Wye, Appalachia, U.S.A., might not appear on one of our maps, Kinbote grants the place apparent legitimacy in his commentary by, for example, recording Gradus's arrival to the New Wye airport (Nabokov 280). Nabokov situates something fantastic alongside something real and accepted: respectively, the made-up city of New Wye, and the fairly commonplace airport. In doing so, he engages in an effort to convey equivalence between the two, which Quayson says serves to "[invite the reader] to switch sides in a shifting hierarchical relationship" (Quayson 729), permitting the reader to decide whether they should consider New Wye to be a real place that existed for Shade or a fake place invented by Kinbote in his commentary.

This decision only represents part of the complicated layerings of the real and the fantastic that the reader must navigate while traversing *Pale Fire*. The novel is unique because it allegedly provides the perspectives of two distinct contributors: that of John Shade (who, we learn from Kinbote, has written the poem "Pale Fire"), and that of Kinbote (who, we learn from



Kinbote himself, has provided the Foreword and the Commentary). These two perspectives supply the evidence that the reader uses to determine, or at least guess, which elements are “real” in *Pale Fire*, and which are “fantastic.” But the reader must remember that Kinbote’s notes to the poem “Pale Fire” have supposedly been published after Shade’s death, and the assumptions that Kinbote makes about the significance of the poem have not been confirmed by Shade. Still, the situation generates what Quayson might label a “scrupulous equivalence” (728) between the two domains: that which Shade intended to convey in his poem, and Kinbote’s interpretations of that which Shade intended to convey. Both are potentially legitimate, though mutually exclusive, answers to the same question: what was Shade talking about in his poem, and whose story—Shade’s or Kinbote’s—should we believe?

Kinbote, for his part, believes that Shade has written “Pale Fire” to honor the former’s home country of fictional Zembla, a notion that, with its associations of fantasy, could possibly fail to bode well for a legitimate defense of Kinbote’s claims. Kinbote mentions as early as his note to line 12 (of the 999-line poem) that Shade’s invocation of “that crystal land” could be “perhaps an allusion to Zembla, my dear country” (Nabokov 74). He details the incredible events of King Charles the Beloved’s escape from Zembla, and relays to readers that “one can hardly doubt that the sunset glow of the story acted as a catalytic agent upon” Shade’s composition of the poem “Pale Fire” (81). Most of his notes evoke some memory of Zembla, though many of the memories do not directly relate to the poem, and Kinbote often delivers anecdotes that ramble excessively and do not shed much light on the lines themselves. Line 130 of Shade’s poem reads: “I never bounced a ball or swung a bat” (117); Kinbote’s note to this line begins with the statement that, “Frankly, I too never excelled in soccer or cricket...” (117). The note then continues for nearly twenty pages, most of which is spent discussing King Charles’s

escape from the castle in Zembla. The only information that Kinbote provides about Shade's poem in this note deals with a discarded draft, and Kinbote claims that even the image in this draft "was suggested by something Shade had from me" (118).

The fantastic tales of royalty and adventure that Kinbote strongly suspects to be present in "Pale Fire" convey a much different sentiment than do the actual lines of the poem, which discuss more familiar matters, such as Shade's love for his wife, Sybil, and his struggles with the thought of death. Shade writes in line 35 about the "[s]tilettos of a frozen stillicide," and unlike Kinbote, most readers would not immediately "note...the shadow of regicide in the rhyme" (74), an association that our commentator believes Shade has subtly made with Gradus's plot to kill King Charles. Readers would be more likely to understand the image in this line as one of the mental "photographs" (line 31) that Shade claims to record in his mind. However, the nature of a commentary presupposes that the commentator is well-acquainted with the work that they are examining, and since Shade has died, readers are inclined to believe Kinbote's analysis of the lines, even when he makes what seem to be ridiculous or fanciful interpretations. Why, other than to elucidate the motivations that compelled the late Shade to compose "Pale Fire," and to provide the poet's various notes and alterations, would Kinbote bother to write his commentary?

Nabokov further complicates the reader's understanding of the roles that Shade and Kinbote play in the story by muddling Kinbote's intentions in writing the commentary. The fantastic anecdotes that Kinbote delivers through the course of his notes to "Pale Fire" not only seem unbelievable and perhaps in discord with Shade's thoughts, but these tales also take a form that is inconsistent with the very concept of what a commentary is supposed to be. Kinbote's lengthy descriptions of his childhood memories from Zembla, as well as the arduous journey in which he escapes from Zembla to New Wye, begin to look more like a coherent story and appear

less like divergent elements of the commentary that they allege to be. Kinbote, as the commentator, is tasked with unpacking the complexities of Shade's poem in his analysis; but, it turns out that "Pale Fire" reveals more about the story of the Kinbote's life than of the poem that permits these notes to exist at all. Quayson's ideas about equivalence seem particularly relevant: Kinbote's pervasive narrative regularly interrupts any stability "of the perceived world" (Quayson 730), in this case the world created by Shade in "Pale Fire," and generates confusion about which world—Shade's or Kinbote's—is the "real" world of the novel.

The magical elements present in Kinbote's contributions to *Pale Fire*, including the commentator's mythical hometown of Onhava (meaning, in Zemblan, "far away" [Nabokov 255] and striking a fairy-tale note) and his near-obsession with keeping hidden the treasures belonging to his family ("[Y]ou will never find our crown, necklace, and scepter," Kinbote jeers at the apparent pursuants [244]), might threaten to diminish his credibility. They might rob Kinbote's tales of their equivalence with Shade's poem—if the story that Kinbote tells were not so essential to Shade's life. Though the thread of Kinbote's narrative never seems to draw too closely to that of Shade's, the two threads suddenly come together at the end of *Pale Fire* when our commentator's antagonist, Gradus, actually arrives to New Wye and accidentally kills Shade in an attempt to murder Kinbote. This event produces the circumstances that provide a basic understanding for why *Pale Fire* exists at all: Kinbote writes the notes to Shade's poem because Shade can no longer do so. And so the details of Kinbote's commentary, even those that seem fantastic, maintain their equivalence among the more realistic elements of the novel; with Shade's death in mind, we have reason to believe our commentator's story, which led to Shade's death.

Yet, to continue an analysis of the “interplay” (as Quayson might call it) between the competing realities of Kinbote’s story and of Shade’s story, we encounter evidence that suggests we should doubt the ethos of Kinbote’s persona. He includes (within his own contributions to the poem) scathing comments made by Shade’s colleagues and associates concerning their distrust of Kinbote’s analysis, and even his possession of the “Pale Fire” manuscript; he notes that Shade’s lawyer called Kinbote’s legal agreement (permitting Kinbote to edit the poem and signed by Shade’s widow, Sybil) ““a fantastic farrago of evil”” (16). Even Sybil, according to Kinbote, used to refer to the commentator as ““an elephantine tick; a king-sized botfly; a macaco worm; the monstrous parasite of a genius”” (172). It seems strange that Kinbote would include these kind of doubt-inducing accusations, unless he wants to elicit sympathy from his audience by showcasing the mean-spirited comments made by those who wish to interrupt the commentator’s apparently innocent agenda. But any feelings of pity in the reader disappear when Kinbote commits other authorial transgressions that do little to uphold his legitimacy. He, for example, often makes sweeping and unverifiable assumptions about what Shade would have said or thought, for example informing us that Shade “intended to ask my advice after reading his poem to me” (16). These kinds of notes are especially revealing when Kinbote admits that he only knew Shade for a few months before the poet was killed (18).

Despite this short period of acquaintance with Shade, Kinbote insists that he and the poet maintained an intimate friendship, one so intimate that often Kinbote and Shade start to seem like the same person. He initially maintains some distance from Shade, for example in the Foreword commenting on the poet’s special brain that is “of a different brand than that of the synthetic jellies preserved in the skulls around him” (27)—presumably Kinbote’s own brain included. But Kinbote reveals details about his own life that draw him steadily closer to

Shade. He identifies Sybil as their common enemy when he realizes that “she made [Kinbote] tone down or remove from his Fair Copy everything connected with the magnificent Zemblan theme [which]...I fondly believed would become the main rich thread in [the poem’s] weave!” (91). Covertly, Kinbote informs us that “the King...also was not quite three when his father, King Alfin, died” (101), information he provides in response to the lines of Shade’s poem that concern the deaths of the poet’s parents at a young age. As I have noted before, Kinbote and Shade were both poor athletes (117), and we further learn that Kinbote and Shade share the same birthday (161). In these instances, the boundaries that allege to demarcate the separate identities of the two men seem to blur.

Contributing to the confusion is the insecurity of Kinbote’s own identity, the many facets of which themselves often blur. As he tells the story of King Charles the Beloved, he vaguely implies that he might actually be this king; “[a]ll...Zemblans look alike, and I who have not shaved now for a year resemble my disguised king,” (76) Kinbote writes. Kinbote shares his first name with the king, and the overlap of identities is confirmed when Kinbote includes in his notes a letter that he wrote, which directs an unnamed recipient to refrain from sending him letters at ““Charles X. Kingbot, Esq.”” (257)—presumably to protect the king from being found by Gradus, which is ostensibly the reason why Kinbote has changed his name for the purposes of the Commentary. Even as the king, however, Charles’s identity appears to split, at least symbolically, during his escape from Zembla: following this escape, in which the king is clad in scarlet attire, hundreds of imposters also wearing scarlet roam the countryside in order to mislead the police and to facilitate the king’s safe exit. The Zemblan police, exhausted by their search and unable to accommodate anyone else in the packed Onhava jail, actually mistake Charles Kinbote for one of the imposters and allow him to go freely (144).

Shade's profile is even less clear, since we are receiving information about the poet secondhand from a potentially unstable narrator. Shade's last name alone suggests an ambiguity that even he recognizes; Kinbote provides a "false start" following line 274, in which Shade apparently wrote "Shade, *Ombre*, almost 'man'/In Spanish..." (174). The French translation of "ombre," meaning "shadow," might first lead to an association with the opening lines of "Pale Fire" ("I was the shadow of the waxwing slain"), but perhaps we should think about the word as it relates to Shade's position in relation to Kinbote. Unable to correct Kinbote's possible misinterpretations or to respond in any way to his comments, Shade and his poem are relegated to the shadow of Kinbote's story, serving more as a source of supplementary details for the commentator's fantastic tales rather than as the focus of that commentary. Even when directly observing Shade, Kinbote struggles to describe the poet with any kind of certainty. "John Shade's physical appearance was so little in keeping with the harmonies hiving in the man," Kinbote writes (25), adding that Shade's many conflicting physical qualities "reminded one of a fleshy Hogarthian tippler of indeterminate sex...He was his own cancellation" (26).

We are drawn "as readers into the domain of the various blurrings that have taken place in the course of the story" (Quayson 737), and left to decide for ourselves which truth seems most plausible based on the narrative evidence with which Nabokov has provided us. Shade's home in Appalachia is more familiar to us, because we know that a region with this name in the United States actually exists outside of the text, and because of this familiarity we lean towards accepting Shade's as the framing narrative of the story. Kinbote's fictional (and magically tinged) home country called "Zembla" seems much more distant and impossible than Shade's, reinforcing the apparent reality of Shade's framing narrative. However, consider also that the name of Shade's hometown was called "New Wye," and despite its likely reference to the real

place of New York, the possibility exists that “Zembla” could simply be a part of the fictional world in which “New Wye” also resides. Note that Zembla, too, bears resemblance to a familiar element of our knowledge—its very name imitates a mirroring word, “resemblance,” in the English language.

These examples, and indeed *Pale Fire* as a whole, highlight Nabokov’s habit of not only blurring the boundaries between various, coexisting realities, but of doing so through the intentional manipulation of language. Nabokov alerts us to his intentions by including comical narrative details such as, for example, the country of Zembla, which possesses the unique quality of both resembling something we know (the word “resemblance,” which indicates that the country is perhaps *supposed* to resemble something) and of being foreign to us (there exists no country called Zembla, and we have only a hazy idea that it exists somewhere in Europe among other, real cities and countries). Zembla does not stand alone; among other examples, Nabokov has clearly transposed the components of Goldsworth (the last name of the judge in whose house Kinbote is staying) and Wordsmith (the name of the university at which Shade and Kinbote both teach) in order to make a statement about the fluid nature of language, and by association, perceptions of reality (Nabokov 82). The realities embedded within *Pale Fire* exist only as the reader collects their details; the problem is that Nabokov has employed “magical” tricks of language to provide legitimate evidence for, as well as evidence against, the various, mutually exclusive realities whose existence *Pale Fire* both aims to defend and to destroy.

When Kinbote reports that Shade once asked him about the truthfulness of Kinbote’s anecdotes about King Charles, and how Kinbote might confirm those details, our commentator responds to the poet, “‘Do not worry about trifles. Once transmuted by you into poetry, the stuff *will* be true, and the people *will* come alive’” (214). Nabokov seems to channel himself through

Kinbote here, and to speak about the nature of fiction, especially concerning the work that he (Nabokov) is writing. The magical elements of Nabokov's story clearly do not exist anywhere outside of the text (though as we have seen, they often resemble real places), but that does not matter in a work of fiction; a novel like *Pale Fire* asks us to leave behind our notions and expectations of reality. "In the represented worlds of the texts, anything can happen," Quayson writes (730), and paired with Kinbote's words, we might understand that any world in a novel can become a (temporary) reality, as long as the reader believes in it; by the simple act of reading, they give life to a text. But in order to make them believe, the author must construct a world that is stable and the qualities of which are non-contradictory. The details of this world must remain consistent.

We have observed that the world of Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is anything but stable. The identities of the characters are shrouded in ambiguity, and are unsure whether both Shade and Kinbote ever actually existed at the same time. We do not know if what Kinbote tells us is reliable, though his notes to a poem written by the alleged John Shade comprise the majority of the novel's text. Perhaps Kinbote has invented Shade as a character to disguise his own perilous identity as the escaped ex-king from Zembla, or Shade has invented Kinbote in order to cover up his death; perhaps what Kinbote has told us is true, and Shade did live in New Wye until his associations with the commentator led to the poet's accidental death. However, the reader need not necessarily make a decision in favor of one reality over the other. The point in magical realism, Quayson suggests, is uncertainty—a de facto tug-of-war between the possible realities of a story, and not the search for a settled resolution to this seemingly unsolvable dispute. "We are invited to piece the lines of the story together by paying close attention to the mythical worldview, even if this is highly elusive," Quayson writes (753). We may not be able to solve



Nabokov's puzzle, but we may find purpose in the practice of gathering the (conflicting) details and attempting to piece them together.

Nabokov seems to have another aim in writing the unsettled tales of *Pale Fire*, one that aligns with Quayson's ideas about magical realism. "The regular fragmentations," Quayson writes, "are an invitation for us to look beyond any settled norms of epistemological ontological forms, rather than as a means of instituting a desire for normality" (730). Fragmentation takes the form in *Pale Fire* as the variegated and clashing components of the multiple realities that coexist; as I have noted above, Quayson believes that the equivalence of these realities—realities both ordinary and extraordinary—establishes the conditions for magical realism. In the case of *Pale Fire*, Nabokov intentionally obscures these realities (or, at least, obscures the evidence that would solidify their legitimacy) in order to force us to "look beyond" the conventions of the novel and the ways in which readers have traditionally read novels. He disrupts our tendency to rely on information provided to us by our narrator; he leaves the competing realities of *Pale Fire* neither completely proven nor disproven.

"[Shade] was reassembling my Zembla!" Kinbote exclaims victoriously upon the possible discovery that his friend was, in fact, writing a poem about the ex-king's beloved homeland (260). Kinbote's tentative conclusion, which he has produced only after months of attempting to piece together supporting evidence provided by his own dubious analysis of Shade's poem as well as alleged interactions with Shade, echoes the very process in which readers are engaged while reading the novel where all of this takes place. The reader is effectively trying to "reassemble" the incoherent details of the novel in order to come to some kind of sound conclusion about *Pale Fire*'s people, places, and events. Though we will never be able to know the intentions John Shade had while writing the poem "Pale Fire," or whether or

not this man ever even existed within the world of the novel, it is easier to speculate about Nabokov's intentions—and perhaps more important to this study. As I have noted, the “magical” elements of a novel have, within the context of realism, often been relegated to an inferior status; that is not the case in *Pale Fire*. Nabokov's apparently intentional obfuscation of the novel's details challenges readers to make some kind of decision about what is “real,” and what is not. But resolution is not the aim in a magical realist text, I argue; the aim, at least in part, is to generate questions about an accepted reality and to emphasize uniqueness of an individual's interpretation of that reality. *Pale Fire* leads readers to both.

## Part 2

### *Ada*

Nabokov immediately introduces the conflict between the real and the fantastic in another novel, *Ada*. We learn that the events of this story are not even taking place on Earth, and discover that they are occurring instead on a planet called Antiterra, also referred to at times as Demonica. Antiterra possesses a semi-theoretical sister-planet, Terra, which seems to represent Earth, though the details of Terra's "real" existence (replete, for example, with accurate descriptions of our current world's geography) are not much more than a fantastic product of the deranged minds of Antiterra. What we learn about Terra derives from a book that Van Veen, one of *Ada*'s central characters and the implicit narrator of the story, is attempting to write about his experience observing the insane, who provide him details about the apparently mythological planet. In setting up such a dynamic, Nabokov reverses that which we typically accept as real—da place in which, for example, "the king of Terra's England, yet another George...ruled" (341)—and grants legitimacy to the unfamiliar and sometimes strange components of the planet called Antiterra. Nabokov uses fantasy to parody our Earth and the conventional ties that allege to bind us to it. In doing so he employs Quayson's tenet that we maintain only a "tenuous" grip on that which we refer to (erroneously, Nabokov seems to suggest) as reality.

Much of what we learn about Antiterra comes from the family of focus in *Ada*, the Veen family, whose members' boundaries blur in much the same way as those between Terra and Antiterra. The living members of the Veen family overlap both in the ways by which they are identified and in their relationships to one another. We are introduced to two twin sisters, Aqua and Marina, whose names share an overtly maritime element that provides a contrast against Van Veen's studies of Terra (perhaps "land") later in the novel. We learn about the sisters' husbands,

two cousins whose names both happen to be Walter D. Veen. They are made distinct throughout the novel when referred to as Demon (Aqua's husband) and Daniel (Marina's husband), though even these identifiers prove fluid. Demon's name is "a form of Demian or Dementius," though "he was generally known in society as Raven Veen or simply Dark Walter to distinguish him from Marina's husband, Durak Walter or simply Red Veen" (4). This explanation does little to differentiate the two men; the sheer quantity of possible names by which they might be called blurs the boundaries of their identities and hinders our ability to keep separate descriptions and details about them. Recall Marquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in which a "dizzying repetition of similar names across different generations" (Jose, Arcadio, Jose Arcadio, Aureliano, etc) convolutes attempts at keeping the identities of the individual characters straight (Quayson 737). We further learn that all four of the individuals have the same birthday (Nabokov 10), a detail that can hardly be ignored in a discussion of similarities among the members of the family.

There is not quite so much repetition in Nabokov's novel as in Marquez's, but the muddling of the identities of a few vital characters is as critically important to a magical realist interpretation of *Ada* as is that of the hundreds of nearly identical characters in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The identities of the children of Demon and Aqua and of Daniel and Marina twist and turn as much as those of their parents. Ada, allegedly (according to the family tree that precedes some versions of the novel) the daughter of Daniel and Marina, turns out to have been the product of the passionate affair between Marina and Demon. Van, allegedly the son of Demon and Aqua, was substituted by Marina early in his life for the unstable Aqua's lost baby; we learn that Van's parents are also Marina and Demon. Thus, it is revealed that Van and Ada, allegedly cousins, are (amidst the hazy relations between their natural and adoptive parents)

actually siblings. “In the ecstasy of reconciliation, neither remembered to dupe procreation,” *Ada*’s narrator writes of the secretive relationship between Marina and Demon, adding that this was the point where “started the extremely *interesnoe polozhenie* (‘interesting condition’) without which, in fact, these anguished notes could not have been strung” (Nabokov 15). This interesting condition, of course, is the incestuous relationship that arises between the two siblings, unaware of their true connection until after they are already too deeply entrenched in their romance to retreat. And this “interesting situation,” these incestuous circumstances, fosters a discussion about the relationship of *Ada* to the genre of magical realism.

Among these initial blurrings arise more intricacies involved in the relationships between the four parents, who have engaged in a surprising amount of intermingling. D. Barton Johnson discusses even more complicated layers of the relationship between the Veen cousins and Marina and Aqua in his book *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*. Johnson deduces in his analysis that Marina and Demon may have also participated in incest, though unknowingly. Johnson determines that Demon Veen’s mother was not likely to have been Irina Garin, as the family tree suggests, but was perhaps instead Dolly Zemski (the mother of Aqua and Marina), who had an affair with Demon’s father, Dedalus Veen, that resulted in Demon’s birth. A reference to Marina and Aqua’s father, General Ivan Durmanov, indicates that the “antlered general” may not be the true father of his alleged daughters; this provides further evidence that Dolly Zemski continued her affair with Dedalus after her marriage to the general and perhaps gave birth to Aqua and Marina, making Marina, Aqua, and Demon full siblings (Johnson 127). Demon maintains sexual relations with both sisters, fascinated by the “blended and brightened charms of twin peris” (Nabokov 19); this language additionally obscures the boundaries that separate at least the siblings from one another. Van and *Ada*’s incestuous,

muddled family ties are but one in a line of ambiguous, complex, and often secretive intra-familial relationships that have surfaced in among the several generations of Veens.

Consequently we find that the boundaries between the children of *Ada* and their parents seem blurry. Of course, the siblings *Ada* and *Van* have entered into an incestuous relationship just as *Demon* and *Marina* (also siblings and also lovers) did. *Van* once asks his son, “You are not a pederast, like your poor uncle, are you? We had some dreadful perverts in our ancestry,” perhaps recalling his own incestuous relationship (233). *Van* at times can predict what his father is going to say, for example thinking to himself during a conversation between father and son that “[t]he next thing will be ‘paternal repetitiousness’”; unsurprisingly, these are *Demon*’s next words (242). He shares some mannerisms with his father, such as when he “shook his head, simultaneously lifting his hand, like his father” (233). *Ada*, for her part, shares a love for theater with her mother; she pursues an acting career despite the incessant lectures by her mother (portrayed throughout the novel as a strikingly untalented actress) about theater during *Ada*’s childhood.

*Ada* and *Van* also bear uncanny resemblance to one another. On *Van*’s first visit to *Ardis*, the home in which *Ada*, *Marina*, and *Lucette* (the half-sister of *Ada* and *Van*, born to *Marina* and *Daniel*) reside, *Marina* looks “up at the balustrade along which two left hands progressed with strikingly similar flips and glides like siblings taking their first dancing lesson” (39-40). *Marina* observes these occurrences and notes that they are “‘old-fashioned qualms’” (40), a sickly comical comment that provides an additional link between the siblings’ relationship and the one in which she and *Demon* engaged. *Van* and *Ada* are not only physically inseparable. In another instance, during a childhood game of *Flavita* (itself a phonetic transfiguration of one of Nabokov’s earlier novels), *Lucette* is left with a row of blocks spelling

out the “amusing VANIADA” perhaps in Spanish “Van y Ada”—Van and Ada. Their presence on the page of a book, represented here by words, joins the entities into one (capitalized) unit. Lucette continues the metaphor during a meeting with Van years after that fateful game of Flavita, asking Van to recall the “Vaniada divan” (373), intertwining not only the identities of the two lovers but also integrating them into the place (the divan, which conveniently invokes a partial anagram of their names) where they shared the sexual experiences that blur their boundaries in such a literal manner.

Van blurs the boundaries of his own amorphous identity. He disguises himself as a character named Mascodagama, dressed in what appears to the children watching his show to be an “enormous and black” creature that harbors a “macabre quiver” (183). The character’s title has obvious ties to the real-life Vasco da Gama, who first linked Europe and Asia by boat in the late 1400s; Van adopts this transfigured version of the explorer’s title and appropriately transfigures his accomplishments as well. As the disguise “suddenly [comes apart],” and Van’s head appears impossibly between his legs (to reveal that he is walking on his hands, as he often does), the performance links the “shapeless nastiness” of the “masked giant” to Van’s very human countenance, and further, the fantastic to the real (184). As Vasco da Gama, Van grants equivalence (albeit symbolically) via the character of Mascodagama, or at least acknowledges that a connection exists between the two previously unlinked entities (the fantastic and the real), which opens the door for future connections in both cases.

Clearly, the assumed boundaries between the identities of the characters have been blurred, and perhaps in some ways nearly eliminated; but identity blurring is not limited to the individuals that people *Ada*. Nabokov also muddles the locations of this novel, much in the same fashion as he does in *Pale Fire*. I have already noted that *Ada* takes place on a planet separate

from Earth, but one that closely resembles it and one in which the some of the people of Antiterra have a strong fascination. The country in which *Ada* takes place, identified by the novel's narrator as "'Russian' Estoty," is said to be a "tesselated protectorate...[that] commingles, granoblastically and organically, with 'Russian' Canady, otherwise 'French' Estoty" (3). These complexly described details, put forward on the first page of the novel, provide a stomping ground for the events of the novel that is ambiguously located and difficult to grasp. The fantastic nature of Estoty, suggested by its history on the Zeno map in which it was parodically granted equivalence with a utopia or paradise (Oleson), is further mysticized and also fragmented when we consider the "tesselated" components which "granoblastically" (ie, irregularly) make it up (3). In short, it is a large, probably made-up region with irregularly sized and shaped parts. Moreover, the names of the imaginatively invented parts within Estoty often rhyme or transpose parts of their names with one another. The regions of focus in *Ada* include such places as Kaluga, Ladoga, Ladore, Luga, and Raduga, among numerous others. Not only is our readerly knowledge—our construction, as readers, of the book's "reality"—limited by the non-existence of these places outside of the text, but the similarities among their names further complicate our ability to recall and distinguish between them as we read.

The pattern continues. Van, describing his plans to travel after finishing his studies, dreams nonchalantly about taking "the dark-blue African Express, [which] began in London and reached the Cape by three different routes, through Nigero, Todosia or Ephiochia" (345). In the midst of writing about those cities that we know definitively to be made-up places, Van shrugs off what he believes to be the silliness of Terra's reality, having become "painfully aware how little he knew his own planet while attempting to piece together another one from jagged bits filched from deranged brains" (345). Van's urge to reconstruct various realities (expressed in the



form of the book that we are reading, *Ada*, as well as in the form of the book about Terra) mirrors the reader's arduous process of constructing the reality of Antiterra as they progress through Nabokov's novel.

The reader struggles alongside Van in attempting to keep solid footing in Antiterra's reality, encountering unsettling instances in which people and things succumb to the blurrings that threaten to erase the distinctiveness of their identities. After spending a whole day traveling out of Ardis, Van observes that "[i]t was only nine P.M. in the late summer; he would not have been surprised if told it was midnight in October" (308). Van frequently muddles realities and memories, as when he once remembers Bout, the butler, running a finger over the dusty globe in his room. After a confusing and short nap, he simultaneously recalls (what later proves to be) a dream of Blanche, the nurse, wiping it clean, and "for a few moments, the brief dim dream was...closely fused with the real event" (231). Similarly, when Van leaves Ada after learning for the first time about her infidelities, he forms an amorphous, "mosaic"-like image of her within his mind, an image which is composed not of a single expression but of a "blend of...random images and expressions of hers" (297). The fragments of the tessellation which comprise Van's memory of Ada's expression come together to create "a definite picture that he knew he had never seen in reality" (298). Though he claims to have never encountered such an image of Ada in "real" life, by describing this image as "definite," he grants legitimacy to the reality of the fantastic image that has been generated through the mechanisms of his memory and imagination.

Ada persists with Van even after he leaves her, interrupting his daily realities and leading him (and readers) to question the stability of what he is experiencing—that is, those experiences that are allegedly experienced without Ada. During one of his visits to Villa Venus, Van holds a young girl whose name he thinks is Adora, an identity that adds just a few letters to his former

lover's name. He confirms Ada's virtual presence when we read that "the soft little creature in Van's desperate grasp was Ada" (358), displacing ambiguous Adora and allowing Van to muddle elements of his past and of his present. Ada also infiltrates Van's book about Terra, despite his best attempts to keep her out of it. He finds himself writing about an "enchanted, melancholy, betrayed" character named Antilia, but ends up "stamping out in Antilia, a born brunette, all traces of Ada, thus reducing yet another character to a dummy with bleached hair" (340)—among others, apparently.

Perhaps most prominent among Ada's appearances, however, are those that take place via her sister, Lucette. As her sister before her, Lucette loves and longs for Van, and visits his post-Ada apartment hoping to win Van back—for Ada. Prior to this point, Ada has attempted to contact Van by mail, but he ignores all of her letters, prompting Lucette to make a last attempt to pursue their mutual love. Yet, in doing so, she only draws her identity closer to that of Ada's and further complicates Van's perceptions of reality. She calls Van, "[pleading] for an interview (in a new, darker voice, agonizingly resembling Ada's)" (366). During their meeting, Van observes that Lucette's "only crime was to be suffused with the phantasmata of the other's innumerable lips" (378), and calls her a "wonderful imitatrix" (395). In Lucette's attempts to prove her love for her sister (which has been compounded by the sexual intermingling that took place between the two) and to pursue her love for Van, she inadvertently causes Van to identify similarities between the two sisters and to long for Ada once more. But, more importantly, Van perceives Lucette as a proxy for Ada and misinterprets the reality of his longing, which is directed towards the older sister even though she is not physically with him.

Van's grasp on reality, then, seems, in Quayson's words, quite "tenuous"—a notion evidenced by his difficulty in differentiating between Ada and Lucette. Van, however, has been

muddling his sisters' identities since the three were children. During his first weeks at Ardis, Van and the family travel to a picnic site for Ada's twelfth birthday; on the way home Ada is instructed to sit on her cousin's lap. "Boiling and brimming...poor Van" must endure a bumpy carriage ride with his future lover seated directly on "the core of his longing" (87). He escapes from the incident without "[perplexing] her innocence," but finds himself in the same situation years later—only with Lucette on his lap instead. Her (Lucette's) body "seemed to sink deeper and deeper in the quicksand of the dream-like, dream-rephrased, legend-distorted past" (280). Fittingly, he refers to Lucette as his "little proxy" (281) and eventually as the "impeccable paranymp" (337), having perceived her as a near-perfect substitute for the lover that once sat on his lap. The instances blur the boundaries between the two girls, even though the situations take place nearly four years apart. Even when she is not taking the place of Ada, Lucette maintains her presence at the margins of Van and Ada's relationship. "Lucette, the shadow" (213), seems to invade every instance of Van and Ada's privacy and "seemed to lurk behind every screen, to peep out of every mirror" (211). She may not replace Ada as Van's lover, but to suggest that she is a shadow or a reflection of the "kissing cousins" implies that Lucette is a permanent component of the relationship and is inextricably tied to her older siblings.

Van's comments concerning the "dream-like" nature of his experiences provide a fantastic undertone for the many instances in which he transforms or misinterprets realities: we might consider that dreams are one of the spaces in which "anything can happen" (Quayson 730), and that the word "dream" can represent an object of desire—a fantasy. Van's use of these descriptors underscores the "general instability" (730) of his perceived worlds, a quality that he recognizes and acknowledges himself in the writing of the text that is called *Ada*. He, for instance, entitles his Chose dissertation "'Terra: Eremitic Reality or Collective Dream?'"

(Nabokov 182), questioning the existence of Antiterra's elusive sister-planet; the Terra native Theresa in *Letters From Terra* expresses "nothing but praise" (341) for the planet and its rulers, providing evidence that Terra could be a fantasy for those weathering the allegedly miserable conditions on Antiterra (though it should be noted that Theresa later redacts her claims of Terra's "bliss"). The title of Van's project articulates the sentiment of interplay between fantasy and the perceived realities of the planets Antiterra and Terra.

"All dreams are affected by the experiences and impressions of the present as well as by memories of childhood," Van writes (362), and we might take this to understand that the sexual relationship that formed between Van and Ada at such a young age affected not so much their sleeping dreams, but the dream form that their reality takes in their waking life. "Van, you are responsible for having let loose something mad in me when we were only children," Ada claims in a letter she writes to Van after he has left her, adding that now, "I am happy only in my dreams of you" (334). Van conflates his identity and those of the people around him with dreams as he searches for Ada following a long separation. In pursuit of the driving force of his fantasy, Ada, he says to someone at a party, "I think I am dreaming. I think you are Dreaming Too" (189). The precarious footing of the dream-world, which at times seems to replace "reality," also defines the world of fantasy in which he roams, and nothing around him is stable.

The instability of Van's reality is often reflected by the disjointed nature of the novel that he is writing. *Ada*, though apparently written by Van, frequently includes interjections that have apparently been inserted by Ada herself. Recalling the young start to their relationship, Van provides some vague description, and then calls on his partner: "Go on from here, Ada, please!" (70). They exchange narrative responsibility for a few pages, each asking the other to continue

the story, Ada pleading for reprieve and Van insisting that she continue speaking. “[N]ow prepare to take over,” says Ada, and Van responds, “no, Ada, go on...I’m all enchantment and ears” (71). As the pattern continues, it becomes ever more difficult to differentiate between the speakers. They frequently argue within parentheticals, with little indication as to who is speaking: “(I wonder, Van, *why* you are doing your best to transform our poetical and unique past into a dirty farce? Honestly, Van! Oh, I *am* honest, that’s how it went. I wasn’t sure of my ground, hence the sauciness and the simper...)” (120). The conversation continues, and though we can generally discern which voice belongs to which character, there appear no overt signals that might allow us to distinguish the individual speakers, aside from occasional moments when one character says the other’s name. It often seems like the author, assuming there is only one, is engaging in a fight with himself (or herself).

This practice recalls one employed by Jorge Luis Borges, another magical realist writer, in which he inserts extra-textual references to the story he is writing. These references often hail from sources outside of the events that are ostensibly occurring, and readers are unfamiliar with the information presented in these references and how the information relates to the story that they are reading. Though clearly Van and Ada remain necessary to the plot of *Ada*, their discourse within the marginalia demonstrates a type of boundary blurring that Quayson refers to as the layering of factual framing. This tactic involves the author altering the meaning of the primary text (in this case, *Ada*) by inserting notes or comments that exist outside of the plot. Consider the exchange between Van and Ada I have just noted; not only does the lack of distinction between the two voices make it difficult to tell who is speaking at a given moment, but it also allows for the possibility that these are not even two separate voices at all. This fundamentally alters a basic assumption underlying the text, namely that an old man named Van

wrote this account with the assistance of his late lover, Ada. Could it be possible that Ada was only ever a figment of Van's imagination, and that the latter has provided an entirely false story about his younger years, which he spent loving a girl named Ada?

Nabokov does provide evidence that counters this possibility. Conversations between the two lovers often contain cues that seem to direct readers to understand who is speaking. One passage interrupts Van's reflection of his and Ada's "indolent days" of their childhood: "(Ada: They are now practically extinct at Ardis. Van: Who? Oh, I see)" (98). The names of the characters precede their respective lines, very like the directions of a play, and in such moments the notion that one of these characters does not exist seems very unlikely. But perhaps Nabokov is merely following the patterns of writers like Borges and other magical realists, toying with our understanding of the nature of authorship, and to what degree the speaker of a novel can be trusted to provide a valid representation of the events that make up his story.

In fact, the conversations that take place within the parentheticals may merely serve as a subtle reminder that all fictions represent only a semblance of the truth that we call reality, a concept about which Nabokov himself has admitted to being skeptical. In his novel *Lolita*, Nabokov notes that reality is "one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes" (312), implying Nabokov's belief in the idea of reality as subjective or malleable. Fictional works are by their nature made up, so consequently, what does it really matter whether the events in *Ada* stick to some kind of consistent "truth"? The passages that I have noted in *Ada* serve to toy with readers' notions of what is "true" (or "real") and what is not—since fiction, by its nature, disregards the "truth" in favor of recounting a story. Quayson notes that Borges intentionally muddles the criteria for his categories of the animal kingdom in his essay "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," and does so for what are ostensibly the same reasons that Nabokov

includes conversations between Van and Ada that occur within the parentheticals. The “boundary blurrings” generated by these details “indicate how tenuous our grasp is on what we call reality” (Quayson 735), and Nabokov may even mock the attempt to discern the nature of reality introduced by a fictional text.

Nabokov’s habit of blurring boundaries might be innocent if it were not so closely tied into ideas about sex, and in this case (by association), incest. Incest represents a taboo concerning sex—a double dose of familial closeness, in which members are brought together not only by their blood relations but also by sex. And in the case of *Ada*, incest is driven by deep, almost spiritual bonds that frequently transcend the real and delve into the realm of the fantastic. Demon once describes his relationships with Aqua and Marina as “a mirage in an emirate, a geminate gem, an orgy of epithelial alliterations” (19). These mythical descriptions pair appropriately with the idea of the twins as “peris,” which in Persian mythology represent genies or fairies. Imagining Aqua and Marina as superhuman or non-human beings reminds us of our search for the magical elements in *Ada*, which (as in the case of Demon and his sibling-lovers) are in the novel so often associated with ideas about the beauty of love and sex. Consider, for example, the extravagance of the string of Villa Venus love-abodes, which (created by the young David van Veen, who in an additional instance of boundary-blurring apparently has no relation to the Veen family) are ornately decorated and invariably populated with young girls (and sometimes boys) who represent countries from around the world. Villa Venus is one fitting example of the connection between the fantastic and sex in *Ada*, perhaps not only because the place’s name derives from the mythological goddess of love, but also because it began as the product of a David van Veen’s adolescent sexual fantasies. Villa Venus locations in

turn serve the sexual needs of old men fantasizing about wildly impossible sexual circumstances.

It is through the sexually-driven blurrings of the identities of the members of the Veen and Zemski families—particularly Vana, Ada, and Lucette—that Nabokov is able to grant equivalence to the real and to the fantastic. “The three of them formed a pretty Arcadian combination,” Van writes of his siblings (204), later noting that “mixed metaphors and double-talk became all three Veens, the children of Venus” (410). With descriptions of the children steeped in the language of mythology, for example the approximation of their last name to the first name of a mythological goddess, the sexual relationships between Van, Ada, and Lucette seem less real and more closely resemble a fantasy. Yet the fantastic takes place within in this “family chronicle,” this “rambling romance”—both labels that Nabokov explicitly assigns to his novel, and both labels that seem to suggest that a sense of normalcy will pervade this story.

In such instances, we get the sense that Nabokov is mocking the novelistic form that *Ada* takes, or at least the conventions upon which the construction of romantic novels (novels that *Ada* resembles) is grounded. Upon Van’s initial arrival to Ardis, “the romantic mansion [in which Ada lives] appeared on the gentle eminence of old novels” (Nabokov 35). A later meeting between Van and Ada describes how they “met in the passage, and would have kissed at some earlier stage of the Novel’s Evolution in the History of Literature” (96). Van’s acknowledgement of the romantic novel within the novel *Ada* itself lead to an ever-spiraling chain of questions: are these observations by Van intended to convince us that *Ada* is not actually a novel, but a project intended to parody the conventions of a novel? If so, how can this be true when *Ada* still manages to tell a story in a form that looks enticingly like a novel—a book with chapters and parts, with characters and a plot? Can there exist a novel which exhibits all (or



most of) the qualities of a novel but simultaneously aims to dismantle the very foundation upon which its form was founded?

Using Van as a proxy (fitting for a novel that muddles the identities of so many characters), Nabokov seems to use these questions to enter into a discussion concerning the nature of writing, and specifically invites us to question the nature of fiction. In Quayson's words, Nabokov toys with the novelistic form in order to enjoin readers to "look beyond any settled norms of epistemological ontological forms," especially those qualities of romanticism that for so long have dictated the "right" way to construct a novel (730). By mocking the traditional forms of the novel while simultaneously using it to tell a story that appears realistic, Nabokov uproots those literary norms that for so long have dominated discourses. He reworks accepted concepts of reality and "[confounds] any simple or clear sense of the...hierarchies between the real and the fantastic" by building a novel that relies equally upon the legitimacy of both realms (728). And he does so simply through the use of language: by describing similarities between family members and muddling their identities, by inventing the names of imaginary places and intentionally including them among real ones, and even by incorporating languages other than English into the story. Language has the power to influence the reader's perception of an invented world, and by extension, of the "real" world; *Ada* attempts to convey ideas about the highly subjective and individualized nature of interpretation with regard to the physical world.

Nabokov also uses language in *Ada* to command attention to perceptions of the passage of time, Quayson's fourth "issue cluster." Time becomes an express function of language as Van writes about the subject in his book, *The Texture of Time*. The chapters of *Ada* devoted to describing the content of *The Texture of Time* entail a lengthy discussion about Van's examination of time, and his struggles with its complex layers. "It is a queer enterprise—this

attempt to determine the nature of something consisting of phantomic phases,” Van writes (540). It is “queer” not only for its attempt to make concrete the elusive matter of space-time, but also because Van has already allowed us to bear witness to these “phantomic” phenomena within the same book where he is attempting to explain it—the one that we are reading. We might consider the many instances where Van is “transported” to times in the past, for example when he is suddenly reminded of some younger version of Ada at a later point in both of their lives. While watching a movie in which Ada appears, Van observes that “she was again that slip of a girl...a remembered triviality that intruded upon the chill of his present emotion” (489); the past, in other words, intrudes upon the present, perhaps as if they were the same moment. The “doubled” presence of time—Van’s observations about how its mechanisms, and his raw experience of its insistent and complex ubiquity in all parts of his life—simply reinforces language’s power to serve many purposes, especially its ability to change the ways in which we perceive the same phenomenon. It is important to note that the *Ada* provides only one individual’s perception of how time functions (Van’s), an aspect of the novel that supports the idea that magical realism emphasizes the absolute subjectivity of interpretations of reality.

In the movie that Van watches, Ada “was absolutely perfect, and strange, and poignantly familiar” (489); this is a fitting way to describe the ways in which the magical real appears to operate in *Ada*. That which is perceived by the characters of the novel, especially by Van, is familiar to us perhaps because we are familiar with the conventions of literary realism. Yet these things also possess a sentiment of the extraordinary: they have been fantastically altered by the forces of mythology and the passage of time. “Arcadia,” for example, might merely serve as a literary trope that supplements some novels’ dominant discourses, but its Nabokovian sister, “Ardis,” serves as the very real setting for the events of *Ada*. The characters of *Ada* live the

enchantment that plays only a superficially aesthetic role in works that this novel seems to mock. The magical and the real coexist, their antithetical elements mingling (but not merging) in a harmony of contradiction, prompting us to question which characterizes the novel's "true" reality. We can only guess, but we are at least left with a product that asserts the reign within literary works of individualized and personalized interpretations of reality, those that are amended by the interior magic of that which lives inside of the mind.

## Conclusion

In both *Ada* and *Pale Fire*, I have observed overwhelmingly the presence of the first two of Quayson's "issue clusters": a high frequency of boundary blurrings, the use of language to create realities. I have proven that Nabokov uses these two tools to grant equivalence to the realms of both fantasy and realism, and that using a magical realist framework to examine these two novels illuminates the nature of the "magical" and often contradictory elements that exist within them.

I wish to note that from my analysis of Nabokov's use of these tools emerges evidence of the last issue cluster, as well. By intentionally blurring the boundaries between characters, as well as by manipulating language, Nabokov exhibits how easily individuals can alter history and especially the way it is perceived by those who read about after it has been recorded. The uncertainty surrounding Charles Kinbote's commentary—the confusion between the identities of Kinbote and John Shade, the presence of made-up locations among real ones, and Nabokov's use of language to convey (or to muddle) these things—skews our understanding of what the "real" events of the novel are. As I have noted, ultimately *Pale Fire* does not provide evidence that allows us to make a definitive decision about which are the "real" events of the novel, and which are not. As a work of fiction, coming to a conclusion about the veracity of *Pale Fire*'s events is not crucial; the debate, I think, is more important than the resulting decision. But the fact that Nabokov seems to intentionally generate this conflict suggests a concern with the power of a written work to alter the perception of a historical event. Kinbote "simultaneously affirm[s] and

subvert[s] the historical”—that is, the history of fictional events that the novel suggests have taken place—in his commentary.

I come to similar conclusions regarding *Ada*. The sexually driven blurrings between members of the Veen household lead to an intentional muddling of their histories, especially regarding the identities of the parents of Van and Ada. Though we know “officially” that the two are cousins, we learn that the lovers are actually siblings, and further it is revealed that their (unofficially) shared parents are also siblings. Yet the “official” device for keeping historical records—the family tree—indicates otherwise. The perceived truths conveyed by the family tree are manipulated by simply changing the language used to report such information; for example, by merely substituting the name “Aqua” for “Marina” on the family tree leads us (and all of the characters involved) to an entirely different understanding of the family’s history. I emphasize that the Veen family does not employ grandiose means to change their history: they commit the very basic act of masking a truth by hiding it behind the veil of language.

Nabokov’s writing tends to simultaneously adopt and mock the forms of literary realism, lending itself to an alternative understanding of another history: that of the conventions of the romantic novel. Van “subverts” the history of this tradition in much the same way that Kinbote subverts Shade’s alleged history in the “Pale Fire” commentary: by inserting himself into a certain kind of writing, and then parodying it from the inside as if he were on the outside. “[I]t was all, historically speaking, at the dawn of the novel,” Van writes of the events occurring within his own story (127), and yet uses his voice within this story to write about the form that the novel takes—an observation that, historically, can only be made by those who reside outside of a story’s confines. The near-weariness with which Van makes these comments indicates an

effort on Nabokov's part to rework these tired conventions and to question their efficiency as tools for telling stories.

Though my observations about the presence in *Pale Fire* and *Ada* of Quayson's final issue cluster may seem secondary or indirect—that is, having emerged from observations about the first three issue clusters, rather than from Nabokov's texts themselves—I do find that this phenomenon, which involves questioning accepted realities and histories, is important because it helps to refine the points of discussion in my analysis. As I have found, observing Nabokov's texts using the framework of magical realism supports the idea that conclusions about the elements of a reality are up to those who are actively attempting to interpret that reality; it does not matter whether the elements of these realities are “magical” or “real,” because the world that has been created within the mind of the interpreter gives equal status to all elements. By their virtue of simply having been imagined by a mind, they are given life and legitimacy.

However, this poses a problem for the analysis I have just completed. What is the point of assigning labels to make conclusions about an author's works, when that language is simply an expression of an individual viewpoint, and when other individuals might use different labels to make distinct conclusions of their own? If we accept the efficiency of a magical realist framework as a tool to help answer our questions about Nabokov's works, we must also attend to other conclusions that emerge, especially that the act of using labels to categorize *Pale Fire* and *Ada* as “magical realist” contradicts the genre's emphasis on the arbitrariness of language. Perhaps it was for this reason that Nabokov was hesitant to allow his works to be categorized; in a discussion of his use of “symbols”—words used arbitrarily to represent some idea or sentiment—Nabokov replied that “[t]he type of writer I am...finds the use of symbols hateful because it substitutes a dead general idea for a live specific impression” (*Lolita*

364). Using words whose meanings are too narrow is inefficient and fruitless, Nabokov seems to suggest, because the practice of doing so limits discussions about ideas by prohibiting the renegotiation of meanings of words in an ever-changing language.

Ironically, a magical realist framework also solves the problem that it creates. As we observed, one of the aims of magical realism is to create a space in which we can challenge accepted norms, which could include the meanings assigned to words. Nabokov challenges accepted meanings of words simply by changing those words: he renames cities and countries and muddles the names and identities of his characters, enchanting elements of the decidedly realistic foundation upon which these novels are grounded. What is important is not the labels that he chooses to assign to the locations and people of his novels, or those that we choose to assign to the phenomena that we observe in those novels; rather, these labels are important simply because their use demonstrates the power of language in shaping interpretations of an event, object, or reality. Such attention to language—for instance, invoking the simultaneously strange and familiar setting of New Wye, Appalachia—provides us with a tool that generates discussions about the very uncertainty that underlie words and labels. A descriptor like “magical realism” indicates similar speculation about not only the works that it aims to analyze, but also about the arbitrariness of attempting to employ such a categorization.

In this way, using a magical realist framework to observe the events of Nabokov’s novels also helps to clarify the function of the label that we assign to the genre. “Magical realism,” we find, refers to patterns of self-reflexivity, and the awareness of the uncertain footing of language, even that which seems to refer to a “stable” term like itself. This label is, much like the novels *Pale Fire* and *Ada*, cognizant of the simultaneous power and vulnerability of employing labels; it is reluctant to impress the undue burden of collective interpretation upon the individual. Yet

those novels that we read using a magical realist framework also push forward confidently with the beauty of elements of both the magical and the real, establishing the boundaries of their realities while allowing the reader to continue interpreting these stories as they will.



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## ACADEMIC VITA

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#### **EDUCATION:**

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#### **RELEVANT EXPERIENCE:**

##### **Intern at Local Food Journey/WPSU**

Fall 2014, Summer 2015

Penn State Public Broadcasting, University Park, PA

- Conducted interviews with local restaurants and food vendors for the purpose of composing articles, which were published weekly on the Local Food Journey blog on WPSU's website

##### **Conference presenter**

2013 Africana Undergraduate Research Center Exhibit, University Park, PA

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2014 National Conference for Undergraduate Research, Lexington, KY

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- Presented the findings of a research paper at the ARC Exhibition, held at Penn State University, taking 2nd place; presented findings from the same research paper at NCUR 2014 at the University of Kentucky

##### **Front of House and Hospitality staff member**

Fall 2013- December 2014

Eisenhower Auditorium, Penn State University, University Park, PA

- Served as part of a small staff responsible for organizing hospitality materials, greeting and seating audience members at performances, and performing office duties

**Reporting candidate**

Spring 2013

*The Daily Collegian*, Penn State University, University Park, PA

- Conducted interviews with local businesses and persons in charge of area events for the purpose of writing articles, which were published in Penn State's student-run newspaper *The Daily Collegian*

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