Chapter 4

AMBIVALENCE

Symmetry, Asymmetry, and the Physics of Time Reversal in Nabokov’s Ada

As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality.

Albert Einstein, Ideas and Opinions

In Ada Nabokov interprets the field concept with considerable license, using the scientific models more as catalysts for his own ideas than as well-defined paradigms he follows. In this he is like Lawrence; he is like him too in investing his literary strategies with intense ambivalence. But the roots of the ambivalence are essentially different in the two writers. As we have seen, Lawrence was strongly attracted to a field concept because of the union between subject and object that it seemed to promise; he was, however, also wary of the loss of individuation that this fusion could entail. Nabokov, by contrast, is relatively uninterested in the mystical union of self with other that so fascinated Lawrence. A more cerebral writer than Lawrence, Nabokov is also more adamant about preserving the boundaries of the ego intact. For him the attraction of quantum field theory lies in the possibility implied by its broken symmetries (for reasons we will discuss shortly) that time is reversible. Nabokov can accept this possibility only at the price, however, of subjugating the freedom of his artistic creation to the limitations that he associates with scientific observation. The central issue in Ada is therefore not autonomy but control, and it is rendered not through the polarities that Lawrence adapted from Maxwellian electrodynamics, but through the mirror symmetries that dominate
both Nabokov’s fictions and the unified field theories of modern physics.

Symmetry is fundamental to field theory because it is through its symmetrical properties that the field is described. When the world is conceived atomistically, as a collection of material points arranged in space, the symmetry of any given arrangement is an accidental property of the system. But with the shift to the field as “the only reality,” the symmetries of the underlying field become the chief means by which particle interactions are understood and predicted. The shift of emphasis from an atomistic to a field concept thus transforms symmetry from an accidental to an intrinsic property, and consequently places symmetry considerations at the center of modern physics. Werner Heisenberg describes in his memoirs how he and his colleague Wolfgang Pauli came to see symmetry as the key to a unified field theory. “In the beginning was the symmetry’ is certainly a better expression than Democritus’ ‘In the beginning was the particle,’” Heisenberg asserts.¹ The importance of symmetry to field theory has been underscored recently because of a series of experiments indicating that the symmetries of the underlying field are not universally upheld. These violated or “broken” symmetries have led to renewed speculation about the role of symmetry in field theory. To understand them, we shall need briefly to review what symmetry operations are, and how they enter into particle physics.

Perhaps the most familiar kind of symmetry operation is the reflection of an object in a mirror. If the reflected image can in theory be taken out of the mirror and superimposed on the object, then the object is said to possess mirror symmetry. There are also other kinds of symmetry operations; for example, if an object, after being rotated n degrees still looks the same, it possesses n-rotational symmetry. The three symmetries of most interest to particle physicists are charge symmetry, in which positive and negative charges can be interchanged; parity, the equivalence of left- and right-hand mirror images; and time symmetry, in which −t can be substituted for t in the field equations without violating any known laws. Until the mid-fifties, all three of these symmetries were thought to obtain throughout nature. In 1956, however, C. S. Wu and her associates, in a historic experiment, proved that

electrons were emitted preferentially upward (that is, in the direction of the magnetic field) in the decay of radioactive cobalt.\textsuperscript{2} This result proved that parity was not upheld, for had parity obtained, the electrons should have been emitted equally up and down ("up" and "down" in this context can be thought of as equivalent to "right" and "left"). As Martin Gardner explains in \textit{Scientific American}, this meant that "there are events on the particle level . . . that cannot occur in mirror-reflected form."\textsuperscript{3}

Physicists sought to extricate themselves from this uncomfortable situation by postulating that asymmetries in charge could cancel out the asymmetries in parity. Thus, if charge and parity were considered together as a single CP symmetry, the CP symmetry could hold even though the symmetry of neither P nor C by itself could. In terms of Wu's experiment, CP symmetry would be conserved if there existed a parity- and charge-reversed theoretical counterpart to cobalt, cobalt made of antimatter or "anti-cobalt," which emitted electrons preferentially downward. Then nature would still be said not to have a preference for one "hand" over the other, because the two cobalt emissions, one up and one down, would in theory cancel each other out.

But the preservation of CP symmetry was in turn thrown into doubt by a 1964 experiment on the decay of K mesons which implied that CP symmetry was violated. Now the only way for physicists to salvage the overall symmetry was to assume that asymmetries in time could cancel out the asymmetries in charge and parity, so that even if CP symmetry did not hold, CPT symmetry would. But this in turn implied that time-reversal symmetry did not hold by itself, so that the last of the three single symmetries was also assumed to be violated.

Despite the steady encroachment of asymmetries into the field model, physicists regard it as extremely unlikely that the overall CPT symmetry will fall. Eugene Wigner, a seminal researcher in this area, explains why: not because physicists love symmetry (though some do), but because of the "stubborn fact that we cannot formulate equations of motion in quantum field theory that lack this symmetry and still


satisfy the postulates of Einstein’s special theory of relativity.” Hence, if CPT symmetry should not hold, a revision of the very foundation of modern field theory would be necessary.

Even if overall CPT symmetry is conserved, however, the collapse of the individual symmetries has implications that Wigner finds disturbing. Because there is at present no theoretical explanation for why nature should prefer one “hand” over the other, physicists are forced to conclude, Wigner points out, that although “two absolutely equally simple laws of nature are conceivable, nature has chosen, in its grand arbitrariness, only one.” Thus, though a universe in which the CP symmetry tilts one way is as conceivable as one in which it tilts the other, one is consistent with the laws of nature, the other not.

As we shall see, there is an extraordinary congruence between these scientific developments and Nabokov’s conception for Ada. The congruence can be traced certainly to one source, Martin Gardner’s The Ambidextrous Universe (first published in 1964), and less certainly to Gardner’s 1966 Scientific American article on time reversal (“Can Time Go Backward?”). Published in 1969, Ada as a novel apparently grew out of the shorter philosophical work, The Texture of Time, that Nabokov identifies in a 1966 interview with Alfred Appel as its “central rose­web.” Nabokov would claim in 1970 that, “whatever I may have said in an old interview,” the speculations on time apply only to Part Four of Ada, not to the entire novel; nevertheless, it seems clear from the “time­wrenched” cosmology of Ada that Van’s physical and metaphysical inquiries into time are central to its conception. It is also clear from internal evidence that Nabokov was familiar with Gardner’s book. In the first edition of The Ambidextrous Universe, Gardner had quoted lines from the poem “Pale Fire,” puckishly attributing them to the “poet John Shade” without mentioning Nabokov. In Ada Nabokov quotes the same two lines, attributing the quotation to an “invented philoso­

5Ibid., p. 36.
The correspondence between the two works is, however, far more extensive than this polite exchange of pleasantries.

Gardner’s book examines the extensive role that mirror symmetry plays in life on earth, from man’s bilateral symmetry to the double helix of DNA. The final chapters deal with the “Ozma Problem,” the question of whether there is any way to describe the difference between right and left in absolute terms, without referring to other conventions. The problem is usually posed as how to communicate what right and left mean to Planet X, assuming that only words, not pictures or common reference points, may be transmitted between the two planets. The question the Ozma Problem asks is this: are the two halves of left-right symmetry as they are found in fundamental structures exactly equal? Or is there some asymmetry that allows us to distinguish between them? In short, is the universe ambidextrous? Gardner explains that the Ozma Problem was answered in the discovery that parity is not conserved. The fall of parity has implied, of course, that a slight skew exists in nature, a slight preference for one “hand” over the other.

Gardner goes on to discuss what implications the fall of parity has for the other major symmetries of charge and time. The most important is that antimatter, or more precisely antiparticles, exist. Although the first edition went to press before it was discovered that CP symmetry also may not hold, Gardner nevertheless links the fall of parity with time reversal by suggesting that an antiparticle could be an ordinary particle that has been rotated through a higher dimension, for example through the “fourth dimension” of time. Through this reasoning Gardner anticipates his later Scientific American article explaining why the symmetry violations of particle physics imply that time is reversible.

In his Scientific American article, Gardner deals explicitly with whether time can be reversed and, if so, what it means to say a world is moving backward in time. He points out that it makes sense to say time goes “backward” only if we ourselves are moving in the opposite direction; otherwise, all we would be able to know is that time moves.


Gardner thus asserts that "it is only when part of the cosmos is time-reversed in relation to another part that such a reversal acquires meaning." He then discusses some of the reasons why we would not be able to communicate with a time-reversed world. "If you somehow succeeded in communicating something to someone in a time-reversed world," Gardner explains, "he would promptly forget it because the event would instantly become part of his future rather than his past." The occasion for the article was, of course, the recently discovered symmetry violations in high-energy physics, so that time-reversal was placed in a context that linked it with a slight asymmetry in nature's generally symmetrical design.

Even without the more explicit arguments about time reversal in Gardner's *Scientific American* article, enough is said about it in the first edition of *The Ambidextrous Universe* to serve as a powerful stimulus to Nabokov's imagination. Gardner himself, in the revised second edition of *The Ambidextrous Universe* (published in 1979), remarks upon the parallels between his book and Nabokov's 1974 novel *Look at the Harlequins!* Gardner modestly remarks that "questions about the symmetries of space and time are so essential to the plot that I like to think that the book was influenced by Nabokov's reading of the first edition of this book." A reader less tied to the demands of modesty would see in Gardner's book not merely an influence, but a seminal conception that Nabokov appropriated for his own purposes.

*Ada* is the pivotal text for Nabokov's new conception of symmetry. Gardner had suggested there could be no communication between us and a world moving backward in time; in *Ada* Nabokov imagines that there can be no direct communication between his two "time-wrenched" planets, Terra and Antiterra. Gardner recounts how physicists resisted the intrusion of asymmetry into their field theories; Nabokov creates a protagonist who desperately searches for symmetry but discovers instead the slight asymmetries that defeat his expectations. Gardner writes about

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10 Martin Gardner, "Can Time Go Backward?" p. 102.
12 The argument for the link between Gardner's *Ambidextrous Universe* and *Look at the Harlequins!* has been made by D. Barton Johnson in "The Ambidextrous Universe of Nabokov's *Look at the Harlequins!*" in *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Phyllis Roth (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984). I am grateful to Professor Johnson for sharing his work with me prior to its publication, and for his suggestions for this chapter.
scientific experiments that imply time can run backward; Nabokov makes Van a scientist, and has him devote his later life to a treatise suggesting that time can repeat itself. And in Ada as in Gardner, symmetry and asymmetry are deeply bound up with the question of whether time can be reversed. The connections are implicit in the way Van structures his narrative.

In arranging his material, Van chooses to emphasize the repetitions of patterns he first encountered in the summer of 1884 when he fell in love with Ada. The repetitions suggest that time can be made to repeat itself, for no matter what chronological time has passed, in Van’s “Real Time” the same events keep repeating themselves in varying configurations. The constellation that began the repetitions (the coming together of Van and Ada) was itself composed of the joining of two reflective images. Ada’s “right instep and the back of her left hand” bear the same “indelible and sacred birthmark” that marks Van’s right hand and left foot (p. 230), Ada’s “plain Irish nose [is] Van’s in miniature” (p. 64), and her hands are “Van’s in a reducing mirror” (p. 403). Because Van, in possessing Ada, is co-joining mirror images out of which the later reflections evolve, he is always anxious whenever she changes; change threatens the mutuality of reflection. But the mirror correspondence between them miraculously continues as they grow older. In middle age Van sees that they have had the same molar, though on opposite sides of their mouths, drilled and filled with gold.

However, Van is not always so fortunate. Though he aims for exact mirror correspondence, frequently all he can achieve is a reflection that has been slightly wrenched from the original. When these asymmetries intrude upon him, Van is forced to recognize that exact repetition of earlier events is not possible, and hence he is confronted with the truth that all things change in time. The displacement from exact reflection is therefore nearly always invested with connotations of failure, because it implies time does pass; conversely, the successful replication of image brings intense satisfaction, because it implies that the past can be recaptured. The contrast is apparent in Van’s unqualified ardor for Ada, in which symmetry is confirmed, and his ambiguous relationship with Lucette, into which some slight asymmetry inevitably intrudes. Lucette is a wrenched image of Ada, and broken symmetry between the two ultimately proves tragic.

Ada’s colors are black and white, often modulating into black and
yellow. Ada has black hair and white skin; the divan on which she and Van first make love is black with yellow cushions; she wears yellow slacks and a black bolero on the day Van learns of her infidelities to him. Lucette’s color, on the other hand, is red. She has russet-colored hair, and though strongly resembling Ada, repeats the image in a different tone. At one point Lucette propositions Van by mentioning that she too has a black divan and yellow cushions. But Lucette fails because she can never duplicate Ada exactly. Her crime, Van thinks, “was to be suffused with the phantasmata of the other’s [Ada’s] innumerable lips” (p. 400) while never being Ada. Lucette finally commits suicide wearing, in an inversion of Ada’s colors, black slacks and a lemon blouse. Van, riding back from the family picnic in 1888 with Lucette on his lap, remembers the occasion four years earlier when Ada rode there: “Family smell; yes, coincidence; a set of coincidences slightly displaced; the artistry of asymmetry . . . but it was that other picnic which he now relived and it was Ada’s soft haunches which he now held as if she were present in duplicate, in two different color prints” (p. 296).

As Van tells his story, then, two conflicting principles compete in the organization of the narrative: the desire to create exact reflection, and the frequent wrenching of these into slightly displaced variations. One of the mirror-reflections Van creates is Mascodagama, the version of himself when he dances on his hands. Van likens the pleasure he takes in his Mascodagama act to the later convolutions of his writing: “It was the standing of a metaphor on its head not for the sake of the trick’s difficulty, but in order to perceive an ascending waterfall or a sunrise in reverse: a triumph, in a sense, over the ardis of time” (p. 197). Lucette’s governess explains to her that in Greek, “ardis” means “the point of the arrow,” and it is the linearity of time’s arrow, the uniform direction of its flight, that Van sees defeated in the circularity of mirror reflections. Symmetry represents Van’s triumph over time; asymmetry, the inevitable admission that time passes, people change, people die. It is when he is forced to accept the asymmetries that Van feels most desperate about maintaining his control over time. The issue of control is central, then, both to Van’s attitude toward time and to the tension between symmetry and asymmetry that runs through the text.

To understand how the issue of control relates not only to Van’s attitude toward time, but also to his artistic arrangement of his material, we may consider how ordinary time is measured. Take for example a
ticking metronome. The metronome works by holding all variables but one constant: the sound of the tick, the intervals between ticks, the length of the tick and so on, are always the same, infinitely replicable. Despite the overwhelming sameness, we are aware that the second tick is an event distinct from the first. When we try to define the difference that makes the events discrete, we are left with time. The events, identical in every other respect, are different because they take place at different moments. Unvarying similitude allows us to concentrate on the defining difference, and hence to approach pure time—that is, pure time in the ordinary sense.

In *The Texture of Time*, Van tries to free time from this arbitrary sequence and make it a function of human perception by asserting that “real Time” (denoted by a capital “T”) is not a series of identical moments, but a sequence of events that can be either extended or compressed, depending on whether the alert, “tense-willed” mind attends to them or not. Through this argument, Van hopes to establish the primacy of human imagination over time. But because he sacrifices, in the process, the similitude inherent in clock time, he therefore risks making it impossible to measure Time at all, since measurement of time depends upon a uniform series of events against which it may be discerned. So he attempts to replenish the similitude from his own craft, creating uniformity among events through extensive repetitions and reflections. Since the similitudes come from the narrator’s craft in organizing his material, they express his will (express, in fact, his obsession with Ada), in contrast to the similitude inherent in ordinary time which derives from a linearity indifferent to human desire. The repetitions in *Ada* can therefore be seen as a strategy to defeat the linearity of time, and in a sense to humanize it.

Van’s ultimate nightmare is to be caught in a world that refuses to reify the subjective patterns of his thought. After Demon discovers the affair between Van and Ada and forces them to break it off, Van experiences the horror of linearity: “Numbers and rows and series—the nightmare and malediction harrowing pure thought and pure time—seemed bent on mechanizing his mind” (p. 478). The intricate patterns of repetition in *Ada* are an attempt to break that linearity, to force it to conform to the subjective patterns of time arising from the narrator’s own preoccupations.

Moreover, if we are to understand Van’s narrative, we are obliged to
enter into those rhythms, and hence to share his preoccupations. Consider how a text such as *Ada* must be read if it is to be understood. Because so many passages reflect or vary details from previous passages, the reader who fails to remember these superabundant details will find subsequent passages increasingly unintelligible. We realize that we must not only closely attend to the present details, but retain those details as they move into the past in order to understand the future details moving into our present. Understanding the text, even on a literal level, thus requires that we duplicate Van’s “tense-willed” mind and his dedication to accurate recall.

Furthermore, by entering into this dynamic, we are also valorizing Van’s philosophical speculations on the nature of time. As the memory-patterns slowly accumulate in our minds through interlocking details, both present and future are put in the service of the past—precisely what Van attempts to do philosophically in his *Texture of Time*. For as we continue to read, we recognize the present as a repetition of or variation on the past, and therefore organize it in terms of the past. The accumulation of past detail in the reader’s mind is what makes the present detail memorable. As the patterns accumulate in memory, more and more of the present is organized in those terms. Van writes, “What we do at best (at worst we perform trivial tricks) when postulating the future, is to expand enormously the specious present causing it to permeate any amount of time with all manner of information, anticipation and precognition” (pp. 596–597). The repeated reflections and their associated details have just the effect that Van describes, causing the “specious present” to expand until we share Van’s perception that he lives his life out of the single summer of 1884 when he first fell in love with Ada. We, no less than he, are forced into a nostalgic stance if the present or future is to have any meaning. As we read through *Ada* the past is constantly expanding as an organizing principle, while the unknown, unforeseeable potential that we call the future is contracting.

Recall that the measurement of time depends upon both similitude and difference. We have seen how Van organizes his narrative to emphasize the repetitions, thus supplying similitude between events and linking them together in time. But unvarying reflection, being circular, would obliterate time. Making us aware that time has passed are the displacements from exact reflection, which Van always to some extent resists. The symmetries serve the purpose of defeating the ordinary
linearity of time; the asymmetries allow us to distinguish between sim­ilitudes and hence to define them as discrete events separated in time.

Van recognizes, at least intellectually, the danger implicit in the nostalgic repetitions that threaten to proliferate endlessly into the future. In his treatment of Time, Van admits that a completely “determinate scheme” would create a predictable unfolding as pernicious as the clock-time that stretches toward an exactly divided, and hence infinitely predictable, future. “The determinate scheme,” Van writes, “would abolish the very notion of time. . . . The determinate scheme by stripping the sunrise of its surprise would erase all sunrays” (p. 597). What Van does not seem fully to realize, however, is how closely related the perils of a “determinate scheme” are to the dominance of the past that he so much desires.

To escape the dangers of an overdetermining past, Van in his theory of Time turns to the future. He writes that “the future remains aloof from our fancies and feelings. At every moment it is an infinity of branching possibilities” (p. 597). However true this is for Van as he lived his life (and one wonders how true it can be, since Van perceives his life as being lived out of moments in the past), it is less true when we consider how Van treats time in his narrative. Van, always teetering on the edge of a “determinate scheme” dictated by the past, attempts to break out of it into the less constrictive time of his present by injecting that present into the text, for example through the notes that the present Ada and Van exchange throughout their reminiscences of the past. He thus creates an artificial future, as it were, for the reader in the text.

But this does not alleviate the problem, since that “future” (that is, Van’s present time as writer of the memoir) is seen by Van as the culmination of the patterns originating from the past. For example, Van begins the chapter in which the incestuous affair between Van and Ada is discovered by announcing that the many precautions they took were “all absolutely useless, for nothing can change the end (written and filed away) of the present chapter” (p. 458). By injecting his present into the past, Van has not so much redeemed his narrative from over-determination as he has extended the dominance of the past even further, into a future which is becoming for the reader as determined as the past.

So Van tries other ploys to relieve the sterility of a “determinate scheme.” He denies, for example, that there is the future, only a future,
by introducing time forks into the narrative, problematic futures that exist but that are not taken in this unfolding of the narrative. But here we arrive at a moot point: is Van introducing these time forks? Or is he merely describing a feature of the fictive world that Nabokov has created? With the time forks, the answer is unclear; they could be either one, a trick of the narrator or a real feature of Van’s world. But there are other points at which the events deviate from Van’s predicted pattern and thereby fail to conform to his subjective desires—points, that is, where he is forced to recognize the asymmetries. Whatever may be Van’s appreciation of the dangers of a “determinate scheme,” the countermeasures he takes as an artist are ineffective in escaping them. The real deviations from exact reflection are beyond Van’s control, often bitterly resisted by him and proof of the partial failure of his attempt to establish the dominance of patterns emerging from the past. They arise not from his will as narrator, but from the will of his creator, Nabokov.

Thus, it is Nabokov rather than Van who takes seriously the dangers in a “determinate scheme.” Because Van gives his allegiance to science as well as art, his control over his material is only partial; he can arrange, he can interpret, but he is not free altogether to invent the events he narrates. We as readers can perceive how, despite Van’s frantic efforts, these events fail to conform exactly to the symmetries he wishes them to embody. Ada’s infidelities, the repeated and painful separations from her, the desperate search for her reflection in the pitiful girl-prostitutes, all testify to Van’s inability to bring exact reflections into being through the exercise of his will.

Yet at the same time, Nabokov permits Van’s endeavor to be mostly successful. There is, after all, an astonishing abundance of mirror correspondences in Van’s world, from the physical similarities between Van and Ada to the cosmological link between Terra and Antiterra. Nabokov and Van collaborate in establishing the dominance of the past as an organizing principle. They differ in their desire to create unvarying similitudes. Van would have complete replication, but he is denied this by his Fate—that is to say, by Nabokov. Nabokov is engaged, then, in a delicate balancing act. On the one hand he creates extensive patterns through reflections, doubling, and repetitions, thus putting the present and future in the service of the past, from whence the patterns originate and accumulate. On the other hand, he strives to escape the determinacy of over-patterning through displacements from exact re-
flections. Not surprisingly, these displacements are heavily invested with ambivalence, since they are at once a threat and promise. Because they vary the pattern, they contain an implicit threat to it as an organizing principle (and hence to the dominance of the past which is at the very center of *Ada*). At the same time, however, they also promise to liberate the future from the tyranny of an over-determining past.

We are now in a position to understand better the role that Terra and Antiterra play in the novel's larger patterns. The interplay between the two worlds is an expression, on a cosmic scale, of the tensions in Nabokov's artistry. The two worlds mostly mirror one another; but there are significant departures from exact reflection. There is, for example, a time gap of anywhere from fifty to a hundred years between the two worlds, so that they are separated in time as well as in space. Moreover, even given the time difference, the reflections between the two worlds are not exact, with "not all the no-longers of one world corresponding to the not-yets of the other" (p. 20). Terra is therefore not an exact mirror of Antiterra, but a "distortive glass of our distortive glebe," as one Antiterran scholar put it (p. 20).

Because wrenched reflections are always regarded ambivalently in this text, the moral values attached to these two slightly asymmetric worlds are ambiguous. After Lucette's suicide, Van imagines how much better her life might have been had she been on Terra rather than on that "pellet of muck," Antiterra. Judging by Antiterra's proper name, Demonia, we might suppose that this judgment is correct—until we remember that on that mirror planet demons are "noble iridescent creatures with translucent talons and mightily beating wings" (p. 23). Van is disenchanted with Antiterra in times of crises, seeing it as a "multicolored and evil world" (p. 319); but in cooler moments he writes *Letters from Terra*, proposing that the "strain of sweet happiness" that Demonians suppose they hear from their sister-planet Terra is a fraud. The "purpose of the novel was to suggest that Terra cheated, that all was not paradise there, that perhaps in some ways human minds and human flesh underwent on that sibling planet worse torments than on our own much maligned Demonia" (p. 363). Whether Terra is Heaven or Hell, and consequently whether the fictional Antiterra is a twisted parody of its heavenly Terran counterpart or a paradisical twin to our own "pellet of muck," is left ambiguous. All that we can say with certainty is that neither position is left unqualified. Given the terms in
which Nabokov creates symmetries and asymmetries in *Ada*, we might almost say that ambivalences arise whenever mirror images are posited; they are a necessary consequence of cosmic doubleness.\(^{13}\)

The fascination with broken symmetries that we see in *Ada* has deep roots in Nabokov’s thought. Mirror symmetry, the circularity of mutual reflection, is generally expressed by Nabokov as a conviction that all true things are round. In the Appel interview, Nabokov insists at one point that “a real good head . . . is round.”\(^{14}\) Carol Williams, in her article “Nabokov’s Dialectical Structure,” uses as her epigraph these lines from Nabokov’s poem “An Evening of Russian Poetry”:

> Not only rainbows—every line is bent, and skulls and seeds and all good worlds are round.

Williams believes these lines “contain the essence of Vladimir Nabokov’s metaphysical division. The human eye, he implies, can see only half of the circle (the rainbow’s arc); the other half must be taken on faith.”\(^{15}\) But the roundness, Williams quickly points out, is not exactly the roundness of a circle—more precisely, it is the circle “set free” in a spiral. “I thought this up when I was a schoolboy,” Nabokov writes in *Speak, Memory,*

and I also discovered that Hegel’s triadic series . . . expressed merely the essential spirality of all things in their relation to time. . . . If we consider the simplest spiral, three stages may be distinguished in it, corresponding to those of the triad: We can call “thetic” the small curve or arc that initiates the convolution centrally; “antithetic” the larger arc that faces the first in the process of continuing it; and “synthetic” the still ampler arc that continues the second while following the first along the outer side.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{13}\) The ambivalence may surface in another way in the incest motif that increasingly seems to occupy Nabokov in his late English fiction, especially in *Ada* and *Look at the Harlequins!* An incestuous coupling simultaneously violates and achieves difference; on the one hand it violates socially decreed kinship differences, but at the same time it catapults the offenders outside the social norm, thereby insuring their difference within their society. These ideas were suggested to me by my reading of D. Barton Johnson’s “The Labyrinth of Incest in Nabokov’s *Ada*” (forthcoming in *Contemporary Literature*), which makes clear the extent of the incest theme in *Ada*, not only in the treatment of Van and Ada but also in that of their ancestors in the Zenski-Veen family line.

\(^{14}\) An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov,” p. 33.

\(^{15}\) Carol T. Williams, “Nabokov’s Dialectical Structure,” in Dembo, p. 165.

The spiral, then, accommodates the demands of symmetry, yet at the same time allows for a slight asymmetry that, in twisting the spiral upward, liberates the return from the prison of a closed circle.

In Nabokov's work as a whole, asymmetry is linked, L. S. Dembo suggests, with "the artistic need for escape from necessity." It is what keeps the return from vicious circularity. Dembo quotes from Cherdyntsev, the "pure" artist of *The Gift*:

> The theory I find most tempting [is] that there is no time, that everything is the present situated like a radiance outside our blindness. . . . And if one adds to this that nature was seeing double when she created us . . . that symmetry in the structure of live bodies is a consequence of the rotation of worlds . . . in our strain toward asymmetry, toward inequality, I can detect a howl for genuine freedom, an urge to break out of the circle.

Here we have an interpretation of asymmetry that is opposite to the value Van gives it in *Ada*. To Cherdyntsev it implies freedom, whereas Van laments it as a regrettable accident that interferes with the desired circularity of time. "The irreversibility of Time," Van writes, "is a very parochial affair: had our organs and orgitrons not been asymmetrical, our view of Time might have been amphitheatric and grand" (p. 573).

But what the narrator construes as his defeats—the asymmetries that impose themselves upon him—are also the very qualities that rescue his world from unreality. From this point of view, Van Veen is perhaps the most favored of Nabokov's narrators. The asymmetries that Cherdyntsev as artist must create, Nabokov weaves into the fabric of the universe in *Ada*. All that Van has to do is recognize them. Hence he is a scientist as well as an artist: his dedication to accurate observation holds in check his tendency to create the world, balancing the artificial world of artistic creation against the recognition of a natural world in which partial failure is inevitable. Significantly, Van is the one Nabokovian hero who finally achieves his desired end in something like the fullness and serenity he imagined. The limitations that Nabokov imposes upon his protagonist in *Ada* do not puncture the world of artistic creation, but collaborate with it to redeem it from its own excesses.

17L. S. Dembo, p. 15 ("Vladimir Nabokov: An Introduction").
In this sense *Ada* is the inverse of *Pale Fire*, the novel that immediately preceded it (putting aside those novels that Nabokov had translated from Russian into English in the interval). In *Pale Fire*, the relation between the two worlds of Shade and Kinbote is antagonistic; both interpretations cannot be correct. They occupy the same space and time, but touch each other only tangentially. The curious echoes and pale reflections between them are all that provide Shade and Kinbote (though in very different ways) with the reassurance that life is anything more than an absconded and prolonged joke.

In *Ada*, on the other hand, the two worlds, Terra and Antiterra, are parallel and complementary, though occupying a different space and time; there is no difficulty in supposing both can be true at once. With so much reflection between them, the heavy hand of necessity can be seen not in the chance that there is no correspondence, but in the possibility that the correspondences may be too perfect. The emphasis thus shifts from *Pale Fire*’s “artistry of coincidence” to *Ada*’s “artistry of asymmetry.” What Nabokov withholds from Kinbote in *Pale Fire* is the fundamental congruence that can confer the status of reality upon Kinbote’s artistic dream. But what Nabokov withholds from his protagonist in *Ada* is perfect correspondence which, if granted, would result in sterility, if not in proof that at least one of the images did not exist. The distinction is the difference between the “tragic farce” (Carol Williams’s phrase for a genre that she finds prototypical of Nabokov’s fiction) of *Pale Fire* and the tragicomedy of *Ada*.

These differences between *Ada* and Nabokov’s earlier work appear especially significant when we consider that it was while *Ada* was being written that Nabokov read Gardner’s book, and possibly Gardner’s later *Scientific American* article on the broken symmetries of physics. Already concerned with problems of artistic freedom in the midst of temporal necessity, with the need to redefine time as something other than linear sequence, and with the appeal of asymmetry, Nabokov found in Gardner a synthesis of these elements into a brilliantly simple thesis: amid the overwhelming symmetry of nature there exist slight asymmetries, and these asymmetries, collected together into antiworlds, imply that time can go backward. The result is a changed stance in Nabokov’s work toward the relation between art and reality.

L. S. Dembo has pointed out that Nabokov’s fiction before *Ada* had consistently embodied a tension between the protagonist’s desire for a
solipsistic world of his own making and the author’s intervention to puncture that desire, revealing the inadequacy or even the insanity of the protagonist.19 Such a technique presupposes that the author possesses a more secure ontological viewpoint than the narrator; otherwise, the tension could not exist. Nabokov’s narratives are problematic not because reality does not exist, but because they are not reality.

Ada, however, represents a significant variation on the Nabokovian pattern of ontological security. In Ada, Nabokov seems quite self-consciously to have set himself the task of coming to terms with the new physics and, by implication, with the connection between art and the verifiable reality of scientific theory. Some readers, tempted by the usual Nabokovian pattern, have proposed that Antiterra is another solipsistic world of the narrator’s creation.20 But to accept this proposition is to simplify the text and ignore the kind of complexities that Nabokov is exploring. In Ada, the conflict is not between a world of illusion in which desires can be fulfilled and a real world that continually frustrates the artist’s desire for control. Rather, it is the subtler tension inherent in a real world that seems partly to be amenable to the narrator’s attempt to control it and partly to resist those patterns through its stubborn asymmetries.

The change is writ large in the novel’s cosmology. Terra and Antiterra represent the two different kinds of worlds: one fully accessible to the protagonist but from our viewpoint unreal; the other real but shrouded in mystery for the protagonist. There is a mirror reversal here that keeps us from too easily equating Antiterra with the artificial world of art and Terra with reality, since for Van the terms of those equations are reversed. But it is significant that Van, far from ignoring Terra, spends his professional life attempting to communicate with it, just as it is significant that he is both scientist and artist. The scheme suggests that in Ada Nabokov is trying to connect his fictional, created world with the “real” world of scientific observation. If so, we may speculate that the enticement for Nabokov is the thesis that he found in Gardner: that time reversal is not merely an artistic dream, but has been verified by scientific observation.

19 Dembo, pp. 3–18.
20 See for example Bobbie Ann Mason, Nabokov’s Garden: A Guide to Ada (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1969). Mason’s thesis is that Van, consumed by guilt over his incestuous relationship with his sister, invents Antiterra out of whole cloth; he really lives on earth the whole time.
LITERARY STRATEGIES

This new conjunction between art and science has its own anxieties, however, for it must have raised questions about Nabokov’s artistic control over his material. For Nabokov, science means “above all natural science,” and hence a commitment to accurately describe a pre-existing reality. But when he speaks of his creative writing, he imagines himself as a “perfect dictator” who is “alone responsible” for the created world’s “stability and truth.” To connect art and science, as Nabokov tries to do in Ada, would thus bring into conflict two opposing methodologies: one dedicated to the accurate observation of a pre-existing reality; the other to the premise that art is an illusion under the complete control of its creator. The solution that Nabokov apparently arrived at was to appropriate the relativistic field model, but also to introduce into it the idiosyncratic variations that spring from his personal will as the creator of Ada’s universe. Thus, he asserts his own control at the same time that he avails himself of the legitimating power of the model to validate the reversal of time.

How Van distorts the Special and General Theories of Relativity is discussed at length by Strother Purdy in The Hole in the Fabric. Noting these distortions, Purdy remarks that if Nabokov himself understood the concepts, he kept it “well concealed.” Purdy points out, for example, that Antiterra is not really an antiworld in Gardner’s terms, because it is not moving backward in time from our world, only parallel to it. Purdy concludes that Nabokov discards current scientific theories frivolously, flying “in the face . . . of relativistic time and the relation of space and time” in relativity theory, without offering any plausible solutions of his own.

But in a sense Nabokov has offered a solution, or at least a compromise, to the larger question that Purdy’s objection raises. At issue is the artist’s control over his material, and the kind of restrictions he becomes subject to when he incorporates into his text a well-articulated scientific model. Purdy’s position is extreme: he implies that Nabokov, to play fair, must faithfully reproduce the model in all its aspects. Purdy is

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21The quotation is from “An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov,” p. 33. For a fuller discussion of Nabokov’s attitudes toward science, see Timothy F. Flower, “The Scientific Art of Nabokov’s Pale Fire,” Criticism, 17 (Summer 1975), 224.
22“An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov,” p. 25.
24Ibid., p. 131.
correct when he observes that Nabokov does not adhere to this requirement. Rather, Nabokov implicitly insists on his right to control his created universe by adhering to the model in some respects and rejecting or altering it in others. On a deeper level, however, Nabokov concedes Purdy’s underlying premise that some restrictions on the artist are inevitable if he wishes to maintain contact with reality. Witness Nabokov’s ironic stance toward his narrator: Van wants complete control, but Nabokov arranges matters so that this is equated with perfect reflection, and hence with the perfect mirror images that would trap the protagonist in a world of illusion. Though Van resists the knowledge, Nabokov knows that “a perfect likeness would rather suggest a specular, and hence speculatory, phenomenon” (p. 21), as one Antiterra scholar observes. The observation implies that if the world of art, cut loose from reality, is free to assert its primacy of being, it is also a retreat into a solipsistic, self-reflexive creation that is endlessly circular. Cut loose from reality, “all art [is] a game” (pp. 480–481). By admitting the asymmetries that modern field theory links with time reversal, Nabokov at once connects his fiction with scientific fact and implicitly avoids the circularity of self-reflexive art.

We are now in a position to meditate more deeply on what Antiterra means. As Purdy has pointed out, it is obviously not an antiworld in the strict scientific sense of being a world composed of antimatter and moving backward in time. Rather, it is a complementary and completing half of the arc of our world, an “antithetic” world that is a mirror reflection of our “thetic” reality, but with significant twists that keep it from exact mirror symmetry. It is precisely in those asymmetric twists that the circle is set free, so that the mutuality between the two worlds can be a creative rather than a destructive tension. In that spirality, that lack of exact reflection, Nabokov can both exercise the control that

Nancy Anne Zeller’s “The Spiral of Time in Ada,” in A Book of Things about Nabokov (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1974), pp. 280–291, demonstrates how the chronology of Van’s encounters with Ada can also be seen as taking place (with a little wrenching) along a spiral. Her thesis is that Van’s last reunion with Ada is slightly off a perfect spiral, and that he therefore needs to turn back a year, as it were, by running down a spiral staircase, meeting Ada at last on one level below his present room. The symmetry and slight asymmetry Zeller notices are entirely consistent with my point here. Zeller seems not to take into account, however, that the helical spiral (a spiral of constant diameter) is only one possibility, and that spirals of increasing diameter are not only possible but indeed what Nabokov seems to have had in mind (the “still ampler arc” of the Speak, Memory passage).
he identifies with artistic creation and accommodate the demands of a scientific reality. Nabokov grants to science the limitations on artistic control; he gains back from it the assurance that time can indeed go backward.

The possibility that time could be reversed must have touched a deep chord in Nabokov. Even a casual reader of his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, is aware of the crucial role that the sense of a lost past played in Nabokov's life. Exiled from his homeland, fated to see the entire way of life he knew there destroyed forever in the Revolution, Nabokov felt keenly the appeal of nostalgia. In *Ada* that past is recreated, history rewritten so that Nabokov’s two homelands merge in “Amerussia.” Van’s attempt to blunt the point of time’s arrow, denying its relentless forward flight by capturing, and then recreating, the ardors of Ardis through memory, is surely in part Nabokov’s endeavor as well.

I have been suggesting that in *Ada*, the difficulty of reconciling art and reality lies not primarily in internal contradictions within the novel’s created universe, as it does for many other Nabokov novels, but in Van’s resistance to asymmetries. Antiterra and Terra both exist; the mirror reflections are not merely a function of Van’s imagination. But the broken symmetry also insures that the search for a completely mutual reflection cannot be successful, and this in turn implies the failure of the narrator’s attempts to control completely what can only partially be made to come under his shaping imagination. In this struggle, imagination is one important factor: it promises the possibility of free artistic creation. But in *Ada*, creation depends on both imagination and memory; and memory is tied to the accurate observation that Nabokov associates with science. If half of time’s spiral is created through imagination, the other half is created through memory.

In the Appel interview, Nabokov commented that “imagination is a form of memory. . . . An image depends on the power of association, and association is supplied and prompted by memory. When we speak of a vivid individual recollection we are paying a compliment not to our capacity of retention but to Mnemosyne’s mysterious foresight in having stored up this or that element which creative imagination may use when combining it with later recollections and inventions. In this sense, both memory and imagination are a negation of time.”26 As we have

26 “An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov,” p. 32.
seen, what Nabokov calls in his own life “Mnemosyne’s mysterious foresight” is supplied to Van by his creator. Van need not invent his memories; he need only remember accurately to have the material at hand upon which his imagination can act. But memory also implies that the memoirist is constrained within the boundaries of accurate recall. Memory represents the “antithetic” constraint that exists in tension with the “thetic” freedom of the artistic imagination. In the broken symmetry of this conjunction, the spiral moves yet another turn, yielding a “still ampler arc” in Van’s attempt to control time.

In Ada there are two different types of memory: true memory and false memory. Van makes the distinction most often by comparing his recollections to a camera still or movie. Both re-create events, but to Van, the mechanical recall provided by a camera or movie is a pale mockery of the sensual immediacy of his own memories. For example, Van sees Marina’s sensibility as inferior to his and Ada’s, and even to Demon’s, because of her willingness to rely on mechanical reproduction rather than direct sensual recall of the event. Demon, faced with the women he had loved beyond all reason twenty years earlier, tries to “possess the reality of the fact by forcing it into the sensuous center” (p. 265). Marina, however, is content to remember their affair as a “stale melodrama” neatly filed in her “screen-corrupted” mind (p. 267). When Marina sees Van and Ada’s hands together in 1888, she can’t summon the memory it ought to trigger from 1884, the view of their twin hands gliding up the staircase rail in tandem (“though only four years had elapsed!” Van remarks in parenthetical exasperation). Marina is a “dummy in human disguise” because she lacks that “third sight (individual, magically detailed imagination)” which makes memory capable of vivid re-creation. Marina’s flat recollections are distanced in her mind as if she were watching a movie of her own past—a movie she intends to edit and rearrange at her convenience.

By contrast, the sensual immediacy of Van’s recollection is the very soul of his narrative. But he pays a price for this immediacy that Ada implicitly acknowledges when she says that “no point would there be, if we left out, for example, the little matter of prodigious individual awareness and young genius, which makes, in some cases, of this or that particular gasp an unprecedented and unrepeatable event in the continuum of life or at least a thematic anthemia of such events in a work of art, or a denouncer’s article. The details that shine through or shade
through . . . [are] all” (pp. 76–77; italics in original). The ambivalence in this passage (the “thematic anthemia,” the “unrepeatable event” that Van desperately yearns to reproduce) “shades through” despite the celebration of vivid recall. For if the false memory of movie-like distancing leads to the purgatory of non-personhood, the true memory of vivid sensual recall can sometimes lead straight to hell. When Van recalls—in his usual blindingly clear fashion—the memory of Lucette’s suicide “in a series of sixty-year-old actions which now I can grind into extinction only by working on a succession of words until the rhythm is right” (p. 521), the agony is unmistakable.

Van, unlike Marina, does not edit. He reports the sickening betrayals and falsities with the same fidelity of recall that he brings to the glorious moments. But he characteristically narrates shameful moments as though they were a movie script, perhaps unconsciously relegating them to the purgatory of false memory, which at such times is a relief from the hell of unrelenting immediacy. For example, in recollecting the episode where he and Ada try to seduce Lucette in bed between them (an episode he feels ashamed of afterward), he writes as though he were trying to force his sensuous recall into the impersonal angles of a camera panning across a ceiling mirror: “Thus seen from above . . . we have the large island of the bed illumined from our left (Lucette’s right) by a lamp burning with a murmuring incandescence on the west-side bedtable. . . . Another trip from the port to the interior reveals the central girl’s long white left thigh . . . .” (pp. 443–444). Though the sensual immediacy keeps breaking through in that “long white left thigh,” it only qualifies, it does not negate, Van’s attempt to distance his shame by resorting to movie-like recall.

We may, if we wish to attribute a psychological motive to Van’s association of movies and betrayal, trace it back to the summer of 1888, when Ada confesses her infidelity to him by paralleling herself with the unfaithful heroine of the movie script of Les Maudits Enfants. The entire chapter following this confession is written as a movie scenario: “If one dollied now to another group . . . one might take a medium shot of the young maestro’s pregnant wife” (p. 210). The dreadful movie script dominates this chapter, seeming to dictate the actions of the characters out of the script as well as those in it. Poor Philip Rack, playing a part in life parallel to the wretched third lover who is included in the movie heroine’s affections only because she pities him, confesses to Ada, “One
feels . . . One feels . . . that one is merely playing a role and has forgotten the next speech” (p. 214). Van, included by proxy in the movie as another of the heroine’s lovers, is also caught in the script when he strides away from pool-side at the same moment that the character who is his cinematic counterpart “leaves the pool-side patio” (p. 215).

Though Van’s associations with movies are mostly negative, Ada can see the “sun side,” for example when she explains why she enjoys acting within the confines of the script. “In ‘real’ life we are creatures of chance in an absolute void—unless we be artists ourselves, naturally; but in a good play I feel authored, I feel passed by the board of censors, I feel secure, with only a breathing blackness before me (instead of our Fourth-Wall Time)” (pp. 451–452). The constraints provided by the script thus provide Ada with a protection analogous to that Van finds in mirror reflection, that is, a predictable pattern that protects one from the anxiety of an indeterminate future cut loose from the bounds of the past.

As an artist, however, Van is unable to accept this solution because a script can never be totally under the artist’s control. Van objects to making movies of books because the book “belonged solely to its creator and could not be spoken or enacted by a mime (as Ada insisted) without letting the deadly stab of another’s mind destroy the artist in the very lair of his art” (p. 450). If Van is not in complete control of the emergent pattern, weaving it according to his preferred design, then he is unable to accept it as a valid extension of the past into the present.

Perhaps this is why Van, despite his dislike of movies in general, dotes on Ada’s portrayal in Don Juan’s Last Fling. By some “stroke of art, by some enchantment of chance,” Van finds Ada’s three brief scenes to be a “perfect compendium of her 1884 and 1888 and 1892 looks” (p. 520). Because the movie’s portrayal exactly coincides with his own recollections, Van can accept the movie as an extension of his own memory. What he can’t stand is a reification of memory that conflicts with his recall. Hence his outrage at Kim’s pictures. Van finds the pictures not just embarrassing or inconvenient but a desecration, because they posit another version of the reality that Van recollects, a version not under his direct control. So he tells Ada, “This is the hearse of ars, a toilet roll of the Carte de Tendre! I’m sorry you showed it to me. That ape has vulgarized our mind-pictures” (p. 430).

Even though Ada welcomes constraints on action, it is emphasized
that only the artist can create the comforting pattern that will contain without being so constrictive as to kill the life it holds within it. Ada thinks of the “novelistic” atmosphere of their room at the Three Swans as a “frame, as a form, something supporting and guarding life, otherwise unprovided on Desdemonia, where artists are the only gods” (p. 553). Van, more ambitious than Ada, wants to be the “god” who creates the constraints. The egocentricity of this position is intrinsic to Van’s characterization. He may be faithful to his memory by including the painful episodes along with the joyous ones; but it is still his memory which he is reifying by writing his chronicle. Nabokov’s vision, more complex than Van’s, admits to constraints on the artistic re-creation through memory. “Unless we be artists ourselves,” we will not have the privilege of preserving our memories; but only the great artist can hope to escape from the difficulties besetting the odyssey of memory, as it steers between the Scylla of exact symmetry and the Charybdis of asymmetries that nevertheless must be acknowledged.

In response to Kim’s pictures, Van intends either to “horsewhip his eyes out or redeem our childhood by making a book out of it: Ardis, a family chronicle” (p. 430). We know he does both. But even so, the asymmetry of Kim’s “wrenched” recollection cannot be escaped. Encapsulated within the larger recollections of Ada, which we understand as Van’s attempt to reclaim the past on his own terms, is the smaller detail of Kim’s pictures, modestly posing its own version of that recollection. To recollect faithfully and completely is to include the memory of counter-recollections which deny that the memoirist’s reality is the only one. The very comprehensiveness of the mnemonic endeavor insures that the means for it unraveling are contained within it.

Van’s success in controlling the memory-patterns is thus never total. His partial success hints that the larger endeavor in which he is engaged, the stopping of time, can also never be complete. For when “memory and imagination” cooperate in a “negation of time,” there is one final qualification: human mortality. Only an immortal can remember forever. As Van admits, the inverse proposition is also true: “you lose your immortality when you lose your memory.” He continues: “And if you land then on Terra Caelicstis, with your pillow and chamberpot, you are made to room not with Shakespeare or even Longfellow, but with guitarists and cretins” (p. 622). Although in one sense death “catapults us altogether out of space, out of time,” as
Martin Gardner puts it, \(^{27}\) finally allowing us to achieve true timelessness, in another sense mortality represents time's final victory over the memorist, for when he dies his memories die. Van recognizes the paradox very early. "Space breaking away from time," what he strives to accomplish in his philosophical treatise, is fully achieved only "in the final tragic triumph of human cogitation: I am because I die" (p. 164). The only recourse is to do what Shakespeare and Longfellow did, and what the cretins do not: defeat the final amnesia by preserving the memories in lasting form, which is the real reason Van writes *Ada*. He hopes that he and Ada "will die into the finished book."

And in a sense they do. But Nabokov knows that recapturing life through art, like living memory, is transitory. Given enough time, the mnemonic enterprise to defeat Time must necessarily fail, since the full realization that Time can be overcome through the twin efforts of memory and imagination is limited to the duration of our own memory, fully achieved only as we see the completed pattern and the next moment already fading as we close the book. At the moment the narrative catches up with Van's present, Van finishes writing his book on Time, and his description of its emphasizes how fleeting is the moment when the meaning of the text is both fully immanent and sensually vivid: "My aim was to compose a kind of novella in the form of a treatise on the Texture of Time, an investigation of its veily substance, with illustrative metaphors gradually increasing, very gradually building up a logical love story, going from past to present, blossoming as a concrete story, and just as gradually reversing analogies and disintegrating again into bland abstraction" (p. 599).

It is fair to say this is Nabokov's strategy as well. For in *our* book, the past has been slowly accumulating meaning at the same time as it is moving toward Van's present, the present that we are aware of through narrative interjections but that we can glimpse only as momentary fragments distracting us from the nostalgic text. When the narrative reaches Van's present, Nabokov allows only a brief moment of synchronicity before the two time lines again begin to diverge, with us, the readers, going back into the reality of our present on Terra, and Van and Ada fading into the indeterminacy of a future unknown to us. "Actually, we

had passed through all that,” Nabokov tells his readers after Van and Ada are finally reunited; “Our world was, in fact, mid-twentieth century. Terra convalesced after enduring the rack and the stake . . .” (p. 618). This transition back into our own time comes at the end of the penultimate chapter. As we begin the final chapter, Van and Ada grow progressively remote and fuzzy in outline, as they recede away from us back into “bland abstractions.” The book ends with a bald plot summary of the book, wryly acknowledging its inability to recapture the reality of the lived experience. In another sense, of course, it is Nabokov’s final attempt to do just that. For as we read the mock-blurb, we compare it with the story that now exists in our memory; and finding the memory infinitely richer than the summary, we are faced with the recognition of having achieved, through the art of Nabokov’s words, a lived memory beside which his final verbal representation of it pales into parody. The beauty of Nabokov’s art in Ada is the way he makes a virtue of necessity, achieving success through admitting partial failure. If the successes of Ada are never absolute—Van in his Treatise on Time admits he is “wounded by the Imposter” Space—the failures are never unmitigated by success. The only unqualified truth to emerge is the certainty that life and art are double, forever shade and sun intermingled.

The metaphysic of Ada may thus be defined as follows: what can be controlled is never completely real; what is real can never be completely controlled. The metaphysics is strikingly similar to Einstein’s famous aphorism, “As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality.”28 Ada is thus Nabokov’s tribute to an idea intrinsic to the field concept, that reality can never be entirely captured in the abstractions of either art or science.

Yet there is a subtler implication of the field concept that Nabokov misses, or perhaps ignores. The desire for control is predicated on the assumption that it is possible to make an unambiguous separation between the one who controls and that which is controlled. It relies, in other words, on the Cartesian dichotomy, and hence is deeply bound up with the Newtonian world view. To accept that control can never be complete is to modify that world view, not to reject it; the revolutionary view would be to propose that the control is a chimera, and the

desire for it is induced by the illusion that we are separate from the world and each other.

Nabokov's stance toward the field model is thus finally ambivalent. By imposing limitations on his narrator's attempt to control time through the twin efforts of imagination and memory, Nabokov voluntarily subjugates his art to some of the requirements imposed by a field model. The concession is reflected in the fact that in *Ada* Nabokov brings various versions of the two halves of a symmetric whole—Van and Ada, Terra and Antiterra, art and science—into tense and close relation. But relation is not unity; in admitting this much, Nabokov has escaped the more radical implications of the field concept. The image that lingers from *Ada* is not the universe made whole, but the atomistic universe of the Cartesian dichotomy compressed into two nearly perfect mirror images that, through their slight asymmetry, resist complete union. That tension is a measure both of the influence of the new physics on Nabokov's thought and of his ambivalence toward locating his fictional world within the cosmic web.