

## Vaniada: *Cousinage-dangereux-voisinage adage*<sup>1</sup>

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While working on *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, Nabokov famously remarked that the novel was like a woman 'bursting out of her corset. I take this to mean that Nabokov felt that his novel would in some way exceeding the norms of novelistic discourse. In what follows I will enlist some of Derrida's key concepts in reading this boisterous novel as a means of coping with its literary excesses. I will argue that the textual surplus produced by *Ada* is precisely its challenge to both novelistic form and to the limits of the literary canon. At the same time *Ada* pushes the envelope of literary convention from a position within the canon, to which Nabokov's crowning accomplishment belongs. As I will argue, this exceeding and pushing takes many forms such as the misquotation and decontextualisation of other canonical texts. In deploying such strategies, *Ada* advances a challenge that is both performative and deconstructive.

My approach to *Ada* will involve a somewhat novel reading of the text through narrative card games, which I take to be significant nodes of textual breakdown where the play of semiosis and a dissemination of gambling metaphors begin. Further, as a consequence of particular elements in the fictional world of *Ada* (textual, economic, structural), card games constitute events that seem to demonstrate the logic of Derrida's notion of general economics. This is partially attributable to circumstantial aspects of the narrative, such as the Veen children's 'consanguineous romance' which informs the novel (133). It is early on in the novel that Van and Ada discover documents to prove that they are brother and sister and not just 'kissin' cousins' as they had thought. Remarkably, however, the children choose to disregard this information and their passionate *cousinage-dangereux* continues untrammelled (232). The telling document in fact rather fans than cools their passion, which eventually includes Ada's little sister Lucette, whom they share as substitute object of desire until her suicide. But in spite of bizarre circumstances (and Lucette's suicide

aside) *Ada* is a celebratory account of sibling love that extends well beyond the flower of youth and endures through two life times. As I will show, the Veens' subversion of the supposedly universal incest taboo spills over into every aspect of the novel including the numerous games they play, so that subversion is an essential constituent of how they are played and how they signify.

Furthermore, disrespect for the incest prohibition is generalised in *Ada* and carries over to accounts of 'social structure', including all kinds of rules and norms. The resulting disregard for rules in *Ada*'s fictional world likewise appears to extend to 'structural elements' commonly belonging to texts, with the consequence that the novel seems to be destructured. In other words, universal norms and interdictions from the incest taboo to textual closure that might regulate random, chaotic intercourse between characters and elements of the narrative, as well as between the novel itself and other texts, appears to be evacuated from *Ada*. This lends the text the semblance of lacking structural elements that would hold it together from a 'centre', nurturing the illusion that *Ada* is decentred and in a perpetual process of slipping beyond its own constructedness as a narrative and linguistic entity.

These characteristics of *Ada* could be read as a performance of Derrida's 'La structure, le signe et le jeu', and in particular his critique of Lévi-Strauss' construction of incest and taboo.<sup>2</sup> For Derrida, Lévi-Strauss' *Le cru et le cuit* is exemplary of thought which takes as its starting point a 'stable narrative' such as 'le *factum* de la prohibition de l'inceste...[qui] s'installe donc au point où cette différence qui a toujours passé pour aller de soi, se trouve effacée ou contestée' (416). According to Derrida, the moment at which the structurality of structure begins to be rethought as something which can no longer be unproblematically taken for granted [*passer pour aller de soi*] constitutes an 'événement de rupture...et [de] redoublement', and his essay is devoted to showing how such 'events' rupture texts including Lévi-Strauss' (409). Derrida explains, for example, that Lévi-Strauss' notion of incest is founded on discourses of subjectivity. Yet, he argues, if cultural taboos are susceptible to being 'deconstructed', then the concept of a subjective centre, or 'un signifié central, originaire ou transcendantal' which would ground epistemological constructions, has been evacuated (416). At this poststructuralist juncture, therefore,

discourses [*philosophique ou scientifique...[et] aussi politique, économique, technique, etc.*] are no longer perceived as having a centre [*le centre n'est pas le centre*] so that an infinite play of substitutions now replaces what was previously conceptualised as a stabilising ideological fulcrum (410, 414). Within literary, philosophical, economic discourses, Derrida's argument offers a reading of the postmodern tendency to a-centricity, and in what follows I will draw from Derrida's essay as a means of explaining how *Ada* works, at the narrative and textual levels, by reading it as an incest story that 'deconstructs' the incest taboo and itself in the process.

### *Ada, Incest, Intertext*

Several features of *Ada*'s 'structure' are put forward in the very first line of the text, which readers of Tolstoy will recognise as the first line of *Anna Karenina* in reverse:

'All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike', says a great Russian writer in the beginning of a famous novel [...] (3).

In inverted form in this new fictional setting, Tolstoy's axiom tells the reader that *Ada* will probably have something to do with families, and that this 'something' will be rather the reverse of conventional wisdom.

Furthermore, the citation of this line suggests a link between the two novels, and between Tolstoy and Nabokov, while affiliating *Ada* with the tradition of the canonical 19th-century family history to which *Anna Karenina* belongs. Yet while it announces these connections, the line rendered backwards is the first indication that *Ada*'s position viz. the canonical family romance and the western literary tradition will be one of deviance. It is equally the first hint of how *Ada* will relate intertextually to its extended literary family. This is accomplished in a variety of ways analogous to the family's distinguishing happiness and dissimilarity, which is the product of Van and Ada's incestuous passion. This is textually mimicked in the novel through incessant and incestuous appropriations from the European family romance.<sup>3</sup> *Ada* assimilates bits of text from 19th-century novels as enthusiastically as Ada's extroverted sexuality embraces brother, sister and various paramours, both male and female. This is to say that

the 'tender consanguinity' that motivates the narrative and informs the text, parallels *Ada's* parodic and transgressive relationship with the canon (133).

Chateaubriand's *René* is a prominent intertext in the collage from which *Ada* is constructed, which often highlights satirises *Ada's* relationship to the traditional sibling romance in the way I have just described.<sup>4</sup> For example, while *René* is an incest romance about Amélie's unwholesome, unconsummated passion for her brother René, *Ada* does much more than just fantasise about her brother Van, maintaining a robust affair with him throughout the text. So when *Ada* happens upon a line 'in a story by Chateaubriand about a pair of romantic siblings', she conveniently and inaccurately remembers it as '*les deux enfants pouvaient donc s'abandonner au plaisir sans aucune crainte*' (133). Hence, in *Ada* sibling passions that spell disaster and tragedy in traditional incest novels like Chateaubriand's, light-heartedly culminate in unrestricted *jouissance*.

So by routinely trotting out lines from great 19th century novels, *Ada* seems to disengage from prohibition, reversing norms and establishing a subversive relationship with canonical literature. This, moreover, could equally be said concerning the use made in *Ada* of standard devices and scenes of discovery from canonical novels. For example, games and gaming scenes are employed as metafictional devices in *Ada*, recalling Tolstoy and Dostoevsky while serving as indicators of affluence and aristocratic privilege. In one such scene, *Ada's* father Demon exhibits a charming nonchalance toward his gambling debts, while a hurried departure from a dull family gathering for an evening of cards signals aristocratic detachment, and echoes a similar exit made by Ivan Ilyich in Tolstoy's novella.<sup>5</sup> Parodying chaste, 19th-century literary lovers who deploy parlour games to tacitly revealing their passion, the Veen children use their gamesmanship for more blatantly sexual ends. For example, the scene in *Anna Karenina* in which Kitty covertly confesses her love for Levin in a word game is evoked by Lucette who writes 'Vaniada' in Scrabble, unabashedly spelling out the nature of her siblings relationship (226). The moral prohibitions of *Ada's* parent literary tradition are likewise parodied in the openly erotic messages featured in the Veen's language games, such as *Ada's* anagrammatic manipulation of 'Eros qui prend son essor' ('Eros, the rose and the sore') (367).

Van and *Ada's* language games take on greater significance when they merge in the invention of a secret code as their romance temporarily enters the epistolary mode. As the code develops, however, it is progressively destabilised so that it ultimately resists rather than conveys sense. As their rules for the secret code become progressively more 'deconstructed', Van and *Ada's*:

messages [become] even harder to read than to write, especially as both correspondents, in the exasperation of tender passion, inserted after thoughts, deleted phrases, rephrased insertions and reinstated deletions with misspellings and miscodings, owing as much to their struggle with inexpressible distress as to their overcomplicating the cryptogram (161).

The Veen's exuberance in this language game reflects their tendency to dispatch with rules in general, hence the game's underlying, structuring regime is neglected and the game breaks up before reaching a logical conclusion.

Moreover, particular language games, like the greater language game of which *Ada* is made, appear to resist sense, leaving a trail of 'deconstructed' fragments that are eventually integrated back into the text. For example, Van and *Ada's* code is entirely disrupted at one point and then reabsorbed in seemingly random fashion back into the greater narrative, as in the following passage:

Van plunged into the dense undergrowth. He wore a silk shirt, a velvet jacket, black breeches, riding boots with star spurs and this attire was hardly convenient for making *ku zdB. AoyvBno wkh guzxm dgg dzuAqvo a guttp vq wiffm* *Ada* in a natural bower of aspens, *xlic mujzickm!* [...] (157).

Remarkably enough this textual game, which is of a piece with all of the other language games in *Ada*, falls apart around the Veen's disdain for rules, only to be re-incorporated into the main narrative with the appearance of 'seamlessness'. *Ada* then appears to flow around and past textual structure, while possessing the capacity to integrate almost anything with which it comes in contact.

### Trumps and Tropes

*Ada* propensity to turn outside of itself intertextually has its counterpart in the novel's predilection for self-indulgence. *Ada's amour-propre* takes the form of a kind of textual introversion to which one might refer as 'writely self-consciousness' or 'autoreferentiality'. This takes many forms, one of which is references made to Nabokov in the fictional world of *Ada*, which effectively fictionalises Nabokov himself. The narrator, for example, speaks of the days of Timur and Nabok<sup>5</sup> as well as the butterfly '*Nymphalis danus* Nab. [...] and] its discoverer Professor Nabonidus of Babylon College', which are allusions to Nabokov, the novelist and lepidopterist (158, 268).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, fictional characters from Nabokov's other texts make appearances, as on the occasion of Ada's 12th birthday for which the 'dolorous nymphet' dons a lolita, relating Ada and Dolores (Lolita) Haze, the nymphet of *Lolita* (218-9).<sup>7</sup>

Nabokov's autoreferential self-indulgences have further ramifications elsewhere in the novel, as the text mirrors Ada's sexual proclivities through linguistic rhetorical antics, taking the form of self-indulgent paronomasia that folds onanastically inwards.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the text's double orientation, its propensity for introversion as well as for extroversion, can be traced once again in Nabokov's chismatic rewriting of the line from *Anna Karenina*. For example, both *Anna Karenina* and *Ada* named for heroines with palindromic names and this, given the logic of the text, is likely more than coincidence. In Nabokov's self-conscious novel, however, Ada's name also mirrors her doubly directed lust expressed in rhetorical figures and anagrammatic games. The 'ambiverted' girl and the palindrome 'Ada' constitute points of shifting or reversal inscribed in *Ada*, insuring the text's instability and equating lust with all the anagrammatic language play and subversive ludicity that have their nexus in *Ada/Ada* (165). *Ada* therefore, constitutes a shifter in all of the games of which *Ada* is made and as the subject of the novel her destabilising influence extends to virtually every aspect of the text.

Hence, with sister as with brother Ada's destabilising force as the shifter in the text is rendered in language. Her symmetrical trysts with Lucette, referred to as *vanousissements*, are recalled in rhetorical terms:

We were Mongolian tumblers, monograms, anagrams, adalucindas [...] our heads clamped in such odd combinations that Brigitte [...] thought that we were giving birth simultaneously to baby girls (375).

Love making's linguistic equivalent in this passage is a verbal redoubling of Ada and 'Lucinda' in real and invented ('adalucindas') rhetorical figures, which reverberate with the multiplication and disappearance of Adas and Lucettes: 'we were simultaneously giving birth...your Ada bringing out *une rouasse*, and no one's Lucette, *une brune* (375).

The link I am trying to make between language, sexuality, games and subversion is perhaps most cleverly demonstrated in a game of anagrams played on Ada's twelfth birthday:

Van looked at his love's inclined neck as she played anagrams with Grace, who had innocently suggested 'insect'.

'Scient', said Ada, writing it down.

'Oh no!' objected Grace.

'Oh yes! I'm sure it exists. He is a great scient. Dr. Entsic was a scient in insects'.

Grace meditated, tapping her puckered brow with the eraser end of the pencil, and came up with: 'Nicest'

'Incest', said Ada instantly.

'I give up', said Grace. 'We need a dictionary to check your little inventions' (85).

As this dialogue illustrates, the anagram game (like the other games played in *Ada*) is driven by Van and Ada's lust and ends up echoing their passion. This, moreover, occasions the metaphorical and semantic shift in the narrative from 'incest' to 'nicest' - the source of the text's instability. In this specific case, both semantics and grammar are at issue because the anagram game highlights Ada's irreverence with regard to both language and love which, as I have been arguing, invariably leads to the break down of the games from which the novel is constructed. Fittingly then it is Ada's lack of respect for grammar as well as her anagrammatic agility which send Grace off to consult a lexical authority.

### Ada the Queen of Hearts

Within a fictional context constructed of language games then, it is not without significance that Lucette describes Ada as being 'touched with fraise in four places [...] *pour conger une fraise*, a symmetrical queen of hearts' (375). That Ada can be read from both ends like a playing card is important as she constitutes a busy intersection in the Veen family's 'ambi-amorous' love triangle, regulating rhetorical traffic in the children's polymorphously perverse liaisons. The precocious little heroine is necessarily symmetrical like a queen of hearts, and as such Ada is a double-faced, *mise en abyme* of herself.

Playing cards are furthermore, a recurring metaphor for sexuality throughout *Ada*, and more often than not they trigger erotic memories. For example, the Veen's first intimate experiments are connected to Adas castle of cards, built with only the court cards from a gambling deck:

'You [Ada] were building a house of cards, and your every movement was magnified, of course, as in a trance, dream-slow but also tremendously vigilant... I remember the cards', she said, '[...] it was not a castle. It was a Pompeian Villa with mosaics and paintings inside, because I used only court cards from Grandpa's old gambling packs. Did I sit down on your hot hard hand?' (113).

This initial erotic scene takes on the quality of an epiphany, which will be recalled with proustian intensity throughout the narrative. Lucette also remembers her siblings' first sexual encounter when she recalls the card table on which Ada built her villa, along with her own recollections of 'comminglings' and 'adalucindas'. Exhibiting a remarkable facility for displacement, Lucette refers to their incestuous trysts as 'Pressing the Spring' or releasing the lock, metonymically linking card tables, locks and *jouissance*:

'Well, that secretaire', continued Lucette, [...] 'enclosed a folded card table and a top-secret drawer [...] crammed with our grandmother's love letters, written when she was twelve or thirteen. And our Ada knew, oh, she knew, the

drawer was there but she had forgotten how to release the orgasm or whatever it is called in card tables' (374).

Sexuality ('our grandmother's love letters'), and more specifically orgasm, is collapsed into cards and locks in this passage. This could equally be said of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, a mock epic poem about the erotic conquest of a lock of hair, which is a thinly veiled metaphor for the heroine's virtue. Belinda's lock is lost in a card game called Ombre and this is significant because *The Rape of the Lock* and the game of ombre resurface with some regularity in *Ada*. For instance, on the occasion of Van's first meeting with Ada, the game of ombre is suggested when Ada introduces Van to games belonging to her own 'shadow and shine group', until they settle finally on one particular shadow game (*jeu d'ombres*) (51). This connection with ombre is likewise suggested in the mention of an English novel entitled *Ombre Chevalier*, and again in 'an 1820 edition of Chateaubriand's short stories', entitled *Ombres et couleurs* (270, 280).

To pursue this connection further, the game of ombre – the 'shadow' game of Pope's poem – got its name from *Hombre* a popular Spanish game from the 15th century, which spread over the European continent, and persisted as a popular pastime for centuries. If one places the original Spanish name of this card game along side *Ombre*, the name by which the game is known in the rest of Europe, one gets *hombre-ombre* or man-shadow. This is yet another of Nabokov's autoreferential puns like those mentioned above, recalling the running play on being and shadow in his fiction, of which names like *Lolita Haze*, John *Shade* and Humbert *Humbert* are familiar examples.

### Cards and Writing

Metaphors that depend on cards and card games also frame the account of Van Veen's two outstanding achievements: dancing on his hands and writing *The Texture of Time*, a 'space romance' (343). For Van, writing and gripping the brow of gravity' as he call walking on his hands, are analogous and 'the magical reversal' of acrobatic perspective comes to perform the theory of time and space developed in *The Texture of Time* (82):

Thus the rapture young [...] Van] derived from overcoming gravity was akin to that of artistic revelation [...]. Van on

the stage was performing organically what his figures of speech were to perform later in life-acrobatic wonders that had never been expected of them and which frightened children (185).

Because it is rhetorical ('performing organically what his figures of speech were to perform later') the gravity-defying hand-dance is on the same order of activity as the 'self-imposed, extravagantly difficult, seemingly absurd task' that becomes his *The Texture of Time*. Fittingly, *The Texture of Time* 'always reminded [Ada] of the sun-and-shade games [the game of ombre] she used to play as a child in the secluded avenues of Ardis Park' and not, indeed, of Van's hand-dance (759). But if one combines both Ada and Van's characterisations of his accomplishments, many of the metaphors for writing, time and space, as well as for *Ada*, come full circle through Van's gravity defying acrobatics, the shade/ombre game and *The Texture of Time*, to the castle of cards that Ada builds on the oft-remembered occasion of her first tryst with Van:

It was Ada's castle of cards. 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 (184-5).

Ardis (the name of the manor and its arbours where Van and Ada expend their first ardours) is Greek for arrow, the 'ardis of time' then referring to a linear trajectory between two points in time.<sup>9</sup> The triumph over linear narrative progression (the ardis of time) is rendered metaphorically in the text as well as in Van's hand-dance and Ada's castle of cards, and is the subject of Van's dissertation, *The Texture of Time*. What Van's work analyses and *Ada* pretends to perform, is an aleatory, risk-oriented form of artistic production; a compositional mode that supposedly emerges from chance connections and contingencies, and stands convention 'on its head' (185). Hence, the Veens' first intimate moment, which takes place as Ada chooses court cards at random for her Villa, is analogous to the writing process through which Van created his *Texture of Time*. The 'chance

creases in the texture of time<sup>2</sup> – like the memory of Ada's castle of cards – that recur in the supposedly haphazard collection of elements of which *Ada* is made, give the impression that the text has been woven of coincidence (32, 34). Indeed, the general climate of stochasticity in *Ada* prompts Ada to declare that she is 'only a pale wild girl with gypsy hair in a deathless ballad, in a nulliverse, in Rattner's "menal world" where the only principle is random variation' (416). *Ada* and *The Texture of Time* which it frames, are compositions of chance, a supposed triumph over the ardis of linear narrative time and a performance of writing for which playing cards are the preferred metaphor.

Furthermore, as a metaphor for writing, playing cards are a familiar feature of Nabokov's characteristic self-consciousness. The author was eager to create the impression that his work was largely a matter of happenstance, which impression he reinforced with card metaphors well as his unconventional habit of writing manuscripts on index cards. In order to impress this notion on readers' minds, Nabokov often posed for photographers while writing on cards.<sup>10</sup> This writing technique suggests that the author could reshuffle his cards at will in order to restructure his narrative, while inviting the chance into the process. In other words the implication is that the author's metaphorical deck of cards allows for seemingly endless random combinations of narrative elements that fall where they may. That *Ada* does not adhere to narrative codes such as linearity and closure adds to the illusion that it depends on the luck of the draw and can be played out in an infinite variety of ways.

Based on the logic of puzzle solving, *Ada* and *The Texture of Time* both present a play of words, memories, dream images and rhetorical figures dealt out like cards. As a character in both texts then, Van concludes that 'all art is a game', while *Ada* contends that 'in "real" life we are creatures of chance' (426, 452). This notion is expressed at a poker game with 'doctored deck', as Van and a professional cardsharp discuss art and people who think they are artists, like novelists:

'I say, Dick, ever met a gambler in the States called Plunkett? Bald grey chap when I knew him...One of my father's pals. Great artist.  
'Artist?'

'Yes, artist. I'm an artist. I suppose you think you're an artist. Many people do.'

'What on earth is an artist?'

'An underground observatory', replied Van promptly.

'That's out of some modern novel', said Dick, discarding his cigarette after a few avid inhalations.

'That's out of Van Veen', said Van Veen (174).

Quoting himself, Van the artist asserts authoritatively that an artists are underground observatories, which is to say that Van's art is self-contained ('"That's out of Van Veen", said Van Veen) and reproduces its own possible world or 'nulliverse'. More importantly, Van defines artists and cardsharps as marginals who belong to the underground because of their questionable practices, thereby relating Van's writing to the cardsharp's sleight of hand: 'I'm an artist. I suppose you think you're an artist'.

According to Van, the similarity between cardsharps and writers is that both practice 'the tricks of an art...pure and abstract and therefore genuine' (172). The tricks of Van's trade produce a fictional world articulated through 'parlour game rules', populated with 'crystal cretins' and 'Cartesian glassmen', while the professional poker player practices moves involving reflective surfaces and marked cards (123, 173, 558). What makes *Ada* a 'random nulliverse' constructed through artistry akin to cardsharpping, is the way in which the text embraces 'the gambit, the gambol and the gambler', 'mere poker luck', and more significantly the 'faint possibility of trickery' (200, 352, 172). Importantly, while the text gives the impression of being the product of chance, it is also very much the product of trickery and rampant cheating.

### Ada and Exchange

Van's poker game comes to an abrupt end when he indignantly hurls cards and chips in his opponents' faces, and writes a cheque to cover the losses of his 'ecstatically astonished' fellow players, Jean and Jacques (175). Van's monetary nonchalance in this scene at the poker table is characteristic of the Veen's the social class for whom money was formerly no object. Part of the Veen's charm is that, as *nouveau pauvre* aristocracy, they continue to live in grand-style, spending

carelessly with largess and gratuity. Van's cheque is part of his native aristocracy, the imagined privilege that colours the Veen's financial transactions, and gives shape to an economic profile defined by various forms of what Derrida has called sovereign expenditure. So while Demon is always ready to duck out for an evening of gambling, Ada's nostalgic reminiscences turn on 'the happy old days when Demon paid all [of their] gambling debts', or her vacations in the casinos of Nevada, her 'thyme-name town' (476, 333).

Gambling, which is represented in many contexts throughout *Ada*, informs the characters' behaviour in a number of connected areas. Predictably, sexuality is related metonymically to gambling, as in Van's word play that moves into the libidinal economy, eliding him with Ada (Vaniada) in Nirvana via Nevada ('Nirvana, Nevada, Vaniada') (583). This connection exemplifies Baraille's notion that non-procreative sexual activities, like those that define Van and Ada's romance, constitute a form of gratuitous expenditure, akin to the expenditure entailed in gaming.<sup>11</sup> According to Baraille, in a sexual economy based on Puritanism as an analogue of utilitarianism, the goal of sex is reproduction and excessive or recreational sexuality [*lépense*] is considered a delinquent form of libidinal exchange. So if the Veen's are monetarily capricious and engage in gratuitous forms of expenditure like gambling, their views on sexuality are equally thriftless, and shape the parallel incestuous, ostentatious libidinal economy that informs Ada.

In this article I have attempted to establish a connection between expenditure, subjectivity, sexuality and concepts from the work of Derrida and Baraille. I would also argue that forms of sexual and monetary expenditure that are non-restrictive or gratuitous, like noncopulatory sex and gambling, are akin to artistic writing, a category to which Nabokov's *Ada* belongs. In theories of economy and writing such as Baraille's, expository writing is analogous to monetary utilitarianism while artistic writing falls in with what Derrida has called general or sovereign economics, or modes of expenditure that have no ostensible utilitarian purpose. So if one agrees with Baraille and Derrida, texts fall within a spectrum discursive economies, from general to restricted, where fragmented, playful, open-ended works of literature that celebrate chance rather than control would form a predominately general economy, while more restricted literary modes like realism with its more expository aims would be placed at the other

end of the economic spectrum. *Ada* would then naturally fall far from the restricted end for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is its resistance to logic, linearity and closure.

According to Derrida, were a text truly a general economy of discourse it would arrive at the rupture [*l'absolu déhincement*] of meaning [*sens*]. This is to say that such a text would conform neither to logic nor lend itself to a linear reading [*se donner à lire*] and constitute a subversive mode of writing that would undercut even the most fundamental presuppositions of reading. Such a text could, therefore, be read '*dans n'importe quelle main : la droite ou la gauche*' (407). While *Ada* does not perform such a breakdown in any absolute sense, it does present a variety of reading difficulties, due in part to its generalised disregard for structure, sequence and continuity. This is why ostentatious, non-purposeful expenditure, such as gambling and noncopulatory sex are right at home in the greater economic paradigm of *Ada*, and do not distinguish themselves as events as they might in a textual economy based on regulation and recirculation.

### Old Masters and Young Mistresses

Many of the forms of gambling represented in *Ada*, such as Demon Veen's speculative venture with the family fortune, are sexual, recreational and financial at once. Formerly a Manhattan hobby banker, Demon decides to devote himself late in life to his 'twofold hobby [of] collecting old masters and young mistresses' (4). Art collecting is a pastime particularly well suited to an imaginary aristocrat with a predilection for wenching and gaming. Indeed, because art has no quantifiable use-value and becomes 'priceless' should it chance become known as a 'masterpiece', trading in art is perhaps the perfect gamble for the Veen's. In a novel where poker luck and economic risks like investing in the art market are pervasive, Demon's preoccupation with collection and the creation of an inclusive microfilm museum of the world's masterpieces falls in neatly with the grain of the text. Demon's obsession with the museum extends moreover to the way in which he experiences and describes his life, so that he describes *Ada*'s mind as 'a closed museum', and refers to the 'vast library of microfilmed last thoughts' which comprises 'the copiously illustrated catalogue' of his son Van's mind (435, 436). Moreover, this tendency of Demon's to conflate art with life and the museum with experience

accounts for his son's name, Otto van Veen, after the 17th-century Dutch Master.

As with most things in *Ada*, the senior Veen's fascination with collecting and the museum becomes a family affair. And predictably enough, as enthusiasm for the museum is transferred from father to son it takes on a heightened erotic complexion, and results in Van spending many of his callow years at the 'Villa Venus: an Organised Dream', or 'gentlemen's club' (348). The Villas Venus, of which there are one hundred in different locations around *Ada*'s fictional globe, are part of a project conceived by the adolescent Eric Veen and executed by 'David van Veen, a wealthy architect of Flemish extraction' (ibid.). From without the Villas are meticulously constructed as a sort of museum of architecture 'from dodo to dada, from Low Gothic to Hoch Modern' (350). From within, any of the Villas in the Venus chain are designed to be living erotic museums in flesh, boasting a collection of every possible variety of female attraction from 'slender Nordic dolls' to 'opulent Southern charmers' to the exotic 'Egypsiacs' (347, 348, 349). In turn, each of Villa Venus' 'collectibles' evokes a masterpiece in portraiture, so that the 'three Egyptian squaws' that Van selects for his pleasure, are 'borrowed [...] from a reproduction of a Theban fresco [...] printed in Germany (*Künstlerpostkarte* Nr. 6034)' (353).

Moreover, the Villa Venus harkens back to *Ada*'s castle of cards, that is, to her 'Pompeian Villa with mosaics and paintings inside' made only from court cards as well as to the Veen children's first shared sexual experience: 'Did I sit down on your hot hard hand?' (113). The Villas and the castle of cards from 'grandpa's gambling decks' are similarly inclusive: each deck of cards is a kind of perpetual almanac, from which *Ada* produces her miniature art gallery in court cards, just as each Villa contains every possible version of femininity. And with all the self-containment of a deck of cards, the Pompeian Villa mirrors Van's Villas, Demon's collection, *Ada* the novel, and Van's *Texture of Time* so that they recede into each other, as a *mise en abyme* of the novel itself.

But while *Ada*, the Villas, the cards, and Demon's collection appear to be exhaustive museums, they likewise undercut and parody the idea of the collection.<sup>12</sup> And of course, the source of this parody, and of the constant decentring that goes on in *Ada*, is traceable to *Ada*, the shifter in the text. Therefore, although Van's visits to the various Villas of

Venus are intended as an antidote for Ada, the text shifts continuously back to her through anagrammic games that throw the narrative off centre and disrupt textual coherence. For example, one of the Villas is known to insiders as the '*Madam-I'm-Adam* House', a pun and a palindrome, taking in the style of Robert Adams in which the Villa is faithfully constructed, and echoing Adá's name (349). And as Van's nostalgia becomes acute, his feverish memories of Ada erupt in sporadic bouts of paronomasia such as this passage:

[Van Veen's Villa Venus] looked like [...] a converted convent [...] with such miraculous effect that one could not distinguish the arabesque from the arbutus, ardour from art, the sore from the rose (351).

Ada and Ardis continue to crop up throughout the rest of Van's 'cure' at the Villa ('the trembling Adada', 'a pale Adalusian', 'the ardent Ardillusian', 'her name was really Adora') so that the last word in the chapter is Ada: 'the soft little creature in Van's desperate grasp was Adá' (353, 354, 358). Once again then, the textual structure breaks down around Ada until narrative elements become indistinguishable from one another, and notions of sense and narrative logic *appear* to have given way to the deconstructive logic of a Nabokovian language game.

Yet while *Ada* approaches what Derrida calls a general economy of discourse that goes against the grain of established narrative logic by perpetually deconstructing itself, I would like to examine one point of sustained textual cohesion. As I have argued, one of the most salient and subversive features of this text is the incest romance and it is around this feature of the text that the narrative breaks up. As I have also explained, this liaison at the heart of the novel sets up a sort of general decentring in the text so that non-reproductive sexuality and monetary gambles are not framed as disruptive events in the narrative, but rather as comparable elements that follow the general circulation and logic of the text. Furthermore, decentring in *Ada* is analogous to Van's poker game, which comfortably accommodates cheating, so that the text is collapsed into the poker game with the 'crystal cretin', reflecting the supposedly random confluence of elements of which both are made. The novel is, therefore, a castle of cards, made up of palindromes and random rhetorical figures, always threatening to fall

apart and to reconstruct itself elsewhere.

But while *Ada* studiously performs derridian general economics, there is after all, a central organising metanarrative that has made its way into the text as if by sleight of hand. Given that most of games in *Ada* are dishonest or subversive, it seems to me that Nabokov has inadvertently 'stacked the deck' against his own literary project. Behind all the wittily legerdemain and metafictional smoke screens, one detects the trace of a centring principle in *Ada*, slyly at work 'structuring' the text. For Nabokov, the old Master, presents the reader with a collection of young mistresses, a veritable gallery of willing and disposable virgins who, like Lucette, are considerate enough to commit suicide when things get dicey. In doing so the Master deals the reader a strong suit of 19th-century style misogyny along with the queen of hearts. So this novel, which appears to have come together by sheer luck, functioning as an unregulated economy of random elements, is shot through with the unifying logic of misogyny to which it invariably returns.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, because Ada is primarily a narrative object and point of shifting, she is not an active and controlling participant in the story, and therefore her ontology is of a different order than Van's. Lucette puts a fine point on it by surmising that Ada is 'only a picture painted on air'. As a fictional character whose ontology is one step removed from Van's, Ada provides the point of entry for ludicity and difference in the text and a field for the free-play of Van's signifier. So in spite of appearances Ada does indeed adhere to a familiar, readable aesthetic – simply put, the misogynistic representation of women in fiction. As a result *Ada* only partially deconstructs itself, not entirely disengaging from this recognisable metanarrative, so that whatever subversive potential sexuality in the novel may have had, it is consistently recuperated by an all-to-familiar ideology. In other words, while *Ada* has the appearance of a text that could be read, as Derrida wrote '*dans n'importe quelle main : la droite ou la gauche?*', Nabokov has more correctly written what Rousseau referred to as a text to be read '*avec une main*' (406).<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir. *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 226, 232. Further references in the text.
- <sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris: Éditions Seuil, 1967.
- <sup>3</sup> For a detailed list of intertextual references in *Ada*, consult B. Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, chapters 20 and 22.
- <sup>4</sup> On the sibling romance, see Marc Shell's *The End of Kinship: Measure for Measure, Incest, and the Ideal of Siblinghood*, Stanford: Stanford University, 1988: 3-25, 190-196. See also Boyd on *René* and *Ada*, 552-3.
- <sup>5</sup> Demon arrives at Ardis Hall complaining that the 'gaming [in town] is not what it used to be' and leaves a dinner 'glutted with family joys and slightly annoyed he had missed the first half of a gambling night in Lodore for the sake of all that well-meant but not *quite* first-rate food' (242, 261). Ivan Ilyich similarly leaves a funeral for an evening of bridge in Tolstoy's novella, and makes an appearance in *Ada* as a piece of furniture: 'Van...lowered himself on the *ivinitich* (a kind of sighing old hassock upholstered in leather)' (232). On card playing and gambling in the 19th-century Russian novel, see Jorij Lotman's 'The Theme of Cards and the Card Game in Russian Literature of the Nineteenth Century', *PTL* 3 (1978): 455-492.
- <sup>6</sup> 'Nymphalis danans Nab.', is at once a reference to Nabokov's passion for lepidoptery, as well as to his invention of the word nymphlet in *Lolita*. Moreover *Ada*, like *Lolita*, is the story of a Nabokovian nymphlet and her discoverer 'Professor Nabonidus of Babylon College'.
- <sup>7</sup> Intertextual games in *Ada* are always more complex than this simple observation, giving the impression that they recede infinitely. Cf. Paul J. Thibault's *Social Semiotics as Praxis: Text, Social Meaning Making and Nabokov's Ada*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, Vol. 74, 1990. Thibault links this passage to the popular song 'Carmen' in *Lolita*, to Mérimée's *Carmen*, and to Chateaubriand's *Le dernier Aventurage* through the 'signifier little Andalusian gypsy' (130-2).
- <sup>8</sup> Alfred Appel notes that 'Nabokov seems to be suffering from terminal paronomasia' expressed in the endless rhetorical play in *Ada* (183). See 'Ada Described', in his *Nabokov*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970. In the introduction to *Bend Sinister* Nabokov himself explains that '[p]aronomasia is a kind of verbal plague, a contagious sickness in the world of words...where everybody is merely an anagram of everybody else' (*Bend Sinister*, New York: Vintage International, 1990, xv).
- <sup>9</sup> Hence, 'Ardis. Arrowhead Manor. *Le Chateau de la Fleche*, Flesh Hall' (*Ada* 318).
- <sup>10</sup> See Boyd, 'Lolita Sparks: Cornell, 1955-1957', 288-318. Nabokov arranged publicity photographs of himself writing on cards in jaunty settings like the back

seat of his car (see illustrations in Boyd, particularly 226-7, 'Nabokov composing *Lolita* on index cards in a car - a reconstruction for *Life* magazine, 1958'). Similarly, John Shade of Nabokov's *Palefire* composes his epic poem on 'eight medium-sized index cards' (1).

<sup>11</sup> On the relationship between sexuality and expenditure see Baraille's *La part maudite*. Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1967, particularly 'Le principe de la perte', 28-31 and 'Le Christianisme et la révolution', 41-3. According to Baraille, 'l'activité sexuelle perverse (c'est-à-dire détournée de la finalité génitale)...[est une activité pour laquelle] il est nécessaire de réserver le nom de *dépense* à l'exclusion de tous les modes de consommation qui servent de moyen terme à la production...[car] l'accent est placé sur la *perte* qui doit être la plus grande possible pour que l'activité prenne son véritable sens' (28). The waste [*perte*] that accompanies non-reproductive sex is, according to Baraille, the equivalent of the potlatch and other forms of non-utilitarian expenditure in the economy of the body.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Appel, op. cit. p. 161: '*Ada* is a kind of museum in more ways than one. As the family chronicle to end all such chronicles, it is also a museum of the novel'. Appel goes on, however, to show how in *Ada* the idea of the museum is consistently satirized.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the overwhelming and unsettling misogyny of the text has proved a rough spot in Nabokov criticism, which Brian Boyd and others have attempted to smooth out. Boyd, for example, tries to explain her as more than Ada and Van's expendable 'love slave', by arguing that she has greater in the text than is commonly thought. See Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, *Ada*, 536-563.

<sup>14</sup> Rousseau, *Les confessions* I, Paris: Gallimard, 1973: 74.