The Labyrinth of Incest in Nabokov's Ada

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The Labyrinth of Incest
In Nabokov's *Ada*

VLADIMIR NABOKOV's *Ada* inspired John Updike to coin the aphorism, "Rape is the sexual sin of the mob, adultery of the bourgeoisie, and incest of the aristocracy."¹ Updike's *aperçu* goes well beyond *Ada*, for Nabokov, that most aristocratic of writers, never wrote about rape, and only rarely about adultery. Incest, however, makes its first major appearance in Nabokov's English chef-d'oeuvre, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, and, once again, in his last novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*⁵, which is a retrospective of the author's favorite themes.² This essay examines the "classic" and later literary sources for Nabokov's late-flowering use of the incest theme, unravels the tangled skein of incest in *Ada*, examines the meaning of incest in various literary periods, and suggests an interpretation of incest in Nabokov's work.³

Nabokov, like other "mandarin" writers, wrote with an informed awareness of earlier literary treatments of each of his themes. Allusion to such predecessors, both classical and commercial, was a hallmark of his style. *Ada* is the most allusive of all Nabokov novels—the consummate work of a writer who was also a professor of modern European literature. The book's coy reference to the actions of its characters as

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2 Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (New York, 1969), and *Look at the Harlequins!* (New York, 1974). The role of incest in the latter novel has not been widely recognized, owing to the book's involuted narrative which thoroughly obscures the web of consanguinity enmeshing Vadim Vadimovich and his several wives. See my "Inverted Reality in Nabokov's *Look at the Harlequins!*" in *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature*, 8 (1984), 293-309.
3 The author gratefully acknowledges his debt to the following colleagues for information relating to the sibling incest theme in European literature: Stuart Atkins, Richard Exner, Gunther Gottschalk, Nell Granoien, Kenneth Harper, Albert Kaspin, Rolf Linn, Ursula Mahlendorf, Olga Matich, and Harry Steinhauer.
stages in the “Novel’s Evolution in the History of Literature” makes it, as Alfred Appel remarks, “a self-contained survey course”.4 Ada’s central theme is sibling incest, and, as might be expected, Nabokov draws heavily upon his literary predecessors in his own re-creation of it.

The appearance of the theme of sibling incest in modern European literature is largely coincident with the rise of Romanticism, whose principal French and English avatars, François-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848) and Lord Byron (1788-1824) explored the forbidden theme in their works and, possibly, in their lives.5 The presence of Chateaubriand in the thematic background of Ada has been widely recognized. In his early review essay, John Updike dwelt at length on the echoes of Chateaubriand in the novel while noting that the thematic basis for the comparison is the 1802 novella René as well as certain passages from the French writer’s autobiography, Mémoires d’outre-tombe (1849-50). As Nabokov observes in the notes to his Eugene Onegin translation, a “subtle perfume of incest” permeates the relationship of René and his sister Amélie, a relationship widely thought to be modeled on that of the author and his sister Lucile.6 Chateaubriand’s tale of incest is

5 John Updike continues from my opening quotation by saying: “Romanticism, which made every ego an aristocrat, spawned Wordsworth and Dorothy; Byron and Augusta; Chateaubriand and Lucile...” The link between the theme of incest and Romanticism is discussed in Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony, trans. Angus Davidson (London, 1970), pp. 111-12. Praz’s index listings under “Incest” are particularly useful in documenting the association. “Incest and Romanticism,” Chapter viii in Eino Raito, The Haunted Castle: A Study of the Elements of English Romanticism (London, 1927), also contains much helpful information, especially on Byron and Shelley, pp. 267-81. An interesting study of brother-sister relationships (not necessarily incestuous) contrasting the Romantic and Victorian sensibilities may be found in Judith May Schelly, “A Like Unlike: Brother and Sister in the Works of Wordsworth, Byron, George Eliot, Emily Bronte, and Dickens” (Diss. University of California, Berkeley, 1980). The sibling incest theme was not unrepresented in American Romanticism. Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64) draws on the theme in his story “Alice Doane’s Appeal” and Edgar Allen Poe (1809-49) hints at it in “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). The story has been treated in this light by D. H. Lawrence and Allen Tate; their essays are reprinted in Edgar Allen Poe: The Fall of The House of Usher, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Columbus, Ohio, 1971). Given Nabokov’s extensive use of the Poe-Virginia subtext in Lolita, it is surprising to find no allusion in Ada to the (possibly) incestuous siblings in Poe’s most famous tale. Herman Melville (1819-91) makes use of the theme in Pierre; or, The Ambiguities (1852).
cest was, he said, conceived under the very elm in Middlesex, England, where Byron "s'abandonnait aux caprices de son âge." Although less visible in Ada than Chateaubriand, Byron is also present. His relationship with his half sister Augusta, after whom he named his daughter Augusta Ada, has been the subject of much speculation. Byron's fascination with brother-sister incest is reflected in three of his works: The Bride of Abydos (1813), and the blank-verse dramas Manfred (1817) and Cain (1821). In the latter the name of the stepsister-wife is Adah.

Ada is a literature survey course that draws its primary subject matter from the three literatures that the trilingual Nabokov saw as preeminent: French, English, and Russian. In this literary triptych Chateaubriand may be said to represent the French incarnation of the sibling incest theme and Byron, the English. But what of Russian? Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) occupies in Russian literature a position in some ways correspondent to Chateaubriand in French and Byron in English literature. The early verse of Russia's greatest poet is, in its themes if not in its form, very much under the sway of Byron and Chateaubriand. There can be no doubt that Pushkin was aware of the incest theme in the works of his mentors. It is known that Pushkin read Byron's Manfred in a French volume that also contained The Bride of Abydos. Manfred is specifically mentioned in the text of an early separate edition of Chapter vii of Onegin.

There are a number of overt references in Pushkin's Eugene Onegin (1823-31) to Chateaubriand's René, albeit none to its incest motif. There is, however, a curious stanza in Pushkin's novel-in-verse that


7 Quoted by Nabokov from Chateaubriand's Memoires in EO, III, 98.
8 For discussions of Byron and incest, see Railo, pp. 273-76, and Praz, pp. 73-77. The numerous Byronic allusions in Ada were first remarked by Matthew Hodgart, "Happy Families," The New York Review of Books, 22 May 1969, pp. 3-4.
9 One of Pushkin's few Russian precursors may have been the first to introduce the theme of sibling incest into Russian literature. N. M. Karamzin (1761-1825), the founder of Russian Sentimentalism, wrote (very guardedly) of brother-sister love in his 1793 tale "The Island of Bornholm" (Selected Prose of N. M. Karamzin, trans. Henry M. Nebel, Jr., Evanston, Ill., 1969).
10 See EO, II, 159-60, and III, 95. EO also provides evidence that Pushkin was familiar with Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, in which Mignon is the product of a brother-sister relationship (III, 93).
11 Pushkin paraphrases an innocuous line from René and gives the original text in his footnote 15 (EO, I, 144; Ch. ii, st. 31). Discarded variants of Onegin also make reference to René (EO, III, 98-100). The index to Nabokov's translation identifies other less explicit allusions.
seems faintly to foreshadow crucial aspects of Ada. In Chapter iii, Tatyana, newly smitten with Onegin, immerses herself in her favorite novels such as Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774), Rousseau’s *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), and Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753). In these and other sentimental tales Tatyana finds a misguided model for her feelings for Onegin, who is, however, a man of a quite different literary generation. Pushkin then contrasts these antiquated eighteenth-century novels (which, incidentally, he used to twit his sister Olga for reading) with the “fables of the British Muse.” The stanza ends with an allusion to Lord Byron who “by an opportune caprice, / in woebegone romanticism / draped even hopeless egotism.” In the following stanza (13) Pushkin embarks upon a digression: “I,” he says, shall abandon (Byronic?) poetry and “descend to humble prose: a novel in the ancient strain / will then engage my gay decline. / There, not the secret pangs of crime / shall I grimly depict, / but simply shall detail to you / the legends of a Russian family, / love’s captivating dreams . . .” It is in stanza 14 that outlines of *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* faintly emerge:

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I shall detail a father’s, an old uncle’s
plain speeches; the assigned
trysts of the children
by the old limes, by the small brook . . .

. . . I’ll have them quarrel and at last
conduct them to the altar. I’ll recall . . .

the words of aching love,
which in days bygone at the feet
of a fair mistress
came to my tongue . . .
(I, 160)
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13 “The fables of the British Muse / disturb the young girl’s sleep, / and her idol has become / either the pensive Vampyre, / or Melmoth, gloomy vagabond, / or the Wandering Jew, or the Corsair, / or the mysterious Shogar” (*EO*, I, 159). Nabokov’s Commentary identifies the works and authors as follows: *The Vampyre, a Tale*, an 1819 work attributed to Byron but written by his physician, Dr. John Polidori; *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), by Charles Maturin; *The Corsair* (1814), by Byron; and *Jean Shogar* (1818), by Charles Nodier (*EO*, II, 352-59).
14 Onegin’s character is ultimately defined for the naive Tatyana by the writings of Byron and Chateaubriand with their dark romantic heroes. After Onegin coldly rejects her and leaves his country estate, Tatyana gains access to his library where she finds Byron’s portrait and well-thumbed copies of his works (*EO*, I, 270-73, Ch. viii, sts. 18-25). Although there is ultimately little similarity between them, it is a commonplace that the “initial impulse” for Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* came from Byron’s *Don Juan*; cf. D. S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature*, ed. Francis J. Whitfield (New York, 1958), p. 90.
There is, of course, nothing here suggesting incest, but when the lines are reexamined in the context of Byron and Chateaubriand on the one hand, and Nabokov's Ada on the other, they begin to seem less innocent. An "incestuous" interpretation of this stanza assumes that Pushkin is being tongue-in-cheek in his hypothetical conversion from "the secret pangs of crime" characteristic of exotic Romantic poetry to the humble prose of a Russian family chronicle. First, let it be noted that the stanza immediately follows one cataloguing a clutch of echt Romantic heroes renowned for their demonic activities. In this setting "the assigned trysts of the children by the old limes" seems faintly suggestive. If, as seems plausible, the children are those of the father and uncle just referred to, they are first cousins. Their meetings among the old limes of the family estate perhaps echo the rambles of François-René Chateaubriand and his sister Lucile in their parental park and, more pointedly, those of the writer's characters René and his sister Amélie. Lastly, in a discarded variant of the stanza, we find instead of "a fair mistress" the doubtful reading "the fair Amalia"—a name not dissimilar to that of René's beloved sister Amélie and, in fact, a possible Russian form of that name. The case is far from conclusive, but it does not seem inconceivable that Pushkin is toying with the favorite Romantic theme of incest in his projected novel.

Pushkin did not live to write his fictional family chronicle; but Nabokov, born exactly one hundred years later, devoted nearly a decade of his "gay decline" to Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle, a book that seems to echo and develop the scenario implicit in Pushkin's digressive Eugene Onegin stanza. The father and uncle of the Onegin lines might well correspond to Ada's Demon and Daniel Veen. Demon is the father of Van, while Dan is ostensibly the father of Ada. Thus, Demon is Ada's "uncle," and Dan is Van's "uncle." Officially, the children are

15 Pushkin is not infrequently "tongue-in-cheek." In the "library scene" (Ch. vii, sts. 22-24) where Onegin's character is revealed to Tatyana by her discovery of its literary prototypes, Pushkin mockingly raises the possibility that his hero is "an insignificant phantasm," "a Muscovite in Harold's mantle, a glossary of alien vagaries," in short, "a parody" (EO, I, 273).


18 "Demon," the name of Van's and Ada's father, has strong romantic associations for Russians. The allusion is to the narrative poem "Demon" (1839) by M. Iu. Lermontov (1814-41) who is perhaps the purest representative of Romanticism in Russian literature. Lermontov is also the author of an unfinished novel, Vadim, in which the central brother-sister relationship has erotic undercurrents.

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first cousins as the children of Pushkin's stanza appear to be. The favorite trysting place of Ada's incestuous pair is the park of the family manor with its old limes and small brook, both specifically mentioned by Nabokov and quite possibly borrowed in part by both Pushkin and Nabokov from Chateaubriand. Like the children in Pushkin's projected family epic, Nabokov's Van and Ada are finally united in their love after numerous quarrels and reconciliations. A final parallel is the position of the two narrators. Both are old men writing first-person accounts of family histories.

Even if one doubts the presence of the incest theme in Pushkin's text, there remains the possibility that Nabokov read such an interpretation into it and then drew on that reading as a source for Ada. Nowhere in his massive Commentary on Onegin does Nabokov explicitly suggest an incestuous interpretation of the cited stanza, but there is some reason to believe that he projects such an interpretation (rightly or wrongly) into his translation of the text. Nabokov's choice of terms is curious: "the assigned trysts of the children." The word "tryst" in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries often has the connotation of a clandestine appointment made by lovers. Pushkin's Russian "uslovennye vstrechi" (agreed-upon meetings) is much more neutral in its implication. Translation is perforce an act of critical interpretation, and the cousins' "assigned trysts" would seem to reflect Nabokov's incestuous understanding of the passage. It is, moreover, the term used by Nabokov to specify the amorous dalliances of brother and sister in Ada's Ardis Park (p. 133). Our argument linking Pushkin's Onegin stanza with the sibling incest theme is tenuous, but the cited coincidences are at least suggestive. That Nabokov himself had an incestuous interpretation of the passage and drew on it for his novel is less tenuous, although still speculative. Whatever the merits of our surmise (and Nabokov's), there is no question that Pushkin's work in general, and Eugene Onegin in particular, looms large in Nabokov's oeuvre.

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20 Although no romantic, Tolstoy is also a major source of subtexts in Ada. Tolstoyan parodies both open and close the book. At least one of the Tolstoy allusions shows how far Nabokov is willing to go in search of incest implications—a subject relevant to our discussion of Nabokov's "incestuous" reading of the One-
This much is clear: the English Byron and the French Chateaubriand with their fictional and biographical theme of sibling incest are part of the literary subtext of Nabokov's *Ada*. As Nabokov documents in his *Onegin* commentary, these same figures are an informing presence in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, a work which seems in certain ways to foreshadow the basic outlines of Nabokov's *Ada*. Thus the Russian Pushkin, the French Chateaubriand, and the English Byron all serve as sources of literary resonance for the sibling incest theme in *Ada*, Nabokov's tribute to European Romanticism.

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 gin stanza. In the following passage Nabokov is describing mad Aqua's delusions: "... presently panic and pain, like a pair of children in a boisterous game, emitted one last shriek of laughter and ran away to manipulate each other behind a bush as in Count Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, a novel, and again, for a while, a little while, all was quiet in the house, and their mother had the same first name as hers had" (p. 25). Aqua's mother Dolly is a namesake of Dolly Oblonsky in the Tolstoy novel. The allusion is to a scene in which the distraught Dolly Oblonsky complains to Levin of the "vile tendencies" of her daughter Masha who with brother Grisha had gone off "among the raspberry canes and there... I can't even tell you what she did." Later Dolly tells Levin (but not the reader) "Masha's crime"; the brother and sister are approximately ten and nine. (*Anna Karenina*, trans. A. Maude, New York, 1970, p. 545, Pt. VI, Ch. xv). Aqua's Tolstoyan hallucination presages the amorous activities of Van and Ada in the bushes of the family's country estate. The allusion was first identified by Bobbie Ann Mason, *Nabokov's Garden: A Guide to Ada* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1974), pp. 25 and 176, *War and Peace* also provides fuel for Nabokov's fires of incest. Ada's mother Marina in her usual myopic fashion warns Van of the dangers of inadvertently arousing the affections of his little cousin Lucette. In doing so she hazily refers to the French adage which in its correct form reads "Le cousinage est un dangereux voisinage." The adage is doubtless borrowed from *War and Peace*, Bk. I, Ch. v, where Countess Rostov is warned that her son Nicholas may marry his impoverished cousin Sonia (New York, 1966) pp. 42-43. Oddly, Nabokov does not make use of a much more promising incest reference in *War and Peace* where rumors circulate that the relationship between "La Belle Hélène" and her equally depraved brother Prince Anatole Kuragin are closer than delicacy might dictate (p. 223; Bk. III, Ch. i). In a discarded and much stronger variant of another passage (p. 342; Bk. IV, Ch. vi), the pair's father forbids them to meet in private after their mother finds Anatole sitting on his sister's bed caressing her bare arm (L. N. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, ed. V. G. Chertkov, XII, Moscow, 1949), pp. 479-80.

21 We have noted that Byron's *Don Juan* was an impulse toward the creation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. In Nabokov's initial jottings for the novel that became *Ada*, the hero's name was Juan (Vladimir Nabokov, "Inspiration," *Saturday Review of the Arts*, Jan. 1973, p. 30). In the final form of the book Van is on occasion referred to as Juan and there is a Don Juan motif centering on a film entitled "Don Juan's Last Fling" in which Ada has a small part.

22 We are using the term Romanticism in a broad sense. Of our three authors, only Byron (1788-1824) is unequivocally a Romantic. The older Chateaubriand (1768-1848) is "one of the great precursors of le Romantisme" (*The Oxford Companion to French Literature*, ed. Sir Paul Harvey & J. E. Heseltine, Oxford, 1959, p. 126). The case of Pushkin (1799-1837) is more ambiguous. His work of the early 1820s such as "The Prisoner of the Caucasus," "The Fountain of Bakhchisaray," "The Gypsies," and the first chapters of *Onegin* are all strongly Byronic in their stance and thematic content, although their form is entirely classical in its concision and clarity. It can nonetheless be asserted that Pushkin introduced Ro-
Incest is not found as a theme in Nabokov’s Russian work. He does, however, make reference to it as a theme in the work of other writers. One example is the short story “Vstrecha” (“The Reunion”), written in December 1931. Set in Berlin on a Christmas Eve circa 1929, it recounts the dismal encounter of two brothers separated by the Russian Revolution. The elder, Serafim, a Soviet engineer who is briefly in Berlin on a purchasing commission, visits the shabby room of his émigré brother Lev, a former literature student. The reunion is uncomfortable for both men, and they desperately cast about for topics of conversation. Looking over Lev’s modest library, Serafim fills in the time by recounting the plot of a silly but “rather entertaining” German novel about incest that he happened upon in the train (E134/R137). Listening to Serafim’s account Lev ponders the absurdity of spending their brief meeting discussing “some philistine tripe by Leonard Frank” but contents himself with the remark that incest is “a fashionable subject these days” (E134-5/R138). Nabokov apparently still had the Frank book in mind between 1935 and 1937 when writing his Russian chef-d’œuvre, Dar (The Gift). The novel’s poet-protagonist, Fyodor Godunov-Chernyavtsev, who lives in Berlin, writes to his mother in June of 1929: “I’ll visit you in Paris. Generally speaking I’d abandon tomorrow this country, oppressive as a headache—where everything is alien and repulsive to me, where a novel about incest . . . is considered the crown of literature, where in fact there is no literature” (E362/R393).

Incest, and particularly sibling incest, was, and indeed had long been, a “fashionable subject” in German literature and art. The national epos that underlies the Wagnerian cycle Der Ring des Nibelungen tells of Siegfried who (at least in Wagner’s version) is the son of Wotan’s offspring, the Wälsung twins Siegmund and Sieglinde. Their story is inspired by the uncanny fascination of incest for German authors—from the Gregorials of Hartmann von Aue onwards (p. 366). According to Walter H. Sokel, incest was a theme of particular fascination for German Expressionist writers and constituted “an obvious correlative of the narcissistic element in much of Expressionism” (The Writer in Extremis: Expressionism in Twentieth-Century German Literature, Stanford, Calif., 1959, p. 129.).
the subject of *Die Walküre*, the second opera of the Ring cycle. The theme of sibling incest is introduced into modern German literature, albeit marginally, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) in his *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-96), which has been described as "the basis for the modern novel of the Romantic School." The ethereal child Mignon, purchased by Wilhelm from a company of travelling acrobats, eventually proves to be the offspring of an Italian monk (later, the mad wandering Harpist) and a girl who, unbeknownst to him, is his sister. Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853), one of the founding figures of German *Romantik*, treated sibling incest in the fairy-tale-like *Der Blonde Eckbert* (1797), his most remembered story. The theme is also central to Schiller's *Die Braut von Messina* (1803) and Franz Grillparzer's play *Die Ahnfrau* (1817).

In the present century the works of Thomas Mann, one of Nabokov's *bêtes noires*, almost constitute a survey of sibling incest in German literature. The incestuous brother and sister of Mann's 1905 story "Wälsungenblut" ("The Blood of the Walsungs") echo the names (and sin) of their prototypes in the Wagnerian opera that they attend. Mann's 1951 novel *Der Erwählte* (The Holy Sinner), the story of a medieval Pope born of the union of a royal brother and sister, is, says its author, "based in the main on the verse epos *Gregorius vom Stein* by...

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28 Nabokov refers to Mann (*inter alia*) as a "puffed-up" writer of second-rate, ephemeral works in his *Strong Opinions* (New York, 1973), p. 54. Other, equally hostile, Mann references may be found on pp. 55, 57, 83, 85, 112, and 204. Although references to German authors are infrequent in Ada, Mann is alluded to twice. In one case, Professor Veen refers to the *Collected Works of Eielermann* as something "dumped by my predecessor" in his apartment (p. 371). Mann's uses of the incest theme are detailed below. William Faulkner (1897-1962) used sibling incest as a theme in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom, Absalom* (1936). A second Mann reference is to a novel entitled *Love under the Lindens* "by one Eielmann" which is described as "One of the most tawdry and *réjouissants* novels that ever 'made' the front page of the Manhattan *Times' Book Review*" (402-03). In his notes to the Penguin edition of Ada, Nabokov identifies Eielmann as a blend of Thomas Mann and Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953). O'Neill's play *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) has incestuous undercurrents between brother and sister while *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), with its son-stepmother affair, is "quasi-incestuous." It is perhaps of note that Mann, who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1929, is unceremoniously lumped together with two other Nobel laureates: O'Neill, in 1936, and Faulkner, 1949.
29 Although written in 1905, the story first appeared in 1921 as a privately printed edition intended for the author's friends (Munich, 1921; reprinted in *Stories of Three Decades*, New York, 1936); see Bithell, p. 314. Mann's story as well as those by a number of other writers on the incest theme may be found in the anthology *Violation of Taboo: Incest in the Great Literature of the Past and Present*, ed. D. W. Cory and R. E. L. Masters (New York, 1963).
the Middle High German poet Hartmann von Aue (c. 1165-1210), who took his legend of chivalry from the French.\textsuperscript{29}

The theme of brother-sister incest becomes especially prominent in German literature of the 1920s and early 1930s when Nabokov was residing in Berlin.\textsuperscript{30} If the long-suppressed publication of Mann’s “Wälsungenblut” in 1921 reinaugurated the theme, its most complex manifestation is to be found in the writings of Robert Musil, who first assayed the subject in his “hyper-Freudian” poem “Isis und Osiris” (1923) and ultimately made it the central mythic metaphor of his unfinished masterpiece \textit{Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften} (I-1930; II-1932; III-1943).\textsuperscript{31} The esoteric theme was, however, by no means limited to high art. Frank Thiess gained notoriety with his 1922 novel \textit{Die Verdammten}, which portrays an incestuous brother-sister relationship as a part of its picture of the Baltic German aristocracy.\textsuperscript{32} Gunther Birkenfeld’s 1929 \textit{Dritter Hof Links} (known in English as \textit{A Room in Berlin}), another sensational novel of the period, deals with a brother and sister who become intimate because of crowded living conditions resulting from their poverty. Another German best seller of 1929, the one to which Nabokov contemptuously alludes in his 1931 short story, is Leonhard Frank’s \textit{Bruder und Schwester}, which takes its epigraph from Goethe’s \textit{Wilhelm Meister}.\textsuperscript{33}

Nabokov’s Berlin was awash in works about sibling incest. This general fact and specifically Leonhard Frank’s \textit{Bruder und Schwester},


\textsuperscript{30} Although exceptionally well represented in German literature of the period, the theme was by no means restricted to German writers. Note, for example, the above-cited works of Faulkner and O’Neill. The theme is represented in English literature by Ivy Compton-Burnett’s \textit{Brothers and Sisters} (1929; rpt. London, 1971) and W. Somerset Maugham’s 1931 tale of sibling incest, “The Book Bag,” in \textit{East and West: The Collected Short Stories of W. Somerset Maugham} (Garden City, N.Y., 1937). French literature contributes Jean Cocteau’s 1929 \textit{Les Enfants Terribles}, which appears in \textit{Ada} as \textit{Les Enfants Maudits} (p. 198), written by Ada’s governess Belle Larivièr under the \textit{nom de plume} Monparnasse. Some of her works recreate the stories of Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893), notably “La Parure,” which appears as “La Rivière de Diamante” (p. 83), but not, strangely enough, Maupassant’s only tale of sibling incest, the 1887 “La Porte.” Leo Tolstoy so admired the latter piece that he adapted it into Russian and published it under the title “Frantswaza: Rasskaz po Maupassantu” (“Francois: A Tale after Maupassant”); in \textit{Polnii sobranie sochinenii}, ed. V. G. Chertkov, XXIV (Moscow, 1936), 251-58 (text) and 671-76 (annotations).


\textsuperscript{32} Bithell, p. 471. Thiess’s novel was reprinted in 1923 and 1924 and again in 1930-33.

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Bruder und Schwester} (Leipzig, 1929). The translation, \textit{Brother and Sister} (New York, 1930), went through several printings. Citations in the text are to this translation and to the 1953 German edition (Munich).
s singled out by Nabokov in his early short story, may have played a role in the later genesis of Ada. Before proceeding we must address a preliminary question. Nabokov often proclaimed his ignorance of German in spite of his fifteen-year residence in Berlin. Typical is his comment in the preface to the English translation of his 1928 novel King, Queen, Knave, which is set in Berlin and has an entirely German cast: "I spoke no German, had no German friends, had not read a single German novel either in the original, or in translation." This flat assertion should be viewed with some suspicion. Not only does Nabokov make reference to the Frank novel in his 1931 story and again in his later novel Dar (The Gift), but his own 1930 novel Zashchita Lushina (The Defense) contains an interesting parallel to it.

In Frank's Bruder und Schwester we find a scene set in the spring of 1924. The sibling lovers, Konstantin and Lydia, are strolling along Berlin's Friedrichstrasse. As they pass a shop window, they see "a life-sized wax figure, a man with two heads, one face cheerful and one bitterly aggrieved, constantly draw aside the lapels of his coat, showing first a piqué waistcoat stained with ink, and then—beaming—the other side, snow-white, because the fountain-pen in the pocket was of a non-leaking sort" (E48/G43). A remarkably similar description is to be found in Nabokov's The Defense. Grandmaster Luzhin is strolling along a Berlin street with his wife in the winter of 1929-1930: "Presently he stopped stock-still in front of a stationery store where a wax dummy of a man with two faces, one sad and the other joyful, was throwing open his jacket alternately to left and right: the fountain pen clipped into the left pocket of his white waistcoat had sprinkled the whiteness with ink, while on the right was the pen that never ran" (E204/R184). The parallel is most striking especially in view of the hard-cover publication dates of 1929 for Frank and 1930 for Nabokov, but the case is less than conclusive.

Judging by reviews, Frank's novel was published in late 1929. Nabokov was finishing The Defense in the summer of 1929 and the first portion of the novel started serial publication in the Parisian émigré journal Sovremennye Zapiski in the last issue of 1929. The wax dummy appears, however, in the second issue of 1930, presumably well after the publication of Frank's novel. The crucial issue is, of course, when Nabokov composed the passage in question. Was the manuscript complete when Frank's novel appeared? These questions remain un-

85 Vladimir Nabokov, King, Queen, Knave (New York, 1968), p. viii.
86 V. Sirin (Vladimir Nabokov), Zashchita Lushina (Berlin, 1930), and Vladimir Nabokov, The Defense (New York, 1964).
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answered. The available evidence shows only that it is chronologically possible for the borrowing to have occurred. It must also be considered that both authors lived in Berlin during the twenties and could easily have seen the prototype of the figure that each man incorporated into the text of his current novel. If Nabokov did adopt Frank's image, it was from the original German edition rather than the November 1930 English translation, although the English version could conceivably have been the source of Nabokov's reference to Frank's novel of sibling incest in the December 1931 short story. Whether Nabokov borrowed his wax dummy from Bruder und Schwester or from life, it is certain that he was aware of Frank's novel of sibling incest, although it remains unclear how well he knew the book. If nothing else, the episode casts doubt upon Nabokov's assertion of total unfamiliarity with German fiction in the twenties and thirties. Nabokov's hostility to all things German is well known, and it may be that his blanket denial reflects his general attitude rather than particular facts.

Nabokov's Ada does not seem to contain any allusions to German treatments of the sibling incest theme, notwithstanding its frequency in German literature. We have shown, however, that Nabokov was aware of that theme in its German variant and in particular in Frank's Bruder and Schwester. We must also keep in mind Nabokov's vast literary memory and such statements as, "I can always tell when a sentence I compose happens to resemble in cut and intonation that of any of the writers I loved or detested half a century ago." It is not "in cut and intonation" but rather in a series of coincident details and scenes that we find similarities between the 1969 Ada and the 1929 Bruder und Schwester. The major point of similarity is, of course, the brother-sister incest theme. This, however, merely relates both books to a rather select thematic genre. Beyond this, there are an impressive number of parallels in detail and in scene that occur in both books.

Both Van and Ada Veen and Konstantin and Lydia of Bruder und Schwester are from extremely wealthy cosmopolitan families. Kon-

38 This possibility should be seriously entertained given Nabokov's use of automated mannikins in the 1928 novel King, Queen, Knave, in which the Berlin department store owner Dreyer becomes involved in a scheme to develop such mannikins.

39 A further consideration contributing to Nabokov's dismissal of contemporary German literature and Frank's book in particular may have been Frank's identification with socialism. In the Weimar Republic there was pronounced association between art and leftist politics that Nabokov found abhorrent. Although Frank's Bruder und Schwester is not political and indeed depicts only the cosmopolitan haute bourgeoisie of Nabokov's own background, its passing reference to the Russian Revolution as "the willing self-immolation of a people building a new storey on the edifice of human history" understandably may have annoyed a Russian émigré reader such as Nabokov (p. 15).

40 Strong Opinions, p. 46.
stantin and Lydia are, like Van and Ada, endowed with extraordinary physical beauty, intelligence, and a sense of honor immeasurably beyond those of ordinary mortals. The problems of the world are not theirs. Van, like Konstantin, is an athlete and a sportsman. Lydia, like Ada, has mat white skin and black hair—features that serve as leitmotifs for both heroines. The lives of the polyglot families (German, Russian, English, and French) revolve about a series of estates, foreign travels, and luxury hotels. Van and Konstantin are both writer-scholars. Just as Ada has her French maid Blanche, Lydia has Marie. Scholar Konstantin’s male secretary mirrors the older Veen’s Ronald Oranger. The homes have dachshunds (as did Nabokov’s own family). Both pairs of brother and sister share gestures and table mannerisms that are clues to their kinship. Konstantin, like Van, is intensely jealous of his sister’s suitors and threatens mayhem. Their respective rivals have attended the same posh prep schools as the brothers and discuss their terms there.

A number of scenes coincide in the two novels as well as details such as the above. Just as Van and Ada wander and declare their love in the park of Ardis Manor, Konstantin and Lydia roam and make their avowals in the Berlin Tiergarten (compare the Chateaubriand parallel). Each book has an erotic interlude in which the heroine sits on her lover’s lap while riding in a vehicle. The initial scene of intercourse takes place on divans (ottomans) which become leitmotifs throughout the respective narratives. There is in each novel a confrontation scene in which the hero is told of the incestuous nature of his relationship by a parent—Konstantin by his mother; Van by his father (although Van is already aware of the fact). The relationships are both curtailed until after the death of the parents, and in each the hero contemplates suicide by pistol. Although the protagonist of Frank’s novel has no half sister equivalent to Ada’s Lucette, he is followed about in his travels by a mysterious woman who is so smitten at the very sight of him that she abandons her husband and children to follow and gaze at him from afar. Like Lucette in Ada, this woman serves as a paranymph and brings Konstantin and Lydia back together after they lose each other—an act that leads to her own ruin. In both novels the hero wildly drives through the night toward a final reunion with his sister.

Many of the parallels that we have noted are undoubtedly functions of the incestuous relationship and the social milieu of the families. They are, so to speak, “built into” the underlying situation. The very abundance of the coincidences is, however, striking. The most suggestive similarity between the two novels is the one that opposes them to almost all of the other treatments of their theme. In virtually all treatments of the brother-sister incest theme, the relationship, once revealed, leads to grief, separation, and death. Perhaps the most distinctive parallel be-
tween the Nabokov and Frank novels is that the reunited sibling-lovers live happily ever after.\footnote{In his autobiography, Frank says that in the earliest stages of writing \textit{Bruder und Schwester} he himself did not know "whether love could overcome this greatest of all obstacles." \textit{Heart on the Left}, trans. Cyrus Brooks, (London, 1954), p. 199.}

We have remarked the classic thematic prototypes for \textit{Ada} in the giants of Romanticism—the English Byron, the French Chateaubriand, and the Russian Pushkin. These authors, all frequently alluded to in \textit{Ada}, form the literary backdrop of the sibling incest theme. The theme resurfaces after a century in a German incarnation. Nabokov, resident in Berlin at the time, was aware of this resurgence and of Frank’s book in particular. It does not seem inconceivable that, \textit{inter alia}, Frank’s \textit{Bruder und Schwester} played a small role in the genesis of \textit{Ada} even if only in a negative sense.\footnote{Obituaries on Frank such as that in \textit{The Times} (August 24, 1961, p. 10) may have recalled \textit{Bruder und Schwester} to Nabokov, who was then resident in Switzerland, where Frank had spend many years in exile. \textit{Ada} was begun in late 1965 (\textit{Strong Opinions}, p. 310).}

\textit{Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle} is a family saga of an extraordinary sort. The history of the Zemski-Veen clan is presented over five generations although the last, that of Van, Ada, and Lucette, receives by far the most attention. The family genealogy is sufficiently important (and complex) that Ada’s narrative is prefaced by a family tree in order to facilitate the reader’s journey through the long novel.\footnote{Within the framework of the novel the chart is presumably made up by Van, or, conceivably, by Ada. It is also possible, however, that it is the work of Van’s obtuse posthumous editor Ronald Oranger. One notes the similarity of his name to that of G. I. Gurdjieff’s disciple, A. R. Orage, who extensively edited his master’s writings (James Webb, \textit{The Lives and Work of G. I. Gurdjieff}, P. D. Ouspensky, and Their Followers, New York, 1980).} The genealogical chart is helpful in some ways, but its primary purpose is to mislead the reader. It gives the “official” version of the family history while the true history is wildly different. The disparity is most evident for the fifth and last generation of the moribund Zemski-Veen clan, and the unraveling of this situation is the major secret (and motivation) of the plot. Van Veen is ostensibly the son of Demon Veen and his wife, the mad Aqua Durmanov. Ada and her sister Lucette, no less ostensibly, are the children of Daniel Veen, Demon’s first cousin, and his actress wife Marina Durmanov, Aqua’s twin sister. In reality, Demon Veen is the father of both Van and Ada by Marina while only Lucette is Daniel Veen’s progeny. According to the falsified genealogical chart, Van and Ada are first cousins whereas in truth they are full brother and sister and Dan’s daughter Lucette is their half sister. This state of affairs has come about as follows. Marina has been Demon’s mistress both
before and after her marriage to Dan. Marina becomes pregnant with Van very shortly before her lover Demon marries her twin sister Aqua and not long before her own hasty marriage to Dan. Aqua soon becomes pregnant but suffers a miscarriage in a mental home in Switzerland. Nearby, Marina gives birth to Van. Marina (and Demon) succeed in substituting their newborn son Van for Aqua’s dead child at a time when she is too disoriented to grasp the deception. Thus, Van is raised by his father and initially regards Aqua as his mother, Marina as his aunt, and Ada as his cousin. He and Ada, ages fourteen and twelve, discover the truth while rummaging among family mementos in the attic of Ardis Hall. This revelation is, however, so obscured by the complexity of the narrative that many readers fail to grasp it.

Most critics have successfully unraveled this artfully tangled skein and arrived at the central secret of the novel’s plot—that the turbulent lifelong love affair of Van and Ada is one between full brother and sister, although Van’s narrative thinly maintains the official version with occasional hints that the lovers are (at worst) half-siblings. What has not been widely recognized even by critics is that the incestuous relationship of Van and Ada is but the final episode in a series of incestuous matings among Veens and Zemskis over several generations. Van, Ada, and Lucette are the fifth and final generation. The fourth generation, that of their parents, comprises, as we have noted, four living persons: the twin sisters Aqua and Marina (Zemski) Durmanov, who respectively marry Demon and Dan Veen, who are each other’s first cousins. The Durmanov twins are ostensibly the children of Dolly Zemski Durmanov and her husband General Ivan Durmanov, who also have (officially and presumably in fact) a son, Ivan, a musical prodigy who dies before the opening of the novel. The male members of the fourth generation of the Veen family, Demon and cousin Dan, are respectively the offspring of the Veen brothers: Dedalus (married briefly to Irina Garin) and Ardalion (married to Mary Trumbull). Here again we come to a major discrepancy between the official genealogy and probable reality. There is good reason to doubt that General Durmanov is the father of Aqua and Marina and some reason to question that Irina Garin is Demon’s mother. The complex opening chapters of Ada in-

44 Matthew Hodgart, for example, possibly misled by the Byronic parallels, saw Van and Ada as half-brother and sister in his review in the New York Review of Books. Subsequent critics have generally recognized the true relationship. See, for example, Appel, “Ada Described,” pp. 161-62. Although there are numerous “giveaways” embedded in the text of the novel, the story of the baby switch is first told (in covert form) in the flower list (pp. 7, 8).

45 It is of marginal interest that even in terms of the official genealogy the Durmanov females and the Veen males are second cousins. The Durmanovs’ maternal grandfather is Peter Zemski, whose sister, Olga Zemski Veen, is the Veens’ paternal grandmother.
clude much of the genealogical data in the book, and although some sketchy information is provided on the first two generations of the Zemski family, the more detailed genealogical exposition starts (for no obvious reason) from Daria (Dolly) Zemski Durmanov, Ada’s grandmother: “Dolly, an old child . . . married in 1840, at the tender and wayward age of fifteen, General Ivan Durmanov” (p. 3). It is then reported by nonagenarian narrator Van that “Dolly had inherited her mother’s beauty and temper but also an older ancestral strain of whimsical, and not seldom deplorable, taste, well reflected, for instance, in the names she gave her daughters: Aqua and Marina” (p. 4). At this point her husband is brought on stage with the parenthetical thought, “‘Why not Tofana?’ wondered the good and sur-royally antlered general.” Aqua Tofana was a poison used in eighteenth-century Italy by young wives (Dolly is twenty-four years her husband’s junior) to dispose of their aged and “antlered” spouses.46 Thus Dolly’s fidelity and the cuckolded General’s paternity of the children are both subjected to doubt at the very beginning of the narrative. These doubts are nourished in incidental asides throughout the novel, albeit never explicitly formulated or confirmed.

“Wayward” Dolly is fifteen at the time of her marriage to General Durmanov and nineteen when her twin daughters are born in 1844. That Dolly’s waywardness predates (as well as postdates) her marriage to Durmanov is suggested by references to “love letters, written when she was twelve or thirteen” (p. 374), that is, well prior to her marriage to the General.47 Dolly’s sexual precocity is further evidenced by Ada’s remark on her sixteenth birthday that she is already “Older than grandmother at the time of her first divorce” (p. 279). Dolly has been married (and divorced) prior to her marriage at fifteen to General Durmanov. We may conjecture that Dolly has also borne a son—perhaps to the unknown first husband or, more probably (as we shall see) to a lover. Two questions arise: who is the hypothetical son, and who is the father?

Before addressing these questions, let us return to the third generation of the Veen family, Dedalus and his brother Ardalion. The marriage of Demon’s father Dedalus to Countess Irina Garin ends in her

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47 The letters are mentioned by Lucette in her childhood recollection of Van, Ada, and herself rummaging through a locked secretaire in the Ardis Hall library where Van, she says, expected to find “our grandmother’s love letters” (p. 374). Dolly’s name is not mentioned, but she is the only grandmother shared by the three children. Cf. Count Rostov’s exclamation in War and Peace: “Why our mothers used to be married at twelve or thirteen” (p. 43). The remark is in the same scene as the “Cousinage est dangereux voisinage” comment discussed above.
death in the following year, 1838, the year of Demon’s birth. Once again we are given reason to doubt the official version. The supposition that Irina is Demon’s mother is subtly undermined when Demon casually mentions (and demonstrates) to his son Van an “ancestral mannerism” of Demon’s mother that is shared by him and Ada (p. 240). Since Demon obviously cannot remember Irina Garin, the reader might reasonably suppose that his mother is someone else. A less direct bit of evidence is a passing comment made by Demon at a family dinner attended by Marina, Van, and Ada. Among the dishes is Peterson’s grouse, or gelinotte, which is served, to Demon’s dismay, with burgundy. Demon is moved to material remark that “my maternal grandfather would have left the table rather than see me drinking red wine instead of champagne with gelinotte” (p. 256). Irina Garin’s father is never alluded to in the narrative. It is a reference in a void. If, however, we pursue our assumption that Dolly is Demon’s mother, Demon’s maternal grandfather is Peter Zemski. It is probably not by chance that they are dining on Peterson’s grouse. All things considered, it seems more than likely that wayward Dolly is Demon’s real mother.

Only one thing seems to weigh heavily against our supposition that Dolly is Demon’s mother. Dolly would have been thirteen at the time of Demon’s birth in 1838. This is not a fatal objection, however, when we recall that Dolly’s romantic life started at twelve or thirteen (the love letters) and that her marriage at fifteen to General Durmanov is already her second marriage. Demon is in all probability the product of a liaison between Dedalus Veen and his sexually precocious first cousin Dolly about two years prior to her marriage to General Durmanov. If so, this makes Demon (at the least) a halfbrother to Dolly’s two daughters: Aqua, who becomes his wife, and Marina, his mistress and the mother of his two children, Van and Ada. We have noted that Demon’s putative birth in 1838 is in the same year that Dedalus’s wife Irina dies. Let us suppose that Dedalus takes his natural son Demon and passes him off as the child of his just-dead wife. There is yet a further possibility. Dedalus, who fathers Demon with cousin Dolly in 1838, resumes the affair after her marriage to the “sur-royally antlered” General Durmanov (p. 4). The twins Aqua and Marina (b. 1844) may also be Dedalus’s children. In this eventuality Demon marries one and mates with

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48 Dolly never appears as a character in the narrative so the reader is deprived of the opportunity to observe her mannerisms. Demon, however, is thirty-two at the time of Dolly’s death and would be well aware of them. The gesture, a wagging of a forefinger at temple height in “casual, pacific denial” (p. 240) has previously been used by Ada (p. 227).

49 There is no Peterson’s Grouse, which is described as being one of Demon’s favorite dishes. The allusion is presumably to ornithologist Roger Tory Peterson and his famed field guides as well as to Peter Zemski. Multiple allusions are frequent in Nabokov’s work.

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another of his full sisters. Lest this line of conjecture seem altogether implausible, let it be recalled that it closely (but not exactly) parallels the events of the following generation which are far less speculative, if no less scandalous. An illicit child (Demon and Van) is taken from its real mother (Dolly and Marina) by its father (Dedalus and Demon) and is attributed to the unwitting wife (dying or dead Irina Garin Veen and mad Aqua Durmanov Veen). The children (Demon and Van) then mate with their own sisters (Marina and Ada). Other, more partial, parallels include Lucette, who is the loser in the incestuous triangle “Lucette-Van-Ada,” as is Aqua in her own triangle, “Aqua-Demon-Marina,” i.e., Lucette is to Ada and Van as Aqua is to Marina and Demon. In her role as half-sibling to brother and sister lovers she also echoes the position and tragic early death of young Ivan Durmanov, Marina’s and Demon’s half brother. In many ways the incestuous tangle mirrored in each of the last two generations of the Zemski-Veen family parallels the relationship of the two worlds of the novel’s underlying cosmology—Terra and Anti-Terra whose histories and geographies are distorted mirror images of each other. The genealogical chart given in Figure 1 (p. 242) is our revision of Van and Ada’s family history.

The clan’s founding father, Prince Zemski, has a penchant for ever younger girls culminating in his marriage at seventy-one to the fifteen-year-old Princess Temnosinny. Although incest is not, so far as we know, among his sins, the spirit of Prince Zemski seems to look benignly upon the incestuous activities of his descendants. On the morning after Van and Ada first couple, Van passes beneath the portrait of “a pleased-looking Prince Zemski” (p. 124). Given the prevalence of incest in the third, fourth, and fifth generations of the family, one can not but wonder about the earlier generations—especially that of Peter Zemski and his sister Olga. Tempting though the idea is, there seems to be little textual support for it. Further, if Dedalus Veen is the son of Peter and Olga Zemski rather than Olga and her husband Erasmus Veen, there is no Veen blood in Demon, Van, or Ada. This seems un-

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50 This may be the ultimate implication of Marina’s affirmation that “in bed . . . Demon’s senses must have been influenced by a queer sort of ‘incestuous’ (whatever that term means) pleasure . . . when he fondled . . . flesh that was both that of his wife and that of his mistress . . . an Aquamarina both single and double” (p. 19). That Marina and Aqua are twins would not make Demon’s dual relationship with them incestuous—unless he were, in fact, their brother. Nabokov’s readers are well advised to pay particular attention to words given “parenthetic” emphasis; e.g., “whatever that term means.”

After the completion of my article it was proposed that Dan is Demon’s (non-identical) twin rather than his first cousin (Lucy Maddox, Nabokov’s Novels in English, Athens, Georgia, 1983, p. 111). The implication is that Dolly’s and Dedalus’ twin sons marry their twin sisters. I have incorporated this supposition into my revised family tree (Fig. 1) but not into my text.
Figure 1
Revised Zemski-Veen Family Tree

Generation

I
1770
Prince Vseslav Zemski + Princess Sofia Temnosiniy
1699-1797 1755-1809

II
1824
Mary O'Reilly + Peter Zemski
1806-1850 1772-1832

1793
Olga Zemski + Erasmus Veen
1773-1814 1760-1852

III
1840
Gen. Ivan Durmanov + Dolly Zemski
1801-1872 1825-1870

1837
Dedalus Veen + Irina Garin
1799-1883 1820-1838

Ardelion Veen + Mary Trumbell
1800-1848 ?-1849

IV
1869
Ivan Durmanov
1842-1862

Aqua Durmanov + Demon Veen (+)
1844-1883 1838-1905

Marina Durmanov + Daniel Veen
1844-1900 1838-1893

V
1871
Ada Veen (+) Van Veen Lucette Veen
1872-1967 1870-1967 1876-1901
likely because Van, Ada, and their father Demon share many physical traits and mannerisms as opposed to Lucette in whom, we are told, “the Z[emski] gene” dominates (p. 367). The pattern of incest begins with Dedalus Veen and his first cousin Dolly Zemski, who are, respectively, the children of Olga Zemski Veen and her husband Erasmus, and Olga’s brother Peter Zemski and his wife Mary O’Reilly. Dedalus’ and Dolly’s children, Demon and Marina, are probably full (or perhaps half) brother and sister while their offspring, Van and Ada, are unquestionably full brother and sister. Their sterile union marks the end of the superimperial Zemski-Veen clan.

The Zemski-Veen labyrinth of incest is, appropriately, not without its mythological antecedents and it is in part these antecedents that lend support to our argument about the extent of incest in the family’s history. The names of the progenitors of the clan, Prince Vseslav Zemski (1699-1797) and his young bride Princess Sofia Temnosiniiy (1755-1809), bespeak the misty mythological origins of the clan. The name “Zemski” is from the Russian root for “land” or “earth” and Temnosiniiy “dark blue” is the traditional epithet for the sky. Compare the progenitors of the Greek gods: Uranus, who personifies Heaven, and his wife Gaea, who is an embodiment of the Earth. Uranus is dethroned by his son Cronos who marries his own sister Rhea; Cronos is in turn ousted by his son Zeus who weds his own sister Hera.51

It is not by chance that Dedalus Veen, the initiator of the Labyrinth of Incest, bears the name Daedalus, the creator of the famed Labyrinth of Crete. The association is made explicit when Dedalus Veen’s son, Demon, is humorously addressed as Dementiy Labirintovich, a mock Russian patronymic meaning Demon, son of the Labyrinth (pp. 523-24).52 Further, Demon, the son of Dedalus Veen, dies in an air disaster as does Daedelus’s son Icarus, whose wax-sealed wings melt when he flies too near the sun. Lastly, Marina and Lucette, the sole surviving possessors of Van and Ada’s secret after Demon’s air death also meet metaphorically mythological ends: Marina by fire (cancer), and Lucette—by water (suicide by drowning).53 The Labyrinth of Incest

51 Charles Mills Gayley, *The Classic Myths in English Literature and in Art* (Boston, 1911), pp. 4-6; and Ralo, 1.268.

52 Demon’s name and physical image has still other nonclassical mythological associations. His name, as we have noted, is that of M. l’u. Lermontov’s poem about a fallen angel. Demon’s physical description, including references to his wings (appropriate to a son of Daedalus), derives from a set of pictures based on the poem made by the Russian artist Mikhail Vrubel (1856-1910).

53 The three deaths are described by Van in specifically mythological terms: “Three elements, fire, water, and air, destroyed, in that sequence, Marina, Lucette, and Demon” (p. 450). Marina dies of cancer which in Russian is *goreb’ rakom* “to burn with cancer.”

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created by Dedalus Veen is scarcely less a maze than that of his mythological prototype Daedalus, the legendary artist-craftsman.

Incest is the most emotionally charged of all human experiences and, not surprisingly, has a long literary history. In its earliest appearances it is an attribute of the gods and as such doubly forbidden to mortals. Sibling incest was rife in the Greek pantheon and its practice by the Egyptian Ptolemies was a sign of their divine stature. Peter Thorslev has suggested that Oedipus’ punishment was not so much for challenging fate but for emulating an incestuous Zeus, that is, lèse majesté. Nonetheless, Sophoclean incest is closely linked with the defiance of fate, with rebellion and the rebel. Greek speculative philosophy has left us a second incest tradition recounted in Plato’s Symposium: all humankind are originally single-bodied twins who, having become separated, eternally seek their other halves, that is, reintegration of the self. Most postclassical treatments of the incest theme draw upon some variant of these two traditions.

In the Christian Middle Ages the fateful incest theme becomes linked with the idea of repentance and grace. He who commits the greatest sin is offered the greatest chance for holiness. The French legend La Vie du Pape Grégoire upon which Hartmann von Aue based his Gregorius (circa 1200) embodies this idea as does Mann’s more quizzical modern version. The Gothic romance à la Horace Walpole, which often reached back into the medieval for its ambience, also made use of the incest theme. Although in some Gothic work incest may have symbolized the dark irrational element against the evenly lighted and orderly background of the eighteenth century, in most its function was shock value, pure and simple, for example, Anne Radcliffe and “Monk” Lewis.

The great age of the sibling incest theme is the Romantic period. Thorslev, who terms incest a “Romantic symbol,” incisively points out that Romantic uses of the theme are distinguished from the earlier Gothic ones in that for the latter incest is, at least initially, unwitting, the product of “a malignant fate” (p. 45). In high Romanticism the rebellion is conscious and willfully chosen. Romanticism’s employment of incest embraces earlier facets of the theme—hubris, Fate, ultimate sin (versus ultimate sanctity), the irrational side of man, and sheer horror. More importantly it focuses on two essential modern thematic ingredients: rebellion and solipsism. If anthropologists are to be believed, the taboo against incest underlies the organization of society

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55 Robertson, p. 96.
56 Thorslev, pp. 42-45.
and, indirectly, of civilization itself. The act of incest is an attack on society: the triumph of irrational nature over rational society. This, presumably, is why incest, particularly brother-sister incest, becomes a central theme for Romanticism, with its cult of the demonic hero in rebellion against the stifling strictures of society, that is, the Byronic hero. Incest is the ultimate rebellion. The second component, the solipsistic, takes its origins from Aristophanes' legend in Plato's Symposium. Aristophanes uses his model to account for homosexual and Lesbian relationships but does not extend it to incestuous ones, although the connection is apparent. In this context sibling incest is the cardinal symbol of the human urge to union, to total integration of the self to the exclusion of all other creatures—in its extreme form, solipsism. The ideal, or most solipsistic, form of incest is between opposite-sex twins. The folklore surrounding such pairs in both primitive and literate societies is rich in sexual implication: "Throughout opposite-sex twin lore, the two are always seen as an original unit which has split, a unit destined to be reunited by sexual love, the ultimate symbol of conjoining." In the alienated world of the Romantic vision, this urge to union is thwarted by the exclusivity of the hero whose fate it is to be tormented by the masses. So exalted is the hero in comparison with the surrounding world that only one of the same blood, someone genetically and psychically very like the protagonist, is conceivable as the missing half, i.e., capable of reconstituting the lost whole. The urge to wholeness can be satisfied only by sexual congress with an intimate family member—a choice that (at least in the Romantic imagination) had the added frisson of defying mankind's most deep-seated taboo. The incestuous sibling twin is the final way station on the road to total solipsism. Rebellion and solipsism are in some sense parallel and reflect the major polar opposition that structures Romanticism: the individual versus society. Rebellion suggests a liberating chaos, a shattering of society; solipsism, the ultimate reintegration of the individual within himself. Romanticism in its pristine form (e.g., Byron) gives priority to the ill-starred rebellion of the individual; integration is of lesser import.

Twentieth-century writers have tended to attach greater significance to the individualistic integrative aspect of the sibling incest theme.

57 Claude Lévi-Strauss reviews modern anthropological theories of incest in Chapter ii, "The Problem of Incest," in his seminal work The Elementary Structures of Kinship, trans. J. H. Bell, et al. (Boston, 1969), pp. 12-25. 58 Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Toward a Recognition of Androgyny (New York, 1973), p. 34. Heilbrun provides a convenient survey of opposite-sex twins in literature, pp. 34-35. Van and Ada are, of course, not twins but their resemblance to each other is often emphasized. Ada herself says, "Physically . . . we are more like twins than cousins, and twins or even siblings can't marry . . ." (p. 148). Given the physical and psychic similarity of brother and sister, the relevance of the opposite-sex twin lore is apparent.
Mann's "Wälsungenblut" presents Siegmund's and Sieglinde's incest as a symbol of their hermetic exclusivity in the face of German society and Sieglinde's suitor. Further, it has been suggested that the sin of incest is an enabling act that may set free Siegmund's creativity. Incest is indirectly linked to art. Something vaguely akin (sans the art connection) may be seen in Iris Murdoch's *A Severed Head* (1961) in which the darkly demonic anthropologist Honor Klein explains her incestuous relationship with her half brother, a psychiatrist and apostle of freedom in human relations, as primitive "strange knowledge" that excludes her less exotic suitor.

Some modern treatments that dwell upon the integrative aspect of the incest theme take their origin directly from Aristophanes' thesis in Plato's *Symposium*. Robert Musil's unfinished *The Man Without Qualities* is a prominent example. Ulrich, the alienated man without qualities, after a vain sifting of philosophical views that might give integrality to his life, turns at last to his sister Agathe. Although scholars debate the extent and probable outcome of the relationship there can be no doubt about its meaning for Musil, who makes specific mention of the Platonic legend.60

John Barth has repeatedly dealt with sibling incest in his novels. Ebenezer Cooke, the hero of *The Sot Weed Factor*, has a twin sister, Anna, who according to his mentor Burlingame is sexually obsessed with her brother: "In every land and time folk have maintained that what we see as two are the fallen halves of some ancient one—that night and day, Heaven and Earth, or man and woman were long since severed by their sinful natures, and that not till Kingdom Come will the fallen twin be a blessed one. 'Til this lies 'neath the tale of Eve and Adam and Plato's fable . . . and Heaven knows how many other lovely lies . . ."61

In consequence of her incestuous passion Anna, under Burlingame's tutelage, becomes an authority on twins. This lore, much of it incestuous, is conveyed in a chapter entitled "A Layman's Pandect of Geminology Compedened by Henry Burlingame, Cosmophilist" (Pt. III, Ch. ii,). In *Giles Goat-Boy*, the hero, the offspring of the great WESCAC computer and the Chancellor's daughter, mates with Anastasia, whom he believes to be his twin. Here again the meaning of the sexual sibling

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60 The most detailed consideration of the meaning of sibling incest in the Musil novel is Part III, "Die Geschwisterliebe als Versuch, Eigenschaften zu erwerben," in Judith Burckhardt, "Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften" von Robert Musil, oder das Wagnis der Selbstverwirklichung. Basler Studien zur deutschen Sprache und Literatur, 48 (Bern, 1973). For a summary of the dispute over Musil's intentions with regard to the incest theme, see pp. 149-51.

relationship is that of an all-embracing unifying truth that comes to the pair when they couple in the Belly of the Computer.\textsuperscript{62} Barth, himself an opposite sex twin, has discussed the meaning of the Platonic myth of the separated twin: "The loss accounts for alienation, our felt distance from man and god; the search accounts for both erotic love and the mystic’s goal of divine atonement.” Rephrasing this last as divine harmony, we return to our distinction between the nineteenth-century Romantic view of sibling incest as rebellion and the twentieth-century view of incest as reintegration as we have seen in the work of Mann, Musil, and Barth.

Not all twentieth-century writers are benevolently disposed toward sibling incest as a symbol of psychological self-affirmation. Proceeding from the anthropological view that the incest prohibition (which leads to obligatory exogamy thus extending kinship ties and resulting in larger and more complex social organization), Anthony Burgess sees incest as antisocial and anti-art in the most fundamental sense. The hero of his novel \textit{MF}, Miles Faber, is a jejune worshiper of art as rebellion, particularly the work of one Sib Legeru whose name ultimately proves to mean “sibling incest.” In search of his idol, unwitting Miles nearly marries his own sister before discovering that he himself is the product of a brother-sister relationship. Although it may seem strange to see Burgess’s novel as a \textit{Bildungsroman} (pace \textit{Wilhelm Meister}), the message of Miles’s maturation is clear: “... I use the term [incest] in its widest sense to signify the breakdown of order, the collapse of communication, the irresponsible cultivation of chaos... It is man’s job to impose manifest order in the universe, not to yearn for Chapter Zero on the Book of Genesis... Art takes the raw material of the world about us and attempts to shape it into significance. Anti-art takes the same material and seeks insignification.”\textsuperscript{63} Burgess’s book is a direct literary statement on incest and art and is an explicit refutation of artistic solipsism. Although Burgess goes against the current in his denunciation, his case is of particular interest in that he shifts the sibling incest metaphor from the domain of psychology to that of art.\textsuperscript{64}


\textsuperscript{64} Our survey of sibling incest is by no means exhaustive. Other recent examples include: Sylvia Townsend Warner, “A Love Match” in \textit{Swans on an Autumn River} (New York, 1966); Theodore Sturgeon, “If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Let One Marry your Sister?” in \textit{Dangerous Visions: Thirty Three Original Stories}, ed. Harlan Ellison (Garden City, N.Y., 1967);
In the most general sense (one to which Nabokov would doubtless object), *Ada* allies itself with most other major twentieth-century treatments of the theme. *Ada* rejects the “rebellion” component of the romantic model and emphasizes the exclusivity-integrative-solipsistic polarity of the thematic dyad. Metaphorically Van and Ada are aspects of a single being, and Nabokov, like Musil and Barth, makes allusion to the legend of Plato’s *Symposium*.

Critics have assigned a variety of meanings to Nabokov’s incest theme. Elizabeth Dalton suggests that it is a metaphor for the identity of mind and reality. In conjoining with Ada, “almost his twin, Van achieves the perfect containment of mind and body within its own reverse counterpart. The division between subject and object is healed . . . Paradise is regained.” Other critics see the meaning of *Ada*’s incest theme in the area of moral philosophy. Bobbie Ann Mason avers that “*Ada* is about incest, and . . . incest . . . is virtually synonymous with solipsism.” In her view, the older Van, tormented by guilt for corrupting his sister Ada, largely creates an idyllic past for himself and Ada in his “memoir.” Van opts out of life. Mason presumes that Nabokov (who granted that his protagonists were “both rather horrible creatures”) condemns Van’s escape into solipsism as a means of assuaging his incestuous guilt. Unfortunately for Mason’s argument, there is no evidence that Van is wracked by guilt and, judging by her occasional marginal notes, Ada at eighty is no less happy with their lifelong incestuous love that is Van. Further, Ada, who is the “victim” in Mason’s view, is quite as aggressive as Van in initiating and pursuing their affair. Brian David Boyd, in his brilliant doctoral dissertation, also

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65 In the following we shall be discussing thematic interpretations of sibling incest. Quite apart from such thematic considerations, the incest taboo and its structural opposite, exclusivity (ultimate exogamy versus ultimate endogamy), have obvious roles on the mechanical, plot level. The taboo provides the dark secret which is the novel’s central plot mechanism. Were Van and Ada not brother and sister, there would be no need for subterfuge, no obstacle to their love, and no plot. Because of their exclusivity, all other romantic options are closed to the lovers. They can love only each other. Walter Sokel has neatly formulated this erotic dilemma in his discussion of the Austrian poet Georg Trakl (1887-1914) whose life and work were shot with the sibling incest theme: “One’s sister is perhaps even more than one’s mother . . . the woman closest to oneself. If she resembles one physically and mentally . . . one can see and love in her his own self disguised in the opposite sex” (p. 78).


69 Nabokov’s assessment is from his letter to the *New York Review of Books*, 10 July 1969, p. 36.
advances a moral interpretation of the incest theme: "Lucette . . . is the real reason for the prominence given to incest in the book. Incest is in *Ada* not as it has generally been conceived, as an emblem of solipsism or self-love—Nabokov detests such symbols—but rather to stress the intimate interconnections between human lives, interconnections which impose on human life requirements of morality and responsibility." In Boyd’s interpretation, incest is an evil not so much as it pertains to Van and Ada but in that it ends in the agony and death of their vulnerable half sister Lucette. Nabokov’s theme of sibling incest, of course, has moral implications, and Boyd may well be accurate in his assessment. It does not, however, seem plausible that Nabokov’s intense focus on the incest theme was more than marginally motivated by ethical or philosophical rather than literary considerations. They are to be inferred from the narrative but do not underlie it.

When asked about the meaning of incest in *Ada*, Nabokov answered, or rather parried, the question with the following words: “If I had used incest for the purpose of representing a possible road to happiness or misfortune, I would have been a best-selling didactician dealing in general ideas. Actually I don’t give a damn for incest one way or another. I merely like the ‘bl’ sound in siblings, bloom, blue, bliss, sable.” If Nabokov is to be believed, his comment would seem to explode any hope of relating *Ada*’s sibling incest theme to the generalities of anthropology, mythopsychology or philosophy—moral or immoral. The main thrust of the novel’s central thematic metaphor must be sought elsewhere.

Nabokov has made it abundantly clear that in his view the proper study of art is art. All of his novels in one way or another take as their main subject art and the artist. *Ada* is no exception. Van, a psychologist-philosopher specializing in the study of Terra’s hypothetical sibling

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72 From among Nabokov’s many statements on the subject, we cite: “Although I do not care for the slogan ‘art for art’s sake’ . . . there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art.” (*Strong Opinions,* p. 33). Nabokov’s most astute Russian critic, Vladislav Khodasevich, in a 1937 essay was perhaps the first to identify the artistic process as Nabokov’s main theme. Khodasevich’s insight is reaffirmed by Andrew Field, who in his *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (Boston, 1967) adds that “this view provides a universal key which ‘works’ in almost all of Nabokov’s fiction” (p. 102).
planet Anti-Terra, finally comes to realize that the value of his writings lies not in their epistemic content but in their literary style (p. 578). Accordingly, the meaning of Ada's sibling incest theme is to be sought in the world of art rather than in the world of ideas. We shall see that Nabokov's use of the theme is a far cry from that of writers earlier mentioned—even from those such as Mann or Burgess who link incest and art. It is no accident that Ada's only explicit extended discussion of incest takes place in the chapter which recounts Van and Ada's adventures in the Ardis Hall library only hours before their sexual initiation.78 Twelve-year-old Ada's access to the family library is closely monitored, a situation she hotly resents. Van, via blackmail, gains unlimited and unsupervised entrée for Ada and himself to the bibliographic treasure trove of Ardis Hall. Not surprisingly, the chapter is a compendium of literary allusions, real and imaginary, ranging from the Arabian Nights to John Updike's Centaur, which is transmuted into Chiron. Most of the works referred to deal with matters sexual and sometimes incestuous. Near the beginning of the chapter we read that Ada's newly won access to the library is due to her "intimacy with her cher, trop cher René, as she sometimes called Van in gentle jest . . ." (p. 131). The allusion soon becomes explicit in the remark that Ada had not quite understood the sentence "les deux enfants pouvaient donc s'abandonner au plaisir sans aucune crainte" when she had first read Chateaubriand's tale about "a pair of romantic siblings" (p. 133). This is followed by a disquisition drawn from a volume entitled Sex and Lex on the incestuous family life of one Ivan Ivanov (the Russian version of "John Doe") who first impregnates his five-year-old great-granddaughter, Maria, and then, five years later, her daughter, Daria, who, in turn, produces a daughter named Varia. Upon his release from enforced seclusion in a monastery, Ivan, age 75, makes an honest woman of Daria. In consequence of this scandal, "not only first cousins but uncles and grandnieces were forbidden to intermarry" (p. 135). The Ivanovs are presumably a satirically vulgarized version of the Zemski-Veens, although the detailed similarities seem to be limited to the coincidence of the names: Maria = Mary O'Reilly Zemski, while Maria's daughter Daria = Daria (Dolly) Zemski. That the children's lewd library lore is put to good use is suggested by the fact that purloined library volumes accompany them into Ardis park "whenever she and Van had their trysts" (p. 133), and also by the couple's lifelong preference for "positio torovago" which is first described in one of their library treasures (p. 136). The ultimate function of the family library is not merely that of a voluminous sex manual, however. The library es-

78 The "library" chapter is xxi of Part I, pp. 130-37.
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tablishes the proper context for Nabokov’s theme of sibling incest—a context that is literary rather than social, psychological, or philosophical.

The link between incest and art is first formulated by Ada, seemingly quite *en passant*. To a description of the ever fertile and ever incestuous Ivan Ivanov as an “habitually intoxicated laborer,” Ada casually responds: “a good definition . . . of the true artist” (p. 134). Any literary work is the outgrowth of a complex interaction with other literary works—particularly those that are closely related in setting and theme. Given *Ada*’s myriad of literary allusions and its references to stages (generations) in the Evolution of the Novel (p. 96), it does not seem untoward to see its theme of incest as a metaphor for intercourse among kindred works of art. *Ada* is the consequence of a complex act of procreation.

Nabokov’s subtexts and allusions to the literary forebears of his novel are often parodic—a literary device with evident ties to the idea of incest. The parallels between intergenerational incest and parody are more basic than one might assume. Most obvious is that the relationship between the original text and its parody is genetic; the latter derives from the former. Almost equally apparent is that the relationship is in some sense illicit. Another parallel is that while an “original” work of art often represents some aspect of reality, a parody represents an earlier work of art. Parody is a representation of a representation, a (distorted) likeness of a likeness. Like incest it involves a turning inward rather than outward. Both are self-reflexive. Parody has always played an important part in Nabokov’s writing, and in part *Ada* can be seen as Nabokov’s parodistic reworking of the great romantic theme of sibling incest. It is to this parodic aspect of *Ada* that Nabokov alludes in the final passage of his “library” chapter on literature and

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75 See, for example, Professor Gleb Struve’s remark that it is precisely in parody that the key to much of Nabokov’s work is to be found. Gleb Struve, *Russkaya literatura v izgnyanii* (New York, 1956), p. 284.
76 In spite of its plethora of allusions to Romantic treatments of the sibling incest theme, *Ada* cannot be accurately classified as a reincarnation of its prototypes. Neither Van nor Ada can be seen as demonic heroes in rebellion against an oppressive society. While they conform to the Romantic model in being superior creatures set apart from the mass, there is no real conflict. They are so rich, so powerful, there is no contest. If nothing else, the book’s happy ending for the lovers sets Nabokov’s novel outside the conventions governing the traditional Romantic theme of incest as Nabokov’s early novel, *Despair*, does to the trite Romantic theme of the Doppelgänger—a theme which is, incidentally, not without affinity to that of sibling incest. An excellent survey of Nabokov’s use of Doppelgänger subtexts in *Despair* may be found in Julian Connolly, “The Function of Literary Allusions in Nabokov’s Despair,” *Slavic and East European Journal* (1982). *Despair*, however, is restricted to Russian subtexts while the later, much more complex *Ada* takes all of European literature as its field of allusion.
incest: "That library had provided a raised stage for the unforgettable scene of the Burning Barn [viz., the night of the siblings' first intercourse]; it had thrown open its glazed doors; it had promised a long idyll of bibliolatry; it might have become a chapter in one of the old novels on its own shelves; a touch of parody gave its theme the comic relief of life" (p. 137).

Ada is the end product of many generations of bibliolatry—taken in a specifically sexual sense. It has its thematic founding fathers (Chateaubriand, Byron, Pushkin) whose offspring are intimately and obscurely related. Its more recent, and perhaps less illustrious, forebears (Frank, et al.) are even more dubiously intertwined. The parallel to the Zemski-Veen family is evident. It is in this connection that the incest of the preceding generations is thematically important. If the novel's incest theme were restricted to the generation of Van and Ada, the genetic parallel to the literary history of the theme would be less impressive. The elucidation of the literary genealogy of the sibling incest theme is not unlike the detection of the carefully concealed incestuous relations in successive generations of the Zemski-Veens. It is the historical depth of the Zemski-Veen family incest that establishes the parallel to the evolution of that theme in European literature. It is important to note that Nabokov's parodic use of the sibling incest theme does not derive from particular progenitors. Although there are many casual allusions to incestuous "classics," Ada's kinship to its predecessors is systemic, not individual. Intergenerational incest is a metaphor describing the transformation of a textual system or what Julia Kristeva has termed "intertextuality." Ada is a reworking of a tradition, a codified set of expectations about the literary theme of sibling incest, just as Lolita is a reworking of other romantic traditions. Ada's theme of sibling incest can plausibly be read as a master metaphor for the creative intercourse of several generations of sibling incest novels in the three great literatures to which Nabokov's novel is heir.

George Steiner has advanced the idea of "extraterritoriality" as one of the hallmarks of twentieth-century literature. Noting the multilingual background of such writers as Samuel Beckett, Jorge Borges, and Nabokov, Steiner has suggested that much of the singularity of

77 For a clear definition of this much misused term, see Leon S. Roudiez's "Introduction" to Julia Kristeva, Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art (New York, 1980), p. 15.


their literary styles may derive from the filtration of one language through the grammatical and cultural world view inherent in a second language. It is conjectured that their writings in each of two languages may somehow be “meta-translations” of the other—a phenomenon that presumably underlies their dazzling virtuosity. Much of Nabokov’s work, Steiner asserts, may be read “as a meditation—lyric, ironic, technical, parodistic—on the nature of human language, on the enigmatic co-existence of different, linguistically generated world visions and of a deep current underlying, and at moments obscurely conjoining, the multitude of diverse tongues” (p. 8). Underlying Steiner’s thesis, although not explicitly stated, is that, genetically, Russian, English, and French are sibling tongues all taking their origin from a remote common parent known as Proto-Indo-European. The interaction of the distinctive world visions (cultures) imposed by the grammatical and lexical systems of these three sibling tongues—all inhering in Nabokov’s mind from early childhood—is surely not without parallel to the phenomenon of incest. Steiner speculates that this linguistic interaction is “the source of the motif of incest, so prevalent throughout Nabokov’s fiction and central to Ada.”

Nabokov’s unique literary career displays a curious interaction among its own parts. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the self-reflexiveness of Nabokov’s career is his singular role as the translator of his own work from Russian into English and English into Russian. Beyond this there is the even more intricate act of drawing upon his own versions of Pushkin and other writers as a basis for original creations. Pale Fire obviously draws its formal structure from Nabokov’s massive Onegin translation cum commentaries. Far more subtle is Nabokov’s practice of making allusion not so much to a “classic” source but to his own highly idiosyncratic interpretation of that source; for example, his “incestuous” reading of (and borrowing from) the Onegin stanza discussed above. Nabokov interacts with Nabokov.

Nabokov’s English career has in some ways paralleled and replicated 80 Steiner’s fascinating thesis remains to be proved or disproved. A preliminary examination of the possible influence of Nabokov’s native Russian on his English prose may be found in Ch. ii, “Wordings and Meanings,” of W. W. Rowe’s Nabokov’s Deceptive World (New York; 1971).

81 Steiner’s characterization of incest as being “prevalent throughout Nabokov’s fiction” (p. 8) is exaggerated. The incest theme, as we have noted, is restricted to Nabokov’s late English work. Perhaps what impels Professor Steiner to his statement is the feeling that incest “works” so well as an interpretative metaphor for much of Nabokov’s writing.

82 It is curious that Lolita, the only English novel that Nabokov saw fit to render into his native Russian (for an audience not permitted to read it), deals with the theme of pseudo-incest. As Humbert Humbert says, his relationship with Lolita is “a parody of incest.” In this sense Lolita is a transitional work leading to Ada and Look at the Harlequins! wherein the theme of incest springs full-blown.
the earlier Russian one in that certain of the English novels re-ekvoke themes first enunciated in their Russian predecessors. This partial mirror imaging of the English and Russian works has been accompanied by the increasingly self-referential quality of the late English novels. This phenomenon, with its modest beginnings in the Hitchcock-like cameo appearances of the author inset in the early works, ends in the incest-suffused Look at the Harlequins!, which is a reprise of Nabokov's own writings and a meditation on the identity of its own narrator.

The theme of sibling incest pervades not only Nabokov's late English work but casts its bright shadow back over his entire oeuvre. Incest becomes Nabokov's master metaphor, embracing literature as a whole as well as his own career. The point has been made by a pen far more eloquent than mine in David Levine's classic caricature that appeared soon after the publication of Nabokov's Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle.

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83 For a detailed exposition, see the Clarence Brown essay cited in note 19. Nabokov responded to Brown's assertion of "repetitiousness" by remarking "he may have something there." He then said, "Artistic originality has only its own self to copy" (Strong Opinions, p. 95).

84 Vadim Vadimovich, the novelist who narrates the story of his life in Look at the Harlequins!, first marries his sister, then his half sister. As in Ada, the incestuous nature of the relationships is cunningly concealed. For a close analysis, see my above-cited "Inverted Reality" and also my "The Ambidextrous Universe of Nabokov's Look at the Harlequins!" in Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov, ed. Phyllis Roth (Boston, 1984), pp. 102-215.

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