

VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S *ADA*, OR THE TEXTURE OF REFERENTIALITY

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1. With his magisterial *Ada, or Ardor, A Family Chronicle*, the 1969 novel that most critics consider his *summa*, Nabokov playfully undermines the mimetic specularity between world and words inherited from the realist novels of the 19th century, and fully questions referentiality, as a typical post-modernist novel would. But in *Ada*, Nabokov does not limit himself to the typical metafictional or metatextual hints of his previous works, nor to his extraordinary handling of English prose, with its conspicuous alliterative lilt, neologisms, multilingual puns, and dazzling metaphors. In this story of a happily-ever-after incest, the image of Ada and Van—two siblings—having their first sexual intercourse in the library of Ardis manor is one of the keys to understanding the peculiar specular relation that the novel has to both literature and the world.
2. In a novel that parodies literature on many levels (structure, characterization, style), Nabokov takes the meaning of parody on a literal level etymologically speaking, and offers a “parallel road”,¹ or rather a parallel world, called Antiterra, that foregrounds its own specular relationship to the reader’s terrestrial “reality” (a word that Nabokov could not bear to see without quote marks).² *Ada*’s Antiterra is indeed a world that resembles our own from many aspects, but with significant differences—electricity was banned after a mysterious disaster, Russia and America are one and the same continent (therefore cancelling any possibility of a Cold War, and reuniting Nabokov’s two homelands and two creative languages), people use a hydrophonic system to communicate.
3. Throughout his career as both a writer and a literature professor, Nabokov warned against “blind” referentiality, and repeatedly mocked the widespread reading of literary texts as documents used for cultural, historical, geographical or sociological studies. He vehemently criticized this type of reading when he taught literature at Cornell, as shown in his *Lectures on Literature*:

Nothing is more boring or more unfair to the author than starting to read, say, *Madame Bovary*, with the preconceived notion that it is a denunciation of the bourgeoisie. We should always remember that the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is to study

1 *odos* means ‘road’ in Ancient Greek.

2 Nabokov’s ‘reality’ has been lengthily analyzed by Leland de la Durantaye in his *Style is Matter, The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, part 1, chapter 2.

that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know. When this new world has been closely studied, then and only then let us examine its links with other worlds, other branches of knowledge.³

4. As hinted at in the above quote, Nabokov repeatedly emphasized the utter fictionality of all literature, its essential severance from ‘reality’;⁴ however, most of his novels are not set in unrealistic diegetic worlds, and despite his claims of sheer indifference to any social or political questions, his works are deeply steeped in the real history and geography of his time.⁵ Keeping this tension in mind, the present study will delve into the very specific way in which Nabokov not only plays with referentiality in *Ada* (a novel that spans the 19th and 20th centuries, from Europe to America via Russia), but also offers a profound reflection on what the referential relation means in terms of the function of literature, and the reader’s relation to the world. I will thus study the various strategies Nabokov develops to displace what French philosopher Jean-Christophe Bailly terms “the mimetic field”⁶ onto the world of Antiterra, and their significance in terms of a Nabokovian “philosophy of referentiality”. The analysis will be threefold: it will first focus upon the geography of the alternate world of Antiterra and its relation to Earth (Terra in the novel), and its specific ramifications into the potentialities of language; then the playful dimension of referentiality in its historical aspects will be studied; finally the structure of the novel, with its closing on the fusion of Antiterra with Terra, as when two parallel paths converge into one road, and its effects on the referential relation will be examined.

Playing on Referentiality in Space

- 3 Vladimir Nabokov, “On Good Readers and Good Writers” in *Lectures on Literature*, 8.
- 4 “Literature is invention. Fiction is fiction. To call a story a true story is an insult to both truth and art” (*Lectures on Literature*, 9).
- 5 This is hardly surprising, with a life tossed in the torments of the 20th-century: born in a wealthy, aristocratic but progressive family of Saint-Petersburg in 1899, he initially lived a privileged life in a cultured, trilingual background. After losing Russia and his family home in the wake of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, Nabokov studied in Cambridge for four years and then began his career as a Russian poet in exile in the *émigré* community of Berlin, where his father, a major political figure, was assassinated by a Russian monarchist extremist in 1923. He then had to leave the Nazi capital in 1938 (his wife was Jewish), and after some time in France, he left Paris for the United States in May 1940, two weeks before Hitler’s troops marched on the French capital. The ship taking him and his family to America never made the trip back and was sunk by a German submarine. His gay brother Sergey died in a German concentration camp. After 18 years in the US during which he achieved his metamorphosis into an American novelist, and after the international success of *Lolita*, he came back to Europe and settled in Switzerland, where he lived in the Montreux Palace Hotel until his death in 1977. A recent trend in Nabokov studies explores the ways in which his claims of total indifference for the world he lived in are false, see especially Agnès Edel-Roy’s 2018 PhD Dissertation *Une démocratie magique: politique et littérature dans les romans de Vladimir Nabokov*. For a full account of Nabokov’s life, see Brian Boyd’s two-volume biography: *The Russian Years* and *The American Years*.
- 6 See Jean-Christophe Bailly, *Le Champ mimétique*.

5. *Ada's* Antiterra is cast according to the 'repetition with variation' principle. In its distorted reflection of our world, the reader navigates between obvious geographical referents that anchor the diegetic world within a known system (e.g. Manhattan, which designates New York City as a whole via a metonymic device), and other referents that destabilize this known system. Some referents are partly veiled (e.g. Canady), and others are very obscure, requiring either encyclopedic knowledge, or an encyclopedia (e.g. Estoty). As the first part of the novel unfolds, the reader is invited to play the referential game to piece together the geographical puzzle of the Antiterranean reshuffling of the map of our world. For example, one gradually grasps that on Antiterra Russia and America are the same entity. In that Amerussia, which correspond to Earth's North America (including Mexico), two currencies are used, the dollar and the ruble. As Brian McHale sums up:

The alternate world, or Antiterra, of *Ada* has been constructed by superimposing Russia on the space occupied in our world by Canada and the United States, Britain on our France, Central Asia on European Russia, and so on.⁷

6. In that world, a typical postmodernist "zone" according to McHale, Nabokov's two homelands are reunited, both in space and time, for the Russia described in the Estoty province of Amerussia clearly reflects pre-Bolshevik Russia, with its wealthy noble families ruling over large estates and their villages. The paradisiacal domain of Ardis where the events of the first part of the novel take place—Van and Ada's initial romance—is located in Eastern Estoty. This region is the equivalent of Eastern Canada (Quebec, Newfoundland, Labrador, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, but without the break of the Saint Lawrence River Gulf, and a part of US Maine),⁸ a territory roughly corresponding to the historical Acadia—the proximity of this name with Arcadia echoing the paradise-theme that infuses the Ardis episodes. Fittingly, people speak a mix of French, Russian and English (much like what was spoken in Nabokov's family)⁹ in the Estoty region where Ardis is situated. On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, what the USSR was in the 1960s (when *Ada* was composed) is called Tartary,¹⁰ and corresponds to "the Russia of both postrevolutionary communism and the

7 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 47.

8 For a map of Northern America on Antiterra, consult Dieter Zimmer's webpage called *The Geography of Antiterra*: <http://www.dezimmer.net/ReAda/AntiterraGeography.htm>

9 Nabokov describes his trilingual daily life in *Speak, Memory*.

10 Tartary is the ancient name (now fallen out of use) for the region in northern and central Asia that stretches eastwards from the Caspian Sea and from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. For any additional information on the layers of references buried in each toponym, the reader can consult the website *Ada online*, by Brian Boyd, which presents annotations to the novel from chapter 1 to chapter 41 of part I: <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/>. For annotations to the rest of the novel, consult the French annotations to *Ada* in the Pléiade collection (Paris: Gallimard, 2020).

Golden Horde”.¹¹ It is described as “an independent inferno”,¹² entrenched behind its “Golden Veil” (*Ada*, 461), the Antiterranean equivalent of the Iron Curtain. Little of what happens beyond that veil is known. Toponyms reflect the geographical mix of earthly referents, as we find cities such as Sebastopol, Id, or Laduga, Me, while on Earth there are no such cities in Idaho nor Maine, and Sebastopol is located in the Crimean Peninsula and Laduga is some 140 km from Saint-Petersburg. One notes however that the gap between world and words is more frequently established through *language*, via various playful strategies. Linguistic transfers and mixings establish the Russianness of Amerussia, in toponyms like “Akapulkovo” (*Ada*, 190), a mix of Acapulco and Pulkovo, a village south of Saint-Petersburg, or “Belokonsk”, literally meaning “white horse”, which is, according to the notes by Vivian Darkbloom¹³ that come with the novel, “the Russian twin of Whitehorse (a city in N.W. Canada)” (*Ada*, 470). These examples correspond to places of secondary to no importance in the novel, but some key toponyms mix real places with legendary ones, therefore stretching the referential gap towards fiction. Such is the case of Ardis, which, according to Brian Boyd, was not chosen uniquely for its paronomastic echo with ‘ardor’:

Nabokov seems to have chosen the name primarily to evoke intimations of “paradise” (from the Greek *paradeisos*, park, paradise (of Persian origin) and “artist” and the Greek *ardis*, “point of an arrow” (225); important in connection with the theme of “the ardis of time”. There may also be an echo of Sardis, the former capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia in Asia Minor, which was notorious to early Greek historians for its luxury and immorality.¹⁴

7. More complex still, Estoty or Estotiland is a toponym that first appeared on a Venetian map, the Zeno map,¹⁵ published by Nicolo Zeno in 1558, claiming that he found it in his attic, along with letters, all coming from his ancestors the Zeno Brothers, from a trip they took in the North Atlantic in the 1390s. Most historians regard the map and accompanying narrative as a hoax, perpetrated by the younger Zeno to make a retroactive claim for Venice as having discovered the New World before Christopher Columbus. However, Estotiland, situated on the Zeno map precisely where East Estoty is located on Antiterra (i.e. in today's Labrador and Québec), and the narrative accompanying the publication of the map made its way through the centuries (including Milton's *Paradise Lost*)¹⁶.

11 Rachel Trousdale, *Nabokov, Rushdie and the Transnational Imagination*, 60.

12 Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor, A Family Chronicle*, 20. All subsequent references to the novel will be from this edition.

13 Vivian Darkbloom is the fictional annotator of *Ada*. His name is an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov.

14 Brian Boyd, “Annotations to *Ada*”, *Ada Online*. <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/>

15 The Library of Cornell University (where Nabokov taught from 1948 to 1959) holds a 1561 version of the Zeno map, to be seen at: <https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/ss:19343153>

16 “Cold Estotiland”, in John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book X, l. 686, 378. It is a fitting intertextual reference for a story located in Antiterra, aka Demonia, where the city of Los Angeles lost its angels and is simply called “Los” (*Ada*,

Interestingly, Zeno's narrative includes the unusual mention of “Latin books in the King's library, which they at this present time did not understand”,¹⁷ which echoes the large library in the Ardis mansion. The presence of books, hence of fiction, within the legend which brought Estotiland to the general knowledge made it a fitting choice to locate the heart of the plot of *Ada*.¹⁸

8. Some toponyms include geographical, historical and cultural elements to the mix. Such is the case of the “‘Swedish’ Manitobogan” (*Ada*, 22), which combines the Canadian province of Manitoba (known for having a large Scandinavian community), the state of Michigan in the US, and the toboggan, a very common sleigh in Canada and the northern states of the United States. In this instance, referentiality seems to be pointing not only in different directions from a spatial point of view, but also from the point of view of the *type* of referents called forth in the *portmanteau* name (coming from geography, sociology, ethnography, material culture). Some spatial references require even further decoding: “the Pisang Palace Hotel in Los Angeles” (*Ada*, 255), for example, is the Antiterranean version of the Beverly Hills Hotel in Los Angeles,¹⁹ whose signature wallpaper is composed of very large, dark green banana leaves (*pisang* means ‘banana’ in Malay). The referential game here weaves together translation and knowledge from the material culture of the United States.

9. When one studies the toponymical system at work in *Ada*, one is struck by a salient feature, namely the almost systematic resort to punning in the creation of place names. Punning implies a form of *expansive* referential mode, in that it reaches to the readers not only to make them perform the link between the fictional referent and its real source (like for any referential relation), but also through the recognition of the humorous play on words. Puns act as an inviting hand into the designing of the text's referential system, since they entice the reader to look more closely at the very bricks of the textual structure—the words chosen or crafted by the author. One could quote for instance Libralta (Gibraltar on Terra) whose name puns on ‘liberty’, ‘alta’ and of course ‘library’; similarly, the university of Aardvark (Harvard University on Terra) recalls an old joke on the similarity between the university's name and “hard work” when pronounced with a Bostonian accent. This therefore points out to another theme of *Ada*, that of pronunciation, and the impact of the

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17 Niccolò Zeno, *The voyages of the Venetian brothers, Nicolò & Antonio Zeno*, 20.

18 Moreover, among the many intertextual references to be found in the characterization of the narrator Van Veen, many point to Medieval or Renaissance travelers and explorers, among which Vasco Da Gama. For Rachel Trousdale, these affinities point to the status of the whole narrative being an essential unreliable one, like medieval and Renaissance travel narratives (See Trousdale, 58, 62-68).

19 Nabokov and his wife stayed in that hotel, famous for having hosted all the stars of the Hollywood Golden Age, for a month and a half in 1959, when Nabokov came to Hollywood to sign the contract settling his writing the screenplay for Kubrick's *Lolita*.

speaker's origin and accent on the production of sense. Another interesting example is the systematic renaming of the main avenues of Manhattan, according to a punning system that reveals the potentialities of toponyms in terms of meaning, as if the pun opened up the aura of suggestions pregnant in a name. For example, the location of Park Avenue is mixed with the name of Park Lane in 'Pat Lane' (*Ada*, 204), a name connoting the patrician nature of the area. Madison Avenue is 'Mad Avenue' (*Ada*, 193) on Antiterra, therefore revealing the hidden mental instability behind the veneer of affluent buildings. The most interesting instance of this process is probably 'Alexis Avenue' (*Ada*, 259), the equivalent of Lexington Avenue, because it can be read as 'a lexis', and therefore metatextually points to *lexis* (word in Latin).

10. If punning on toponyms or onomastics is common in literature, Nabokov brings that art to heights of complexity, since the majority of such puns happens to be bilingual, or even multilingual. Doing so, the text aptly reflects the multilingual diegetic world it conjures up, and the referential relation the reader is invited to knot is consequently complicated, for it is necessary to know French, Russian, Latin, Italian, Spanish, German, and Greek (this list is non-exhaustive) to decode all the onomastic puns of *Ada*. One could begin with mentioning the Bras d'Or province in Amerussia, whose name derives from real Canadian Labrador, but discloses, behind the name of João Fernandes Lavrador, the Portuguese explorer who sailed along its coasts in 1498–1499, a poetic image in French—that of “Golden Arms”. In the same vein, one should recall “‘German’ Mark Kennensie” (*Ada*, 461), which, through a multilingual pun, combines the German words meaning ‘border’ (*Mark*) and ‘do you know?’ (*kennen sie?*) with three states from the southern United States, Arkansas, Kentucky and Tennessee, suggesting, in a cryptic way, the border between slave states and free states, since these three states were slave states.²⁰

11. Some bilingual puns used for toponyms more directly rely on translation (another crucial theme in *Ada*, which opens on a faulty translation of the incipit of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenin*). For instance, Hollywood is “Houssaie” (*Ada*, 218, 265, 390) on Antiterra, which is a literal translation of “a wood of holly trees” in French. Here the passage of the toponym through the French translation unearths the actual meaning of the toponym, usually forgotten or ignored, and points to the prickly dangers of the cinema Mecca. The linguistic transmutation therefore operates like a revealer of the

20 That part of Amerussia is mentioned when the narrator explains that the ban on electricity was applied everywhere. Since the interdiction began some time in 1859, it was implemented before the American Civil War on Earth (even though there does not seem to have been any African slaves on Antiterra, nor descendants of slaves). Since these three state names all come from Native American names, the reference to Germany may point to the genocide of the Native peoples (another dark spot in American history that is barely evoked by the narrator of *Ada*).

underside of the name—at least for the reader who knows French, or the reader willing to read Vivian Darkbloom's notes to the text (*Ada*, 478). Another interesting toponymical pun is to be found with Gamlet, a small village (or hamlet), near Ardis. Indeed, the Russian word *gamlet* literally means 'hamlet', and from the conspicuous insertion of this Russian word into the English text, points to the homophony between 'hamlet' and the Shakespearean tragedy.²¹ This paper can only provide but a glimpse into the constant punning process at work within *Ada* to create toponyms, but one should indicate that the text foregrounds this process in a passage dedicated to a description of Terra, as it is reported by the people who know how the sibling planet looks like. The passage therefore relies upon a mirror effect, since the narrator speaks about the readers' world from his Antiteran perspective, thus perfectly mirroring the readers' situation when they envision Antiterra's geography. In that case, Terra's geography is a source of amusement for the narrator:

Ved' ('it is, isn't it') sidesplitting to imagine that 'Russia,' instead of being a quaint synonym of Estoty, the American province extending from the Arctic no longer vicious Circle to the United States proper, was on Terra the name of a country, transferred as if by some sleight of *land* across the ha-ha of a doubled ocean to the opposite hemisphere where it sprawled over all of today's Tartary, from Kurland to the Kuriles! (*Ada*, 19)

12. One can note that this excerpt self-reflexively foregrounds not only the idea of humor, but also produces two remarkable puns: "some sleight of **land**", which evokes a conjurer's trick, and therefore the magical powers of fiction, and "the **ha-ha** of a **doubled** ocean", which transforms the natural separation of Russia and America—the Pacific Ocean—into a hilarious "ha-ha" that cancels the Cold War on Terra. In addition, the lexical field of splitting and separation (with the ha-ha and the *double entendre* on "sidesplitting") is further developed in the sentence that follows, which describes how "in Terrestrial spatial terms, the Amerussia of Abraham Milton was **split** into its components, with tangible water and ice **separating** the political, rather than poetical, notions of 'America' and 'Russia,'" (*Ada*, 19, my emphasis in bold). The referential gap between world and words is therefore highlighted not only through the lexical field chosen, but also through the distinction made between the political and the poetical.

13. Antiterra's geography therefore casts the planet not only as a false double²² of Terra, the "sib-

21 *Hamlet* is one of the key intertexts of *Ada*, and the complex network of references to *Hamlet* have nourished many scholarly articles and discussions on Nabokov-L, the online Nabokov forum. One of the main functions of this Gamlet intertextual reference is that it announces, in the vicinity of Ardis, where the ardent love story of Van and Ada is born, the fate of their half-sister Lucette, "a mad Ophelia", who drowns herself because she is rejected by Van and remains on the periphery of the main couple's story.

22 Nabokov said that the Doppelgänger theme was "a frightful bore" (*Strong Opinions*, 83), but *false* doubles abound in his fiction (especially in *Despair*, *Lolita* or *Look at the Harlequins!*). In *Ada*, the theme of false doubles and re-

ling planet” (just like any sibling is a false double), but this structural device is also a powerful tool to foreground four essential aspects of fiction-writing: 1. the referential relation readers need to knot between words and world as they read; 2. the power of language in the knotting of this relation; 3. the potentialities to be found in words; 4. the power of humor and puns to reach out to the readers.

14. Let us now examine how the parallel world of Antiterra also entails a reflection on the temporal aspects of the creation of literary worlds.

Playing on Referentiality through Time

15. The many parodies of 19th-century novels in *Ada* (especially the historical novels, realist novels and novels of manners) evidence Nabokov's stance regarding the referential relationship, as these literary genres were grounded on a mimetic model that erased the gap between world and words. We find in *Ada* a systematic parodying of these novels from the preceding century—among many examples, Ardis Manor appears in the narrative “on the gentle eminence of old novels”²³ (*Ada*, 32)—but also a philosophical essay entitled *The Texture of Time*, which forms the fourth (and shortest, chapterless) part of the novel. This essay is actually the first bit of *Ada* that Nabokov composed, and it is from that text, therefore, that the rest of the narrative was developed. Yet I would like to argue that the reflection on time that *Ada* contains and displays should not be limited to that particular section of the book (often viewed as lacking originality by philosophers), but should be viewed as an invitation to be aware of the *temporal* gap between world and words. This invitation is made clear thanks to the actual temporal gap between Antiterra and Terra:

But (even more absurdly), if, in Terrestrial spatial terms, the Amerussia of Abraham Milton was split into its components, with tangible water and ice separating the political, rather than poetical, notions of ‘America’ and ‘Russia,’ a more complicated and even more preposterous discrepancy arose in regard to time—not only because the history of each part of the amalgam did not quite match the history of each counterpart in its discrete condition, but because a gap of up to a hundred years one way or another existed between the two earths; a gap marked by a bizarre confusion of directional signs at the crossroads of passing time with not *all* the no-longers of one world corresponding to the not-yets of the other. (*Ada*, 19)

flections is thematized in many elements, the faulty translations, the twin sisters, the cousins with the same name Walter D. Veen, the sibling planet, etc.

- 23 The position of the manor echoes the presentation of such mansions in the novels of George Eliot or Jane Austen, but in fact, as Brian Boyd showed, the “gentle eminence” is a direct quote from *Ulysses* (Brian Boyd, *Ada Online*).

16. The spatial gap between Antiterra and Terra is therefore duplicated in a temporal gap, which itself is instable, since it varies throughout time (“a gap of up to a hundred years”) and is not always placing the same planet ahead of the other (“one way or another”). Indeed, if Antiterra is ahead of Terra as far as technological and scientific progress is concerned (with electric devices used from the beginning of the 19th century, some fifty years earlier than on Terra), the mysterious L disaster stops all progress²⁴ because of the ensuing ban on electricity that is implemented during about a century of reactionary ruling. For a reason left largely unexplained in the novel, the L disaster “had the singular effect of both causing and cursing the notion of ‘Terra’” (*Ada*, 18), therefore entailing a spectacular reversal of the usual hierarchy in referentiality, namely a negation of the world reference (Terra) by the reference in words (Antiterra). Nabokov thus reduplicates the spatial and temporal gap with a radical gap in the belief in the real referent—a gap and not a complete break, because not all of Antiterrans stop believing in Terra. The narrator gives a rather cryptic explanation for the negation of Terra:

It was owing, among other things, to this ‘scientifically ungraspable’ concurrence of divergences that minds *bien rangés* (not apt to unhobble hobgoblins) rejected Terra as a fad or a phantom, and deranged minds (ready to plunge into any abyss) accepted it in support and token of their own irrationality. (*Ada*, 19)

17. One should note the accumulation of elements that render the explanation particularly difficult to understand. First, the quote marks around “scientifically ungraspable”, deprived of the source of the quote, somehow draw suspicion to the scientific quality of the evaluation, all the more so as this adjectival compound is attached to an odd expression—“concours of divergences”. This expression indeed has no equivalent nor other recorded use in English, but to a French speaker,²⁵ it immediately evokes an idiomatic expression, *concours de circonstances*, which is used to refer to the chance coincidence of certain elements that produced an event (usually unfortunate). Except that here this is not a conjunction of elements but of “divergences” that produced the referential rejection. Now, ‘divergence’ is probably a key word in the present reflection on referentiality, as it very aptly describes the relation between Terra and Antiterra, since it means, beyond mere disagreements over Terra’s existence and/or the interpretation of the L-disaster, “the acquisition of *dissimilar char-*

24 Things are never simple in *Ada*, for even if Antiterra lags behind Terra because of its absence of electricity, it can still be ahead in some areas; for instance the first 10-story building on Antiterran Manhattan is built in 1871 (*Ada*, 9), whereas on Terra the Home Insurance Building in Chicago was built in 1885, and the Tower Building at 50 Broadway in New York in 1888.

25 The inclusion of a French expression, “*bien rangés*”, immediately afterwards tends to confirm that the key to understanding this obscure passage is to be found in French.

acters by related organisms in unlike environments” (according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, my emphasis). What Nabokov repeatedly shows in *Ada* is the unsuspected potentialities to be found not only in words as shown in the first part of this paper, but in historical events, that is, how a given situation can fork into radically different directions. For example, to explain why Northern America is peopled with Russians, Antiterranean history has it that the region was colonized in the 14th century AD by Vikings/Varangians who brought there a large Russian population (and some exiled Jews) who exterminated the native populations before a mix of European peoples began to settle in America. We see here how Nabokov develops the potential consequences of given historical facts, since Vikings are known to be the first European populations to have reached the American continent around the year 1000 AD, and to have founded a settlement called Vinland or Vineland²⁶ there (indeed exactly where Antiterranean Estoty is located). The referential gap therefore serves to show the power of fiction and counters the idea of a form of necessity or inevitability in the unfolding of historical events—therefore resisting the premises of Marxism.²⁷

18. The notion of divergence is actually taken up and developed in the paragraph immediately following the explanation about the “concourse of divergences”, via the image of mirror distortions:

As Van Veen himself was to find out, at the time of his passionate research in terrology (then a branch of psychiatry) even the deepest thinkers, the purest philosophers, Paar of Chose and Zapater of Aardvark, were emotionally divided in their attitude toward the possibility that there existed ‘a distortive glass of our distorted glebe’ as a scholar who desires to remain unnamed has put it with such euphonic wit. (*Ada*, 19)

19. The conspicuous (invented) quote by some anonymous scholar is worth our attention, and especially its “euphonic wit”. Indeed, the paranomasiac effect between “distortive glass” and “distorted glebe” is but a digression from the subject of referentiality, via a reference to *Hamlet*. As Brian Boyd has shown, the word “glebe” calls for another move of the distorted mirror, and not only for its rarity. Brian Boyd explains

Glebe means “soil, sod, an earthlike mineral; an earth”, but itself looks like a distorted form of *globe*.

26 *Ada*’s husband Andrey Vinelander is thus cast as a direct descendant from the Varangian founders.

27 As Agnès Edel-Roy and Isabelle Poulin have shown, there is a political dimension to the ban on electricity in *Ada*. At the time when Van writes the story, electricity is no longer forbidden. What this quote and other passages seem to intimate is that it was banned in a sort of premonition of the potential consequences of the “Great Revelation” (*Ada*, 21) and “the eighteen-sixties the New Believers” (*Ada*, 21). Agnès Edel-Roy recalled in her annotations to *Ada* that on November 21, 1920 Lenin famously said: “Communism is Soviet government plus the electrification of the whole country”. On Antiterra, electricity is authorized in 1922 (at the exact time when on Earth Lenin launches his New Economic Policy), and banished again in 1930 (corresponding to the period of forced collectivization under Stalin).

But the phrase also distorts “this distracted globe” in a passage in *Hamlet* 1.5 that Nabokov has drawn on several times. (Boyd, *AdaOnline*)

20. So both as a signified (earth) and a signifier, ‘glebe’ summons forth the world-word ‘globe’. The Shakespearean quote that the text distorts is from Hamlet’s words after his ghost father just left him: “Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat / In this distracted globe” (1.5.96-97). What is interesting is that ‘globe’ here does not refer to the world, but to the head of the protagonist. By leading the reader on Hamlet’s path, Nabokov foregrounds the diverging power of *metaphor* in the referential relation, since metaphors produce a double-bottomed reference, when the reference to a real element (the head) is made via another referent (the globe). The image of Hamlet’s “distracted globe” (and the rumors on his madness) also echoes the fact that the Antiterrans who believe in Terra have “deranged minds (ready to plunge into any abyss)”, opposed to the “minds *bien rangés* (not apt to unhobble hobgoblins) [who] rejected Terra as a fad or a fantom” (*Ada*, 19). Again, the Shakespearean ghost crops up, this time to emphasize the binary opposition carried out by the bilingual polyptoton “deranged” vs “*bien rangés*”, which can be interpreted as yet another Nabokovian strategy to show how the English word 'deranged' stems from the idea of distracted order. For even for the believers in the existence of Terra, the referential relation is somehow negated because of the Great Revelation²⁸ they blindly follow. This is illustrated by the character of Aqua, a firm believer in Terra, who spends most of her life in mental institutions:

Chronologically, the initial stage of her mental illness coincided with the first decade of the Great Revelation, and although she might have found just as easily another theme for her delusion, statistics shows that the Great, and to some Intolerable, Revelation caused more insanity in the world than even an over-preoccupation with religion had in medieval times.

Revelation can be more perilous than Revolution. Sick minds identified the notion of a Terra planet with that of another world and this ‘Other World’ got confused not only with the ‘Next World’ but with the Real World in us and beyond us. (*Ada*, 21)

21. While the “New Believers” transform the world-referent into an Other World beyond the universe shared by the sibling planets, the “minds *bien rangés*”, who simply deny the world-referent, are described as “not apt to unhobble hobgoblins”. In other terms, they are not able to perceive the potentialities of words, as shown in the image of the 'hob' that can be removed from ‘hobgoblin’, as if it were unhobbled from a horse, in order to obtain the word 'goblin'. The period without electricity
- 28 For the political dimension of the reference to “the Great Revelation”, see Isabelle Poulin’s study in the Bibliography.

is therefore presented as literally and metaphorically dark, lacking enlightenment, because it destroys the referential relation, which is the basis for fiction-writing. Logically, during that period, the fifty-year advance that Antiterra had in the early 19th century becomes a fifty-year retreat toward the end of the 1880s,²⁹ which is the exact time when Van Veen writes his “*Letters from Terra*, ‘a philosophical novel’”³⁰ that Van publishes under the pen name of Voltemand, the messenger in *Hamlet*. This text within the text has a very specific, and crucial function. Van conceives it from “his passionate research in terrology” (the study of Terra) which he conducts in various mental institutions, and from which he gathers an impressive array of notes on what Terra is like according to the mental patients who can directly have access to it via mysterious “ondulas” (*Ada*, 146, 273). Admitting that his knowledge of physics is not sufficient to explain this phenomenon, Van chooses to borrow from science-fiction to justify his heroine Theresa’s access to Terra:

Quietly, he borrowed what his greatest forerunners (Counterstone, for example) had imagined in the way of a manned capsule’s propulsion, including the clever idea of an initial speed of a few thousand miles per hour increasing, under the influence of a Counterstonian type of intermediate environment between sibling galaxies, to several trillions of light-years per second, before dwindling harmlessly to a parachute’s indolent descent. (*Ada*, 270)

22. Science-fiction posits a type of referential relation that makes sense in this context, for two reasons: first, it is coherent for Van to pick this genre since he is describing events happening on Terra, whose time line is fifty years ahead of Antiterra; but more profoundly, it is a genre that, on a large scale, extrapolates the potentialities of a given historical, sociological or ecological situation and shows what could lie ahead of the world. Yet science-fiction is not the only referential model that Van uses to write about Terra (at a time when it was a “cursed” notion, let us not forget it):

On Terra, Theresa had been a Roving Reporter for an American magazine, thus giving Van the opportunity to describe the sibling planet’s political aspect. This aspect gave him the least trouble, presenting as it did a mosaic of painstakingly collated notes from his own reports on the ‘transcendental delirium’ of his patients. Its acoustics were poor, proper names often came out garbled, a chaotic calendar messed up the order of events but, on the whole, the colored dots did form a geomantic picture of sorts. (*Ada*, 271)

23. This time the referential model is that of journalism, which aims at a referential relation as

29 “As earlier experimentators had conjectured, our annals lagged by about half a century behind Terra’s along the bridges of time, but overtook some of its underwater currents” (*Ada*, 271-272).

30 The subtitle to *Letters from Terra* recalls the “philosophical tales” by 18th-century Enlightenment Philosophers such as Voltaire, and as such it indicates which form of referential relation one should use in it, namely the allegorical one.

close as possible, even claiming no gap whatsoever between the world and words. Yet, on the contrary, Van's account of his writing process underscores the potential distance between his narrative and the "reality" of Terra, especially in terms of names and the chronology of events:

As earlier experimentators had conjectured, our annals lagged by about half a century behind Terra's along the bridges of time, but overtook some of its underwater currents. At the moment of our sorry story,³¹ the king of Terra's England, yet another George (there had been, apparently, at least half-a-dozen bearing that name before him) ruled, or had just ceased to rule, over an empire that was somewhat patchier (with alien blanks and blots between the British Islands and South Africa) than the solidly conglomerated one on our Antiterra. Western Europe presented a particularly glaring gap: ever since the eighteenth century, when a virtually bloodless revolution had dethroned the Capetians and repelled all invaders, Terra's France flourished under a couple of emperors and a series of bourgeois presidents, of whom the present one, Doumercy, seemed considerably more lovable than Milord Goal, Governor of Lute! Eastward, instead of Khan Sosso and his ruthless Sovietnamur Khanate, a super Russia, dominating the Volga region and similar watersheds, was governed by a Sovereign Society of Solicitous Republics (or so it came through) which had superseded the Tsars, conquerors of Tartary and Trst. Last but not least, Athaulf the Future, a fair-haired giant in a natty uniform, the secret flame of many a British nobleman, honorary captain of the French police, and benevolent ally of Rus and Rome, was said to be in the act of transforming a gingerbread Germany into a great country of speedways, immaculate soldiers, brass bands and modernized barracks for misfits and their young. (*Ada*, 271-272)

24. This excerpt from Part II, chapter 2 is a crucial one, because thanks to the text-within-the-text *Letters from Terra* on which the whole chapter is centered, the reader finds gathered all together the geographical, geopolitical and historical bits and pieces about Antiterra that had been scattered over the first part of the novel (which amounts to about half of it). From this excerpt certain Antiterranean facts are confirmed: the size of the British Empire on Antiterra is much larger than on Terra (in fact on Antiterra one can take a train from England to South Africa and remain on British territory throughout the trip),³² and includes France, ruled by an English Governor Lord Goal, stationed in Lute (Paris, under a shortened version of its Roman name Lutetia), while France on Terra is now ruled by a Doumercy. His name recalls both Gaston Doumergue (1863-1937) and Paul Doumer (1857-1932), two successive Presidents of France's Third Republic respectively from 1924 to 1931 and from 1931 to 1932 (hence the confusion in the account from Terra). The name Van notes for this one-president-in-two, Doumercy, reflects the "lovable" quality bestowed upon him ('soft mercy'

31 i.e. 1888-1891 + 50 years = 1938-1941.

32 See "The dark blue African Express began in London and reached the Cape by three different routes, through Nigero, Rodosia or Ephiopia" (*Ada*, 276). To do so it uses a Chunnel, realized in Antiterra in the 1969 novel well before its actual construction which ended in 1994. The first design for such a tunnel dates back to 1805.

in French). The confirmation that Tartary is very much like the USSR is to be found in the mention of its leader's name, Khan Sosso, for "Sosso" was Stalin's nickname. Yet some more crucial discrepancies than name-changes are to be found between our world and the account of it in *Letters from Terra*. From Theresa's account, we obtain a shockingly positive vision of both Stalinist USSR and the Nazi Führer Adolf Hitler, chillingly renamed "Athaulf the Future" after Athaulf (ca 370-415), King of the Wisigoths. This hint at the unreliability of journalistic writings when they deal with dictatorships serves Nabokov to attack the Nazi and Soviet propagandas:

Now the purpose of the novel was to suggest that Terra cheated, that all was not paradise there, that perhaps in some ways human minds and human flesh underwent on that sibling planet worse torments than on our much maligned Demonia. In her first letters, before leaving Terra, Theresa had nothing but praise for its rulers — **especially Russian and German rulers**. In her later messages from space she confessed that she had exaggerated the bliss; had been, in fact, the instrument of 'cosmic propaganda' — a brave thing to admit, as agents on Terra might have yanked her back or destroyed her in flight had they managed to intercept her undissembling ondulas, now mostly going one way, our way, don't ask Van by what method or principle. (*Ada*, 272, my emphasis)

25. This readjustment of the referential relation of the text of *Letters from Terra* to the real Earth it is supposed to describe serves several purposes. It first illustrates the themes of unreliability and propaganda, and it also foregrounds, thanks to the mise-en-abyme effect, the capacity for *Ada*, the encapsulating text, to lapse into unreliability and propaganda—in the case of the Veen narrative, into a form of concealment of the cruel acts Van and Ada are guilty of. *Letters from Terra* is therefore a pivotal element of *Ada*: it provides a second, embedded, referential relation to Terra that resorts to a different referential model than the novel in which it is embedded.

26. Even if *Letters from Terra* is not a text-within-the-text *stricto sensu*, for its actual text is not reproduced within the narrative (contrary to the letters from Aqua, Van, Ada, Lucette etc. that punctuate the narrative), it fully works as a mise-en-abyme of *Ada* as a whole. Its essential role in the complex referential system of *Ada* is confirmed in the last part of the novel, especially in the penultimate chapter of the novel, in which the film adaptation of Van's book is discussed at length, and thus provides another mise-en-abyme of Terra within Antiterra, under the twice-removed frame of reference of the movie adaptation.³³ The ultimate paradox being that it is this twice-removed refer-

33 Movie adaptation, which Nabokov experienced with Kubrick's work on *Lolita*, is also a theme in *Ada*, with two novels adapted for the screen, Melle Larivière's *Les Enfants Maudits*, partly shot in Ardis with Marina in the leading female part, and *Don Juan's Last Fling*, in which Ada plays the part of a young gipsy. If the first adaptation is a mise-en-abyme of the love story of Van and Ada, the second film plays a key role in the plot, for Van sees it as he is about to give in and have sex with Lucette; but the vision of Ada on the screen changes his plan, and he once again refuses Lucette what she had been craving for since her childhood, provoking her suicide.

ential frame that provides the closing of the gap between world and words in *Ada*.

Closing the referential gap

27. What is fascinating with *Ada* is that, after over 450 pages of patient construction of the world of Antiterra as a false double of the Earth, or in a rapport of “broken symmetry”³⁴ to it, as Katherine Hayles put it, the penultimate chapter whirlpools down and crushes the distance between fiction and “reality” that the ‘sibling planet’ structure had established. In Part V, chapter 5 it is indeed made clear that Terra and Antiterra are actually one and the same—a radical move that highlights the power of literature to conjure up a plausible world with no Cold War and no electricity. As a directly symmetrical reflection of Borges’s *Garden of Forking Paths*, *Ada*’s referential structure reveals itself to be a convergent model rather than a divergent one.
28. How is the radical move to complete convergence performed? Stylistically speaking, the chapter describing the adaptation of *Letters from Terra* by famous director Victor Vitry³⁵ is similar to the paragraphs of Part II, chapter 2 in which the book *Letters from Terra* was described. One should note the clear structural echo between Part II, chapter 2 and Part V, chapter 5, which frames the second half of the novel (since Part I occupies half of it). Just like in Part II, chapter 2, the referential game is played at the onomastic level:

In 1905, Norway with a mighty heave and a long dorsal ripple unfastened herself from Sweden, her unwieldy co-giantess, while in a similar act of separation the French parliament, with parenthetical outbursts of *vive émotion*, voted a divorce between State and Church. Then, in 1911, Norwegian troops led by Amundsen reached the South Pole and simultaneously the Italians stormed into Turkey. In 1914 Germany invaded Belgium and the Americans tore up Panama. In 1918 they and the French defeated Germany while she was busily defeating Russia (who had defeated her own Tartars some time earlier). In Norway there was Siegrid Mitchel, in America Margaret Undset,³⁶ and in France,

34 N. Katherine Hayles, *The Cosmic Web*, 123.

35 Under his “double cognomen” (to borrow from Humbert Humbert) the director with the notion of *vitre* (glass) in his name actually gathers several famous French directors (see Alfred Appel Jr. “Nabokov’s Dark Cinema: A Diptych”, 269): Sacha Guitry, who was born in Saint-Petersburg in 1885 and died in Paris in 1957, but also Abel Gance, Roger Vadim and Jean-Luc Godard.

36 These figures are an onomastic mix of Sigrid Undset (1882-1949), Norwegian writer (Nobel Prize for Literature in 1928, after the publication of her historical saga *Olav Audunsson*), with Margaret Mitchell (1900-1949), author of the famous *Gone with the Wind* (1936, Pulitzer Prize). One should note that it is two *historical* novels and best-sellers that are emphasized here, as if to insist upon the difference between *Ada* and that genre, and on the similarity between them and the film, which aims at perfect historical verisimilitude (hence the use of documentary footage within the movie: Nabokov probably has in mind the notorious *Battle of the Somme* (1916) directed by Geoffrey H. Malins and John B. McDowell).

Sidonie Colette. In 1926 Abdel-Krim surrendered, after yet another photogenic war, and the Golden Horde again subjugated Rus. In 1933, Athaulf Hindler (also known as Mittler — from ‘to mittle,’ mutilate) came to power in Germany, and a conflict on an even more spectacular scale than the 1914-1918 war was under way, when Vitry ran out of old documentaries and Theresa, played by his wife, left Terra in a cosmic capsule after having covered the Olympic Games held in Berlin (the Norwegians took most of the prizes, but the Americans won the fencing event, an outstanding achievement, and beat the Germans in the final football match by three goals to one). (*Ada*, 461-462)

29. However this time one can note that it is only the names of female *writers* that are the object of the referential game. Besides Athaulf Hindler/Mittler (already identified in the presentation of the book in II,2), all the other names and toponyms (relating to historical episodes) are the exact terrestrial ones. The gradual closing of the distance between world and words is also reflected in the temporal dimension:

Vitry dated Theresa’s visit to Antiterra as taking place in 1940, but 1940 by the Terranean calendar, and about 1890 by ours. The conceit allowed certain pleasing dips into the modes and manners of our past (did you remember that horses wore hats—yes, *hats*—when heat waves swept Manhattan?) and gave the impression—which physics-fiction literature had much exploited—of the capsulist traveling backward in terms of time. Philosophers asked nasty questions, but were ignored by the wishing-to-be-gulled moviegoers. (*Ada*, 460)

30. While referring to an actual fact (hats were placed on horses' heads in New York, Paris and Berlin to prevent them from dying as they worked during heat waves that plagued cities by the turn of the 20th century), the episode foregrounds a form of temporal inconsistency (a “conceit”, noticed by philosophers). And indeed, when one reads in the preceding paragraph that “seventy-year-old Van regretted his disdain when Victor Vitry, a brilliant French director, based a completely unauthorized picture on *Letters from Terra* written by ‘Voltemand’ half a century before” (*Ada*, 460), one understands that the adaptation is in fact being made in 1940 on Antiterra, while on Terra, the timeline is also situated in 1940, since there are no more documentaries to use for Vitry after the 1936 Olympic Games, as the later events have not happened yet. We thus come to the realization that the two parallel time lines have converged, and in fact fused, as evidenced in the last paragraph of Part V, chapter 5:

From the tremendous correspondence that piled up on Van’s desk during a few years of world fame, one gathered that thousands of more or less unbalanced people believed (so striking was the visual impact of the Vitry-Veen film) in the secret Government-concealed identity of Terra and Antiterra. Demonian reality dwindled to a casual illusion. Actually, we had passed through all that. Politicians,

dubbed Old Felt and Uncle Joe in forgotten comics, had really existed. Tropical countries meant, not only Wild Nature Reserves but famine, and death, and ignorance, and shamans, and agents from distant Atomsk. Our world *was*, in fact, mid-twentieth-century. Terra convalesced after enduring the rack and the stake, the bullies and beasts that Germany inevitably generates when fulfilling her dreams of glory. Russian peasants and poets had not been transported to Estotiland, and the Barren Grounds, ages ago — they were dying, at this very moment, in the slave camps of Tartary. Even the governor of France was not Charlie Chose, the suave nephew of Lord Goal, but a bad-tempered French general. (*Ada*, 462-463)

31. Once again onomastic games are played, but this time to cancel Antiterranean doubles instead of creating a distance between the Earth and its rendering in *Letters from Terra*: Uncle Joe was the nickname given to Stalin in the US, and Roosevelt was invariably drawn with his old felt hat on in comics. As for the idea that France was governed by a good-tempered English lord whose name echoes that of De Gaulle, it is also crushed in the last sentence of the chapter. The final phase of the convergence is operated in the short last chapter, which seamlessly fuses into the backcover blurb of the novel, therefore adjoining the external edge of the book, in contact with the real world, to the words of the story between the book covers.
32. By offering the reader the world of Antiterra, which is based on the ‘repetition with variation’ principle,³⁷ Nabokov duplicates “the mimetic field”, and uses referentiality not as a set of landmarks meant to guide the reader’s imagining the diegetic world, but as a playful tool to upset the readers’ usual bearings and invite them to play the wondrous game of fiction.

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³⁷ In *Ada*, Nabokov went as far as inventing butterflies whose species was fictional, but whose genus was real, therefore placing in his text *plausible* butterflies.

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