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'The mental rimmed the sensuous': Nabokov and the singularity of literary experience

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ABSTRACT

Vladimir Nabokov's writing is widely recognised for its intensely philosophical and poetical character, yet how these two qualities relate to one another remains a vexed question. The most compelling critical responses to this issue are those of Brian Boyd and Martin Hägglund, who have offered conflicting interpretations of *Ada or Ardor*, arguably Nabokov's most challenging and moving work of fiction. This essay begins by examining a recent published debate between Boyd and Hägglund – paying particular attention to their differing methods of close reading – to develop a more nuanced account of how literary fictions engage with human experience, and of how we as literary critics can most adequately respond to them. I argue for the need to capture the specifically literary qualities of a novel, and particularly the vital interconnections between textual descriptions of characters' experiences and the experiences – both cognitive and affective – those descriptions solicit from readers. The reading of *Ada or Ardor* illustrates how this approach makes possible a richer and more accurate response to the singular qualities of Nabokov's fiction.

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Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969) was recently the subject of a fierce disagreement between Brian Boyd, inarguably the foremost Nabokov scholar, and Martin Hägglund, now widely recognised as a major philosopher and literary theorist. Their frank exchange in the pages of *New Literary History* was prompted by Hägglund's account of the novel's engagement with temporal finitude, in an article later published without significant revision in his celebrated *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*. Hägglund provocatively contradicts Boyd's well-established thesis that Nabokov and his protagonists aspire towards a timeless consciousness invulnerable to loss, arguing that such a position is logically incoherent, and that *Ada* in fact stages a desire for survival, to go on living mortally in time. I want to begin this article by evaluating the ensuing debate, which

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represents two of the most powerful responses to Nabokov's writing. The principal interest of Boyd and Hägglund's dispute is not, however, the issue of temporal finitude, or even their readings of the novel, but rather the meeting of conflicting approaches to the text behind which lie two fundamentally disparate philosophies of literary fiction. Following this debate can guide us towards a new understanding of a major literary theoretical concern: how do fictions engage with human experience, and how can we, as critics, adequately respond to them? My own reading of *Ada* in the latter part of this article seeks to advance a more accurate and persuasive account of the novel, but also to illustrate the value of a particular mode of close reading, which draws on the most fruitful aspect of each critic's approach.

Hägglund's essay begins with a summary of his increasingly well-known theory of 'chronolibido', later articulated more fully in the introduction to *Dying for Time*:

> What I want to emphasize […] is not only that the temporal finitude of survival is an inescapable condition but also that the investment in survival animates and inspires all the forms of care […]. It is because one is attached to a temporal being (chronophilia) that one fears losing it (chronophobia). Care in general, I argue, depends on such a double bind. On the one hand, care is necessarily chronophilic, since only something that is subject to the possibility of loss – and hence temporal – can give one a reason to care. On the other hand, care is necessarily chronophobic, since one cannot care about something without fearing what may happen to it. […]
>
> The chronolibidinal logic at work here does not deny that we dream of paradises and afterlives. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate that these dreams themselves are inhabited and sustained by temporal finitude.[1]

It on these grounds that Hägglund challenges Boyd as 'the most influential proponent' of the view that Nabokov's 'writing is driven by a desire to transcend the condition of time' (*DFT*, p. 84), arguing that such transcendence would entail the negation of chronophobia *and* chronophilia. In response, Boyd agrees that the text manifests the chronolibidinal double bind Hägglund describes, but contends that Nabokov also strives to imagine non – or extra-human modes of consciousness which escape this limit. To support his position, Boyd cites his widely known argument that *Ada*'s 'internal allusions combine to suggest […] a behind-the-scenes timelessness', a claim we will return to shortly.[2] With Hägglund's counter-response, the discussion reaches an unprofitable impasse, with each critic restating his original thesis without apprehending the challenge posed by the other.

There are two interrelated reasons for this impasse: Hägglund's lack of clarity about what he means by the 'logic' of chronolibido, and Boyd's assumption that Nabokov's own beliefs are relevant to his interlocutor's position. 'Logic' unhelpfully implies that chronolibido is concerned with human conceptions of temporal desire (and Boyd reasonably interprets it as such),

whereas Hägglund's argument is actually that *all* manifestations of desire, experienced by any kind of consciousness, would be subject to its strictures. To the extent that Boyd suggests that certain modes of consciousness are *beyond* human conception, Hägglund fails to address the substance of Boyd's rebuttal, and both leave untouched the underlying and potentially fascinating point of contention about the capacity of conceptual thought to contemplate the possible and the impossible. On a related point of methodology, only in his counter-reply and in *Dying for Time* does Hägglund clarify that he is 'not charging Boyd with having misconstrued Nabokov's philosophy',[3] but rather seeking 'to elucidate how the logic of chronolibido is operative in his writing' (*DFT*, p. 85). Compared to Boyd's unapologetic deference towards Nabokov's stated philosophical opinions, Hägglund's apparently more direct engagement with the text looks attractive. Yet Hägglund's approach is more radical than a straightforward emphasis upon text above authorial intention. As Adam Kelly points out, for Hägglund, the logic of chronolibido not only precedes and renders internally incoherent the author's extra-literary statements, but also those synoptic statements articulated by narrators and protagonists *within* the text:

> By 'logic' Hägglund actually means something closer to experiential or phenomenological description, because there is not only one logic at play in either the *Recherche* or *Ada*. There are in fact two: a logic of synthetic statement, and a contradictory logic of description.
>
> What validates the privileging of description over statement? Although it is not fully thematized by the book's author, this question goes to the heart of the methodology of *Dying for Time*. Hägglund's philosophical answer is that the desire for fullness present in synthetic statements is 'a rationalized repression of the double bind' of libidinal being (p. 152), a double bind that is more easily observed in the less conceptual, more affective lens of description. Occluded but identifiable here is something like a revisionary theory of literary realism, where the synthesis offered by the narrator or subject of a text can in fact be viewed as a repression of the true lessons of his story, embodied not in summary but in description. […]
>
> Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov […] emerge not so much as philosophers of time as *writers* of time. Their literary way of describing temporal experience outstrips attempts to conceptualize temporal being in a more traditionally philosophical manner.[4]

This potential 'revisionary theory of literary realism' is as much a product of Kelly's acute reading as of Hägglund's text. The explanatory privilege afforded to experiential description over antithetical statements is not only undertheorised, but also inconsistently practised; Hägglund in fact appeals more frequently to statements than descriptions, and his first example from *Ada* is a straightforward narratorial reflection on temporal finitude. Nevertheless, together Hägglund and Kelly make visible the prospect of a more affective,

and less conceptual, critical approach, attuned to the specifically literary ways novels engage with human experience (including description, but also dialogue, characterisation, and much else).

Hägglund certainly places great emphasis on affect, proclaiming that:

> [it is] the logic of chronolibido that is expressive of what is at stake in these literary works, *even and especially in their moments of greatest significance and affective intensity*. […] Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov […] practice a chronolibidinal aesthetics, which depends on the attachment to mortal life and *engages the pathos of survival in the experience of the reader*. (*DFT*, p. 19, emphasis added)

Hägglund's appealing attentiveness to the affective force of the literary, however, turns out to be more rhetorical than realised in his readings. Consider Hägglund's first textual analysis (rather than citation of narratorial statement) and the sentence he quotes from *Ada*:

> The logic of chronolibido thus emerges in beautiful, entangled phrases – as when Van describes how the sight of Ada's twelve-year-old hands gave rise to 'agonies of unresolvable adoration.' Van's adoration here signifies an irrevocable emotion; it is 'unresolvable' in the sense that it cannot be dissolved. At the same time, even the seemingly perpetual bond of love can always be broken and is thus characterized by an 'unresolvable' contradiction that permeates Van's adoration with symptomatic agonies. (*DFT*, pp. 89–90)

> The pathos of the carpus, the grace of the phalanges demanding helpless genuflections, a mist of brimming tears, agonies of unresolvable adoration.[5]

Hägglund's point seems to be that, because of the chronolibidinal nature of temporal life, Van's adoration is necessarily permeated by agony. But the adjective 'unresolvable' in fact qualifies 'adoration', not the relationship between the two emotions as Hägglund implies. His reading effectively dislocates the syntax of the sentence to form a (new) logical proposition, rather than registering its own implications and affects.[6] Describing adoration as 'unresolvable' invokes several meanings for 'resolve' listed in the *OED*, including to relieve, dissolve, soften, reduce, slacken, or cause to cease, which each seem to be in play here (and in an irresolvable way). The common implication is that Van's adoration cannot be consummated or alleviated, whilst the rationalistic connotation of the word suggests that this feeling in some sense resists being explicated or accounted for. Such a resistance is vividly evoked by the sentence as a whole through the humorous dissonance between the rhetorically excessive figures of intense emotion and the technical anatomical vocabulary used to describe their cause. This effect is heightened by the use of the definite article, and the absence both of verbs and of an experiencing subject, as though ludicrously suggesting that the sight of Ada's carpus and phalanges might move anyone to tears. Rather than engaging our empathetic pathos, part of the strangeness and playfulness of the passage is precisely that it stages a *disparity* between its evocation of a

character's feelings and the affects the language of the description engenders for readers.

Though Hägglund professes to be examining 'the link between the affective power of aesthetic representation and the investment in mortal life' (*DFT*, p. 2), the relationship between his chronolibidinal explication and the feelings the quotation evokes remains tenuous. To be clear, my claim is not that Hägglund's argument about chronolibido is logically flawed or even untrue, but that, as a method of close reading, it does not tell us much about the aesthetic singularity of the literary work. As Marc Farrant points out, Hägglund's 'all-pervasive logical account of temporality is so powerfully inoculating [that] it certainly does not require any form of literary support. […] [H]is readings […] could have been, reasonably speaking, derived from any source'.[7] By persistently resolving the specificity of the literary into a general philosophical concept, Hägglund's insistence that 'chronolibido is not an extrinsic theory applied to the novels, but something intrinsic to the fictional works' (*DFT*, pp. 18–19) appears doubtful. Shoshana Felman, in her critique of applied criticism, contends that 'one can use theories […] only as enabling metaphorical devices, not as extrapolated, preconceived items of knowledge'.[8] Chronolibido precisely functions as preconceived knowledge which programmes the textual analysis in a manner that is logically sound but aesthetically and affectively desensitised, leaving us with only a minimal sense of what it is like to read the remarkable literary fictions being discussed.

By contrast, Boyd claims to be aiding our appreciation of the uniqueness of 'Nabokov's style' at the 'profound level of the reading experience', opening his canonical study, *Nabokov's* Ada*: The Place of Consciousness*, with the subtitle 'Nabokov and the Reader' (though not, note, '*Ada* and the Reader').[9] Boyd begins by fleshing out Nabokov's own analogy between reading and solving chess problems, suggesting that elements of the novel initially 'resist' disclosing meaning, but by continuing to read, tracing allusions, or making internal connections, we can discover 'solutions' to 'the myriad little problems he sets the reader' (*NA*, p. 21). This process of resistance and solution, for Boyd, expresses 'Nabokov's belief that the world resists the mind so thoroughly because it is so real, because it exists so resolutely outside the mind' (*NA*, p. 19). The text is thus

> apprehended in the same way as the mind apprehends its world. Reading one of Nabokov's works allows us to become aware of the process of gradually distinguishing and relating things in more and more detail: we experience an ever-deepening knowledge of reality […]. Nabokov makes the relationship between reader and text an image and an enactment of the tussle between the individual mind and the world. (*NA*, pp. 41, 60)

What is peculiarly powerful about Boyd's approach is the tenet that literary texts can speak to philosophical concerns through the experiences they

engender for readers. But the potentially far-reaching implications of this critical insight are limited by two interrelated attributes of Boyd's approach. Boyd reconstructs Nabokov's philosophical opinions (as articulated in interviews, private notes, lectures, and his autobiography) with great clarity and detail but, as will be illustrated shortly, his unquestioning adherence to and application of these views results in a profound mischaracterisation of the fictional works. As a result, like Hägglund, Boyd proceeds from preconceived 'knowledge' (gleaned from Nabokov) about the nature of human experience. Though he upbraids Hägglund for conflating Nabokov's philosophy with his own, Boyd shows very little scepticism towards the author's highly egoistic and cerebral representation of reading a novel.[10] Consequently, Boyd pursues the potential correspondences between the reader's experience and Nabokov's declared metaphysics, rather than the most compelling and obvious way that literary fictions engage with phenomenological experience – through the description of characters' thoughts and feelings. Boyd and Hägglund both respond to *Ada*'s manifest concern with the relationships between desire, loss, and time, but their eisegetical readings occlude vital dimensions of the text.

I suggest that we put Hägglund's and Boyd's distinct critical insights into contact, taking seriously the interconnections between textual descriptions of characters' experiences and the experiences those descriptions solicit from readers. Any account which tries to describe the thoughts and feelings produced by a literary work confronts an obvious potential objection – that readers have diverse and often contrary experiences of texts, conditioned by their own subjective dispositions, beliefs, emotions, and desires. To what extent can we definitively attribute experiences to the text itself? This concern is less problematic than it might appear, or rather is a limitation which attends literary criticism generally, rather than just the particular kind of approach I am advocating. Reading any literary language to an adequate degree of textual specificity involves elucidating the effects achieved by its particular language. Accounting for how this language affects readers is simply to recognise the grounds of possibility for any interpretation, and to be more explicit about the compromises critics must always make when sorting wholly subjective experiences from those which they have good reasons to believe originate in inherent properties of the text. Though such distinctions can never be final, we can be more confident, precise, and persuasive by illustrating precisely why the text's specific linguistic qualities, or style, engenders particular thoughts and feelings. As Derek Attridge points out:

> [t]hat we experience literary works less as objects than as events – and events that can be repeated over and over again and yet never seem exactly the same – is something many have acknowledged, but the implications of which few have pursued.[11]

I suggest that one serious implication is that literary fictions engage with human experience by at once representing characters' thoughts and feelings and soliciting particular responses from readers – and that recognising this enables us to produce more accurate and compelling critical descriptions which are more faithful to the literary singularity of the work.

Such an approach raises fundamental doubts about Boyd's dualistic and highly cerebral account of *Ada*. Let us take, as an example, the first passage of the novel in which the word 'reality' occurs. The scene recounts the beginning of the affair between Demon and Marina, who we later discover to be the parents of the main protagonists, Ada and Van. Demon, who is captivated by Marina's performance in a travestied *Eugene Onegin*, visits the actress backstage 'and proceeded to possess her between two scenes', before returning to his seat in the auditorium:

> His heart missed a beat and never regretted the lovely loss, as she ran, flushed and flustered, in a pink dress into the orchard, earning a claque third of the sitting ovation that greeted the instant dispersal of the imbecile but colorful transfigurants from Lyaska – or Iveria. Her meeting with Baron O., who strolled out of a side alley, all spurs and green tails, somehow eluded Demon's consciousness, so struck was he by the wonder of that brief abyss of absolute reality between two bogus fulgurations of fabricated life. (p. 12)

This evocation of Demon's experience is far more strange and complex than can be captured by the picture of a mind gradually discovering more about the world. The polyvalent 'heart', for instance, at once literally describes the organ's action and figuratively describes Demon's sentiment, evoking a feeling in which the mental and physiological are inextricably intertwined, and so unsettling the dualistic conception of a mind discrete from embodiment. The passage, with its invented place names, obscure referents, and profusion of digressive detail, certainly resists being easily parsed. This resistance is accentuated by the fitful movement of the sentences, which lurch between several retarding subordinate clauses, before breaking out into breathlessly long final phrases. The beginning of the passage produces an expectation that it will culminate with an affecting sight which gave rise to an unforgettably profound emotion in Demon, but instead we have the surprising metaphysical tenor of his being struck by 'the wonder of that brief abyss of absolute reality between two bogus fulgurations of fabricated life'. Though this vertiginously figurative description again resists being grasped or unpacked in any straightforward manner, the temporal 'brief' – in concert with the rest of the passage – suggests that 'reality' here is not synonymous with 'the world', or with an acuity of perception, but rather is bound up with intense affective experience.

Such peculiar and challenging uses of 'reality', far from being exceptional, are found throughout *Ada*. Consider Demon's later reflection on his changing sentiment towards Marina since the end of their affair:

> he considered Marina's pretentious *ciel-étoilé* hair-dress and tried to *realize* (in the rare full sense of the word), tried to *possess* the reality of a fact by forcing it into the sensuous center, that here was a woman whom he had intolerably loved […]. (p. 251)

Through its parenthetical elucidations, the passage effects a kind of re-definition or re-description of the word 'realize'. What the 'rare full sense of the word' might be is unclear, though the *OED* offers up 'giving real existence to something' and 'to make real for the mind' (from which the common meaning of 'to become aware of' derives). '[T]o *possess* the reality of a fact' counterintuitively implies that 'realising' something is different from apprehending it as a fact, whilst the polysemous 'sense' and puzzling 'sensuous center' (the centre of what?) intimate that it is a sensory, rather than solely intellective, act. The sexual carriage of 'possess' and 'sensuous' curiously invokes the specific feelings of erotic love that Demon is striving to recapture, as though experiences of realising elude general description isolated from what, particularly, is being realised, and by whom. The passage mobilises an epistemological idiom in concert with an affective one, exemplifying the way in which *Ada* powerfully draws out *the interrelationships between knowing and feeling*. It might be that the novel plays with or unsettles our ordinary descriptions and conceptions of 'reality', or even ruins the very idea by rendering it irreconcilable with any consistent philosophical view, without positing an alternative. Whichever it might be, it is difficult to reconcile *Ada*'s singular experiential evocations with the picture of a mind grasping the world in the manner of a cognitive problem.

The influence of Boyd's highly cerebral reading of Nabokov's fiction can hardly be overstated. Part of the reason for its dominating discussion of *Ada* is the way its central conceptual *and* methodological precepts derive from the author's 'strong opinions'; Michal Oklot observes how the 'implicitly dualist metaphysics on which so much Nabokov scholarship, alas, relies' is one consequence of the critical unwillingness to 'transgress' the author's philosophy.[12] Even those critics advancing readings which dispute Boyd's have tended to proceed from an implicitly intentionalist ground, whether pursuing Nabokov's declared interest in particular philosophers, or else developing a distinct interpretation of his extra-literary statements.[13] Leland de la Durantaye's *Style Is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, for instance, poses the question 'how should we read *Lolita*?', but, as Ellen Pifer points out, despite the book's title and declared focus, there remains an 'emphasis on expository statements'.[14]

It is the propensity to precipitately appeal outside of the text which raises an obvious objection to Boyd's claim that *Ada*'s 'internal allusions combine to suggest […] a behind-the-scenes timelessness', an argument he makes at length in *Nabokov's Ada* and to which Hägglund does not adequately respond.[15] Briefly, Boyd contends that a number of peculiar textual

coincidences demonstrate the posthumous influence of Van's and Ada's sister, Lucette, after her suicide, and thus the existence of consciousness beyond death (within the fiction). The first and most persuasive example Boyd appeals to is a scene in which Van and Ada, who have been incestuously involved since childhood, finally reunite after a long period of separation. A dull evening meal initially leaves both despondent about the apparent demise of their desire, but as Ada journeys towards the nearest airport, she finds her love for Van suddenly rekindled, and instructs her driver to turn back 'somewhere near Morzhey ("morses" or "walruses," a Russian pun on "Morges" – maybe a mermaid's message)' (p. 562). Noting that Lucette is described several times as a mermaid, Boyd concludes that 'Ada's change of mind' is 'inspired somehow by dead Lucette', and cites 'similar transgressions' of 'the ordinary rules of fiction' found in other Nabokov works (*NA*, p. 203). What is problematic about Boyd's theory, however, is that it ultimately rests on these textual coincidences being attributable to Nabokov, rather than Van, the intra-fictive author of the memoir. Given that Lucette's unrequited love for Van provokes her to suicide, it seems far more plausible to suggest that her peculiar presence in the narration emerges, consciously or unconsciously, from his feelings of guilt and remorse.

Boyd's unwillingness to imagine more complex possibilities of subjectivity, authorship, or writing is symptomatic of a more general lack of interest in literary theoretical issues found in Nabokov studies (like most Nabokov critics, Boyd unsurprisingly shares the author's offhand aversion to Freud). Pifer's *Nabokov and the Novel* is perhaps the best example of a study which bucks this trend, yet her description of Nabokov's fiction as an 'epistemological enterprise' concerned with 'grasping the essence of reality' retains Boyd's strongly epistemological emphasis, which has proven remarkably resilient, residing in even those accounts which expressly challenge his own.[16] This resilience is in fact not surprising, for there is a sense in which Boyd's model of problem and solution thematises its own allure, demonstrating at length how a critic who takes up an epistemological lens is rewarded with the reassuring feeling of 'knowing' the text. The challenge is to resist this powerful pressure to resolve the text in cerebral terms, and respond to how readers experience the work of fiction as an event, which has its affective dimension. Indeed, my preliminary discussion of *Ada* has pointed precisely to the ways in which it shows experiences of knowing to be inseparably bound up with feeling. In the following short reading of the novel, I want to develop this claim and unpack some of its implications, both for our understanding of Nabokov's fiction, and for the praxis of philosophically invested literary criticism more generally.

The unusual narration of *Ada* significantly affects how we read its powerfully evocative experiential descriptions. The novel recounts the love affair between Van Veen and Ada Veen from their first meeting in the summer

of 1884, when Van is 14 years old and Ada 12. The two children quickly discover that they are not in fact cousins, as they have been raised to believe, but biological siblings, though this knowledge seems to only heighten the erotic pleasure they find in the illicit nature of their affair. The relationship is broken off and resumed several times over the ensuing decades, before they are finally reunited in 1922. The narrative spans several hundred pages, and is far too rich, expansive, and diverse for a comprehensive account here; my reading will therefore focus on two short chapters from the first part of the book, which describe the first burgeoning of Van's desire for Ada. The novel's narrative form initially appears to be third person, but through notes and editorial commentary incorporated into the text we gradually learn that Van (with occasional interventions from Ada) is the principle author of this memoir, which is begun in 1957 and remains unfinished when the siblings die a decade later. The 'marginalia' predominantly consist of Van and Ada's loving observations, reflections, and dialogues about the draft manuscript of the memoir, intimately addressed to one another in the first person. These shifts between first, second, and third-person pronouns, sometimes in the midst of a sentence, profoundly unsettle the unfolding of the diegesis. Van's narration assumes and exploits the rhetorical resources of authorial fictive discourse, especially the omniscient perception of characters' thoughts and feelings, whereas this is actually an individual's 'factual' account, ostensibly narrated from personal knowledge. The sporadic pronominal slippages are one way in which this disparity is raised for readers; in recognising that this is *Van's* narration, we also recognise that his knowledge is limited, and that his narrative palpably, outrageously exceeds such limits.

We can see how this awareness begins to complicate our reading of *Ada* in the opening clause of the theatre scene quoted earlier: 'His heart missed a beat and never regretted the lovely loss'. The narrative context and representation of Van and Demon's relationship throughout the novel make it extremely improbable that Van would have known about this sexual encounter, let alone his father's momentary bodily and emotional response. As such, the clause is emblematic of the fantastical quality which colours the scene – and indeed *Ada* – as a whole. On the surface, it seems that we can only take this to be Van's fantasy, its 'reality' (in the conventional sense of corresponding to some true state of affairs) rendered highly questionable. Yet the scene is evoked as vividly as any other in the novel, and part of its affect derives from its reading as a kind of origin myth of Van and Ada's procreation which, like all origin myths, incarnates their cardinal shared value – the pursuit of supremely intense sensual feeling. In this sense, it has a kind of affective reality or force which we might not want to too hastily dismiss. Our knowing that Van's narration is epistemologically overreaching does not simply render his story about Demon irrelevant, but rather brings into relief the possibility that the significance of such evocations might eclipse

their 'reality', conventionally conceived. This is a relatively straightforward example of the more general manner in which *Ada* demands that we not only attend to its experiential descriptions, but also attend to how the novel's framing and interpreting those descriptions affects our response to them.

Some of the more troubling implications of the frame narrative begin to take effect in Chapter 9 of *Ada*. The first of the chapter's four paragraphs begins:

> Was she really pretty, at twelve? Did he want – would he ever want to caress her, to really caress her? Her black hair cascaded over one clavicle and the gesture she made of shaking it back and the dimple on her pale cheek were revelations with an element of immediate recognition about them. Her pallor shone, her blackness blazed. The pleated skirts she liked were becomingly short. Even her bare limbs were so free from suntan that one's gaze, stroking her white shins and forearms, could follow upon them the regular slants of fine dark hairs, the silks of her girlhood. (p. 58)

There is a pronounced erotic excitement to the passage, with its reiterations and repetitions ('want' and 'caress'), and the voyeuristic pleasure exhibited in the catalogue of Ada's body and the tactile visuality of 'one's gaze, stroking her white shins and forearms'. In a more straightforward narrative, we might read this eroticism as solely evoking the young Van's thoughts and feelings about Ada through free indirect discourse. Yet the indefinite 'one' draws attention to the peculiar absence of a subject experiencing the feelings these sentences manifest: who finds the fall of Ada's hair a revelation and the shortness of her skirts becoming, whose gaze 'strokes' her limbs? This subtle underdetermination raises two unsettlingly related qualities of the passage. Most obviously, the retrospective frame of the narration presents the disturbing prospect of the elderly Van sexually luxuriating over recollections of a 12-year-old girl. But more disquieting is the almost imperative quality of these subjectless sentences, which involve readers in visualising Ada's body and seem to solicit our complicity in Van's erotic pleasures. This sense of being solicited is only highlighted by the peculiarity of the description, which is so at odds with conventional romantic images of feminine beauty; the text does not present an erotic subject, but rather presents its subject erotically, as though exhibiting the evocative potency of its language.

The anxieties of complicity aroused by the beginning of the chapter are greatly intensified by the third paragraph:

> What Van experienced in those first strange days when she showed him the house – and those nooks in it where they were to make love so soon – combined elements of ravishment and exasperation. Ravishment – because of her pale, voluptuous, impermissible skin, her hair, her legs, her angular movements, her gazelle-grass odor, the sudden black stare of her wide-set eyes, the rustic nudity under her dress; exasperation – because between him, an awkward schoolboy of genius, and that precocious, affected, impenetrable child there

> extended a void of light and a veil of shade that no force could overcome and pierce. He swore wretchedly in the hopelessness of his bed as he focused his swollen senses on the glimpse of her he had engulfed when, on their second excursion to the top of the house, she had mounted upon a captain's trunk to unhasp a sort of illuminator through which one acceded to the roof (even the dog had once gone there), and a bracket or something wrenched up her skirt and he saw – as one sees some sickening miracle in a Biblical fable or a moth's shocking metamorphosis – that the child was darkly flossed. He noticed that she seemed to have noticed that he had or might have noticed (what he not only noticed but retained with tender terror until he freed himself of that vision – much later – and in strange ways) […]. (p. 59)

Though the paragraph is exceedingly complex, its description is clearly driven by a close affinity between seeing and sexual desire. The figurative evocation of Van's vain efforts to picture Ada's body as a struggle to 'overcome and pierce' an 'impenetrable child' is extremely disquieting in its rapacious violence, but becomes even more so in light of its possible correlation with the visual imaginings the passage solicits from readers. The allusion to the 'rustic nudity under her dress' invokes but does not describe Ada's genitalia, arousing anticipation of a more explicit representation. This anticipation is frustrated and heightened by the serpentine sentences – with their elaborate syntax, contextual digressions, parenthetical elaborations, and unusual and complex rhetorical figures – which strain comprehension and demand an intimate attentiveness to the prose, which culminates in the revelation 'that the child was darkly flossed'. The first sense of 'floss' found in the *OED* is 'the rough silk which envelopes the cocoon of the silk worm'. The peculiarity of this metaphor (which again only figuratively depicts Ada's pudenda) demands the reader's participation in imagining the girl's body, discomfortingly aligning us with the younger Van as he masturbates over the recalled image. This discomfort is acutely intensified by the ethical charge of the epithet 'child', which places our interest further under suspicion. The passage at once arouses curiosity about '[w]hat Van experienced' and engenders feelings of unease, anxiety, and even guilt – illustrating both the critical need to capture the vital connections between the text's representations of experience and those it evokes in readers, and how *Ada* powerfully puts knowing and feeling into contact. What I especially want to emphasise here, though, is how this paragraph exposes, and for its effects depends upon, the potential for imaginings to give rise to strong feelings, regardless of their fictionality.

The passage places a similar affective stress on imagination in the parenthetical description of how Van 'saw – as one sees some sickening miracle in a Biblical fable or a moth's shocking metamorphosis – that the child was darkly flossed'. Van's seeing – contrary to his fervid fantasies – that Ada has pubic hair is analogously described not as a discovery which alters his knowledge of her body, but as a supernatural transformation of

how he imagines it. The peculiar priority given to fantasy here significantly resembles Giorgio Agamben's suggestive account of desire, which can help us unpack some of the sentence's more unusual implications:

> [L]ove takes as its subject not the immediate sensory thing, but the phantasm […]. But given the mediating nature of imagination, this means that the phantasm is also the subject, not just the object, of Eros. In fact, since love has its only site in imagination, desire never directly encounters the object in its corporeality […] but [encounters it as] an image […], a 'nova persona' which is literally the product of desire […] within which the boundaries between subjective and objective, corporeal and incorporeal, desire and its object are abolished.[17]

Though Van is intensely conscious of the intimate details of Ada's corporeal body, the revelation of her pubic hair is experienced by him precisely as a metamorphosis of the *nova persona* of his desire. Agamben's figure of the phantasm and his re-description of imagination as mediating between desire and its object also resonates with and highlights a significant tension in the passage, between Van's strenuous masturbatory exertion to summon the image of Ada's vulva, and other moments when it seems to haunt or possess him. It is richly ambiguous whether Van is the perpetrator or victim of the 'ravishment' he experiences, which both invokes his being entranced by Ada and his yearning to sexually possess her. The ambivalent agency and gothic register recur in Van's retaining 'that vision' of Ada 'with tender terror', yet it being himself who must be 'freed' from it 'in strange ways'. Even 'sickening' subtly suggests that the sight of Ada's naked crotch infects Van with a desire which he discharges from his body through masturbation. The paragraph's sentences resist our grasping whether the described affects originate in subject or object, rendering Van's perceptions of Ada inextricable from his desire.

The more profound implication of this descriptive mode – that a person's feelings might indelibly contribute to the world they inhabit – is at the heart of the young Ada's 'own little system', into which she initiates Van towards the end of Chapter 12:

> An individual's life consisted of certain classified things: 'real things' which were unfrequent and priceless, simply 'things' which formed the routine stuff of life; and 'ghost things,' also called 'fogs,' such as fever, toothache, dreadful disappointments, and death. Three or more things occurring at the same time formed a 'tower,' or, if they came in immediate succession, they made a 'bridge.' 'Real towers' and 'real bridges' were the joys of life, and when the towers came in a series, one experienced supreme rapture; it almost never happened, though. In some circumstances, in a certain light, a neutral 'thing' might look or even actually become 'real' or else, conversely, it might coagulate into a fetid 'fog.' When the joy and the joyless happened to be intermixed, simultaneously or along the ramp of duration, one was confronted with 'ruined towers' and 'broken bridges.' (pp. 74–5)

Like the earlier descriptions of Demon's experience, the nomenclature of Ada's system playfully troubles the metaphysical cogency of 'real', which here denotes those things which give rise to pleasurable feelings. Similarly, the existential ambiguity of 'things' is exploited to elide distinctions between material objects, abstract concepts, sensory perceptions, and fanciful imaginings – like the previous quotation, troubling the concomitant boundaries of subjective and objective, corporeal and incorporeal, desire and the desired. Clearly aspects of Ada's system closely resemble some of the elements of *Ada* that we have discussed. But to respond to the passage as the proposition of a conceptual theory is to profoundly misread the novel, by treating it as a philosophical rather than literary text. Indeed, part of the humour here is precisely how flamboyantly *particular* this apparently universal theory is to Ada's own life. There is a childlike pleasure in ostentatious invention, accompanied by the touching absurdity of Ada's pairing the profoundly absolute with the banally ephemeral (what kind of metaphysical category comprises toothaches and death?), and the endearingly upper-class vernacular of 'dreadful disappointments'. The passage, in its sheer particularity, seems almost to entice and burlesque the desire to extract philosophical propositions from fiction.

This exhibition of the particular facility of literary fiction to evoke singular experiences importantly prefaces the final lines of the chapter:

> The classical beauty of clover honey, smooth, pale, translucent, freely flowing from the spoon and soaking my love's bread and butter in liquid brass. The crumb steeped in nectar.
>
> 'Real thing?' he asked.
>
> 'Tower,' she answered.
>
> And the wasp.
>
> The wasp was investigating her plate. Its body was throbbing. […]
>
> Her hair was well brushed that day and sheened darkly in contrast with the lusterless pallor of her neck and arms. She wore the striped tee shirt which in his lone fantasies he especially liked to peel off her twisting torso. The oilcloth was divided into blue and white squares. A smear of honey stained what remained of the butter in its cool crock.
>
> 'All right. And the third Real Thing?'
>
> She considered him. A fiery droplet in the wick of her mouth considered him. A three-colored velvet violet, of which she had done an aquarelle on the eve, considered him from its fluted crystal. She said nothing. She licked her spread fingers, still looking at him.
>
> Van, getting no answer, left the balcony. Softly her tower crumbled in the sweet silent sun. (pp. 75–6)

Brian Boyd offers the following response to the passage (with reference to Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Pour un nouveau roman*):

> The magic of such description lies not only in the precision but also in the suggestion of irrelevance emphasized by the dislocation in the sudden move from Ada to tablecloth. These things are simply there, independent of any design of the author except his desire to put them there for themselves […] independent of other things and of any special import, any human '"significations" (psychologiques, sociales, fonctionelles) [psychological, social, functional]'. (*NA*, p. 32)[18]

Boyd's characteristic concern with Nabokov's design leads him to miss the human import of the description, which is very subtly focalised through Van. What is striking is not the independence of the objects, but precisely how the description of them is saturated with erotic evocations of soaking, throbbing, stripping, smearing, and licking. This sense of sensual pleasure is embodied by the *jouissance* of the poetic prose, with its rhymes and rampant alliterations. The strangeness of the droplet of honey and the violet joining Ada in 'considering' Van vividly gestures towards how his sense of reality is inseparably bound up with his feelings for her. In the final sentence, the focalisation shifts from Van to Ada, evoking her lingering pleasure in the sweet honey and tender sorrow at his silence and departure. What is exceptional and moving about the passage, and *Ada* as a novel, is the sheer weight lent to singular feeling – captured even in the description of sunlight or the most commonplace of objects.

Nabokov's fiction has so often been critically represented as the affirmation of various philosophical propositions that one could be forgiven for envisaging it as a didactic espousal of received morality or conventional wisdom – that reality is too complex for the mind to grasp, or that desire is irrevocably linked to loss. By approaching *Ada* through the lens of preconceived 'knowledge' (whether their own or Nabokov's), neither Hägglund nor Boyd tells us much about the singular experience of reading this fiction. But when the specifically literary qualities of a novel like Ada are taken seriously, we encounter a text which concertedly disrupts the pervasive binary of subject and object, which vividly plays out variegated feelings of knowing, and which evinces the affective and ethical purchase of imagination in the face of the empirically perceptible. The short reading offered here only begins to capture how this captivating and profoundly unsettling fiction mobilises and brings into relief a gamut of epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical concerns – if we but endeavour to respond to the singular ways in which it moves readers.

Notes

1. Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2012), pp. 8, 9–10, 88. Further references, abbreviated to '*DFT*', are given in text.

2. Brian Boyd, 'Nabokov, Time, and Timelessness: A Reply to Martin Hägglund', *New Literary History*, 37, no. 2 (2006), pp. 469–78, 470.
3. Martin Hägglund, 'Nabokov's Afterlife: A Reply to Brian Boyd', *New Literary History*, 37, no. 2 (2006), pp. 479–81, 479.
4. Adam Kelly, 'Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Review)', *Modernism/Modernity*, 20, no. 3 (2013), pp. 589–91, 591, 589.
5. Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (London: Vintage, 1990), pp. 104–5. Further references are given in text.
6. This syntactical dislocation is more conspicuous in Hägglund's earlier article than in the revised *Dying for Time* chapter, which omits the suggestion that chronolibido is manifested by 'Nabokov's syntax'. Martin Hägglund, 'Chronophilia Nabokov and the Time of Desire', *New Literary History*, 37, no. 2 (2006), pp. 447–67, 454.
7. Marc Farrant, 'Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Review)', *Textual Practice*, 27, no. 5 (2013), pp. 921–7, 945. Jennifer Yusin has criticised Hägglund on similar grounds. Jennifer Yusin, 'Chronolibido and the Problem of Reading in *Dying for Time*', *Textual Practice*, 30, no. 1 (2016), pp. 143–68.
8. Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 11.
9. Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's* Ada*: The Place of Consciousness* (Christchurch: Cybereditions, 2001), p. 19. Further references, abbreviated to '*NA*', are given in text.
10. Boyd, 'A Reply to Martin Hägglund', p. 469.
11. Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 2.
12. Michal Oklot, 'Nabokov, Incestuously', *Novel*, 46, no. 1 (2013), pp. 162–8, 165.
13. Nabokov's hinting at an interest in Berkeley and Bergson, for instance, has propelled derivative readings by Dana Dragunoiu, Leona Toker, and Michael Glynn. See: Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (London: Vintage, 1990), p. 288; Dana Dragunoiu, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), pp. 186–222; Leona Toker, 'Nabokov and Bergson on Duration and Reflexivity', in Jane Grayson, Arnold McMillin, and Priscilla Meyer (eds.), *Nabokov's Worlds Volume 1* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 132–40; Michael Glynn, *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
14. Leland de la Durantaye, *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 6 and Ellen Pifer, 'Leland de la Durantaye, *Style Is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (Review)', *Nabokov Studies*, 11, no. 1 (2007).
15. Boyd, 'A Reply to Martin Hägglund', p. 470.
16. Ellen Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 13.
17. Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 25–6.
18. David Rampton similarly suggests that 'the truth of the scene is a function of the accuracy with which the physical detail has been observed'. David Rampton, *Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 123.

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