



## FROM ANTITERRA TO MACONDO

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### Introduction: Fictional narratives as *allegories of writing*

It's already a truism to read postmodernist texts as *allegories of writing* and the mysteries of these texts as mysteries of language. This is to say that postmodernist texts *hesitate* between the literal and the allegorical, between the representation of a world and the anti-representational foregrounding of language for its own sake. Tzvetan Todorov considers *hesitation*, or “epistemological uncertainty,” to be the underlying principle of the fantastic: “A text belongs to the fantastic proper only as long as it *hesitates* between natural and supernatural explanations, between the uncanny and the marvellous” (1975: 12). The fantastic becomes a strategy of an ontological poetics that pluralizes the *real* and thus problematizes representation; this is to say that representation itself is used to overthrow representation. In postmodernist terms, the so called *rhetoric of contrastive banality* or the banalization of the fantastic actually sharpens and intensifies the confrontation between the normal and paranormal. This is made possible by the writers' flirting with the possibility of *transworld identity*, that which Umberto Eco calls the combination of real world figures and the fictional characters — a frequently dangerous manoeuvre which very often requires the intrusion of disclaimers so as to avoid libel actions against the author.

Charles Newman has also argued that, postmodernism “has come to rely upon its *own linguistic awareness of itself* rather than plot or character development, to provide its own momentum” (1985: 87). Consequently, linguistic foregrounding becomes an exercise in self-indulgence, whereas postmodernist writers are very anxious about how literary discourse relates to other discourses and how literary plotting compares to others systems of ordering.

The avoidance of fixed forms demonstrates what Tony Tanner (1971) has identified as a dream and its corresponding fear: “There is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible [...], there is also an abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action”; or as Walter Abish says somewhere, “The innovative novel is, in essence, a novel of defamiliarization, a novel that has ceased to concern itself with the mapping of the *familiar* world.”

### Fictional narrative as bewilderment and isolation

Both Nabokov and Garcia Márquez have a special gift for manipulating narrative perspective in a way that animates themes, minds, an entire ethos. Although the reader of Nabokov's *Ada* (1969) and Garcia Márquez's *Cien años* (1967) soon sees that the first level of representation in the novels is not trustworthy, s/he can delight in tracing down clues spectacularly planted throughout the authors' novels.

Van Veen's unreliability as narrator, in *Ada*, is as noteworthy as that of Aureliano Buendia, in *Cien años*, as the two are manic narrators whose over-determined constructions of reality barely conceal — or fail to conceal — a latent coexisting version of reality which emerges, in spite of the narrators' efforts to obscure it or their inability to perceive it, in the novel's ontology. Many critics have based their interpretation of *Ada*, for that matter, on how the narrative is deceptively revealed by the handling of narration. We take Van and Ada's concurrent and interchangeable narration of their chronicle, in turn self-assured and self-doubtful, as one more proof of Nabokov's masterly rhetoric of bewilderment and isolation (Bontilă, 2004: 108-13). Not only are readers compelled to discern the *centripetal* stratifying forces, partaking of social and historical heteroglossia, but, starting with chapter three, the novel's *centrifugality* is flaunted through the intrusion of two science-fiction themes: the "L (or electricity) disaster," (which resulted in electricity being banned and regarded as almost obscene in the mid-nineteenth century of the story's world), and the world itself "Antiterra," or "Demonia" (which seems both an exact topological match and a frequent chronological mismatch to our own). "Terra" is considered a "sibling planet" in space, and the unhappy, unstable seized on it represent an ideal world, "Terra the Fair", even a kind of Next World, despite its suspicious resemblance to *our* own world.

The Antiterra theme allows Nabokov a glimmer of strangeness, of magic minor dislocations, as he plants innumerable surprises of conjunction and disjunction between Antiterra and *our* Terra, between inclusion and exclusion through narration. This further allows real author and fictional author to cooperate in evincing the intricacy of purpose in this complicated world of multiple artifice. Through the interplanetary theme, Nabokov means to explore the abstract theme of relationship, of identity, similarity, difference. The relationship between these "sibling planets" also relates to the strange relationship between the sibling pairs Marina and Aqua, Van and Ada, Ada and Lucette, who are both contrasted and intricately confused and fused.

The gap between Terra and Antiterra occasions deep probing into the relationship between art and life, the world of the novel and the world of the reader and re-reader. All the more so because the world of this novel seems the world of *the novel*, the old realism of nineteenth-century novel from Austen to Tolstoy, but undermined by the science fiction or utopian tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from J. Verne and H. G. Wells to A. Huxley. Then, the remoteness of the Terra theme proves to be an oblique way of introducing us to Aqua, and the appalling immediacy of her unhappiness, insanity, suicide. What looked in the beginning an extremely romantic love affair (between Demon and Marina) is revealed in its entire sordidness, by divulging the fate of the woman caught up in their coils once Demon marries Aqua "out of spite and pity, a not unusual blend" (*Ada*, 1971: 22).

There are two hypotheses at work in Nabokov's novel: either Van deliberately chooses to narrate his chronicle in the third person so as to conceal an obviously first-person story behind an occulted technique, or there is an invisibly third party "who stands above all participants" and characters, named in the third-person as "indirect beneficiaries of the effusion which they are admitted to witness" (Morrison, 1992: 508).

As the case stands with Nabokov's narrator-protagonists, in *Ada*, readers are *expected* to notice many contradictions and flaws in Van's construction of the plot. We assume that such flaws are indices of authorial intrusion without hampering the narration or confiscating the story. In *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), Mikhail Bakhtin considers such phenomena of "incomprehension" or "stupidity" as plot-generating devices: a way of making clear to the reader something that must remain obscure to the characters. The critic posits that "the coupling of incomprehension and comprehension, of stupidity, simplicity,

simplicity and naiveté with intellect, is a widespread and highly typical phenomenon in novelistic prose. One could say that the aspect of incomprehension and of a specific sort of stupidity (a dialectic stupidity) is, almost always, in one degree or another, a determining factor for novelistic prose of a specific type of parodic novel” (1981: 403). Thus, it is possible to read Van’s professing ignorance all along his fictional re-construction of the meaning of the problematic of *incest* either as a sign of real *incomprehension* or as a sign of *deliberate stupidity*. Either way, his re-created text may allow a glimpse at the construction of the whole fictional ontology strangely reminiscent of *Humberland*, with a view to laying bare Van’s effort to distort things in such a way that he is justified in his incest. This finds support in Bakhtin’s further argument that ignorance in the novel “is always polemical; it interacts dialogically with an intelligence (a lofty pseudo-intelligence) with which it polemicizes and whose mask it tears away” (1981: 403). In so being, Van’s avowal of his innocence of the word “incest” is an instance of self-flagellation through irony, tearing away the mask of *self-sufficiency* toward achieving self-consciousness. Thus, Van’s strategy of narrating his chronicle in the third-person even if he is manifestly the teller of the tale makes him, quite self-consciously, both subject and object of the act of writing. For instance, the initially neutral third-person narration about philosophers’ views on the two planets is soon undermined through the transparent reference to Van, the scientist and philosopher, (“as a scholar who desires to remain unnamed has put it with such euphonic wit”), emended in Ada’s marginal note (“Hm! [...]. In Ada’s hand.”). Conversely, the reader would have no way of knowing that it is Van himself who is undertaking his family chronicle if Van did not, from time to time, lapse from the carefully *struck pose* of the third-person into seemingly ingenuous first-person, (“The modest narrator has to remind the rereader of all this...”). So, the incongruities planted all through the text, might function as self-consciousness prompts, if we opt for the first hypothesis, or as reader empowering instruments, if we opt for the second one.

Bakhtin also develops a “philosophy of the third-person in private life”: “This is a person who knows only private life and craves it alone, but who does not participate in it” (1981: 126). As Van’s chronicle turns to be a private “catalogue of obsessions,” we might say that it hesitates between the novel’s fictive status as an evidently *public artefact* and Van’s effort to disguise his private affairs in a variety of hermetic, obscure techniques. The playful dialogue between Van and Ada, which informs the novel, also imports on the question of the public and the private (“Hm! Kveree-kveree...” < a Russian mind’s (Gavronsky’s) transliteration of a French tongue’s (Larivière’s) accented English ‘Query-query’; “Sufficient for your purpose, Van, *entendons-nous*. (Note in the margin.)” Ada, 1971: 23). Van insists that his chronicle is intended for public consumption, while Ada, more realistically, not necessarily more ethically, recognizes the deeply private nature of the text that results from their collaboration. This prompts the issue of intended readership, in professing their allegiance to, in Van’s case, “laymen and lemans – and not to grave men and gravemen,” (“laymen” < O.Fr. *lai*; Gr. *laōs*, the people – non-expert; “lemans” < illicit lovers); and, in Ada’s case, to “a few readers, those pensive reeds,” willing to accept and celebrate her arrogation to herself and Van of their “super-imperial couple[hood]” (Ada, 1971: 23).

J. Morrison sees in Van’s resort to the third-person, an impulse towards a Romanticist version of innocence as described by Kierkegaard’s account of Schlegel’s novel *Lucinde*. In our view the parallel may hold true with such characters as Aqua and Lucette, whose irony culminates in the freedom of suicide (at once the most severely self-conscious gesture and the most unyielding rejection of the claims of self-consciousness); but it is not tenable with Ada and Van, who are both believers in “an aristocracy of perception” (Wood, 1995: 225), which means life as an entanglement of exhilarating

happiness and brutality, unhappy happiness and happy unhappiness. So, again we must say that pervasive irony attends to a complicated scheme of point of view toward the same sad realization that memory can recreate but cannot abide.

In Garcia Márquez's *Cien años*, Aureliano, last of his line, reads Melquiades, the gypsy's prophetic narrative of the destiny of the Buendias down to the very page on which the moment of his reading of this page is itself prefigured. Still, in Aureliano's case, the spectre of *infinite regress* is forestalled by the instantaneous destruction of the manuscript and its reader, which is simultaneously the end of the book *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This is to say that characters often serve as agents or *carriers of metalepsis*; as disturbers of ontological hierarchy of levels inasmuch as autobiography (in our case with both authors) functions in their texts as a distinct ontological level, a world to be juxtaposed with the fictional world and thus a tool for foregrounding ontological boundaries and tensions. The appearance of Garcia Márquez near the end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as the bosom friend of the youngest Aureliano Buendia signals the paradoxical interpretation of two realms that are mutually inaccessible or, at least, seem so. This is, technically speaking, a case of a heightened form of *transworld identity* and ontological foregrounding of the fictional space versus the real world.

Gabriel Garcia Márquez is thus capable of more than just letting us choose between the literal and the metaphorical inasmuch as his text is primarily a fantastic text, in which, as Todorov says, tropes may be literalized. The author prolongs hesitation between the literal and the metaphorical by manipulating contextual pressures: the fantastic norms of the global context tugging us toward a literal reading in terms of realized metaphor, on the one hand; and the local context which sometimes tugs in the opposite direction, toward a metaphorical reading, on the other hand. That is to say, we can read the fictional space of *Cien años*, the secluded God-forsaken place of Macondo, both as a *metaphor for art* — as it is only through writing that Melquiades and the seekers of Los Buendia offer Macondo “a life of its own” —, and a *realized metaphor* which subsumes the attributes of both motifs of Terra and Antiterra in Nabokov's novel. Van's book within the novel, *The Texture of Time*, is an enormous, extended metaphor for our perception of time, very much like Melquiades' prophetic narrative is on life and death.

In *Ada*, Nabokov lets his characters' idea of Terra or his readers' image of Antiterra stand for the romance of remoteness, the yearning for somewhere better, where love can find idyllic fulfillment, despite such insurmountable obstacles like incest — a secluded place as Garcia Márquez's Macondo which builds its own history, albeit on a model well rehearsed by the writer and readers alike. In the long run, we understand that with every step we take in demolishing the embedded stories, we, in fact, “only dramatize the mind's ability to build its own past, and we celebrate the combinational power of memory every time we challenge its factual accuracy” (Nicol, 1982: 231).

### **Conclusion: Fictional narrative and the promise of meaning**

If *Ada*'s Antiterra theme draws on science and utopian fiction and Macondo theme draws on fantastic and utopian fiction, they also parody them, because the world of these two novels both is and is not ours, because it mixes cosmic remoteness with detailed but distorted local coordinates, because its time and technology seem both futuristic, a nineteenth-century with swimming pools and Hollywood movies, and yet deeply nostalgic.

As Van's chronicle approaches the present and consequently its end, Terra merging with Antiterra, so do we as readers or re-readers, encoded or not in the text, become more aware that both books represent concrete metaphors for writing as their narrators turn to writing for connections in their *disconnected* world.

The ethical lesson both writers are eager to convey is that, very much like Van and Ada, in Nabokov's novel, and Aureliano Buendia, in Garcia Márquez's novel, characters and readers alike are part of a larger scheme wherein difference and not indifference is all that matters. Or, as Wittgenstein puts it: "The self of solipsism shrinks to a point without extension, and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it" (1922: 69). Aesthetically speaking, in spite of the characters' self-centeredness and ethical opacity, the texts are all 'I'-s (eyes), missing nothing, and thus surviving their authors' and character-protagonists' deaths.

But, these two novels are also the perfect illustration of the idea that literature at its greatest like life at its commonest is both fantastically deceitful and replete with meaning. It is what Felman calls the "impossible choice" between the impossibility of "keeping the promise of meaning, of consciousness" and that of "not continuing to make this promise and to believe in it" (1980: 68).

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### Rezumat

*În interiorul unor familii și societăți rivale ca în romanele lui Vladimir Nabokov Ada sau Ardoarea, și Gabriel Garcia Márquez. O cronică de familie, Un veac de singurătate, fiecare familie trebuie să inventeze modalități de a transforma eșecurile familiale în cîștiguri psihologice. Lucru ușor de realizat pentru scriitorii a căror prezență este codificată în text. În cazul nostru, soluția preferată de ambii autori este de se folosi de protagoniști-scriitori care să compenseze în propriile lor romane pierderea spațiului familial mult rîvnit de ei și de adevărații lor creatori. O soluție elegantă pentru a demonstra (a câta oară?) că narațiunile ficționale nu sunt altceva decât alegorii ale scrierii, minciuni cu tîlc atent construite.*

### Résumé

*Au sein des familles ou des sociétés rivales telles celles des romans de Vladimir Nabokov, "Ada ou l'Ardeur: Chronique familiale" et de Gabriel Garcia Márquez, "Cent ans de solitude", pour chacune, devient bien impératif de trouver les modalités qui puissent transformer les échecs de la famille en gains psychologiques. Au moment où l'on instaure un code dissimulateur de la présence de l'écrivain ce but n'est pas si difficile à atteindre. Dans notre cas, la solution agréée par les deux auteurs cités consiste dans l'utilisation de protagonistes ayant rôle d'écrivains créateurs de romans qui récupèrent dans leur oeuvre*

*l'espace familial perdu et tellement convoité d'un côté par eux et de l'autre par leurs inventeurs.*

**Abstract**

*Within the opposing families and societies that operate in Vladimir Nabokov's "Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle" and Gabriel Garcia Márquez's "One Hundred Years of Solitude", each family has to find ways to convert familial loss into psychological gain. Easy said and done with such authors whose perspective is always encoded in the text, no matter how fully "masked" it may appear to be. The solution at hand with both authors is to employ of writer-protagonists who compensate in their own novels the loss of coveted, familial space their very creators are craving to recuperate. Here is an elegant solution meant to demonstrate again and again that fictional narratives are nothing but allegories of writing, that is well wrought meaningful lies.*