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1 Writers, artists and critics have long been aware of the intimate link between literature and the visual arts; the set phrase ‘sister arts’ is witness to this widely recognized kinship. As such, the title of this study may provoke a slight raising of the eyebrow—thanks to the elaborate quotation—, doomed to swiftly dwindle into a resigned sigh as soon as the eye meets the fatal ‘pictorial.’ Before you judge whether it is worth reading on, I wish to defend my case by elucidating my recourse to this word. In dealing with the pictorial aspects of Nabokov’s work, I do not have in mind ‘the picturesque,’ that is, the quaint quality of his descriptions or any part of his work which would somehow suggest an attractive picture. The term ‘pictorial’ implies a much closer relationship with a picture, since the pictorial properly pertains to painting, whereas the picturesque is merely comparable to painting.

2 This distinction is important because Nabokov’s art has too often been treated as a kind of rococo wedding cake, decked with delicate sugar flowers and sexy little girls—fantastically ornamental, indeed, yet hardly artistic, in the noblest sense. It must however be said, or rather repeated, that although he is a dedicated wordsmith, Nabokov doesn’t only indulge in convoluted puns and imagery for the mere sake of show-off—although he sometimes does. Nabokov was a synaesthete and was subject to mild hallucinations from his early childhood: he couldn’t help filtering the world through the prism of his fanciful perceptions and striving to translate these in the most faithful possible way by dint of an iridescent style. Nabokov’s aesthetic sensitivity doesn’t only enhance his style, it also informs his very poetics and the dynamics of his creative elan, thus forming between the sister arts a properly incestuous relationship. Nabokov outlines the tenor of this relationship when describing the process of inspiration in a 1964 interview for Playboy:

[i]here comes a moment when I am informed from within that the entire structure is finished. All I have to do now is take it down in pencil or pen. Since this entire
structure, dimly illumined in one’s mind, can be compared to a painting, and since you do not have to work gradually from left to right for its proper perception, I may direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing. (Strong Opinions 32).

By comparing the initial vision of his future work to the gradual discovery of a painting, Nabokov removes composition from a linear, time-bound structure in order to place it within the looser dimension of space. Significantly, Nabokov resorts once more to the pictorial medium when he evokes, in a 1966 interview, a phenomenon which—he hopes—will occur at the other extremity of the literary process, when the reader reaches the end of a book of his: “I think that what I would welcome at the close of a book is a sensation of its world receding in the distance and stopping somewhere there suspended afar like a picture in a picture: The Artist’s Studio by Van Bock” (Strong Opinions 73). In a gesture of typical whimsicality, Nabokov multiplies the mirror-effects of allusiveness, adding to the already elaborate process of mise en abyme a cameo appearance under the guise of an anagrammatic signature. It is quite probable that Nabokov is referring to Van Eyck’s portrait of Arnolfini and his bride, which also presents a ‘picture in a picture’ by means of a small convex mirror and, just above it, the artist’s self-inscription, “Johannes de eyck fuit hic” along the central axis of the painting (see Picture 1).

The Arnolfini portrait acts as a mise en abyme of the laws of perspective which were introduced in the Renaissance in order to align the painter’s founding perception with the spectator’s viewpoint. Thanks to the device of the convex mirror, the vanishing point towards which the viewer’s eye is drawn becomes the converging point between the painter’s initial vision and its artistic recreation as perceived by the spectator.

If we bear in mind the quotations on Nabokov’s initial vision of his work and his reader’s final vision, we realize that the apparently facetious allusion to The Artist’s Studio by Van Bock is in fact a very pertinent articulation of his ideas on the relationship between reader and writer, who both tend towards the same founding perception, yet are defeated by time, as displayed by Van Eyck’s preterite form (Johannes de eyck fuit hic). The diachronic split between Nabokov and his reader is such that the latter’s relation to the initial creative vision can only be asymptotic, reaching towards the suspended miniature of conception but never grasping it in full. In an essay entitled ‘Good Readers and Good Writers,’ Nabokov does nevertheless envisage a possible meeting point between author and reader, at the top of a mountain that significantly emerges from the mist and that must be conquered by both author and reader. In other words, if we are to admire the panoramic view which Nabokov first enjoyed, we are to pant up a “trackless slope” (
Lectures on Literature 2) swathed in mist, sweating just as much he did, if not more, if we aren’t in good shape. Still in the same essay, Nabokov explains in full detail the athletic aspects of aesthetic appreciation:

the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation. When we look at a painting we do not move our eyes in a special way even if, as in a book, the picture contains elements of depth and development. The element of time does not really enter in a first contact with a painting. In reading a book, we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it. We have no physical organ (as we have the eye in regard to a painting) that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its details. (Lectures on Literature 3).

Now glimpsed from another angle, yet absolutely recognizable, looms the chief culprit, once again: time. It is time, indeed, which seems responsible for the hiatus between the book and its reader. This hiatus also strikes at the very roots of the creative act, for the writer is constantly striving to make inspiration’s unmediated picture coincide with its verbal recapture. The struggle is constant because, as Michel Foucault writes in The Order of Things,

the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. [...]. Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms: it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but, that defined by the sequential elements of syntax. (Foucault 9-10).

This kind of judgment could very well sap the artistic foundations of a writer like Nabokov, who is a particularly prolific producer of such images, metaphors and similes. Throughout this essay, I shall nevertheless attempt to show how Nabokov exploits these limits to his advantage, choosing his words in a manner so idiosyncratic that these seem tailor-fitted to the visual gem they purport to transfer to the text. His stylistic dexterity may be compared to the Old Masters’ handling of chiaroscuro, a technique which increases the tonal range between light and dark and which was devised by Leonardo da Vinci in order to create an illusion of depth on a two-dimensional surface. Young Victor Wind, the child prodigy of Pnin, is also a fond amateur of this technique, which he tenderly calls “gentle chiaroscuro, offspring of veiled values and translucent undertones, [which] ha[s] long since died behind the prison bars of abstract art, in the poorhouse of hideous primitivism” (Pnin 98). One might object that the phrase is too melodious to strictly abide by the semantic requisites of a definition. Indeed, one cannot but notice the perfect poise of the phrase, “veiled values and translucent undertones,” which balances the velvety ripples of “veiled values” against the clipped resonance of “translucent undertones.” The poetic aspects of Nabokov’s prose are often so striking that they can easily outshine its semantic content, leading us to forget that eloquence is part and parcel of a rhetorical apparatus in which ideas and images are inextricably linked. In effect, Nabokov here resorts to the evocative power of harmonious resonances in order to convey the exquisite graces of the tonal unity which characterizes the chiaroscuro technique. This euphonious musicality also serves to enhance his vituperation against modern art, which he found “commonplace, imitative, and academic” (Strong Opinions 33). Against the “blurs and blotches” (Strong Opinions 33) of abstraction, Nabokov’s motto was “caress the details,” all the more so when these details belong to a woman. The ‘father’ of Lolita has indeed a weakness for female portraits, which he limns with utmost care, lingering on the woman’s colours and contours with chiaroscuro’s gentlest touches. To
my mind, Nabokov’s female portraits are most remarkable for the way in which they flesh out the nature of the challenge which both Foucault and Leonardo da Vinci reflect in their own ways. Thus, in his attempt to frame women, Nabokov rises to the challenge of outstretching the frame of literature.

8 In order to avoid branching off in all directions—the temptation is always there with Nabokov—I have chosen to focus on Ada, a novel which frequently conflates the charms of “old masters and young mistresses” (Ada 4). But before we enter Ada’s fantastic realm, I would like to take you on a short trip to Nabokov’s terminus novel, Look at the Harlequins! Its main character and narrator, Vadim, also acts as a parodic alter ego of Nabokov, refracting in a more or less distorted and tortured fashion some of those quandaries which the author himself might have faced. The split between word and image ranks among Vadim’s main artistic frustrations, as is illustrated by the following passage, in which he attempts to describe Bel, the child he has had with one of his former wives, Annette:

Because of the contrast between her pale-gray iris and very black lashes, her eyes seemed rimmed with kohl. Her hollowed cheek and long neck were pure Annette, but her fair hair, which she wore rather short, gave off a richer sheen as if the tawny strands were mixed with gold-olive ones in thick straight stripes of alternate shades. All this is easily described and this also goes for the regular striation of bright bloom along the outside of forearm and leg, which, in fact, smacks of self-plagiarism, for I had given it both to Tamara and Esmeralda, not counting several incidental lassies in my short stories (see for example page 537 of the Exile from Mayda collection, Goodminton, New York, 1947). The general type and bone structure of her pubescent radiance cannot be treated, however, with a crack player’s brio and chalk-biting serve. I am reduced—a sad confession!—to something I have also used before, and even in this book—the well-known method of degrading one species of art by appealing to another. I am thinking of Serov’s Five-petaled Lilac, oil, which depicts a tawny-haired girl of twelve or so sitting at a sun-flecked table and manipulating a raceme of lilac in search of that lucky token. The girl is no other than Ada Bredow, a first cousin of mine whom I flirted with disgracefully that very summer, the sun of which ocellates the garden table and her bare arms. […] Bel’s resemblance to her—same cheekbones, same chin, same knobby wrists, same tender flower—can be only alluded to, not actually listed. (Look at the Harlequins! 168-69)

9 Vadim starts by playing the game and endeavours to recapture the girl’s pubescent charm by dint of very delicate strokes, subtle gradings of veiled values which avoid too sharp a definition of her features. His description oscillates between enunciative modulations (“seemed,” “as if”), and purely pictorial nuances which underline variations in tone or hue (“pale-grey”/ “very black,” then “fair”/ “tawny”/ “gold-olive”) and trace different forms or contours (eyes rimmed with kohl, hollowed cheek and long neck, rather short hair, thick straight stripes). Certain poetic effects create a phonic vibrancy which emulates the radiance and relief of the model and enriches the substance of the description; he thus unfolds a garland of alliterative or assonantic pairs such as “pale-gray,” “black lashes,” “seemed”/ “rimmed,” “cheek”/ “neck” ending in “Annette,” “fair”/ “hair,” “wore”/ “short,” “richer”/ “sheen” and “straight stripes,” which forms a compact compound with the monosyllabic “thick.” Nevertheless, we soon realize that we have been deceived, that we’ve been led into a kind of trompe l’œil, in fact worse than that: the imitation of an imitation, what Nabokov calls the “synthetic jam” instead of the “wild berry” (Strong Opinions 7), that is, the antithesis of art. Indeed, as both Vadim and Nabokov admit, the skirting of the rim of a woman’s body is a familiar topos which recurs
not only in Vadim’s works, but also in Nabokov’s: behind “Tamara,” one can discern the shadow of Nabokov’s first heroine, Mashenka. The end of the passage also makes side-glances at Ada, as well as Lolita, when Vadim calls his daughter Isabel Lee, a translucent allusion to Humbert’s first love, Annabel Leigh, herself a transmute from Poe. A few passages culled from Lolita (“that silky shimmer above her temple grading into bright brown hair,” “the glistening tracery of down on her forearm,” “the bloom along the incurvation of her spine” (The Annotated Lolita 41, 42) reinforce our suspicion that the chiaroscuro shades which adumbrate the surface of Bel’s skin, for instance “the regular striation of bright bloom along the outside of forearm and leg,” are nothing more than a purple patch.

Eventually, the portrait becomes swathed in such veils of intertextual matter that the actual image of the girl disappears, swamped in words. This seems to corroborate what Barthes said about beauty in S/Z: it “cannot assert itself save in the form of a citation” (Barthes 33). Earlier on in the novel, Vadim had declared, in the wake of phenomenologist philosophy, that “we think in images, not in words” (Look at the Harlequins! 102). But if language can only be derivative, how can one’s vision be adequately translated? Rather than strive to make language conjure up effects similar to those created by pictures, Vadim has recourse to ekphrasis, “the rhetorical description of a work of art” (Oxford Classical Dictionary), or, more generally “a set description intended to bring person, place, picture, etc. before the mind’s eye” (Hagstrum 18). By referring to the painting of a well-known artist, Vadim gives the reader the opportunity to envision what he believes to be a more faithful copy of the girl’s image. However, the reader’s scopic desire is thwarted by the fact that the painting is nowhere to be found. Whether this is a deliberate trick played on the reader by Nabokov, as Christine Raguet-Bouvard believes, or simply a genuine mistake (he might have had in mind another painting by Serov, as Brian Boyd suggests: see Picture 2),

or even a result of Russian history’s contingencies, is a question open to debate. In any case, the text manages to only cite, never sight, the girl; her portrait is obfuscated by biographical digressions on a former love affair with Ada, the model of the painting, and one begins to wonder whether the allusion to the painting isn’t simply a ploy mocking many a reader’s obsessive quest for Nabokov’s real models.

In his last unfinished, and supposedly testamentary, novel, The Original of Laura, this type of vertiginous mise en abyme becomes a ruling narrative principle. Like a Möbius strip or an Escher print, the manuscript’s involuted plot expands upon the ambivalence of the sign inscribed within its very title. The referential indetermination of “original” and “Laura” is indeed refracted by a complex matrioshka-type of narrative in which pictorial
and literary representations appear to mirror each other and thus unhinge the classical foundations of mimesis. Its central female character seems to be Flora, the wife of the narrator and, most likely, the ‘original’ of Laura, who is the eponymous heroine of a novel titled My Laura. This novel is sent to the narrator and main protagonist of The Original of Laura by a painter, a rejected admirer of his wife, Flora, of whom “he did an exquisite oil a few years ago.” In My Laura, the mistress is less lucky: she is destroyed by the “I” of the book whilst “in the act of portraying her”—‘literally’, as a writer. Apparently “the portrait is a faithful one,” its features being “absolutely true to the original.” Our desire to peer through the frame—like the unfortunate protagonist of Nabokov’s short story ‘La Veneziana’—is thwarted by the elusive nature of this ‘original’: does it refer to the mistress of the “I,” the Laura of My Laura, or to the probable mistress of this novel’s author, the Flora of The Original of Laura? The manuscript’s playful juxtapositions obviously incite the reader to fuse both ‘originals’ into a single original, a gesture which Nabokov graphically performs in ‘chapter’ 5, by contriving an amusing hybrid, ‘Flaura’. On close observation of the manuscript, one notices that the name contains in fact two capital letters, ‘F’ and ‘L’, as though Nabokov had been loath to give precedence to either name and had instead opted for some typographical monster, a bicephalous cipher of sorts.

Nabokov’s dove-tailing conundrums become even more artfully significant when we consider the fact that portraits of courtisanes called Flora or Laura are well-known masterpieces by such Renaissance artists as Titian and Giorgione and already constitute variations on the theme of Petrarch’s Laura (see Pictures 3 and 4).
which Nabokov selected to define chiaroscuro in *Pnin* suggest nuances that may be either conspicuous or concealed, depending on the way they catch the light or the angle from which they are perceived. But the visibility of these nuances is equally tributary of the degree of saturation with which the artist endows them; he can shade them in to reveal a veiled value, or shade them off to convey a muted glimmer-effect, a “translucent undertone.” When I first referred to chiaroscuro, I explained that it was a device contrived by Leonardo da Vinci to create an illusion of volume on a flat surface. Chiaroscuro is thus intimately linked to the deceptive quality of art. When addressing fledgling artists in his treatise on painting, Leonardo also singles out indirection as a paramount virtue: “Light too conspicuously cut off by shadows is exceedingly disapproved by painters […] do not make your figures appear illuminated by the sun, but contrive a certain amount of mist or of transparent cloud to be placed between the object and the sun.” It is particularly significant that Leonardo should mention a “transparent cloud,” as though the old master’s phrase were foreshadowing Nabokov’s own terms. It induces the same type of shimmer-effect, designating, like the “veiled”/“translucent” couple, a screening device that may at once conceal and reveal.

In this respect, the convoluted structure of *The Original of Laura*, with its web of metatextual allusions and its iridescent play on “original,” could be considered an elaborate bow to the subtle art of the Renaissance. The manuscript depicts various portraits of a deceitful woman, each of them faithful, each of them mere images, offered to the viewer’s appreciation. If you look at Giorgione’s *Laura* or Titian’s *Flora*, you will notice that what is offered to the viewer is just as ambiguous: the woman seems to ignore the spectator, averting her gaze as though lost in her own thoughts. At the same time, the carefully calculated baring of her breast is a clear acknowledgment of the spectator’s presence. Quite obviously the true appeal of these portraits springs less from the features of the woman than from the way these are presented. We are seduced, etymologically led astray, because unsettled by the power of her enigmatic stance, which is neither entirely modest, nor entirely immodest. Although Nabokov’s manuscript remains rather sketchy, its embryonic plot does also reveal the same qualities vis-à-vis the reader; it is up to him to decipher the myriad signs generated by its specular structure. The disconcerting seductiveness of its deceitful mistress is paradigmatic of Nabokov’s preoccupations with representability, authenticity and faithfulness. What Nabokov’s pictorial representation of women lays bare is the fact that the seduction of art lies in its very deceptiveness, its tantalizing oscillation between “le vrai et le vraisemblable,” to quote the title of one of Nabokov’s essays. Because it functions, like the female figure, as a “double-talk mirror,” mimesis cannot be taken at face value only.

The phrase “double-talk mirror” occurs at the close of a passage from *Ada* which reflects in a brilliant miniature some of the themes which I have just outlined. The passage is set at the beginning of the novel, when the narrative unfolds the passionate love affair which brought together Demon and Marina, Van and Ada’s parents. Demon suspects that Marina is having another affair with Baron d’Onsky, an art expert. One day, he invites d’Onsky to examine a picture he has just acquired:

Demon screwed in his monocle, unclicked out of its special flat case a small pen-and-wash and said he thought (did not doubt, in fact, but wished his certitude to be admired) that it was an unknown product of Parmigianino’s tender art. It showed a naked girl with a peah-like apple cupped in her half-raised hand sitting sideways on a convulvus-garlanded support, and had for its discoverer the additional appeal of recalling Marina when, rung out of a hotel bathroom by the phone, and perched on...
the arm of a chair, she muffled the receiver while asking her lover something that he could not make out because the bath’s voice drowned her whisper. Baron d’Onsky had only to cast one glance at that raised shoulder and at certain vermiculated effects of delicate vegetation to confirm Demon’s guess. D’Onsky had the reputation of not showing one sign of esthetic emotion in the presence of the loveliest masterpiece; this time, nonetheless, he laid his magnifier aside as he would a mask, and allowed his undisguised gaze to caress the velvety apple and the nude’s dimpled and mossed parts with a smile of bemused pleasure. (Ada 12-13)

17 This evocation of a painting, in fact a free adaptation of the preparatory sketches Parmigianino made for a fresco (see Picture 6),

![Parmigianino, Fresco in Santa Maria della Steccata (detail), 1531-39](image)

retrieves the original meaning of *ekphrasis*, “telling in full” (*ek* meaning ‘out,’ *phrazein* meaning to tell), since it acts as an instrument of revelation. Although much of the truth is already known, Nabokov dramatizes its ultimate disclosure by interlacing two modes of vision, focusing alternately on the authenticity of the pen-and-wash or on the faithfulness of Marina. The passage is loaded with double-edged terms which intimate the convergence of two male gazes and thus crystallize the various emotional responses that animate the love triangle *topos*. The word “discoverer,” for example, may denote the first discoverer of the picture, Demon, but also the person who is viewing it for the first time, the Baron d’Onsky. The rest of the sentence does not allow the reader to determine the identity of the discoverer, although one might naturally assume that Demon would be better placed to recall Marina in the nude. However, these doubts are cleared at the end of the chapter when Demon reminisces the specific scene that in fact both men have in mind: when Demon had called Marina, she had answered she was ‘in Eve’s state, hold the line, let me put on a *penyar*. Instead, blocking my ear, you spoke, I suppose, to the man with whom you had spent the night [...]. Now that is the sketch made by a young artist in Parma, in the sixteenth century, for the fresco of our destiny” (Ada 16). By joining the two passages, it becomes apparent that the “discoverer” and “the lover” are the one and only Baron d’Onsky, whilst the “he,” in “that he could not make out,” which could have designated either the person on the phone or in her room, is Demon himself. Baron d’Onsky as “discoverer” would however be a safe guess without any foreknowledge of the later passage in the light of the following sentence, which hinges ostensibly upon the baron’s glance, a glance that ominously “confirms Demon’s guess.” Once more, this confirmation could elucidate the identity of either the artist or Demon’s rival.

19 The reader’s mind is left to dwell at leisure over these flickering clues, while Nabokov playfully furthers the ambiguities of disclosure by inserting a tell-tale simile, “he laid his magnifier aside as he would a mask,” and a markedly alliterative epithet, “undisguised gaze.” This gaze conflates carnal and aesthetic bliss whilst the authentic picture and its unfaithful model merge, as in *The Original of Laura*, into one beautiful object of art and
desire. Enhanced by Nabokov’s chiaroscuro caress, the “nude’s dimpled and mossed parts” are appreciated not only as revelations of natural sensuousness but also as supreme achievements in the art of the nude. Contrary to the naked body, the nude is already a form of disguise, an artwork in itself. As John Berger keenly remarks, “a naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude” (Berger 54). Viewing this passage, we also realize why ekphrasis and the female image may be so fruitfully matched. To William Mitchell’s mind, both are eloquent incarnations of otherness: “since visual representations are generally marked as feminine (passive, silent, beautiful) in contrast to the masculine poetic voice, the metaphor goes both ways: the woman is ‘pretty as a picture,’ but the picture is also as pretty as a woman” (Mitchell 706). In Nabokov’s particular case, the topos of the pretty picture/pretty woman acquires its highest definition thanks to the shade of duplicity with which he lightly brushes beauty, thus spinning together the seductions of woman and art into a “fine fabric of deceit” (The Gift 166).

The scope of Nabokov’s chiaroscuro approach thus operates on two levels: the textual—through the tonal nuances which make the nude’s skin almost palpable—and the metatextual—through the lambent dove-tailing of various layers of perception which imparts a secret aura, an almost magic depth, to this unique instant of discovery. The significance of the nude’s revelations as regards Nabokov’s poetics may be fully grasped when contemplated in the light of another mise en abyme in an earlier novel, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. Whilst analysing one of Sebastian Knight’s novels, Nabokov’s narrator asserts that it “can be thoroughly enjoyed once it is understood that the heroes of the book are what can be loosely called ‘methods of composition.’ It is as if a painter said: look, here I’m going to show you not the painting of a landscape, but the painting of different ways of painting a certain landscape, and I trust their harmonious fusion will disclose the landscape as I intend you to see it” (The Real Life of Sebastian Knight 95). In the same way, Nabokov bestows upon the Parmigianino ekphrasis the rich radiance of a sign, so that it doesn’t shine forth merely as the signified in a pen-and-wash, but also illuminates the structure of the signifier, that is, the delicately nuanced handling of light and dark in the Italian master’s pen-and-wash.

There is one last point I wish to underline in regard to this passage: although the pen-and-wash appears after the episode of the clepsydrophone call (electricity has been banned from the novel), it’s quite obvious that Nabokov used Parmigianino’s sketch as a blueprint for the clepsydrophone episode and that it inspired Marina’s pose, rather than the other way round. At the same time, the sketch acquires a new depth when inserted within the dramatic frame of the love triangle. That depth arises from uncertainty, the realization that a particle of naked reality always lies beyond one’s perceptual field. It was this veiled quality, this “gray gloss” (Lectures on Russian Literature 83), to quote Nabokov à propos Turgeniev, that Turner identified as the crux of Rembrandt's entrancing art. In one of his lectures, he declares: “Rembrandt depended upon his chiaroscuro, his bursts of light and darkness, to be felt. He threw a mysterious doubt over the meanest piece of common—Nay more, his forms, if they can be called so, are the most objectionable that could be chosen [...] but over each he has thrown that veil of matchless colour, that lucid interval of morning dawn and dewy light on which the eye dwells so completely entrallied.”

Nabokov also makes Rembrandt’s chiaroscuro brushwork loom rather significantly over Ada, a novel suffused with the twilight glimmer of “remembrance [which], like
Rembrandt, is dark but festive” (Ada 116). The novel is almost entirely devoted to the recollection of Van and Ada’s love story since their first encounter. As such, it is one vast attempt to ‘reflower’ “[Time’s] veily substance” (Ada 563), or, to borrow Ada’s own imagery, a mnemonic gathering of “the details that shine through or shade through: the local leaf through the hyaline skin, the green sun in the brown humid eye [...]. And the most difficult: beauty itself as perceived through the there and then” (Ada 71). Like their creator, Van and Ada both rely on pictorial imagery to establish their metaphysical systems. When writing his treatise on the texture of time and reflecting upon the way we perceive the past, Van resorts to the metaphor of the Past as a series of avenues dappled with pools of light and shade. The exact terms of this image, “we can indulge in an easier game with the light and shade of its avenues” (Ada 547), recall the games that he and Ada used to play with the patterns made by the trees’ foliage onto the avenues of Ardis Hall. He also muses upon the possibility of dating events through their coloration: if the coloration of a recollected object differs from date to date, then one could date one’s own reminiscences by discerning their “exact levels of decreasing saturation or deepening brilliance” (Ada 546). The terms pertaining to Nabokov’s definition of chiaroscuro immediately come to mind, confirming my suggestion, at the beginning of the essay, that there is an eminently metaphysical issue at stake in Nabokov’s pictorial approach to women. The mind, by Nabokov’s book, strives to attain what is most difficult, beauty itself as perceived through the there and then. In order to retrieve one’s past, one must therefore pierce through time’s veily substance and fix a particle of the past in what Van calls “the immobility of perceptual Time” (Ada 549)—a notion which reminds me of Alberti’s laws of perspective.

This metaphysical act of attention is eloquently illustrated by a description of young Ada painting flowers:

On those relentlessly hot July afternoons, Ada liked to sit on a cool piano stool of ivoried wood at a white-oilcloth’d table in the sunny music room, her favourite botanical atlas open before her, and copy out in color on creamy paper some singular flower. She might choose, for instance, an insect-mimicking orchid which she would proceed to enlarge with remarkable skill. Or else she combined one species with another (unrecorded but possible), introducing odd little changes and twists that seemed almost morbid in so young a girl so nakedly dressed. The long beam slanting in from the french window glowed in the faceted tumbler, in the tinted water, and on the tin of the paint-box—and while she delicately painted an eyespot or the lobes of a lip, rapturous concentration caused the tip of her tongue to curl at the corner of her mouth, and as the sun looked on, the fantastic, black-blue-brown-haired child seemed in her turn to mimic the mirror-of-Venus blossom. (Ada 99)

The rest of the passage goes on to describe young Van’s reaction to this young girl who is “so nakedly dressed”, and so desirably unfamiliar. It is a moment of intense sensuality, which both narrator and author are intent on saving from the “ardis of Time” (538). It is remarkable how, with the same attention as that which Ada devotes to the flower, Nabokov contrives to isolate and transform into a unique epiphanic instant what is in fact a repeated event. The beginning of the passage is clearly iterative: the adverb “relentlessly” creates a temporal continuity which is furthered by the enumeration of various subjects chosen by Ada. By shifting to the effect produced by a beam of sun, Nabokov suddenly narrows his focus, as though he were spotlighting one particular scene, dotting its contours with a trail of ‘t’s which enhance its visual vividness. Look at the movement of this sentence: first the wide-angle view, “The long beam slanting in from the french window,” now we draw closer, “glowed in the faceted tumbler, in the
tinted water, and on the tin of the paint-box.” And now we alight onto more intimate areas, from the anatomy of the flower—“she delicately painted an eyespot or the lobes of the lip”—to that of the nymphet—“caused the tip of her tongue to curl at the corner of her mouth”—before reaching the final extravagant metamorphosis of girl into flower.

Nabokov’s *doigté* is of course eminently reminiscent of the beginning of *Lolita*: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth” (*The Annotated Lolita* 9).

Unlike the passage from *Look at the Harlequins!* in which the imitation of an imitation proved a rather sterile design, here, the imitative pattern turns into a spiral of mimicry from insect, to flower, to girl, thus exemplifying the wonderful artfulness of nature. This type of depiction grows in significance when we consider the angle under which Nabokov, a keen lepidopterist, chose to describe nature to his students: “From the simple deception of propagation to the prodigiously sophisticated illusion of protective colours in butterflies or birds, there is in Nature a marvellous system of spells and wiles. The writer of fiction only allows Nature’s lead” (*Lectures on Literature* 5). Quite naturally, Nabokov had wanted an orchid to figure on the jacket cover of Ada. The insect-mimicking orchid could indeed be seen as the emblem of Van and Ada’s mirror-like, incestuous love, as is suggested when Ada, during one of those warm afternoons, suddenly kisses Van, then dismisses him, declaring she is busy, “pointing with her violet-purple-soaked thin brush at a blend of *Ophrys scolopax* and *Ophrys veenae*” (*Ada* 101). Pseudo-copulation between Van and Ada is suggested by the association of Ada with *Ophrys scolopax* and of Van with the orchid she invents for him, *Ophrys veenae*. This idea is reinforced by the fact that according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, male insects “attempt to copulate with *Ophrys* flowers, which resemble females of their own species.” (see Picture 7).

![Picture 7. Ophrys scolopax](image)

Pseudo-copulation is also implicit in the reference to the “violet-soaked” brush, recalling the technique used by Ada to make butterflies mate: “male in your left hand, female in your right, or vice versa, with the tips of their abdomens touching, but they must be quite fresh and soaked in their favorite violet’s reek” (*Ada* 57).

Later on in the novel, this picture of Ada painting orchids recurs a number of times, as an emblem of Van and Nabokov’s attempt to recapture the ecstasy of one’s past. For instance at the end of chapter 38, Van tells Ada that one of these days “I will ask you for a repeat performance. You will sit as you did four years ago, at the same table, in the same light, drawing the same flower, and I shall go through the same scene with such joy, such pride” (*Ada* 264). Still later, when Van discovers a photograph taken just after one of
those ecstatic moments, he remembers how at the time the photograph was taken, he has anticipated its recollection:

in full, deliberate consciousness, at the moment of the hooded click, he bunched the recent past with the imminent future and thought to himself that this would remain an objective perception of the real present and that he must remember the flavor, the flash, the flesh of the present (as he, indeed, remembered it half a dozen years later—and now, in the second half of the next century) (Ada 402).

Perhaps the most poignant recurrence of the image is when Van suddenly recognizes Ada as Dolores, a gypsy girl in a trashy film: “The *gitanilla* bends her head over the live table of Leporello’s servile back to trace on a scap of parchent a rough map of the way to the castle [...] It is no longer another man’s Dolores, but a little girl twisting an aquarelle brush in the paint of Van’s blood, and Donna Anna’s castle is now a bog flower” (489). This image will indirectly cause the suicide of his and Ada’s half-sister, Lucette.

The image of Ada painting the orchid may be seen as the most comprehensive symbol of the writer’s desperate attempt to retain what he knows, all the time, to be fleeting, and un retrievable. As Nabokov’s insistence on chiaroscuro evocations indicates, the power of art is that it can sustain, for a few instants at least, the illusion of immediacy. By way of conclusion, I would like to quote one last passage from Ada, one last *ekphrasis*, this time penned by Demon. It is a depiction of Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* (see Picture 8),

![Picture 8. Hieronymus Bosch, The Garden of Earthly Delights (central panel), c. 1504](image)

which we may consider a perfect pictorial pendant to the edenic garden Van strives to recreate throughout much of the novel. Rather than dwell on the fugacity of pleasures, the vanity of this “garden of tongue-in-cheek delights” (436)—to quote Demon’s teasing *tmesis*—, Demon asserts that he is allergic to allegory and that “what we have to study [...] is the joy of the eye, the feel and the taste of the woman-sized strawberry that you
embrace with him” (437). And that is what I, you, we enjoy in Nabokov’s lusciously sensuous portraits of women.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE


NOTES

3. I would like to warmly thank Dmitri Nabokov for giving me permission to first access, then discuss this unpublished manuscript in the present article.
4. Quoted by Gombrich, 20. The portrait of La Belle Ferronnière (1490-95, see Picture 5) may be considered a masterpiece in the art of chiaroscuro: whilst Leonardo da Vinci displays a broader range of luminance than he actually perceives and hence imparts maximum radiance to the surface of the canvas, he contains this radiance by restricting the painting's range of hues. Despite the stark contrast between plain dark background and seated lady, a veiled sheen illuminates her facial traits as though they were seen through a transparent cloud.

![Leonardo da Vinci, Portrait of an Unknown Woman (La Belle Ferronière), c. 1490.](image)

5. A neologism replacing the suffix ‘de’ in order to convey Ada and Van's desperate attempt to rediscover the innocence of their budding romance.

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