

## **“A distortive glass of our distorted glebe”: mistranslation in Nabokov’s *Ada***

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Reflected words can only shiver  
Like elongated lights that twist  
In the black mirror of a river  
Between the city and the mist.

(Translator’s Introduction. Pushkin, tr. Nabokov, *Eugene Onegin*)

*This article examines the theme of mistranslation in Nabokov’s Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle in the context of the novel’s multilingual style. Focusing on a selection of deliberate mistranslations carried out by the central protagonists, Van and Ada Veen, the article demonstrates that such playful mistranslation serves a function that is much more significant than mere parody. Though, on the surface, the mistranslations parody those forms of ‘paraphrastic’ or ‘free’ translation that Nabokov and his characters consistently critique throughout Ada, each instance of deliberately ‘bad’ translation also contains extremely inventive forms of interlingual mutation and play which have aesthetically-productive defamiliarising effects. The article relates those instances of explicit mistranslation to the overall style of the novel, arguing that problems of interlingual transfer and communication are intrinsic to the multilingual aesthetic of the novel as a whole.*

### **0. Introduction**

Multilingualism is central to Nabokov’s oeuvre: a translator and self-translator as well as writer, his decision, half-way through his career, to abandon his “untrammled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue” in favour of what he rather artfully describes as “a second-rate brand of English” (Nabokov 2000a: 316-317) leads him to make increasing use of multilingual forms of defamiliarisation in his fiction. Such thematic and stylistic concern with interlingual contact reaches its apotheosis in the notoriously difficult *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, a novel that has itself been described as “a gigantic translation” (Cancogni 1985: 251).

*Ada*, the fictive memoir of Van Veen, tells the story of the lifelong love affair between Van and his ‘cousin’ Ada (who is in fact his sister). Natives of an imaginary ‘Amerussia’, the main characters of *Ada* are, like Nabokov, fluent in English, French and Russian; their language, and the language of the novel as a whole, is playful, excessively intertextual, and obsessively multilingual. Such polylingual excess is reflected in a consistent thematic concern with translation. In particular, the novel brutally parodies the practice of

liberal or 'readerly' translation: its very first sentence, as Nabokov's anagrammatic alter-ego "Vivian Darkbloom" informs us, parodies "mistranslations of Russian classics" (*Ada* 463), and, throughout the novel, its main protagonists revel in parodic processes of interlingual mutation and intentional mistranslation. *Ada*, however, reflects a profound ambivalence in Nabokov's attitude to interlingual contact: though, thematically, the novel reflects Nabokov's own extreme disdain for semantic inaccuracy in translation, its very style, as this article will demonstrate, is dependent upon complex processes of interlingual mutation and intentional mistranslation.

Throughout his oeuvre, Nabokov's fictional treatment of translation tends to highlight the incommensurability of different languages, and the failure of complete and effective interlingual communication. In *Bend Sinister*, mistranslation and the miscegenation of languages are associated with the crazy inversions of a dystopian state; in *Pale Fire*, translation is associated with Kinbotian narrative excess and the mutation of the 'original' work through misinterpretation; and in *Ada*, the theme of incest is closely linked to the linguistic and intertextual inter-breeding inherent to the novel's style.<sup>1</sup> Nabokov's own translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* reflects this sensitivity to interlingual distortion: the uncompromising pursuit of semantic fidelity leads him to sacrifice "everything (elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar) that the dainty mimic prizes higher than truth" (Pushkin 1964: viii). The text of the translation, itself intended as no more than "a crib, a pony" (Nabokov 1990: 38), is supplemented by footnotes describing all the historical, linguistic and stylistic aspects of the text that the translation is unable to include. Though Nabokov curbs his own translational creativity, the translation itself seems to have provided some form of creative catalyst: *Pale Fire* bears a direct formal relation to Nabokov's *Onegin*, and can even be read as a by-product of that translation (see Nabokov 1990: 77), *Lolita* shares many of its characteristics (Coates 1998: 107), and *Ada* is littered with lines from *Onegin* that, though unattributed in the text, are indicated in "Vivian Darkbloom's" notes. Translational failure is nonetheless productive; indeed the problem with translation, it seems, is that it *is* an inherently creative process. The inherent differences between languages, coupled with the translator's own creative consciousness, means that translation always and inevitably incurs the mutation of both text and target language. For Nabokov the scrupulous translator of another artist's work, such mutation is highly problematic<sup>2</sup>; for Nabokov the self-translator and writer, however, it can be productively harnessed.

Of course, Nabokov's fiction in English is already in a sense translational in that it has been written in a foreign language. As William F. Mackey (1993: 52) explains, "[m]ost of the difficulties of bicultural writers stem from the need to express in one language concepts that come to them from another – difficulties not only in expressing them, but even in thinking about them". In multilingual writing as in translation, the writer is faced with issues of untranslatability, interlingual distortion, differences in the rhythmic, phonetic and other material qualities of different languages, and so on.

Released from the constraints of semantic and stylistic 'fidelity' to another text, however, the multilingual writer is free to explore the expressive and aesthetic potential of translational processes to a much greater degree: interlingual contact can be used to produce a wide variety of formal and stylistic effects, while semantic mutation can itself be manipulated to produce polysemic and punning forms. And, rather than having to transfer the expressive or semantic qualities of one language into another, the multilingual writer can, to a much greater extent, use *both* languages in complementarity with each other. The by-products and problems of translation can thus become the basis of productive forms of linguistic defamiliarisation.

## 1. *Ada*

*Ada* encapsulates Nabokov's ambivalence towards linguistic and semantic mutation in translation. Van and *Ada*'s attitude to translation itself echoes Nabokov's own disdain for semantic inaccuracy, yet they parody bad translations and play with language to such an extent that their very mode of expression is often translational. *Ada*, for example, engages in a series of translations of English and French texts; examining a selection of these, we find that, besides their clear parodic function, they also gesture towards some more aesthetically-productive effects of interlingual mutation.

### 1.1. *Ada*'s mistranslations

Early on in Van and *Ada*'s acquaintance, *Ada* discourses fluently on Wallace Fowlie's translation of Rimbaud's poem "Mémoire". Fowlie's botanical ignorance is manifest in his mistranslations: in particular, the plant *souci d'eau* "has been traduced or shall we say transfigured" into "the asinine 'care of the water'". "Flowers", as Van punningly remarks, have been transformed "into bloomers" (*Ada* 55-6). The translator, rather than finding an appropriate botanical term for "*souci d'eau*", misses the fact that it is a plant at all, translating instead the literal meaning of its name. *Ada*'s disdain for such "English-speaking transmongrelizers" (*Ada* 56) as Fowlie leads her to compose her own parodic mistranslation of the first two lines of Marvell's "The Garden". Marvell's lines ("How vainly men themselves amaze / To win the palm, the oak, or bays"), are transformed by *Ada* into:

*En vain on s'amuse à gagner  
L'Oka, la Baie du Palmier ... (Ada 57)*<sup>3</sup>

*Ada* has turned herself into a French-speaking "transmongrelizer". Her mistranslation is phonetically rather than semantically directed: *to amaze oneself* becomes *s'amuser à*, a term which, though phonetically similar, in fact means 'to play at' or 'to amuse oneself at' rather than 'to amaze'. Similarly, the transition from "Oak" to "Oka" turns a tree into a river, and the

conjunction of “palm” and “bays” in “*la Baie du Palmier*” makes use of the false friend bay/*baie* (the French word for ‘bay tree’ is *laurier*) to manipulate the meaning of the English homonym, turning the bay tree into another kind of bay: an indentation in the shoreline. Ada thus not only criticises the tendency of certain translators to misunderstand the vocabulary of the original, but succinctly demonstrates the more general semantic distortions and inaccuracies inherent in any translation which makes use of paraphrase and adaptation in order to retain the formal and phonetic qualities of the source text. By succumbing to the false friendships offered by phonetic similarity between languages, the translator betrays the source text.

Ada’s “transversion” of Marvell completes her critique of Fowlie’s “bloomers”; it also directly mirrors Nabokov’s theoretical critique of what he calls “paraphrastic” translation – translation which “offer[s] a free version of the original, with omissions and additions prompted by the exigencies of form, the conventions attributed to the consumer, and the translator’s ignorance” (Pushkin 1964: vii). Nabokov barely disguises his disgust at thus “mutilating [a poem’s] meaning for the sake of a pleasure-measure rhyme” (ix), and Ada’s clever transmutations echo Nabokov’s critique by combining the faithful representation of formal elements with significant semantic mutation, exacerbated by misreadings of the original. There is, however, a further dimension to Ada’s practical example of how not to translate: a *fascination* with that very translational mutation that she mocks. Not content with simply providing a comically bad translation, Ada engages in an extremely skilful manipulation of interlingual ambiguity: for most of Marvell’s substantive words, she finds a phonetically close word in French. The play on homophony produces a collection of potentially divergent meanings, but Ada makes this series of semantic accidents cohere in a newly-formed overall meaning, without marring the phonetic similarity to the original which was the original aim. She thus explores the potential for the creative reconstruction of a poem through mistranslational mutation, while also demonstrating the extent of possible misunderstanding between languages.

An important element of Ada’s fascination with the creative possibilities of interlingual ambiguity is the humour produced by such erudite play. Her bizarre mistranslation of King Lear’s lament at Cordelia’s death is a case in point here. Shakespeare’s words –

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,  
And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more,  
Never, never, never, never, never! (*King Lear* 5.3.305-307) –

become, in Ada’s version:

*Ce beau jardin fleurit en mai,  
Mais en hiver  
Jamais, jamais, jamais, jamais, jamais  
N’est vert, n’est vert, n’est vert, n’est vert, n’est vert.* (Ada 76)

This particular transversion, with its suitably Arcadian theme, has more semantic congruence with Marvell's "Garden" than the lines of Shakespeare's mad king. The only line which is translated is "Never, never, never, never, never!" and it is actually 'translated' twice: once literally ("*jamais*"), and once phonetically ("*n'est vert*"). By turning "never" into "*n'est vert*", *Ada* both evokes the comical distortions that a French accent would lend to Lear's lines and emphasises the semantic possibilities of the foreigner's incorrect pronunciation. *Ada* thus pushes her paraphrastic parody to such an extreme that it no longer really works as parody, but begins to explore the creative possibilities of translating the sounds of words rather than their meanings: in the last line of *Ada*'s translation, it is not merely the rhyme scheme or metre that has directed the semantic content of the translation, but a full replication of the sound of the original words. A particular product of such playful paronomasia is interlingual complementarity: both languages are 'voiced' simultaneously, so that the English "never" is contained within the French "*n'est vert*". Language is thus doubly expressive, producing two meanings in two languages. The translational context of such semantic productivity is crucial here: it is only because we know that it is a 'translation' that we can hear the "never" in "*n'est vert*" in the first place. Such punning effects thus play, not only on the huge potential for interlingual misunderstanding and mistranslation, but on the creative possibilities unleashed by such interlingual contact and confusion.

The fact that both Van and *Ada* keep up their mistranslational play throughout the novel is an indication of how important such play is to the novel's aesthetic. Their treatment of another poem, François Coppée's "Matin d'octobre", illustrates further the potential productivity of interlingual error. *Ada* presents a series of versions of this poem, with varying degrees of inaccuracy and creativity. The original French reads as follows:

Leur chute est lente. On peut les suivre  
Du regard en reconnaissant  
Le chêne à sa feuille de cuivre,  
L'érable à sa feuille de sang. (*Ada* 194)

*Ada*'s first attempt to render this passage in English is as follows:

Their fall is gentle. The woodchopper  
Can tell, before they reach the mud,  
The oak tree by its leaf of copper,  
The maple by its leaf of blood. (*Ada* 103)

*Ada*'s concern, in classically "paraphrastic" style, has been to maintain the rhythm and rhyme-scheme of the original: the French eight-syllable lines find their English equivalent in iambic tetrameters, and the rhyme-scheme is faithfully maintained. "Copper" seems to have proved to be a singularly difficult word to rhyme, however, leading *Ada* to make significant changes to the meaning of the original for the sake of poetic form: the inclusion of a

“woodchopper” and “mud”, neither of which is even hinted at in Coppée, transforms falling leaves into falling trees.<sup>4</sup> Though the translation makes pretty verse, its alterations to the original are no less significant than her liberal treatment of Marvell, and make the poem more Ada’s than Coppée’s.

A later attempt, at which Ada expresses disdain,<sup>5</sup> attempts at least to retain the image of falling leaves:

Their fall is gentle. The leavesdropper  
Can follow each of them and know  
The oak tree by its leaf of copper,  
The maple by its blood-red glow. (*Ada* 195)

Rhythmic effects and rhyme-scheme are still evidently a priority, and this incurs some semantic mutation: the need to find a rhyme for “know” leads to the more abstract “glow” of the tree than the blood-red leaves referred to by Coppée. This is a fairly typical instance of rhyme-scheme being prioritised over meaning. In attempting to find a rhyme for the ever-problematic “copper”, however, the translator here incorporates the “splendid trouvaille”, as Demon calls it, of an invented word: “leavesdropper”. Again, this is a semantic imposition upon the original text, yet this is also an example of the potential productivity of translation, however troubled the transfer of meaning may be. Ada, dismissing her own ability as a translator, proclaims that “[a] paraphrase, even my paraphrase, is like the corruption of ‘snakeroot’ into ‘snagrel’ – all that remains of a delicate little birthwort” (*Ada* 194). The context of this comment is, as usual for Ada, botanical: a “snakeroot” is a plant whose roots are used as a remedy for snakebite; “birthwort” is a climbing plant of the same family which, as Van notices, in uncharacteristic concern for propriety, is used to ease childbirth. “Birthwort” also, however, contains a multilingual pun: if we read in it the German *Wort* (‘word’), this delicate plant also signifies *birthword*. Just as the plant is transformed by paraphrase, so also the original word – the birthwort – is distorted. However, “birthwort” can also signify the birth of words: Ada thus demonstrates the power of interlingual contact to *create* words – which is precisely what happens when a “leavesdropper” is brought into Coppée. Adaptive translation is thus the catalyst for forms of linguistic defamiliarisation. The linguistic inventiveness of *Ada* is bound up with such strange processes of interlingual contact: mistranslations – “bloomers” – are fundamental to the garden of *Ada*.

## 1.2. Intertextual mutations

*Ada* is consistently characterised by linguistic and intertextual miscegenation as well as false friendship. Ada, “who liked crossing orchids”, produces the following cross-breed poem:

*Mon enfant, ma sœur,  
 Songe à l'épaisseur  
 Du grand chêne à Tagne;  
 Songe à la montagne,  
 Songe à la douceur – (Ada 86)*

Ada here takes lines from Baudelaire's "L'Invitation au voyage"<sup>6</sup> and from the *romance* sung by Lautrec in Chateaubriand's *Les aventures du dernier Abencérage*<sup>7</sup>; mixing them together, she translates both poems into the context of her own childhood memories. Such free adaptation mirrors Ada's considerable talent for mistranslation: the product, though openly based upon other authors' works, is twisted into a highly individual hybrid form. The poem is thus closely linked to translation as it occurs in *Ada*: adaptation, whether into one's own language or into one's own personal context, is fundamentally creative, hence signalling not only its reliance on the original source-text(s), but also its transformation of those texts in a way that affirms its independence. The autonomous creativity apparent in translation, therefore, makes any claims of fidelity highly questionable; in *Ada*, however, such productivity is harnessed for expressive purposes.

A particularly interesting instance of intertextual appropriation is Van's poem at the beginning of Part I Chapter 22, a hybrid, cross-breed creation which is the product of various deliberate mistranslations and mutations of Chateaubriand through English, French and Russian. Van's poem is clearly a match for Ada's creative transversions, and demonstrates the exploitation of interlingual transformations for creative purposes. For the purposes of this article, however, I will focus only on the final stanza – a transmutation of Chateaubriand's lines "Oh! qui me rendra mon Hélène / Et ma montagne, et le grand chêne" into:

Oh, who will render in our tongue  
 The tender things he loved and sung? (*Ada* 12)

Van's version is phonetically-derived: "Oh! qui me rendra" is 'translated' into English to produce, not the semantically accurate "Oh, who will give back to me" but the phonetically similar "Oh, who will render". The mutation of *rendra* into "render" itself encapsulates the central themes of Van's poem: to express (render), to translate (render), and to give back (*rendre*) are voiced simultaneously through paronomastic translation, thus fully evoking the poem's (and the novel's) concern with constructing a multilingual, translational, mode of expression through which the past can be expressed.

The multilingual Van and Ada have not one "tongue" but many, however, so that when Van asks "who will render in our tongue", he is answering his own question: the very phrase is constructed through interlingual and intertextual mutation. "Our tongue", then, should really be plural. That Van uses the word *tongue* rather than the word *language* is, again, a product of translation. Just as Ada's earlier poem crosses Chateaubriand with

Baudelaire, so the following lines of Baudelaire's "L'Invitation au voyage" also make their presence felt here:

Tout y parlerait  
A l'âme en secret  
Sa *douce langue natale*. (Baudelaire 1961: 59, my emphasis)

Baudelaire's *langue natale* is present in Van's reference to "our tongue", and *douce* is evoked in "the *tender* things he loved and sung". The reference to Van and Ada's "tongue" is derived from two different intertexts and a mistranslation: it embodies the very nature of the language to which it refers. Interlingual distortion and error can thus become curiously *effective*. In addition, the play on polysemy that occurs throughout Van and Ada's mistranslations becomes a means of producing several layers of meaning at once. And, with characteristically precise control, all the accidental, confusing or inelegant by-products of imperfect interlingual communication contribute to a carefully layered, formally controlled, and extremely efficient mode of expression. Nabokov's multilingual style, though apparently complicating and confusing the semantic function of language(s), thus at the same time makes full use of the more positive products of the incommensurability of different languages.

### 1.3 Multilingual defamiliarisation

One effect of such multilingual and intertextual play is an acute tension between comprehensibility and incomprehensibility. On the one hand, playful multilingualism threatens the semantic stability of the text; on the other, processes such as interlingual complementarity can produce more effective – or at least, more complete – modes of signification through the interaction of different languages. This tension is, appropriately enough, most apparent in cases of madness or extreme passion, where the character's loss of emotional control and stability is reflected in language which, for all its excessively controlled punning, manifests such semantic instability as to threaten comprehensibility. Aqua, Van's putative mother, leaves a suicide note which is typical in this regard:

*Aujourd'hui (heute-toity!) I, this eye-rolling toy, have earned the psykitsch right to enjoy a landparty with Herr Doktor Sig, Nurse Joan the Terrible, and several 'patients,' in the neighboring bor (piney wood) [...] The hands of a clock, even when out of order, must know and let the dumbest little watch know where they stand, otherwise neither is a dial but only a white face with a trick mustache. Similarly, *chelovek* (human being) must know where he stands and let others know, otherwise he is not even a *klok* (piece) of a *chelovek*, neither a he, nor she, but 'a tit of it' as poor Ruby, my little Van, used to say of her scanty right breast. I, poor *Princesse Lointaine, très lointaine* by now, do not know where I stand. Hence I must fall. So adieu, my dear, dear son, and farewell, poor Demon, I do not know the date or the*



season, but it is a reasonably, and no doubt seasonably, fair day, with a lot of cute little ants queuing to get at my pretty pills. (*Ada* 30)

This passage manifests the kind of interlingual play that is typical of the novel's style throughout: it demonstrates the defamiliarising potential of translational processes, while also illustrating the semantic tensions produced by such processes. A particular characteristic of this passage is the translation of words between languages, and especially Russian words into English. This is a common feature of *Ada*, and seems initially to assist the monolingual reader. However, on closer inspection it becomes evident that such semantic repetition functions more as a source of formal patterning and word-play, ultimately making us focus on the surfaces of words at the expense of their meanings.

The first instance of translation in this passage, for example, does not serve to simplify semantic matters at all: "Aujourd'hui" is translated into the German "heute", which is itself transformed into an echo of "hoity-toity". On the one hand, this playful punning is semantically effective in that it refers to the haughtiness inherent in her use of French – a language of status for the intelligentsia and aristocracy in pre-revolutionary Russia. On the other hand, such play simultaneously turns our attention *away* from the meanings of the words and towards their surface qualities. A complex system of sound-patterning is set up: "(heute-toity!) I, this eye-rolling toy" forms a chiasmic structure, surrounding the I/eye pun with the phonetic repetition of *toity/toy*. Despite the semantic repetition produced by the translation of "aujourd'hui" into "heute", focus is deflected away from the actual meaning of these words towards the rather more ambiguous surface play of their sounds.

The translations from Russian to English have a similar effect: the presence of both "chelovek" and "klok" seems merely to serve the purpose of punning "klok" with "clock". The entire section comparing the purpose of a clock to that of a human being revolves around this particular pun, bringing together, by analogy, not so much the direct objects of that analogy (people and clocks) but the two disparate meanings of the *klok/clock* homonym. The content of Aqua's letter is thus subordinated to wordplay; even her reference to the weather seems to be there only so that she can play on "reasonably" and "seasonably". The final reference to "cute little ants *queuing* to get at my pretty pills" alliteratively exemplifies Aqua's concern with the aesthetic surface of words (and pills) rather than their unpleasant actual significance. Her words are themselves merely a "trick mustache" then: they relate primarily to their own abstract play. A curious effect is thus created: the very process of destabilising the referential function of language is paradoxically effective in that it reflects the superficiality of Aqua's display of linguistic wealth and class-status.

It is also necessary to consider Aqua's distressed state here (she is clinically insane by the time she takes her life), and to note that, though the characters of *Ada* are always playing with languages to some extent, the

most extreme multilingualism and punning occurs at moments of crisis: on Van's separation from Ada after finding out about her infidelity (*Ada* 237), for example, or the sexually-charged reunion of Van and Ada's sister Lucette (*Ada* 295-6). In Aqua's letter, we get a sense that her excessive punning control over words might be mirroring her attempt to control her troubled psychic state. Such language thus becomes a means, not of signifying her emotional distress, but of avoiding such signification: the words themselves, caught up in phonetic and semantic trickery, do not directly signify Aqua's turmoil, but only her desire to contain it. Roman Jakobson (1985: 153) writes that the "poetic function" of language, by "promoting the palpability of signs", "deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects"; this is exactly what Aqua's language is doing here. For Jakobson, "poetic" language makes use of paronomasia to enhance sound symbolism and to draw "[w]ords similar in sound [...] together in meaning" (167). The extent of paronomasia in Aqua's letter is so extreme as to constitute some form of parody of 'poetic' language, and as such, the punning does not produce any referentially-helpful forms of, for example, sound symbolism. However, there is one way in which the form of the language does tend to counter the signifier/signified divide: the constant overdetermination and verbal play produces a fragmented language where different languages and divergent meanings, though held together in the patterns of the text, still threaten to pull that text apart. A tension is thus created, between the centripetal effects of overt linguistic control and the centrifugal effects of proliferating meanings produced by multilingual play, which mirrors Aqua's attempt to control her own psychic disorder. Interlingual contact and tension thus, paradoxically, provide a particularly effective way of representing the character's distress.

## 2. The "syncopal kick" of exile

The levels of artifice at such moments of multilingual excess are remarkable. They can also be related directly to Nabokov's own exilic experience. Considering his own exile from Russia in his memoir *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov explains the aesthetic effects of cultural displacement:

I wonder [...] whether there is really much to be said for more anesthetic destinies, for, let us say, a smooth, safe, small-town continuity of time, with its primitive absence of perspective [...]

The break in my own destiny affords me in retrospect a syncopal kick that I would not have missed for worlds. (Nabokov 2000b: 193)

Rivers and Walker (1982: 278) note that "anesthetic" here denotes not only the numbness of plainer, home-bound destinies, but also "an-aesthetic": a kind of *aesthetic* numbness which accompanies this lack of perspective. The "syncopal kick" imparted by exile has a direct aesthetic effect, then, one which, fundamental to Nabokov's art, consistently implies the punning pres-

ence of “worlds” in words. The outsider’s perspective is indeed a valuable one, providing both an awareness of different “worlds” (hence also Nabokov’s own preoccupation with that theme), but also a different perspective on language. That Nabokov seeks to maximise the effects of his exilic and multilingual perspective is indicated by *Speak, Memory*’s own mode of production through translational revision between English, French and Russian, efficiently described by Nabokov as a “re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place” (Nabokov 2000b: 10). The knowledge and use of different languages in different cultural contexts produces a complex linguistic awareness which, in foregrounding linguistic materiality and problematising any stable semantic function, is precisely the kind of perspective to produce paronomasia.

The worlds/words connection is particularly apt in the context of *Ada*: not only is the novel multilingual (and obsessively paronomastic); it also presents a complex system of alternative worlds and ‘realities’. “Antiterra”, the world in which the novel is set, is an odd construct, a fantasy country which distorts the political and natural geography of the world as we know it. America, Canada and Russia, English, French and Russian, are all “at home” in a set of “granoblastically”-mingling “provinces” (*Ada* 9) in an ideally multicultural and multilingual United States. In effect, Nabokov’s own cultural and linguistic experience as a Russian exile in the US has been carried over – or, we might say, *translated* – into the concrete geography of an imagined world in which North America contains a strong Russian cultural and linguistic presence. The Veens’ proficiency in English, French and Russian is thus the norm in this region of Antiterra. They also manifest those specifically linguistic products of the “syncopal kick” of exile: an acute awareness of linguistic relativity and hence of the inherent arbitrariness of language. Their obsession with translation in its various forms reflects this: they are fascinated by interlingual distortion, and never entertain the possibility of any such thing as ‘accurate’ translation. As I have demonstrated, interlingual mutation can produce interesting effects, and can be used as a mode of defamiliarising language. However, it seems that a tendency to defamiliarise language(s) is itself in part a product of the multilingual consciousness of these characters: their fascination with semantic ambiguity is combined with a heightened awareness of the materiality of language(s), evident in their obsession with anagrams, homonyms, alliteration, assonance and other forms of linguistic patterning.

“Antiterra” is a distorted version of our world, but is itself refracted in an alternative world, “Terra”, the imaginary construct of Antiterra’s madmen and visionaries. Confusingly, Terra bears a strong resemblance to the world as the reader knows it. Nabokov inverts ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’, thus bringing the multilingualism of the text to its logical ontological conclusion: the relativity of different languages is reflected in the relativity of different ‘realities’. Indeed, throughout Nabokov’s fiction, multilingualism is closely related to the textual construction of explicitly artificial ‘realities’ and ‘worlds’.

This is even the case in Nabokov's self-translations: Jane Grayson (1977: 215) concludes that the process of interlingual transfer contributes to the introduction of higher levels of artifice in the translated texts than in the original versions. As I have indicated, however, Nabokov's Antiterranean world playfully reflects his particular experience of linguistic and cultural relativity, so that his own bilingual competence and bicultural existence as a Russian exile in America is literalised in a hybrid fictional "America". Antiterra may be a fictional construction, but its cultural and linguistic norms relate to Nabokov's own exilic experience and cannot therefore be dismissed as merely fantastical.

### 3. Conclusion

In Nabokov's work, 'reality' is often translated (and refracted) through the mind and voice of the narrator. The strangeness of Nabokov's insane characters and invented worlds corresponds to the strangeness of their language. So in *Ada*, the levels of distorting multilingualism increase with characters' increasing levels of madness or emotional intensity. The incestuousness, insanity and dubious morality of Nabokov's characters in *Ada* seems inevitably linked to their linguistic idiosyncrasies – idiosyncrasies which in turn seem to play a large part in constructing the textual 'reality' that they narrate. The correspondence of ontological and semantic ambiguity is thus central to Nabokov's fiction: language is estranged in order to construct and to represent estranged worlds. Though Nabokov celebrates the expressive possibilities of multilingualism, its power is not merely mimetic or representational, however. His work seems to seek a perpetuation of Babelian plurality, and consistently foregrounds *artifice* rather than *mimesis*. He takes the chaos of Babelian interlingual distortion, and draws that chaos together into a patterned form of ordered multiplicity. The resultant formliness or "plexed artistry" (Nabokov 1991: 53) both imposes order upon semantic and ontological chaos, and draws upon that chaos, so that the text manifests a tension between the centrifugal forces of ontological and linguistic diversity, and the centripetal forces of imposed artistic control. Hence the apparent contradictions inherent in his attitude to translation, where the absolute fidelity required in translating the work of others is matched by a deliberate recourse to interlingual distortion in his fiction. Nabokov's English fiction brings to the fore the incommensurability of different languages, and from those irrevocable differences constructs fictional worlds that are in turn mirrored in correspondingly strange styles. The miscegenation of languages, misinterpretation and mistranslation might be associated with the betrayal of original texts, emotional instability, and the amoral incestuous sexuality of the Veens, but those very distortions are fundamental to the "magnificent acrobatics" (152) of *Ada*.

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<sup>1</sup> George Steiner (1972: 19) argues that multilingualism, translation, and self-translation are closely related to the theme of incest in Nabokov's work and in *Ada* in particular. D. Barton Johnson (1986: 251, 253) argues that the incest theme in *Ada* works as a metaphor "for intercourse among kindred works of art" in the shape of

the high levels of intertextuality apparent in the text, as well his “incestuous” use of his own translations of other works.

<sup>2</sup> The rigorous pursuit of semantic fidelity is not characteristic of Nabokov’s entire career as a translator, however; indeed, *Onegin* stands in stark contrast to the liberality of his earlier “smooth and elegant” domesticating translations of English and French works into Russian (Coates 1998: 93).

<sup>3</sup> “Vivian Darkbloom” translates this back into English as “In vain, one gains in play / The Oka river and Palm Bay...” (*Ada* 465).

<sup>4</sup> Brian Boyd (1985: 38-9) details the significance of this mistranslation in the context of Ada’s sister Lucette’s tragic fate.

<sup>5</sup> The authorship of this translation is ambiguous: Boyd (2005) suggests that it was in fact composed by Van, not Ada.

<sup>6</sup> The poem begins: “Mon enfant, ma sœur, / Songe à la douceur / D’aller là-bas vivre ensemble! / Aimer à loisir, / Aimer et mourir / Au pays qui te ressemble!” (Baudelaire 1961: 58).

<sup>7</sup> The only line explicitly taken from this poem is from the last stanza, which begins: “Oh! qui me rendra mon Hélène, / Et ma montagne, et le grand chêne?” (Chateaubriand 1996: 236). ‘Vivian Darkbloom’ remarks that these lines form “one of the leitmotifs of the present novel” (*Ada* 467).