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Lolita in *Lolita*, or the Garden, the Gate and the Critics

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In 1959 Vladimir Nabokov told a group of eager journalists that he cried when composing Humbert's final parting from Lolita. Nabokov's wife Véra was seated next to him and deftly turned the listeners' attention to the tears shed by Lolita herself: "She cries every night and the critics are deaf to her sobs."¹

"Hurricane Lolita," as Nabokov called the mediatic storm circling around his novel, was still gathering force in 1959. Given what a complex and deceptive work *Lolita* is, it should perhaps come as little surprise that many early critics failed to pick up the sounds of the girl's sobs. That more recent ones should continue to be deaf to those same sobs is another matter.

A Rather Common, Unwashed Little Girl

In his review of *Lolita* from 1959, novelist and critic Robertson Davies told readers that the book treated, "not the corruption of an innocent child by a cunning adult, but the exploitation of a weak adult by a corrupt child."² Here, susceptible Humbert falls into the clutches of a duplicitous American girl-child. Surprising though the appraisal might sound, it was far from the only one of its kind. In a letter to the author which Nabokov held onto, Stella Estes characterized Lolita as "a charming brat lifted from an ordinary existence by a special brand of love."³

1. The occasion was a press conference to promote *Lolita* in Paris and was reported in *Les nouvelles littéraires*, 29 October 1959. The incident is cited by Schiff (255).

2. "Mania for Green Fruit." Cited by Boyd, *American Years* 230.

3. Unpublished letter in Vladimir Nabokov Archive. Cited by Boyd, *American Years* 236.

Lolita may succeed in being charming now and again, but the reason for our interest in her is that Humbert lifts her out of her ordinary realm to enshrine her in a higher one.

Seven years after these appraisals and Véra's accompanying admonition to the critics, the first book-length critical study of Nabokov's work appeared: Page Stegner's *Escape Into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov*. Therein, Stegner showed himself moved by *Lolita* but not by its heroine. "Humbert's eye confronts vulgarity," he wrote, "and converts it through imagination and subsequently language into a thing of beauty. Lolita is in reality a rather common, unwashed little girl whose interests are entirely plebian, though, in certain respects, precocious" (Stegner 114–15). Precociousness is conceded to the untidy pre-teen, but little more. Her plebian light gutters alongside the great patrician one shed by Humbert. As the title would lead one to expect, Stegner makes of *Lolita* a fundamentally aesthetic tale. Lolita herself is perfectly common and uninteresting. In this, she is like the raw material of reality before the aesthetic eye has begun to transform it into art. It is the magic of Humbert's art that converts her "vulgarity" into "a thing of beauty" and that leads the reader to find her interesting. Stegner's cool view of the state of artistic affairs in the novel is given an image to complete it: Lolita is "rough glass" transformed by Humbert into "sparkling crystal" (114). (It is possible that Stegner consciously or unconsciously borrowed his image from Nabokov's first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, where "the rhythm of [Sebastian's] inner being" is seen by his brother as "so much richer than that of other souls," and is described as "a crystal among glass" [64].)

This vision of a rough and vulgar Lolita only rendered interesting by dint of Humbert's enlivening eye is an idea that earned critical currency. In the fifty years since *Lolita*'s initial publication, such strong opinions have not proven isolated ones. Werner Vordtriede echoed Stegner's sentiment in an essay published that same year.⁴ An anonymous review in the German weekly *Der Spiegel* published three years later stated the same (see Balestrini 187). More recently, John Fletcher has written in his *Novel and Reader* that "Humbert is seduced by a knowing Lolita, and not the other way round. But America having, in the person of its

4. "Die Masken des Vladimir Nabokov"; see Balestrini 187–88.

young people, ravished the staid Europeans eventually abandons them” (161). Fletcher’s remark displays the two most common manners of turning a deaf ear to Lolita’s sobs: making of Lolita a wiser child than Humbert is an adult, and making her a figure or emblem for some value or place (in this case, “America”). Lolita, the diminutive democrat, is rendered interesting by dint of Humbert’s aristocratic art.

More extreme in its expression of both of these tendencies are the writings of Nabokov critic Sarah Herbold. Of the scene early in the novel where Humbert is furtively masturbating against Lolita’s legs, she wrote in 1998: “Humbert does not seem to be the only person who is enjoying himself here. Lolita may be not only having an orgasm but also orchestrating their mutual stimulation” (“*Lolita* and the Woman Reader” 82). Not only is Lolita well aware of what Humbert is doing, Herbold speculates that she is “enjoying [her]self.” What is more, she finds this enjoyment so tangible, taking such definite and intense form, that she advances the hypothesis that Lolita is “having an orgasm.” Not only is Lolita complicit in Humbert’s surreptitious pleasure, and not only is she equally sharing in it, Herbold finds it eminently possible that it is not Humbert who is controlling the situation, but that it is instead she who is “orchestrating their mutual stimulation” (82). Specifying that this is not something that Lolita is caught up in in the moment, Herbold sees this as part of a concerted plan on Lolita’s part. Humbert refers in the passage to Lolita’s “perfunctory underthings,” which remark Herbold uses to extrapolate that the girl has on “an erotic costume, which Lolita uses to direct the action” (82). It bears noting that Herbold’s analysis most resembles another writer speculating on Lolita’s real motivations: the alternate chronicler of Lolita’s life, Pia Pera. To remain with the example at hand, Pera’s Lolita is equally excited by and similarly controlling in this Sunday scene (*Diario di Lo* 102–3; *Lo’s Diary* 132–33).⁵

5. Just as in this first scene, when Lolita and Humbert first become lovers the event will be decidedly untraumatic for Lolita: “That’s that. Hummie’s definitely a bore in bed” (“Tutto qui. A letto Hummie è decisamente noioso”); and it will be characterized as a product of her competitiveness with her mother: “Now I’ll return him to Plasticmom [Dolly’s pet name for her mother]” (“Ora di renderlo a mammoplastica”) (129; 165). “It’s time for him to return to spiritual relationships: he’s too inept for the body to body [troppo inetto per i corpo a corpo]” (129; 165).

In the pages that follow, Herbold goes on to radically update Stegner's evaluation of *Lolita* as "a rather common, unwashed little girl." For her, *Lolita* is "white trash" (83). Whatever sobbing the girl then goes on to do is not of much interest to Herbold, as she finds the trashy little girl the last thing but deserving of the reader's commiseration. Placing her cards on the table, Herbold states that she finds the whole latter section of the novel rather uninteresting as the characters at the end of it seem to her far less "complex" than at the story's outset. "The purified Humbert and Lolita," she writes, "are really mere ghosts or alter egos of their former selves. They have shed their vitality along with their naughtiness" (84). Following the axiom that only evil is truly interesting, Herbold finds a move toward repentance in the novel disappointing and uninteresting. What is most strange about this judgment is not Herbold's position on repentance—which is common enough—but that she classes Humbert and *Lolita* alongside one another as if they were some sort of criminal duo. In her description, *Lolita* sounds every bit as "naughty" as Humbert.⁶

6. *Lolita* may be "white trash" in this essay, but on another occasion, Herbold does take Humbert energetically to task. In this essay, she says that "he appears as a diabolic antichrist, an unrepentant sadist and murderer who has no qualms about brutalizing his victims and enjoys laughing at their suffering. This Humbert is a fierce misogynist, a misanthrope, and arrogant snob, a racist, and an antisemite" ("Reflections on Modernism" 148). She goes on to note that Humbert's "actions and his narration represent a violent Iagoan or Sadean or Ivanish or Melvillean response to these [social] constraints: with all his might he hurls himself against them in a battle to the death" (148). Not inclined to let anyone off the hook, she claims in another essay, without any supporting evidence, that Nabokov's unfamiliarity with Olympia Press (and its pornographic publications) was feigned ("*Lolita* and the Woman Reader" 72). In a reply to criticism of this essay, Herbold proclaimed: "I did not argue, nor do I believe, that *Lolita* is a moral novel. It could equally well be said to be immoral or amoral. Indeed ... *Lolita* is brilliant precisely because it renders all such judgments suspect, at the same time that it makes them seem crucial and even indubitable" (Herbold, 1997, 235). In a more recent essay Herbold flatly contradicts her earlier claim: "*Lolita* is ... a moral book: because it acknowledges the inevitably compromising moral complexity not only of human beings but of art" ("Response to Amy Spungen" 79). Herbold's vehement reading is determined by her avowed wish to combat feminist critics such as Virginia Blum and Colleen Kennedy. According to Herbold, Nabokov "suggests that the male reader wrongly assumes that possessing a penis automatically makes

Herbold's interest soon veers off in a new direction, as she claims that "the 'magic friction' between Humbert's penis and Lolita's thinly clad buttocks ... is also occurring between reader and author. That is, the reader is pleurably and painfully rubbing himself or herself up against (and/or being rubbed by) the shifting layers of the story" (83). This allegory of sexualized reading she finds in the passage is what then concerns her, and her interest in the novel recedes to an emblematic distance.

Herbold is far and away the harshest judge of twelve-year-old Lolita, but her twofold response to the girl's sobs is much like those of her predecessors. On the one hand, like Davies and Stegner before her, she dismisses Lolita as not being worthy of a smart reader's pity because of the girl's lack of cultivation (and hygiene), as well as because of a certain precocious sensual prescience. On the other hand, Herbold emblemizes Lolita, making of her relationship with Humbert the symbol or cipher of another relationship (one between reader and text). The first of these responses takes Lolita seriously as a character, but credits her as the corrupting or co-corrupting influence, in addition to being generally uninteresting or unlikable. Her sobs then might be heard, but fail to move. In Part One of *Lolita*, Humbert does nothing so

him intelligent, and [Nabokov] implies that in reading *Lolita* the male reader is willingly making a dupe of himself even while he imagines himself to be very powerful" ("Response to Amy Spungen" 86). We read that Charlotte Haze "is much more powerful than she appears. Indeed, she subtly controls Humbert's fate from the beginning, not only as a character but also as a representation of a real female author who has already written a novel that anticipates many of *Lolita*'s themes" ("Response to Amy Spungen" 93). (She is not completely alone in this idea, as Alexandrov also considers Charlotte, in the form of a ghost or ministering angel, to be controlling, to some extent, Humbert's fate.) This evocation of Charlotte as "real female author" is, in her reading, Charlotte Bronte and that author's *Jane Eyre*, which she finds evoked, in the absence of any internal evidence whatsoever, in Charlotte's name. For Herbold, Charlotte Haze is an "allusion" to Charlotte Bronte: "she is a kind of hidden avenging deity who, through Lolita ... controls the plot of Humbert/Nabokov's book, which is partly modeled on and a response to *Jane Eyre*" (93). The philological evidence here limits itself to the fact that both books involve a fire. Her essay closes with the conclusion: "*Lolita* thus produces a woman reader as the modern reader par excellence: one who recognizes herself as being as self-divided as she is integrated, as guilty as she is innocent, and as powerful as she is powerless" (97).

artfully and ably as portray Lolita as complicit in his adult desire. Critics like Herbold take him at his word, paying comparatively little attention to Part Two of the book, where he progressively reveals the depths of his depravity and the pain he causes Lolita (Herbold tellingly finds this latter half of the book flatly uninteresting). The other method Herbold employs, like Fletcher before her, is to create distance from Lolita as a character by seeing her as a symbol—in Fletcher's case, for the unwashed new world, in Herbold's for the desiring reader.

Before looking more closely into the causes for critics' turning a deaf ear to Lolita's sobs, let us examine for a moment symbolic interpretations like the ones above. The first thing to be noted is how little sympathy Nabokov had with such approaches.

Speaking of his teaching days at Cornell, Nabokov once noted, "Every time one of my students used the word 'symbol' in a paper, I gave them a bad grade" ("je donnais une mauvaise note chaque fois qu'ils [his students] employaient le mot 'symbole'") (Interview with Pierre Dommergues, 97). Similarly, he later reminisced: "I once gave a student a C-minus, or perhaps a D-plus just for applying to [Joyce's *Ulysses*] the titles borrowed from Homer" (*Strong Opinions* 55).⁷

Given Nabokov's grading scale, it should come as no surprise that ways of reading or writing which systematically undermine the sovereignty of the detail are anathema. Reading for the symbolical plot so incenses Nabokov because it distracts attention from the details of the work of art. "I detest symbols and allegories," we read in "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" (*Lolita* 314). In the list of items offered as advice to an imaginary "budding literary critic" Nabokov writes: "Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint. Ignore allegories" (*Strong Opinions* 66). This position should not be seen as simply appertaining to the bluff and bluster of Nabokov's American literary persona,

7. The first edition of Joyce's *Ulysses* employed chapter titles taken from scenes of *The Odyssey* ("Telemachus," "The Lotus-Eaters," "Ithaca," etc.). Joyce removed the chapter titles from the second and all subsequent editions of the work—which Nabokov held for a fine idea. In Borges's 1935 text "The Approach to Al-Mu'Tasim," the narrator holds these Homeric titles in similar esteem: "The repeated, but insignificant, contacts of Joyce's *Ulysses* with the Homeric *Odyssey* continue to enjoy—I shall never know why—the harebrained admiration of the critics" (42).

as thirty years earlier he had offered the same advice to his mother. In a letter from 1935 concerning his *Invitation to a Beheading*, he warns her that she “shouldn’t look for any symbol or allegory” therein (cited by Boyd, *Russian Years* 419). Responding later to a work analyzing symbols in his own writing, Nabokov said that “the notion of symbol has always been abhorrent to me. ... The symbolism racket in schools attracts computerized minds but destroys plain intelligence as well as poetical sense. It bleaches the soul. It numbs all capacity to enjoy the fun and enchantment of art” (*Strong Opinions*, 304–5). Searching for symbols is an activity that bleaches away the color of life, stifles the poetic, renders unintelligent and unintelligible. And so it, like allegory, should be ignored.

While Nabokov’s directions concerning symbolic readings hold a special interest, they do not need to exercise a special authority. There might well be symbolic aspects of which he remained unaware and which it is worth a reader’s while to puzzle out. As concerns the case of *Lolita*, we might note that symbolic interpretations of the character of Lolita need not be coupled with an express disdain for that character (as was the case with the critics seen above) and that such readings are not always to Lolita’s discredit. The most interesting and intelligent of these is to be found in the chapter of Nike Wagner’s *Traumtheater: Szenarien der Moderne* dedicated to “Lulu and Lolita.” Therein, Wagner states: “Lolita is the creative impulse itself, the desire for art, a name for the unnameable, for the source and the drive to write. She is the very incarnation of the artistic understanding of the self” (“Lolita is der kreative Impuls selbst, die Schöpfungslust, die Kunst-Lust, nur ein Name für das Unbenennbare, den Schreibdrang, Schreibquell. Sie ist die Inkarnation des künstlerischen Selbstverständnisses”; 223). For Wagner, Lolita is a name for the unnamable inasmuch as she is a name for what drives Humbert to relate his joys and pains, his hopes and desires. Lolita is an emblem of what all art strives towards—the desire for creation, and thus “Lolita is the creative impulse itself.” This involves a psychological dimension, and Wagner thus writes, “the essence of language and the essence of the ‘impossible’ woman as pre-adolescent ... condemn the man as lover to a hopeless masochism” (“das Wesen der Sprache und das Wesen der ‘unmöglichen’ Frau als Minderjährige ... verurteilen den Mann als Liebenden zu hoffnungslosem Masochismus”;

224). This then leads to the final judgment that “Lulu and Lolita are ciphers for aesthetic desire that reveal that desire’s profound roots in sexual desire” (“Lulu und Lolita sind Chiffren der ästhetischen Lust, die darin auch ihre tiefe Verwurzelung in der sexuellen Lust bekanntgibt”; 224). This idea concerning the sexual sources of creation is an interesting one, but as concerns the characters it expresses itself through, it must nonetheless express itself at a high level of abstraction. It is for this reason not surprising that such positions are rarely accompanied by very thorough or very close readings of the novel, and have a tendency to be, as is Wagner’s, comparative examinations where *Lolita* is lined up as one of several standard-bearers for whatever is to be represented and revealed. Such investigations are a credit to speculations on the sexual side of creation, if not always to such specific works as *Lolita*.

These various methods of turning a deaf ear to Lolita’s sobs have a deeper source than personal antipathies and the desire to find concrete figures for abstract problems. The problem is that, in a certain sense, too much is made of Lolita.

Discussing *Lolita* in the second volume of his biography of Nabokov, Brian Boyd speaks out against those who portray Lolita as a rather common, unwashed little girl (he does not refer to Stegner, though he does refer to Davies). Boyd writes that “Nabokov ... creates a Lolita far more rounded and rich than that flat image and allows even Humbert himself in the last third of the book to recognize that that portrait does her no justice” (*American Years* 236). As a corrective to callous and superficial readings of the novel like those Véra Nabokov had already objected to (it is worth noting that Boyd worked closely with Véra Nabokov on her husband’s biography), it is laudable. But it fails to note something fundamental. The image of Lolita in *Lolita* is indeed a flat one. And that is a fundamental part of the story.

Safe Solipsism

This making of Lolita a fundamentally flat figure is best seen in the scene in the book that describes Humbert’s first fall. It is a Sunday morning and Lolita, after a tiff with her mother, has stayed home from church. The living room of the Haze house is depicted in bower-like terms—“the implied sun pulsated in the supplied poplars; we were fantastically and divinely alone”—and the entire scene comes to be more and more

bathed in a parodically Edenic light (60). Lolita enters, smartly lofting “a beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple” (58). Humbert is at once Adam and Tempter as he snatches it from her, then offers it to her. They sing and tussle. After a few moments, as Humbert’s “corpuscles of Krause” reach a sufficient and summary state of excitement, we read that “the least pressure would suffice to set all paradise loose” (60). It is given; it is lost.

The playful staging of the lovers’ first fall should not blind us to what it secretly sets in motion. The whole scene is treated by Humbert with high irony, but one can see through the irony that its import, for him, is great. Humbert the Onanist relates:

What had begun as a delicious distension of my innermost roots became a glowing tingle which *now* had reached that state of absolute security, confidence and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life. With the deep hot sweetness thus established and well on its way to the ultimate convulsion, I felt I could slow down in order to prolong the glow. Lolita had been safely solipsized. The implied sun pulsated in the supplied poplars; we were fantastically and divinely alone; I watched her, rosy, gold-dusted, beyond the veil of my controlled delight, unaware of it, alien to it. ... I had ceased to be Humbert the Hound, the sad-eyed degenerate cur grasping the boot that would presently kick him away. I was above the tribulations of ridicule, beyond the possibilities of retribution. In my self-made seraglio, I was a radiant and robust Turk. ... Suspended on the brink of that voluptuous abyss (a nicety of physiological equipoise comparable to certain techniques in the arts) ... (60; Nabokov’s italics; my underlining)

What Humbert describes here is his ability to achieve a state of “absolute security, confidence and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life,” because he is able to “solipsize” Lolita, because he is able to place a “veil of ... controlled delight” between himself and her which renders her not only “unaware” of his pleasure, but “alien” to it. What is more, Humbert’s subterfuge allows him to “st[eal] the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor” (62). As he here describes it, for Humbert it is only in masturbation that an imaginative realm free from the limitations and vicissitudes of one’s relations with others, of

the constant conflict of desires and the compromised and compromising forms of satisfaction or frustration (evoked by the hectic movement from *cur* to *Turk* in the passage's metaphors), can be reached. External reality plays of course a role in the attainment of this pleasure, but it is a reality made passionate by being made passive to imaginative construction and creation. The reader should not then be surprised when Humbert then immediately likens his masturbatory procedure to "certain techniques in the arts."

Humbert will then note of his masturbatory experience:

Thus had I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe—and I was safe. What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own. And nothing prevented me from repeating a performance that affected her as little *as if she were a photographic image rippling upon a screen* and I a humble hunchback abusing myself in the dark. (62; my italics.)

As with the "safely solipsizing" mentioned above, Humbert again stresses the *safety* of his disguised pleasure—the fact that he had done nothing harmful to the twelve-year-old he so desires, as "what I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita." Humbert's masturbatory rationale involves simply dividing Dolores Haze into a "she" in her own right and person, and "another, fanciful Lolita" that is the object of his discreet desire and that he himself "creat[ed]." His *image* of Lolita is then credited with more "reality" than the "real" Lolita ("perhaps more real than Lolita"). In a little-attended-to remark from the *Apostrophes* interview, Nabokov underlines precisely this element (though with characteristic indirection), by reminding his listeners that "it is this sad satyr's imagination which makes a magical creature of this young American schoolgirl," and to underline this fact, Nabokov reminds his interviewer that this is "an essential aspect of this singular book" ("C'est l'imagination du triste satyre qui fait une créature magique de cette petite écolière américaine. ... Et voici un aspect essentiel d'un livre singulier"). Through the passion of his secret senses Hum-

bert has imagined her out of existence.⁸

Unsurprisingly, this image of Lolita is then likened to a photographic or filmic image because after Humbert's masturbatory escapade that image is depicted as having no more individual agency than such a representation ("... no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own").⁹ Lolita is solipsized to the point where she ceases, in Humbert's description, to be an *ethical subject* and becomes an *aesthetic object*, an *inspiring image*. Because of the imaginative investment to which she is subject, this other "fanciful Lolita" is described as "perhaps more real than Lolita"—a phrase all the more striking given Nabokov's special usage of the term "reality" as indexical not of the physical reality or durability of some substance or state of affairs, but instead of the degree of imaginative investment in a given perception.¹⁰ While Humbert

8. It should be noted that in Nabokov's Russian translation of *Lolita* the phrase "Lolita had been safely solipsized" is, following Alexandrov's literal translation from the Russian *Loltia* into English, "Lolita's reality was successfully cancelled" (*Nabokov's Otherworld* 170–71). To augment the aura of solipsism, Humbert is described as wearing in this scene "a purple silk dressing gown" with its suggestions of sovereignty and sexuality. Carl Proffer suggests that the purple robe is an allusion to Gogol's *Dead Souls* (Proffer 140n47).

9. In this connection one should recall Lolita's reason for ultimately leaving Quilty—his insistence that she act in one of his private pornographic films. On quite a different note, one finds a prefiguration of this Lolita, "affected ... as little as if she were a photographic image rippling upon a screen," in a figure from Proust's *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, where the latter notes of the pleasure reaped in being presented to Albertine by Elstir, that "il en est des plaisirs comme des photographies. Ce qu'on prend en présence de l'être aimé n'est qu'un cliché négatif, on le développe plus tard, une fois chez soi, quand on a retrouvé à sa disposition cette chambre noire intérieure dont l'entrée est 'condamnée' tant qu'on voit du monde," with the difference that there is a time lag that for Proust is bound up with what he terms "the internal defectiveness of the present," which necessitates such an operation. This is not only fundamental to Proust's conception of pleasure, but what most separates him from Nabokov (Proust 2:227).

10. In Nabokov's universe, "life does not exist without a possessive epithet," as "all reality is comparative reality" (*Strong Opinions* 118; *Lectures on Literature* 146). In an interview with Pierre Dommergues, Nabokov remarked: "Le mot réalité est le plus dangereux qui soit. ... La réalité de l'art? C'est une réalité artificielle, une réalité créée, qui ne reste réalité que dans le roman. Je ne crois pas qu'il y ait de réalité objective" ("The word 'reality' is the most dangerous

originally sees this imaginative appropriation as a form of protecting Lolita from the beastliness of his desires (as he, like another famous literary masturbator, James Joyce's Bloom, is "too beastly awfully weird for words"), it is ironically this method of turning Lolita from an ethical subject into an aesthetic object—an image which leads to the monstrous acts of the latter half of the book. This scene of venal masturbation leads in its logic directly to Humbert's later mistreatment of Lolita by offering him for the first time an image of Lolita separated from her "real" existence, a template for a variously unconscious Lolita. Humbert's first fantasies, it should be remembered, involve the heavy sedation of the Hazes: "I saw myself administering a powerful sleeping potion to both mother and daughter so as to fondle the latter through the night with perfect impunity. The house was full of Charlotte's snore, while Lolita hardly breathed in her sleep, as still as a painted girl-child" (71). Lolita is not just "as still as a painted girl-child," she is imagined as having only as much agency as a painted image. The first night at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel where Humbert and Lolita first become lovers, Humbert thinks to himself early in the evening that "by nine ... she would be dead in his arms" (116). Still later in the telling of that evening Humbert states that "I was still firmly resolved to pursue my policy of sparing her purity by operating only in the stealth of night, only upon a completely anesthetized little nude" (124). The masturbatory template here developed is the one that remains. As with a work of art, Humbert imagines her without real life ("dead in his arms"), or with, at best, a distant impersonal life, a "nude" like the ones artists draw, not the naked child a parent might hold. The crucial juncture in this adventure of the image is then the following morning as Lolita comes awake and alive and his pleasures and torments begin with a very real, alive, lively

word there is. ... The reality of art? It is an artificial, a created reality that is only reality within the novel. I do not believe in such a thing as objective reality"; Interview with Pierre Dommergues 95). To understand "reality" as, for Nabokov, a common fund of shared perceptions is to radically misunderstand the meaning he ascribes to it. Humbert Humbert tells us that "reality" is "one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes," and Nabokov concurs with him in *Strong Opinions* where he speaks of "such local ingredients as would allow me to inject a modicum of average 'reality' (one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes) into the brew of individual fancy" (*Lolita* 312; *Strong Opinions* 94).

Lolita. Both their sorrows will develop from Humbert's struggle to continue to see her with the "safely solipsiz[ing]" eyes he had seen her through during his masturbatory daze. He will continue to attempt to apply the palimpsest of the aestheticized, anaesthetized Lolita he has *imagined* to the real little girl who is his illicit ward. While Humbert may claim that his solipsizing was safe, it will not remain so. Humbert keeps his gaze riveted not on young Dolores Haze herself, but on the child of his desire, first "created" for masturbatory purposes—"another, fanciful Lolita." And it is only by so fixing his gaze and attention on this image that he is able to ignore the real Lolita whom he, all the while, is so hurting.¹¹ She may be awake, alert, and enterprising when the two first become lovers—something that has greatly attracted the attention of critics without pity for her sobs—but that excuses nothing and explains nothing. As is carefully detailed for the reader, Humbert's affair is less with a real little girl over which he projects "my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps more real than Lolita."

Another of Nabokov's finest, most dedicated and insightful critics, Maurice Couturier, has written that "Nabokov never said: 'Lolita, c'est moi,' but considering the many references he made to his nymphet in his following novels and in his interviews, it is clear that, in his imagination, he entertained the same kind of relation with her as Flaubert did with Emma Bovary. The 'little women' were, in a way, their personal myths" (411). This statement, while insightful on one level, risks misrepresenting Lolita and *Lolita* on another. Under singular circumstances (in court), Flaubert indeed declared "Madame Bovary, c'est moi." It is quite clear from the context of the remark that he meant thereby not a statement of personal faith in or psychological identification with his character, but his legitimate claim to originality (that he did not take

11. In criticism on *Lolita*, the scenes and themes of Humbert's masturbation have received little attention. The most notable exception is David Packman's *Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire*, where we read of this passage that "Humbert's desire for ejaculation mirrors the reader's desire for plot resolution" (52). While such an allegorical or metafictional interpretation of the passage might indeed be developed, it would need be extended beyond not only every masturbatory act in the novel, nor even only every sexual act therein, but every intentional act (an act which posits a goal as its end) whatsoever. To read the passage in such an abstracted light, however, misses the crucial import it bears for what, in the novel, is to follow.

the story *tel quel* from some source—as the prosecutor was at that point in the proceedings implying). In this light, as well as in any other literary one, to say that Emma Bovary was Flaubert’s “personal myth” does not advance understanding of work or author (the character surely carried no totemic force for Flaubert, and the novel was not his favorite one). Flaubert also remarked, “Bouvard and Pécuchet fill me to such a point that I have become them!” (Bouvard et Pécuchet m’emplissent à un tel point que je suis devenu eux!”; letter to Mme de Genettes, 26 April 1877), and yet they are not classified as “personal myths,” and there would be little gain in literary understanding from such a mythology. As concerns the other half of Couturier’s remark and Nabokov’s *Lolita*, the situation is in no way analogous. *Lolita* is not comparable to Emma because, unlike Emma, her inner states, thoughts, hopes, fears, and desires are systematically occluded from the reader’s view. With a very few exceptions, Dolores Haze is occluded from *Lolita* in a way utterly unsimilar to Flaubert’s relentless and, in many respects, ruthless presentation of Emma Bovary (pace the contemporary cartoon of Flaubert with the heart of his heroine impaled on a scalpel held in his writing hand). We catch a few glimpses of Dolores Haze over Humbert’s shoulder, but what we see for the majority of the book is the “safely solip-sized” Lolita Humbert has artfully crafted.

At the point in his story when he recounts the Sunday masturbation scene, Humbert has consciously and conscientiously courted our complicity. This aimed-for complicity only begins to suffer a loss when Humbert passes to the sexual act. Here again Humbert presents mitigating circumstances—that Lolita was not at that point a virgin, that it was at her incitement that they made love for the first time, and so forth. These can be discounted on two levels. The natural objection to the former is that if, in a presumed ideal world, it would be better had Lolita at that tender age not lost her virginity to coarse Charlie Holmes, the fact that this initial “bad” thing happened in no way justifies later “bad” things. More importantly for the secret “mechanism,” as Nabokov calls it, of the book is that the ultimate moral judgment that one is incited by Humbert himself to make is not, very strictly speaking, a question of pedophilia. That the relation is one between a very young girl and her *de facto* stepfather is far from immaterial. But perhaps most importantly, for the reason that being a relationship in which one party

is invested with immeasurably more social, financial, and juridical power than the other, it is a relationship which can—and indeed does—become the site of nearly unlimited manipulation. An ancillary effect of the fact that the victim here is a child is that it effectively serves to eliminate from the field of ethical speculation the idea that the victim is being in some sense repaid for his or her past sins, his or her cruelties or injustices visited upon others in the past. We can fairly well imagine that the forty-something beer-swiller—as literary type—has dealt his fair share of low blows in his roughneck life, and so our pity for his plight is likely to be mitigated by our assumption that he, in any event, was no angel. The prepubescent girl, however, is much less likely to elicit such a blasé reaction, even if it turns out that she is not a virgin, not free from mendacity (a mendacity indeed incited by the cruel treatment she receives), and so forth.¹² Humbert's sin indeed involves the robbing of a child of her

12. As an illustration of this point we might note that *Laughter in the Dark's* cruel Margo indeed shares family resemblances with Dolores Haze and yet elicits little pity. She is vulgar (though at a less excusable age than Lolita herself); she, like Lolita, is likened to a gypsy (“With her dark hair falling over her brow she looked like a gypsy”; *Laughter in the Dark* 58); she shows an absence of interest in the fields of expertise of her cultured mate (the visual arts, rather than literature, in this case); she displays a certain seedy greediness; romps with an immediate and elfin gaiety; displays sexual experience in the place of expected innocence; has questionable hygiene (less questionable for a young German woman of the 1930s than an American lass of the 1950s); desires to live in a film-like world; is cruel, though in a petty, unimaginative, conformist way; falls in love, in a roughly fascinated way, with a brilliant, but cruel and perverse, semi-artist, as does Lolita. But there is also a fair amount of Swann's cuckolded blood coursing through poor Albinus' veins (e.g., “Just as Albinus had accustomed himself never to speak to Margot of art, of which she knew and cared nothing” [77]) and the cheap manipulateness of Odette in Margot (as with the marriage question). On the more specific question of the gypsy-like nature of both Lolita and Margot it is important to underline the place accorded to the references to Merimée's *Carmen* in both works. Apart from the bizarre charm of the “Carman/Barman” rhymes of the pop song that Humbert giftedly garbles into a ludicrous mantra when in the throes of his masturbatory reverie, the references to *Carmen* can be seen as a manipulation in two senses. The first is to deceive (we will explore in a later section this desire to deceive that Nabokov so treasures) or to create suspense in the reader as to the possibility that Humbert, like Merimée's Don Jose, will, in the end, kill his enchantress (“Je suis las de tuer tes amants; c'est toi que je tuerai”; *Car-*

childhood, of treating quite without mercy someone in a subservient position to whom he should have shown kindness, support, and, above all, *true tenderness*. It is curious in this respect that Nabokov's most categorical remark in this vein is so rarely cited (this author is aware of a single mention—the critical German edition's afterword by Dieter Zimmer). Of *Lolita*, Nabokov states, "il y a une morale très morale: ne pas faire du mal aux enfants. Or, Humbert fait ce mal. On peut défendre son émotion devant Lolita, mais pas sa perversité" (Interview with Anne Guérin). Thus, Humbert's fantasies, his "émotion devant Lolita," can of course be defended; what cannot be is his "perversity"—to wit, that he does not limit himself to fantasies. What the critical reader must note is that this sin is effected within a system of justifications which treats Lolita as a work of art and thus removes her from the realm of the ethical.¹³

men 84). The second is more insidious and is, properly speaking, of a rhetorical nature. Carmen, that ponderously capricious gypsy, unlike Lolita (but indeed like Margot), until pushed by a life out of control and in part emotionally drained, really is a *folle* who ruins Don Jose's life—a momentary indiscretion (his allowing her to escape from the prison he was guarding) more or less inexorably leading, in Merimée's hands, to the life of crime which will cost him his, and her, life. She is mysterious, but also crazed, ruthless, merciless, mercenary, preternaturally (or psychopathically—depending on the reader) gay and aggressive. In this allusive frame, Humbert is the victim of a series of events let loose by a more or less momentary indiscretion, which he is powerless to slow or halt. There is, as well, the important and of course quite general theme of love/desire at all costs evoked by the reference to *Carmen*. One finds as well the theme of a union made stronger by its status as outside the law (as where Don Jose says "il me semblait que je m'unissais à elle plus intimement par cette vie de hasards et de rébellion"; 61). And one finds also the dream of changing their life (as in the line that Humbert directly borrows from Don Jose in *Lolita* when he sees her after their long separation: "Changeons de vie, Carmen" (*Lolita* 84). Thus, to the extent that the reader would assimilate Lolita to Carmen, he or she would assimilate Humbert with Don Jose—that is, with the victim of a *belle dame sans merci*. Which he is not.

13. Ancillary rhetorical strategies of course accompany this move. One is a complementary, or, if one likes, ancillary, rhetorical strategy on Humbert's part used presumably to disculpate himself—or to relate the logic he used to disculpate himself during his time with Lolita: his subtle insertion of animalic epithets for Lolita. As did Iago, Humbert links female sexuality with the animalic. This note is often sounded in simple denigration (as when Humbert refers to Lolita wagging her tail to the police officer), but the associations start

Instead of giving life to art, Humbert's treats life *as* art, and the moral message of the work appears to be that this error is a deadly one.

As the story progresses we are encouraged, by Humbert himself, to have more and more contempt for him, and, consequently, to question and/or revise any earlier complicity with him we might have felt—and to perhaps reproach ourselves with it. Nabokov tells Appel that the tone of the narrative undergoes a change as it nears its conclusion (*Strong Opinions* 73), and though he does not spell out what this change is, it seems that it cannot but be Humbert's new *imagining* of Lolita's inner, hidden garden of individual thought—or phrased otherwise, his learning to think from the standpoint of someone else. This change marks the end of his method of telling his tale following the self-set rule of “retrospective verisimilitude” and allows the reader to at last glimpse his reason for telling his tale, the message written in the special inks of a dissimulating art.

What Humbert describes in the passage that Pera, Herbold, and others have so focused upon is his ability to achieve a state of “absolute security, confidence and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life,” because he is able to “solipsize” Lolita, because he is able to place a “veil of ... controlled delight” between himself and her that renders her not only “unaware” of his pleasure, but “alien” to it. This game becomes an ever more dangerous one as it becomes clear how little this solipsism first

before their romance—as early as his first weeks in the Haze house her refers to her “monkeyish feet” and “hot paw” (51). On her way toward being abstracted out of autonomous existence, she thus first passes through the halfway house of the animalic—which also seems to aim at what Iago means by such references: the conjuring of a lubricious animality and the reference to a world or mode of life where uncoerced permission is not a necessary precondition to sexual intercourse. The other of these rhetorical registers is the daemonic. Nymphets are described as “demoniac”; one is referred to as “a little deadly demon,” another as a “demon child,” and Lolita as “some immortal daemon disguised as a female child,” who, at a later point, is said to possess “a diabolical glow” (18, 22, 141, 216). The spelling should tip us off that what is being referred to is not a demon in the Christian sense of the word, as Alexandrov asserts in associating the references to a “conception of evil,” but that what Humbert is referring to is the realm of the daemonic—which is to say, beings who are neither good nor evil per se but dwell in a realm somewhere between the divine and the mortal (Alexandrov 185).

practiced here proves *safe*. Because of this solipsism, Lolita is everywhere referred to, everywhere described, everywhere poetically loved, but as to her *thoughts* and *feelings*, Humbert offers his reader scarcely a glimpse.¹⁴

Humbert is able to take advantage of her, to “deprive her of her childhood,” as he says, because of his refusal to think from her standpoint—to think beyond the lyricism of his love and the practical precautions of maintaining a tractable little concubine (283). Near the end of the novel, hearing a chance remark that Lolita makes to her young friend Eva Rosen, Humbert remarks:

... and it struck me, as my automaton knees went up and down, that I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind and that quite possibly, behind the juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate—dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me. (284)¹⁵

A few pages later, enumerating his indignities, Humbert continues: “Now, squirming and pleading with my own memory, I recall that on this [the occasion of Lolita’s mourning her mother’s death] and similar occasions, it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita’s states of mind while comforting my own base self,” and finally adds, “I must admit that a man of my power of imagination cannot plead ignorance of universal emotions” (287).

Humbert tells the story of his refusal or inability to think from the standpoint of someone else, and in doing so follows a self-imposed

14. De Vries (148–49) alludes to this absence by noting that Humbert is present in all 69 chapters of the novel (as the text is his first-person confession, one wonders how it could be otherwise), while Lolita is present in only 37 of those chapters. This however is to confuse quality with mere quantity. What is of interest in the book, what is revealing and what might sketch something like a difficult-to-read message therein, is the means and nature of this occlusion of Lolita from the story that bears her name. First-person confessions of love and crime may well be dependant upon the absence of the loved object, but the task *Lolita* assigns its readers is the understanding of its nature.

15. It is unlikely, but possible, that Nabokov had come across Nietzsche’s remark in his *Gay Science*: “Wir haben Alle verborgene Gärten und Pflanzungen in uns” (Nietzsche 3:381).

constraint which he does not break until the book's closing chapters. "Fortunately," Humbert states, "my story has reached a point where I can cease insulting poor Charlotte for the sake of retrospective verisimilitude" (71). We should take in the full import of the phrase—that there is a logic of "retrospective verisimilitude" at work throughout Humbert's entire memoir, which results in his endeavoring to convince his reader of what he himself was convinced of at the time the events in question took place. Because of this self-imposed constraint he cannot permit himself to intersperse his text with commentary contemporaneous to the moment of writing—at which point, as the novel's closing sections show, he experienced the bitterest regret and the most intense self-loathing for what he had done. These are the rules of the game, and he cannot allow for more than a faintly intelligible "pattern of remorse daintily running along the steel of his conspiratorial dagger" for his story to fulfill its end (75).

The Double Victim

"Moppet," "little monster," "corrupt," "shallow," "brat"—these are some of the terms assigned to *Lolita* by her critics. Then there are those who condemn *Lolita* because they feel Nabokov turned the rape of a twelve-year-old into an aesthetic experience. We in our class disagreed with all of these interpretations. We unanimously ... agreed with Véra Nabokov who privately commented in her diary: 'I wish ... somebody would notice the tender description of the child's helplessness, her pathetic dependence on monstrous HH, and her heartrending courage all along culminating in that squalid but essentially pure and healthy marriage, and her letter, and her dog. (Nafisi 40)¹⁶

In her *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi's sensitive ear picks up not only the sobs of the young girl Véra Nabokov was so saddened by, but the dismissiveness with which they have been met by many critics. Nafisi indeed uses Nabokov's novel as a lens through which to see her life and world more clearly but this does not lead, as in the symbolic readings

16. Pifer astutely points out that Nafisi's source is Stacy Schiff's *Véra* (Pifer 197; Schiff 235–36).

seen earlier, to airy abstractions. Discouraging a simplified understanding of her title, she writes: “I want to emphasize ... that *we* were *not* Lolita, the Ayatollah was *not* Humbert and this republic was *not* what Humbert called his principedom by the sea” (Nafisi 35). Instead, she compellingly describes “how Tehran helped redefine Nabokov’s novel, turning it into this *Lolita*, our *Lolita*” (6). In discussing the cultural, social and personal predicament of a friend, Yassi, she writes:

Take *Lolita*. This was the story of a twelve-year-old girl who had nowhere to go. Humbert had tried to turn her into his fantasy, into his dead love, and he had destroyed her. The desperate truth of *Lolita*’s story is *not* the rape of a twelve-year-old by a dirty old man but *the confiscation of one individual’s life by another*. We don’t know what Lolita would have become if Humbert had not engulfed her. Yet the novel, the finished work, is hopeful, beautiful even, a defense not just of beauty but of life, ordinary everyday life, all the normal pleasures that Lolita, like Yassi, was deprived of. (33).

It is in this sense that Nafisi will call Lolita “a double victim”: “not only her life but also her life story is taken from her” (41).

It is this final point that has so often been missed or misrepresented—even in the case of such brilliant critics as Boyd and Couturier. Humbert is not one among other centers of consciousness in Nabokov’s tale. With the exception of the occasional discreet wink or gesture made over his shoulder by his creator, Humbert is all the reader has.

Every Night

Humbert’s second night with Lolita proves less intoxicating for him than his first. After having learned in the most abrupt and brutal fashion of the death of her mother, Lolita remains inconsolable. Humbert buys her all manner of coveted things, but to no avail. Night falls. “At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently,” he remarks with sinister subtlety. “You see,” Humbert points out, thereby concluding Part One of his narrative, “she had absolutely nowhere else to go” (141–42).

Such sobs are not frequently noted by Humbert in the country-crossing pages of Part Two, but they are frequent. “We had been everywhere,”

Humbert later summarizes, “We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep” (175–76). Humbert pretends not to notice, and endeavors not to note, how regularly these sobs came, for they came “every night.” Why should they not have been more clearly heard by the critics—especially after the measured reminder offered by no one less than Vladimir Nabokov’s most dedicated reader?

Nabokov’s inspiration, *Lolita*’s tragedy, and Humbert’s mock apotheosis all turn on the perception of his Lolita being safely solipsized. This is the experience that Humbert’s artful prose endeavors to reproduce for his reader in Part One of his narrative. To miss or misconstrue this aspect of the story is to miss or misconstrue Humbert’s objective and the novel’s essence. Radical readings like those noted above do not come as bolts from the blue. They are responses to specific elements in the text. Wishing to see a free and independent Lolita—whether in a negative light like Herbold’s or a positive one like Boyd’s—between the lines of Humbert’s artful prose and through the bars of his artful cage is nothing if not a natural response to her double victimization. The problem with such lights is that they do not correspond to the facts of the case, or to the words of Nabokov’s world.

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