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EICHMANN, EMPATHY, AND *LOLITA*

I

SOMETIME IN LATE 1960 or early 1961 Adolf Eichmann, jailed and awaiting trial in Jerusalem, was given by his guard a copy of Vladimir Nabokov's recently published *Lolita*, as Hannah Arendt puts it, "for relaxation." After two days Eichmann returned it, visibly indignant: "Quite an unwholesome book"—*Das ist aber ein sehr unerfreuliches Buch*—he told his guard.¹ Though we are not privy to, and nor does Arendt speculate upon this officer's intentions, it is difficult to imagine that they were limited to procuring Eichmann a little "relaxation." The tale of a homicidal madman writing under observation and awaiting a trial that will consign him either to death or prolonged imprisonment—which fate spares him by felling him with a heart attack—could hardly have been very relaxing for someone at that moment writing his own memoirs and himself awaiting a trial with similar stakes.

We might imagine other intentions on the part of Eichmann's guard. Could the gesture have been ironic? Or was it motivated by a dark curiosity—something of the order of an experiment? The sulphurous halo of Nabokov's book was still burning brightly in the popular consciousness of 1960.² Might Eichmann's guard have seen *Lolita* as a sort of litmus test for radical evil, and wanted to see whether the real-life villain—he who impassively organized the transport towards certain death of countless innocents—would coldly, even gleefully, approve the various and vile machinations of Nabokov's creation?

This is all only speculation. In Arendt's account, she congratulates Eichmann for his indignation and moves on to other matters. In any event, given Eichmann's radical conventionality one could hardly imagine him liking—or even very well *understanding*—much of the book. As

Eichmann himself avowed, during his adult life he had read only two books, one of them being Theodor Herzl's *The Jewish State*. But whatever the motivations of Eichmann's guard, whatever Eichmann's degree of comprehension, and whatever congratulations Eichmann might have deserved for his disgust, the incident raises a question for the study of Nabokov's finest work which has yet to be answered.

II

Before turning to this question, let us remain with Arendt and her notorious reader for a moment. Arendt notes elsewhere that it appeared to her that Eichmann was nearly "aphasic." She comments that, "when he did succeed in constructing a sentence of his own, he repeated it until it became a cliché," and that, "his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else." Arendt offers here nothing less than a definition of *thought* itself. "To *think*" is glossed (" . . . namely") by Arendt as, "*to think from the standpoint of someone else*." Though as a definition of thought, it is hardly impressive, it nevertheless expresses something essential about Arendt's conception of thought and thinking. (3) In her view, thought is to be placed under the sign of intellectual empathy, under the sign of living in the strangeness and wonder of another's world. (Though Arendt does not mention the connection, both the language she wrote Eichmann in—English—and her native one—German—make special provision for such a sense, as he or she who is "thoughtless" is not her or she who is incapable of some form of cognition or calculation, as "thoughtless" people can indeed be very clever and very clever people have been capable of great "thoughtlessness.")

Thought is thus a communal, not individualistic, thing.⁴ This point is important as, though Adolf Eichmann was unlikely to have seen much of himself in the irreverent and urbane genius of Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, nor in the latter's strange eloquence, Eichmann the man and Humbert the character of the first part of the novel (to leave the repenting Humbert of the book's last pages out for the moment), share an essential trait. What Eichmann the man shares with Nabokov's literary creation is the inability or unwillingness "*to think from the standpoint of somebody else*." The evil they share is the evil of *thoughtlessness*. But here the student of history or the student of literature endeavoring to uncover a parallel between Adolf Eichmann and the narrator of the book he found so distasteful is confronted with a troubling difference.

In Arendt's account, though she never says so in such unambiguous terms, Eichmann is incapable of thought at least in part because he is incapable of living in a creative and authentic relation to language. His near "aphasia," considered as a particularly stubborn stupidity, is not without relation to his blind allegiance to the *Führer's* words-become-law—it is in this, in fact, that his singularly "*banal*" evil, as she describes it, is so profoundly unsettling. The relation between these two elements—Eichmann's "aphasia" and his blind "thoughtlessness"—is left to Arendt's reader and Eichmann's judges to consider. To turn now to the matter that will occupy us in these pages, Humbert Humbert, while, in Arendt's terms, perhaps equally thoughtless, is a far cry from aphasic. His "evil" is more classical, more recognizable—at once simpler and more complex in that it follows the Satanic path of persuasion, adorned with the roses of ruse, guile and pricking wit. The Mephistophelean wedding of fine rhetoric and foul designs is one with which we are well familiar. If Humbert's *sin* is a new one, of sort, his *evil* is as old as Adam and Eve. The unanswered question mentioned above is the nature of this evil: its ways, its means and its place in art.

III

Lolita does not have just one precedent in Nabokov's work—in the Russian novella *The Enchanter*—but a host of them.⁵ Perhaps even more important for the final form that *Lolita* took than the thematic pre-echoes of pedophilia in *The Enchanter* is Nabokov's 1934 novel *Despair*. Like *Lolita*, *Despair* is presented as the "memoir" or "confession" (both narrators use both terms to describe their narratives) of a madman. In *Despair*, we first find the device later employed in *Lolita* to such effect: the authorial eye peering over the shoulder of the narrator and employing a mixed-bag of tricks to express himself—tricks that involve the narrator, in one way or another, disclosing or transmitting an essential detail without being aware of its import. *Despair* also marks the beginning of Nabokov's productions in English: Nabokov himself translated the work from the Russian and wrote in the foreword, "Although I had been scribbling in English all my literary life in the margin, so to say, of my Russian writings, this was my first serious attempt . . . to use English for what may be loosely termed an artistic purpose."⁶

In a bit of awkward preening in *Despair's* foreword, Nabokov recounts the circumstances attending to this first translation of the work. "I asked a rather grumpy Englishman," says Nabokov, "whose services I obtained

through an agency in Berlin, to read the stuff; he found a few solecisms in the first chapter, but then refused to continue, saying he disapproved of the book; I suspect he wondered if it might not have been a true confession" (*Despair*, p. xi). Nabokov's explanation appears to be the one which we will find in nearly all of his later works: Hermann, like his scions in Nabokov's later fiction, is carefully crafted by the author to be unpleasant. That one is put off, annoyed, and shocked by him is, for the author, to be desired. There is the well-known case of *Pale Fire*, where Nabokov is at some pains to provoke doubt and disdain as regards his overbearing narrator Kinbote. In *Ada, or Ardor*, a heavy dosage of Byronic brio is added to the brew and we are supposed to at once admire and disapprove of Van Veen as one admired and disapproved of Byron in his day. In *Lolita*, we dispose of a formula to describe this dynamic which we will have cause to reflect upon: we are to be, as John Ray Jr. tells us, "entranced with the work, while abhorring its author."⁷ Had the novel been *Lolita*, we would easily believe this to have been the case. An examination of *Despair*, however, renders such a hypothesis unlikely.

What can be learned from this early novel? On the very first page of his story Hermann employs a metaphor which becomes, for him, a guiding one. Half-sketching his argument, he states that, "... at this point I should have compared the breaker of the law [and he is soon to begin breaking laws LD] which makes such a fuss over a little spilled blood, with a poet or a stage performer" (*Despair*, p. 3). Hermann then adopts (without referring to) Thomas DeQuincey's playful position from his essay "On Murder Considered As One of the Fine Arts" (1827), and himself comes to treat murder as, in his own words, one of the "creative arts" (p. 122). He likens the mental going-over of his crime to that of, "an author reading his work over a thousand times, probing and testing every syllable"; of his crime he later explains his lack of remorse with the simple self-evidence that, "an artist feels no remorse" (p. 171; 177). Of the investigating officers of the crime in question Hermann tells his readers that, "they behaved just as a literary critic does" (p. 191). Nabokov is being none too subtle in setting clearly before us Hermann's *mal*, and that red line running through the book's pages is difficult to miss. In case we did miss it, however, we find a later remark made by Nabokov of no small importance.

In a letter regarding the translation and publication of this revised translation of *Despair*, Nabokov wrote in 1945: "My book [*Despair*] is essentially concerned with the subtle dissections [sic] of a mind anything but 'average' or 'ordinary': nature had endowed my hero with literary

genius, but at the same time there was a criminal taint in his blood; the criminal in him, prevailing over the artist, took over those very methods which nature had meant the artist to use" (*SL*, p. 57).⁸ Here is a passage from the foreword to *Despair*.

I am unable to foresee and to fend inevitable attempts to find in the alembics of *Despair* something of the rhetorical venom that I injected into the narrator's tone in a much later novel. Hermann and Humbert are alike only in the sense that two dragons painted by the same artist at different periods of his life resemble each other. Both are neurotic scoundrels, yet there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year; but Hell shall never parole Hermann. (p. xiii)⁹

The first question the reader is inclined to ask is why the two books, and the punishment of their protagonists, should be linked in the first place? Humbert's rhetorical venom, a dangerous substance, is indeed related to Hermann's, but only in the way that poisonous venoms can be related to non-poisonous saliva which can digest, but not stun. Is this the only reason to link their fates? Both are whimsical first-person narrators who tell their own story of crime in blithe, irreverent fashion. Both are murderers. Is this, then, all?

Perhaps more important than this collected trivia of plot and presentation is a deeper, more fundamental link binding the two works together—one which comes to the fore in the letter cited above. In Nabokov's verbs and vision, "nature" gives gifts of "literary genius," and intends them for use toward certain ends ("... *which nature had meant the artist to use*"). Hermann succumbs to the sin of allowing the "methods" "meant" for art to be taken over by the "criminal" in him—he is guilty of applying the "methods" destined for *art* to *life*. In doing so, however, he is not alone.

Nabokov's first major critic (after himself) has proved perhaps to be his finest—his countryman and fellow exile Vladislav Khodasevich. In a review of Nabokov's *The Defense* from 1930 Khodasevich wrote:

The artist is doomed to a sojourn in two worlds: the real world and the world of art created by him. A genuine master always finds himself situated on that line belonging to both worlds where the planes of each intersect. The separation from reality, the total immersion in a world of art where there is no flight but only and endless fall is madness. It threatens the honest dilettante but not the master possessing the gift of finding and thereafter never losing the line of intersection.¹⁰

It would be hard to find a more elegant and more precise description of the drama and dilemma that lies at the heart of Nabokov's creation. Though it precedes the publication of *Lolita* by some 25 years, no later analysis more accurately describes the motor driving that dark romance. The special tension in Nabokov's work, as Khodasevich notes, is that between "the real world" and "the world of art created by him [the artist]," between a way of seeing and feeling which one has in common with others and "total immersion in a world of art."

In an article from 1984, Edmund White located what he saw as an impish, perverse, and even cruel streak running through Nabokov's writings in his habit of creating "grotesque versions of himself."¹¹ Nothing, in fact, has been so baffling to critics of Nabokov as precisely this habit. But might not such a tendency, instead of something narrowly personal, be an exercise and a lesson in the dangers of art? Might we not see Nabokov's habit of creating "grotesque versions of himself," of the artist, neither as impish or perverse, as did White, nor as an exercise in radical dissociation, as did Nabokov's biographer, Brian Boyd, but as an intimate part of his thought and art? Might we not see them as monsters and demons carefully carved into the façades of his works to better reveal its mission?

IV

Nabokov's first novel offers a description of the nature of artistic vision:

And in those streets, now as wide as shiny black seas, at that late hour when the last beer-hall has closed, and a native of Russia, abandoning sleep, hatless and coatless under an old mackintosh, walks in a clairvoyant trance; at that late hour on those wide streets passed worlds utterly alien to each other: no longer a reveler, a woman, or simply a passer-by, but each one a wholly isolated world, each a totality of marvels and evil.¹²

A few years later, the narrator of Nabokov's Russian short story "Perfection" (1932) says of a character therein that, "he had a passionate desire to experience everything, to attain and touch everything, to let the dappled voices, the bird calls, filter through his being and to enter for a moment into a passerby's soul as one enters the cool shade of a tree."¹³ Sebastian Knight's brother, at the close of his narrative, speculates that, "the hereafter may be the full ability of consciously living in any

chosen soul, in any number of souls, all of them unconscious of their interchangeable burden."¹⁴ In a front page appeal to aid the unemployed printed in the Russian émigré newspaper *Poslednie Novosti* from January 2, 1932, Nabokov wrote, "it takes a person idle, cold and with an untenanted heart to turn from another's need or simply not notice it. Fortunately such people are few."¹⁵ *The Gift's* Fyodor is described at a party as engaging in the following exercise:

... while the others talked on and he talked on himself, he tried as he did everywhere and always to imagine the inner, transparent motion of this or that other person. He would carefully seat himself inside the interlocutor as in an armchair, so that the other's elbows would serve as armrests for him, and his soul would fit snugly into the other's soul . . .¹⁶

This brief barrage of example can serve to show the kind of mental activity Nabokov imagined as proper to the artist (the characters named above are, if not in every case literal artists, consistently compared by Nabokov to ones)—one of imaginative empathy. This empathy is not meant to be merely a cold, analytical one where one *understands* the chess-like coordinates of another's position, but one where that position is *felt* by the artist—like the cool shade of a tree he or she might enter into. It should then come as no surprise that, years later, in his *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov will go so far as to define *art* itself as: "beauty plus pity."¹⁷ And indeed had Nabokov searched for a Latin tag to place upon his literary coat of arms, he could hardly have found a better one than Terence's tag *Humani nihil a me alienum puto*.¹⁸

In a lecture on Chekhov, Nabokov once offered the observation that, "criminals are usually people lacking imagination."¹⁹ Might we apply this remark to Nabokov's most notorious criminal—Humbert Humbert? Certainly not. Humbert's creator may have refused to grant him a great many things, but imagination was not one of them. And yet, despite his lively imagination and singularly precise perception, imaginative identification of the sort Nabokov associated with the artist's calling is something that he does *not*, at least until very late in his days, engage in. Up until the end of his story, he does *not* endeavor to regard each individual as "a totality of marvels and evil," does *not*, "enter for a moment into a passerby's soul as one enters the cool shade of a tree," and it is precisely because he does not engage in this mobile identification and imagination that he can possess such extraordinary intelligence and sensitivity and yet act so brutally and insensitively in his dealings

with others—and above all, with she whom he professes to love above everyone and everything in the world—his *Lolita*.

In understanding how all this came about, let us start—like empiricists and sensualists—with the senses. If what most determines the artist's perspective is his ability to *feel* his way into another's world, can we learn more about how it is that the artist feels, at given moments, that which infuses his sensibility and suffuses his senses with something promising art?

V

Humbert Humbert owes his fame to the discomfort he has caused his readers. Like most deep discomforts, this is neither a simple nor a straightforward one. At the outset of his memoir, and for quite a few pages thereafter, Humbert endeavors to dismiss or discredit the cares and concerns of others with no small success. But how? In the name of what values, by what reasoning, or by playing upon what weaknesses or vanities does he effect this?

Milton, the inventor of the sensuous, says of his darkest creation that, "his tongue / Dropt Manna, and could make the worse appear / The better reason."²⁰ Humbert's tongue is itself not without a Manna which also makes the worse appear the better reason. Is this not, in fact, what the book's most sensitive, intelligent, and shocked readers have remarked with absolute regularity? One of the book's finest readers and first defenders, Lionel Trilling, wrote as early as 1958 that in reading *Lolita*, "we find ourselves the more shocked when we realize that, in the course of reading the novel, we have come virtually to condone the violation it presents . . . we have been seduced into conniving in the violation, because we have permitted our fantasies to accept what we know to be revolting."²¹ As if surprised by his own choice of words, Trilling, when he reprinted the article some years later, replaced the term "seduced" with "subdued" (without noting that the article in question was in any way revised), but the experience is hardly dampened. However one terms it, how could Humbert persuade one of the century's most gifted and judicious critics to "connive" in a "violation" he "knows" to be "revolting"?²²

The first and best answer to the question is that Humbert is eloquent. He possesses fantastic verbal range, depth, and dexterity. Perhaps most importantly, he also possesses the capacity, in his rapid changes of register, to surprise. As we all know, eloquence is not a blank slate await-

ing persuasive words to fill it, and not an inert substance waiting to be used for adornment. It is a *reactive*. It can only be made to function by coming into contact with the specific desires and fears, ambitions and anxieties of those exposed to it. What then are elements involved in this reaction? What chords does Humbert strike, what fears or desires does he evoke, what ambitions does he flatter?

The first minor chord is pity. Humbert begins by telling us of love and loss at a tender age. In the triple tradition of the confession, the case study and the court case, he makes use of a sad past to explain and excuse a deplorable present. With freakish and acidic irony he tells us of the loss of his mother: "(picnic, lightning)" (*AL*, p. 10). This loss is followed by that of his first love, Annabel Lee, the description of which is a bewildering and bravura mixture of lyricism and merciless self-parody. The self-parody is essential. It serves Humbert's purposes particularly effectively by immunizing, so to speak, his description. If you find his story unbelievable, his complaints mawkish, his reasoning faulty, he is protected, so to speak, from the criticism by the irony and parody which light up his text. If you find his story credible, his complaints compelling, his reasoning sound then this irony and parody becomes something else. It becomes the moving sign of the depth of his pain. All are familiar with the phenomenon of a pain so great it can only be spoken of in a mocking tone used to protect the teller. Humbert calls upon this phenomenon. His urbane self-parody is kept up in the opening sections of his memoir with such delicate intensity that by so keeping his own guard up, he tempts us to lower ours a notch.

Alongside of this delicate game, Humbert plays another one with his reader: a game of letters. Readers are notoriously vain—above all about reading. We all know the experience of finding value and interest in a phrase because it contains an allusion we think only ourselves, and a select group of others, recognize. We also all know the experience, upon re-inspection, of realizing that the phrase had nothing to speak for it except for its hidden heredity. In unpredictable fashion, Humbert invokes the literary sensitivities and education of his reader. From the first lines of his memoir, he begins to weave lines—and names—from the only poem that Edgar Allan Poe ever wrote for his first cousin and child-bride (Virginia Clemm was 13 and Poe 25 when they married in 1836), and which he wrote only after her death: "Annabel Leigh." The poem has a child-like, hypnotic repetitiveness (the distinctive rhythm which led Emerson to unflatteringly dub Poe "the jingle man") that well suits Humbert's hypnotic purposes. More allusions follow. He invokes,

in more cryptic fashion, the adult sorrows and longings of Rousseau, Baudelaire, and Proust.²³ In pedophilic proclivity, Poe is followed by Dante and Petrarch: "After all," Humbert reasons with us, "Dante fell madly in love with his Beatrice when she was nine, a sparkling girleen, painted and lovely, and bejeweled, in a crimson frock, and this was in 1274, in Florence, at a private feast in the merry month of May. And when Petrarch fell madly in love with his Laureen, she was a fair-haired nymphet of twelve running in the wind, in the pollen and dust, a flower in flight, in the beautiful plain as descried from the hills of Vaucluse" (*AL*, p. 19).²⁴ (Humbert does not of course mention that Dante himself was but 8 years old when he met the, in reality, 8-year old Beatrice [or Bice] Portinari [Boccaccio attributes Beatrice to the Portinari family], or the fact that the Laura of Petrarch's love was roughly 6 years younger than the poet.)

Humbert's artistic comparisons do not, however, stop on the level of biographical parallels and literary allusions. He tells us that to perceive a nymphet, to recognize her in a crowd, you must be an "artist and a madman" (*AL*, p. 17). One of the principal things that artists and madmen share in Nabokov's world is their indifference to what others think of their inspired or deranged state. Nabokov loans a great many of his characters experiences and opinions which were also his own, and this giving of very personal gifts is not limited to likeable fellows such as *Glory's* Martin and *The Gift's* Fyodor, but extends to characters Nabokov himself singles out as "scoundrels" and "wretches," such as *Ada's* Van Veen, *Pale Fire's* Charles Kinbote, and, of course, *Lolita's* Humbert. Humbert indeed receives such a gift from his creator—a mighty and a dangerous one: the gift of artistic vision. Nabokov graces Humbert with not only the perceptual and linguistic powers necessary for art, he lends him the credo that a true artist creates in sublime isolation and owes account only to his own genius. And it is here that things begin to go badly.

Nabokov spoke of the similarity between *Despair* and *Lolita*, and of *Despair's* Hermann being given gifts of "literary genius . . . which nature had meant the artist to use"—and which he turned to other ends (murder). Humbert is also given gifts of literary genius—and on a far grander scale. *Despair* is not *Crime and Punishment*, and no reader of the book has yet gone on record as having felt anything like a real or compelling identification or complicity with Hermann, as Trilling and a host of others have for Humbert. As Nabokov makes clear from the

outset, we are to have contempt for Hermann—and for this reason he is not dangerous. Humbert, however, is another story.

Humbert's eloquence also depends on a further element which unifies the ones mentioned above—something not at Hermann's disposal—*love*. For all his blindness and madness and hurt, Humbert loves. And for the Humbert of the first part of the novel, the lover and the artist see the world in the same all-enlivening, all-consuming way. This is the heart of his eloquence and the essence of his alibi: his justifications for his love and his pursuit of it despite the rules of society and reason, are in every way analogous to Nabokov's justifications for art. In the descriptions of his love, he calls upon the inner vision, the sudden image, the irrefutable call of the senses that are all hallmarks of Nabokov's vision of art. His most crucial and subtlest reasoning is the careful parallel he establishes between the proud creation of great art and the proud pursuit of love. By subtly describing and avidly pursuing Lolita as one would the inspiration of a work of art, Humbert tempts the reader to look at her as precisely that—and it is this most slippery step which allows for readers as sensitive and schooled as Trilling to be seduced or subdued. We are led astray because we are offered the wrong optic through which to see Lolita—the *optic of art*—and we are too eager to be worthy of it to suggest that it should not here apply.

VI

As we saw earlier, in the preface to his revision and re-translation of *Despair*, Nabokov says of the resemblance between *Despair's* Hermann and *Lolita's* Humbert, that, “both are neurotic scoundrels, yet there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year.” Why does Humbert merit this brief reprieve? What does he do that allows him an annual walk in Paradise?

The deceptively perceptive John Ray Jr. tells us that what we are to read is “a tragic tale tending unswervingly to nothing less than a moral apotheosis” (*AL*, p. 5). The epithet is doubtless inflationary, but it should not prevent us from seeking its referent. Humbert is hardly promoted to divine status, and does not make a strong case for canonization. But he does appear to do something laudable. This “moral apotheosis” is best sought for in *Lolita's* tenderest chapter, where we read:

Somewhere beyond Bill's shack an afterwork radio had begun singing of folly and fate, and there she was with her ruined looks and her adult,

rope-veined narrow hands and her goose-flesh white arms, and her shallow ears, and her unkempt armpits, there she was (my Lolita!), hopelessly worn at seventeen . . . and I looked and looked at her and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else. She was only the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet I had rolled myself upon with such cries in the past; an echo on the brink of a russet ravine, with a far wood under a white sky, and brown leaves choking the brook, and one last cricket in the crisp weeds . . . [Nabokov's ellipses] but thank God it was not that I worshiped. What I used to pamper among the tangled vines of my heart, *mon grand pêché radieux*, had dwindled to its essence: sterile and selfish vice, all *that* I canceled and cursed. You may jeer at me, and threaten to clear the court, but until I am gagged and half-throttled, I will shout my poor truth. I insist the world know how much I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita, pale and polluted and big with another's child, but still gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond, still Carmencita, still mine. . . . No matter, even if those eyes of hers would fade to myopic fish, and her nipples swell and crack, and her lovely young velvety delicate delta be tainted and torn—even then I would go mad with tenderness at the mere sight of your dear wan face, at the mere sound of your raucous young voice, my Lolita. (*AL*, p. 278; Nabokov's emphases)

Nabokov was to remark of this scene years later that in reading it, "*le bon lecteur devrait avoir un picotement au coin de l'œil*" ["the good reader should feel [here] the forerunner of a tear."²⁵ In another interview, Nabokov confessed to himself having felt more than a forerunner, and to having written the passage through his own tears.²⁶

The moral turn, and we might indeed call it that, that Humbert here takes is easily expressed—he has recognized his sensuous adulation as "sterile and selfish vice"; beneath and beyond his lust is a radiant love. He realizes that he loved her, and loves her, and will always love her—however she might change and whatever she might become. He loves her not for senses she might have fired, but simply and fully for herself. In a line as simple as it is tender, Wallace Stevens once wrote, "and there you were, warm as flesh, / Brunette, yet not too brunette." To love someone is to love them for exactly as brunette as they are, and to love them as they change in a way that can only be their own. "I don't think *Lolita* is a religious book," Nabokov once stated, "but I do think it is a moral one. And I do think that Humbert Humbert in his last stage is a moral man because he realizes that he loves *Lolita* like any woman should be loved."²⁷ Humbert's change in tone and his turn in thinking is one, simply, towards *love*, and the rich empathy and boundless tender-

ness which accompany it. To do such, to *love*, merits, even in the darkest of stories, attention, care, and a special, if slight, dispensation. Francis Bacon wrote of, “that which the Grecians call *Apotheosis*,” and which he described as “the supreme honour, which a man could attribute unto man.” If we recall that there is no greater grace and no higher honor which we might be offered than love, might Humbert not deserve his extraordinary epithet, and his crepuscular stroll, after all?

VII

Nabokov wrote to his friend and colleague Morris Bishop in 1956, that, “*Lolita* is a tragedy.”²⁸ The story is a tragedy for the same reason as Humbert is granted a brief stroll in paradise—because Humbert realizes the fault in his character and the crime of his conduct—but does so, alas, too late to halt the progress of the poison. The tragedy is the loss of Lolita—and she is lost from virtually the beginning of Humbert’s memoir. She can be said to be absent from the book which bears her secret name (only to Humbert is she “Lolita”—she is “Lo” to her mother, “Dolly” at school, “Dolores on the dotted line,” and so forth) because of the ultimately less than safe solipsism to which Humbert subjects her. She is everywhere referred to, everywhere described, everywhere poetically loved, but as to her *thoughts*, and *feelings*, Humbert offers us scarcely a glimpse. 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 (*AL*, p. 283). Near the end of the novel, hearing a chance remark that Lolita makes to 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. (*AL*, p. 284)

A few pages later, enumerating his indignities, Humbert continues: “Now, squirming and pleading with my own memory, I recall that on this and similar occasions [the occasion is Lolita’s mourning her mother’s death LD], 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" (*AL*, p. 287). Humbert makes it clear that he cannot plead ignorance. Despite his gift of artistic perception, he does not enter into the souls of others as one enters into the cool shade of a tree. He never ventures out from under the tree of his own desire, and his interactions with Lolita involve nothing so much as his pulling her into that darkness.

In his reconstructed diary recounting Humbert's first days in the Haze House, we find the following entry: "*Monday. Delectatio morosa.* I spend my doleful days in dumps and dolors" (*AL*, p. 43). The annotated edition of *Lolita* glosses this abstruse beginning of the week as follows: "Latin; morose pleasure, a monastic term" (*AL*, p. 357; note 43/2). This is not false, but it is also not what Nabokov is referring to. More can be said: it is a technical term in Christian theology and denotes a problem which goes to the heart of the Christian conception of sin. *Delectatio morosa* is pleasure taken in sinful thinking or imagining which comes to the sinner unbidden, which is *involuntary*.²⁹

Up to the very end of Part One of his memoir when he sleeps with Lolita, Humbert has endeavored to limit his sin to an "internal" and involuntary one, to engage in nothing much worse than *delectatio morosa*. As he says, he has tried to "preserve the morals of a minor." Nabokov once remarked of his creation that, "you can defend what [Humbert] feels for Lolita, but you cannot defend his perversity" ("*on peut défendre son émotion devant Lolita, mais pas sa perversité*") (Interview with Anne Guérin). In these terms then, it is only when Humbert *acts*, when his fantasies take on flesh that they become cause for a denunciation. Though one might well question the propriety of sharing them with others,³⁰ fantasies *per se* are not to be condemned. Cause for denunciation comes with *acts*. Such a denunciation, however, should be accompanied by a desire to understand how a man not insensitive or unimaginative or generally unable to control himself effects this passage from pardonable fantasy to unpardonable act. It is for this reason that the intermediate or chrysalis stage of Humbert's passage to the act should be of such interest to the attentive reader. The mental operation which allows the in other respects sensitive and intelligent Humbert to proceed to such cruel and indifferent acts is crystallized in the Sunday masturbation scene where it is with an "image" of Lolita that Humbert interacts, a Lolita which was, in Humbert's words, "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" (p. 62). Even when their contact is no longer phantasmatic, it remains so in an important sense in that though it is with Lolita's body that he makes love, it is with the moving image he has created of her that he *engages*—and that image is credited with having, like all images, "no will, no consciousness, no life of its own." And it is for this reason that it can be the passive subject of anything he likes.

As we just noted, until the very end of Part One, Humbert has endeavored to, "preserve the morals of a minor." In his *narration*, however, he has not done much to preserve the morals of his reader. He has passionately dedicated his remarkable rhetorical resources towards seducing or subduing the reader into an acceptance of, or complicity with, his dark fantasies and darker acts. Bertrand Russell once noted that there is nothing so useful to democracy as the immunization against eloquence.³¹ Might we not see Humbert's memoir in a similar light? Does not Humbert's memoir ultimately tell his reader: "What I have done is monstrous, let no amount of eloquence ever convince you that such acts are anything but: look at them for what they are, look at them for the pain they cause." Stated somewhat differently, Nabokov's book tells us that the artist cannot live in the world as he lives in the world of words—and this is a lesson worthy of expressing in the world of words.

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1. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, revised and enlarged edition (New York: Penguin, 1964), p. 49.

2. Given Eichmann's nearly nonexistent English, the copy in question was doubtless the German translation of the novel published the preceding year (1959).

3. On December 4, 1975 Arendt began writing a text she entitled "*Judgment*" and which was to round out the trilogy *The Life of the Mind* which she had been at work upon for many years. Arendt had often stated her sense that Kant's Third Critique, *The Critique of Judgment* (*Kritik der Urteilkraft*), contained the kernel of a radical political philosophy. It was this project on which she last embarked. In §40 of this work Kant outlines something simple and essential—"common sense" ("*Gemeinsinn*"; "*sensus communis*"). In the years leading up to this work Kant put ever more emphasis on the role of maxims and here he bases this sense common to us all upon three maxims: "1. *Selbstdenken*. 2. *An der Stelle jedes anderen denken*; 3. *Jederzeit mit sich selbst einstimmig denken*" (Kant X.226). The second of these is the maxim which Kant isolates as the maxim of "judgment" and it

is, it seems, with this passage in mind that Arendt began her work of that same name. Her death the following day prevented her from shedding more light on the matter. It is none the less likely that this maxim is one which had concerned her for some time and, in all likelihood, as early as her writing *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

4. This is indeed the aspect in which her thought most radically distances itself from her first teacher and first love, Martin Heidegger—so much so that the definition is itself, among other things, a polemical commentary on Heidegger's conception of thought and thinking.

5. As regards *The Enchanter*, Nabokov wrote the novella in Russian in 1939, but never published it and believed it lost when he referred to it in "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*." He notes therein that the work was a precursor to *Lolita* in matter of plot but that he "was not pleased with the thing and destroyed it sometime after moving to America in 1940." (See Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, edited with preface, introduction, and notes by Alfred Appel Jr., 1970; revised and updated edition [New York: Vintage, 1991], p. 312; hereafter *AL*.) Nabokov was later to come across a copy of the story among his papers, in 1959 and found that it was not as bad as he'd remembered. However, he did nothing with it. The manuscript came to Nabokov's son Dmitri's attention after Nabokov's death and the former translated and published it in 1985. As for the host of other minor and major precursors in Nabokov's work, the best summary of them available is in the German critical edition of Nabokov's works. See "Zeittafel zur Entstehung des Romans," Vladimir Nabokov, *Gesammelte Werke. Band VIII: Lolita*, ed. Dieter E. Zimmer (Reinbeck bei Hamurg: Rowohlt, 1989), pp. 696–700.

6. Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair* (1966; rpt., New York: Vintage, 1989), p. xi. The "loosely" appears in context not to refer to a modesty or a later dissatisfaction with the work on Nabokov's part, but to the fact that what he had undertaken there was not the composition of a creative or artistic work, but a translation of one. Nabokov revised this translation and republished the work in 1966.

7. *AL*, p. 5.

8. Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940–1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Broccoli (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), p. 57.

9. It is a curious fact that though Nabokov rejected the idea of a heaven, purgatory and hell for men, he accepted it for literary characters. Another example may be found in the person of Flaubert's Emma Bovary who before she makes off with Léon, hears "the last gust of the beadle's parrotlike eloquence" which "foreshadows the hell flames which Emma might still have escaped had she not stepped into that cab with Léon." See Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 164; hereafter *LL*.

10. David M. Bethea, "Nabokov and Khodasevich," in Alexandrov, ed. (1995), p. 456.

11. Speaking of the Russian short story "Spring in Fialta" (1938), White refers to Ferdinand therein as, "one of those many grotesque versions of himself Nabokov planted throughout his fiction" (White, p. 7).

12. Vladimir Nabokov, *Mary*, trans. Michael Glenny in collaboration with the author (1970; rpt., New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 27.

13. Vladimir Nabokov, *Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Knopf, 1996), p. 336.
14. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941; rpt., New York: Vintage, 1992), p. 202.
15. Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 376.
16. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*, trans. Michael Scammell with the collaboration of the author (1963; rpt., New York: Vintage, 1991), pp. 35–36.
17. *LL*, p. 251. Elsewhere in that same work he defends Dickens against charges of sentimentality through recourse to that purest of experiences, that of, “the divine throb of pity” (*LL*, p. 87).
18. “Nothing human is alien to me.” The remark is from Terence’s play *Heauton Timorumenos* (I.i.2). Incidentally, Nabokov’s linguistic nemesis Roman Jakobson (who Nabokov was [wrongly] convinced was a KGB agent) re-tailored the expression to describe himself, declaring on several occasions that, “*linguistici nihil a me alienum puto*” (cf. Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” in Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language* [Cambridge: Technology Press & John Wiley & Sons, 1960], p. 377).
19. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 376.
20. John Milton, *The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton*, ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 234; *Paradise Lost*, II.113–114.
21. Lionel Trilling, “The Last Lover—Vladimir Nabokov’s ‘Lolita’” (reprint in Page, 1982), pp. 93–94.
22. Trilling is far from the only reader with this reaction—it has been, in fact, more the rule than the exception. To cite a few principal instances, Nabokov’s student and annotator Alfred Appel Jr. wrote in equally severe terms that, “what is extraordinary about *Lolita* is the way in which Nabokov enlists us, *against our will*, on Humbert’s side. *Humbert has figuratively made the reader his accomplice in both statutory rape and murder*” (“*Lolita*: The Springboard of Parody,” *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 8 [1967]: 204–24, p. 224; my italics). More soberly, Toker notes that, “the rhetoric of *Lolita* is the rhetoric of reader entrapment”—*Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 199. Norman Miller states that *Lolita* “can be quite simply described as an assault on the reader” who “softened by the power of appeal is . . . ready to forgive all.” *The Self-Conscious Narrator-Protagonist in American Fiction Since World War II*, unpublished dissertation (University of Wisconsin, 1972), pp 188, 198. This passage is cited, and this line of argumentation is continued in Nomi Tami-Ghez, “The Art of Persuasion in Nabokov’s *Lolita*,” in Roth, ed., *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov*, pp. 157–76.
23. In noting the frequency of French referents we should recall that French is the memoirist’s native language—the presence of Poe being fully compatible with this preference given that only later in Humbert’s fictional lifespan does Poe’s English influence begin to eclipse his French one.
24. More indirect references to another unhappy literary lover, Lewis Carroll, might be found in the work, but they are slight, if they could be said to exist at all (i.e., *AL*,

p. 26; *AL*, p. 39 and other references to Carroll's dubious hobby: photographing young girls). In a remark communicated to *Lolita's* annotator Alfred Appel Jr., Nabokov stated, "I always call him Lewis Carroll Carroll because he was the first Humbert Humbert" (*AL*, p. 381, note 131/1). Humbert, of course, does not fail to call an extra-literary cultural relativism to the bar in evoking distant times and places where sex between people vastly separated in age was not only not condemned, but was encouraged [i.e., "Hugh Broughton, a writer of controversy in the reign of James the First, has proved that Rahab was a harlot at ten years of age. . . . Lepcha old men of eighty copulate with girls of eight, and nobody minds" (*AL*, p. 19)].

25. Vladimir Nabokov, interview with Anne Guérin, *L'Express* (January 26, 1961), p. 27.

26. Vladimir Nabokov, interview, *Les nouvelles littéraires* (October 29, 1959).

27. David Rampton, *Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 202.

28. Letter from March 6, 1956, *Morris Bishop Collection of Nabokov Letters*, Cornell University Rare and Manuscript Division. Cf. also Bishop's widow, Alison Bishop's remark, "Nabokov described *Lolita* to us [to her and her husband LD] as a tragedy" (in Gibian and Parker, p. 217).

29. It is thus classified alongside of *gaudium*, dwelling with complacency on sins already committed, and *desiderium*, the desire for what is sinful as what are classified as so-called "internal sins" in orthodox Catholic theology.

30. *Lolita's* eccentric first publisher, Maurice Girodias, saw in the work an endeavor to alter parent-adult relations in modern society—a project which he heartily approved of. (Nabokov couldn't but have been rather consternated at learning through his European agent Doussia Ergaz that Girodias thought that the book "might lead to a change in social attitudes towards the kind of love described in *Lolita*" [letter from 1955 cited by Boyd, 1991, p. 266].)

31. "To acquire immunity to eloquence is of the utmost importance to the citizens of a democracy" (*Atlantic Monthly*, October 1938).