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“Reader! *Bruder!*”: Broodings
on the Rhetoric of *Lolita*

What a strange couple to go on their rambles together!
Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Little Annie’s Ramble”

A novel that deals with a broken sexual taboo is suspected either of sensationalism or of a defiantly callous aestheticism that promotes insensitivity to crime and suffering. It is no longer necessary to defend *Lolita* from the former imputation; yet Nabokov’s much-quoted remarks about the priority of “aesthetic bliss” may still leave him exposed to the latter charge. What all too often remains unnoticed, however, is that these remarks contain unmistakable moral connotations: “aesthetic bliss” is “a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm” (*L*, 316–17). In the humdrum states of being on this side of an aesthetic object, curiosity, tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy are “fanciful and rare” (*G*, 168); the norm is set by “average reality” and one’s daily efforts to stave off its disintegration. It is not for nothing that throughout Humbert’s most touching last interview with Dolly, her husband is patiently fixing wires near a neighbor’s shack.

But to return to the “fanciful and rare.” Nabokov’s brand of “aesthetic bliss” is, to a large extent, a Schopenhauerian notion. It is as if he had drawn the conclusion about the ennobling effect of art from Schopenhauer’s belief in the power of aesthetic enjoyment to put to sleep the insistent urgings of the malevolent will. If Nabokov’s novels are not *littérature engagée* (see *SO*, 33), neither are they “art for art’s sake.” Aesthetic experience is disinterested, yet, as Marianne Moore observed in “Poetry,” it is also “useful,” especially when it produces a cathartic effect.

The foreword to Humbert's memoirs, signed by one John Ray, ends in a comically well-meaning cliché: " 'Lolita' should make all of us—parents, social workers, educators—apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world" (*L*, 8). A cliché is a statement that has lost its efficacy but not necessarily its validity; one should recollect Tess Durbeyfield's indignant "What all women say some women may feel."¹ *Lolita* does, in a sense, improve one's "vigilance and vision," yet it does not merely call upon "parents, teachers, and social workers" to instill more solid values into the younger generation and protect it from prowlers. The desired "better generation" is not even the moldable younger generation; it is the current generation of the readers themselves. The "vigilance" is, or should be, introspective, directed to the potential vulnerability of the reader's own system of values.

The rhetoric of *Lolita* is the rhetoric of reader entrapment: like many classical novelists before him, Nabokov reads the reader, revealing in him or her attitudes parallel to the ones that threaten the "safety" within the fictional world. The nonvicarious tribulations that make us reassess the attitudes involved in our reading process constitute the cathartic element of the novel; the narrative promotes and then purges certain tendencies in the reader's response. This cathartic element is generally limited to the first reading; in repeated readings it yields to serener aesthetic enjoyment and to a more active participation in constructing the fictional world. Yet these two aspects of the reader's response are also endowed with a specific moral significance.

I

Nabokov's road to the achievement of a balance between aesthesis and catharsis was not easy. The theme of child molestation first appeared in his novella *The Enchanter (Volshebnik)*, written in 1939. Nabokov read it to a group of friends but did not then publish it because he "was not pleased with the thing" (*L*, 314). Pedophilia being "so distant" from his own "emotional life" (*SO*, 15), he knew that the right approach to the subject was still eluding him. It took several years, as well as the freedom from the anxiety of his protracted stay in prewar France, the release of certain tensions through *Bend Sinister*,

¹ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (Harmondsworth, 1982), p. 125.

and a fascination with the new linguistic medium, to allow him to explore the whole complexity of the “strange couple” theme. The impact of *Lolita* made him change his mind about *The Enchanter*; yet it was only the aesthetic quality of the novella’s texture that he commended in a letter to the president of G. P. Putnam’s Sons in 1959, describing the ten-year-old manuscript as “a beautiful piece of Russian prose, precise and lucid” and adding that “with a little care [it] could be done into English by the Nabokovs” (*En*, 16). Eventually, however, instead of having *The Enchanter* translated into English, Nabokov translated *Lolita* into Russian.

The Enchanter has appeared posthumously in an English translation by Dmitri Nabokov. It is the story of a man in his forties, a pedophile who focuses his obsession on a pretty twelve-year-old girl he meets in the park. The girl, symptomatically, is always roller-skating out of the field of vision or otherwise moving away; her loveliness is a shadow of Platonic beauty that no one should presume to capture. Yet in the words of the *Knickerbocker* debate, most of Nabokov’s tragic villains confuse “metaphysics with chowder.”² In order to gain access to the girl, the so-called “enchanter” marries her terminally sick mother. After the mother’s death he attempts to consummate his passion in a hotel room; when the girl’s screams awaken the neighbors, he throws himself under the wheels of a car.

The Enchanter makes good reading, but it is much more limited in scope than *Lolita*. The books differ in length, setting, and tone. Moreover, unlike *The Enchanter*, *Lolita* produces a cathartic effect. It lulls us into long spans of sympathy for Humbert and then punishes us for our temporary suspension of judgment, whereas *The Enchanter* fails to “enchant” us out of our consistent disapproval of the protagonist, a disapproval punctured by only brief touches of compassion.

The protagonist of *The Enchanter* is shown to be capable of consideration and occasional pity for the mother, who is “pregnant . . . with her own death” (*En*, 59) and for the daughter, who is being brought up by friends of the family in “a home without caresses,” with “strict order, symptoms of fatigue, a favor for a friend grown

²One wonders what “Knickerbocker” it is that Nabokov has in mind when he uses the name to explain how the “bo” in his own name should be pronounced (*SO*, 51); given his interest in Melville, it may allude to the New York literary journal of the mid-nineteenth century. On “metaphysics and chowder,” see Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville* (New York, 1956), pp. 59–68.

burdensome" (*En*, 36). However, we are seldom allowed to forget his role of a mad wolf in "Granny's night-cap" (*En*, 67). The scholarly Humbert turns out to be a far better magician. Humbert, of course, is allowed to tell his own story, whereas *The Enchanter* is written in the third person. Although not directly censorious, the novella's third-person narrator is clearly critical of the protagonist's carnal designs upon the little girl's unselfconscious beauty. Such a narrative stance is not conducive to the kind of sympathetic self-projection that a first-person narrator like Humbert can sometimes elicit from the reader.

The first person narrative makes Humbert's spells more enduring than those of his precursor and enhances the drama of the break of these spells. Having already started his work on *Lolita*, in February 1951 Nabokov wrote "The Vane Sisters," a short story in which he perfected his use of the kind of first-person narrator who does not know that he expresses much more than he means to say.³ To some extent, "The Vane Sisters," is a "firing practice" (*G*, 208) for *Lolita*—perhaps a more conscious preparation for it than "Recruiting" is for *Pnin* (see Chapter 2, above).

The structural principle of *Lolita* elaborates on that of "The Vane Sisters" and of Nabokov's 1932 novel *Despair*: the first-person narrator uses (not quite unsuccessfully) an arsenal of rhetoric in order to impose his attitudes on the reader, yet the events described ultimately demand a totally different interpretation of his experience.⁴ Like Hermann of *Despair*, and unlike the sour narrator of "The Vane Sisters" or the villainous one of "The Dashing Fellow" (1930), Humbert claims to be an artist of the quasi-Oscar Wilde type, one who wishes to turn his life into a work of art and therefore solipsistically manipulates the people around him as if they were "methods of composition."⁵ The implied author of the novel, however, dissociates himself from Humbert, asserts his power over the events of the fictional world, and

³The narrator of the story (a French professor on an American college campus), having disapproved of the late Cynthia Vane's probing of the hereafter, is not aware that she and her sister, also dead, haunt the imagery of his text and assert their presence by an acrostic in the last paragraph.

⁴For a discussion of most of his devices, see Nomi Tamir-Ghez, "The Art of Persuasion in Nabokov's *Lolita*," in Roth, *Critical Essays*, pp. 157–76.

⁵"The Vane Sisters" contains many allusions to Wilde; see Isobel Murray, "'Plagiatisme,' Nabokov's 'The Vane Sisters,' and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," *Durham University Journal*, 70 (December 1977), 69–72.

adjusts these events according to his own rather than Humbert's system of values.⁶

II

The cathartic effect of *Lolita* derives from its promotion of our temporary sympathy for Humbert and inattentiveness to Dolly Haze and then in its making us modify our attitudes. Humbert, of course, spares no effort to impose his sense of "norm" upon the reader. He wants ecstasy, an ingredient of Nabokov's "aesthetic bliss," to be the norm not just in his contact with art but also in his life. The novel-reading audience is well conditioned to sympathize with this desire, but it is not conditioned to sympathize with what Humbert regards as the source of his ecstasy: pedophilia. Eventually, however, the audience is entrapped: it begins to derive a pleasure from the account of the pursuit of ecstasy and to ignore the price of this pursuit, the suffering that Humbert causes to others. This is precisely the effect Humbert wishes to produce on the "Gentlewomen of the Jury" to whom he addresses his confession (until, aware of his approaching death, he no longer cares for self-vindication).⁷ His narrative strives to turn the jury's attention into an aesthetic contemplation and then to subject the latter to the rules of visual perspective: the greater the distance, the less distinct the features of the represented scene.

Humbert attempts to present his obsession with little girls as a wide spread and essentially normal phenomenon impeded only by an arbitrary social convention; indeed, who can nowadays draw a line between the eccentric and the insane? Among the initiated, according to Humbert, a sexual preference like his is common enough to merit a name. He supplies the name, "nympholepsy," which is much more flattering than the clinical "pedophilia." His ultimate remorse springs from having ruined Dolly Haze's life; the obsession itself he rather consistently describes as tormenting yet incomparably beautiful, a curse that is also a gift and that singles him out from ordinary mortals.

⁶Following Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961), p. 151, I use the concept of the implied author as distinct from the historical author. Many of the techniques through which the implied author asserts his power over Humbert's story are pointed out in Alfred Appel's notes in *The Annotated Lolita (L)*.

⁷For an analysis of Humbert's motives for writing his narrative, see Grabes, *Fictitious Biographies*; pp. 31-35.

Humbert describes his passion in a way reminiscent of Cincinnatus's metaphysical probings in *Invitation to a Beheading*: he has "caught glimpses of an incomparably more poignant bliss" than the "routine rhythm which shakes the world" (*L*, 20). His difference from Cincinnatus is that he has substituted the violation of a sexual taboo for the breaking of a metaphysical ban. This is Humbert's error, not his crime. His crime consists in an attempt to live by his obsessive fantasies as if they were law, thus turning the object of his passion into his victim and sacrificing whoever may stand in his way. Yet the fact that Humbert is a callous predator and not a tormented artist playing fairy godmother is precisely what tends to elude the reader's intelligence during long stretches of the tale.

Only after the account of the strange couple's coast-to-coast "ramble" is well under way do the wolf's teeth begin to show more and more ominously from under "the enchanted hunter's" mask. Before narrating this "ramble" Humbert tries hard to convince the reader that his sexual exploitation of Dolly need not hurt her and that he can perhaps make her happier than she was under her mother's discipline. Even if not persuaded, the reader is made to slip into a sympathetic attitude toward Humbert; sympathy for a fictional hero who embarks on a mission impossible and displays energy and acumen in its pursuit is a pleasure that few readers wish to give up, despite all the scornful treatment that such a pleasure may receive in various aesthetic theories. Our reluctant sympathy for Humbert's quest is as essential to *Lolita* as Ishmael's sympathy for another "lucid madman" is to *Moby Dick*.

The cathartic experience, however, is produced not by Humbert's rhetoric but by the rhetoric of the implied author, who makes Humbert say more than he can consciously register. The narrative of *Lolita*, like that of Jane Austen's *Emma* or Melville's "Benito Cereno," supplies the reader with clues to the presence of subplots yet delays explicit information. The most obvious instance of this technique is the story of Dolly's conspiracy with Quilty. Only in repeated readings do we decipher the signs of this conspiracy, because not until the very end of the novel does Quilty materialize, only to be messily destroyed in the Pavor Manor episode. Less conspicuous yet more relevant to the study of reader entrapment is the story of Dolly's sexual escapade in Camp Q.

It is a conventional privilege of the first-person narrator to withhold from the reader the information that he himself does not possess at a given moment of the represented time; hence, the reader is not in-

formed about Dolly's adventures in the camp until Humbert learns about them. Moreover, Humbert does not explicitly project the belated information upon the key parts of his story. The conventional reticence of the first-person narrator is here endowed with a psychologically realistic meaning: Humbert the memoirist is ill; his condition deteriorates during his stay in prison, and he has not much energy left to expend on analysis. In chapter 26 of Part I, the shortest chapter of the book, he complains of his "daily headache" and of the effort that the writing costs him: "Don't think I can go on. Heart, head—everything" (*L*, 111). Symptomatically, even the heavy-handed pun on "Quilty" ("*il faut qu'il t'y mène*") in Mona's letter to Dolly escapes Humbert the punster. His only comment—"The letter contained an element of mysterious nastiness that I am too tired today to analyze" (*L*, 225)—underscores his fatigue. This technique of the uncomprehending focalizer is one of the methods by which Nabokov, like James, Melville, and other great novelists, creates an illusion of depth behind the surface of the narrative, an illusion that the fictional world is living its own life in a background that the laws of visual perspective render indistinct.

The effect of spatial and psychological depth, however, is largely a product of dramatic irony, which rises to the surface in repeated reading. It is only in a repeated reading of the Enchanted Hunters episode that we become aware of the intensely troubled emotional life behind Dolly's brash facade, the inner life that Humbert brushes off as irrelevant and depraved childish nonsense. When he picks her up from the camp after her mother's death (of which she has not yet been informed), she has not come to terms with her "activities" (*L*, 116) with Charley Holmes in the woods. She tries to laugh the matter off—"Bad, bad, girl. . . Juvenile delickwent, but frank and fetching" (*L*, 115), yet it relentlessly haunts her speech:

"What have you been up to? I insist you tell me."

"Are you easily shocked?"

"No. Go on."

"Let us turn into a secluded lane and I'll tell you."

"Lo, I must seriously ask you not to play the fool. Well?"

"Well—I joined in all the activities that were offered."

"*Ensuite?*"

"Ansooit, I was taught to live happily and richly with others and to develop a wholesome personality. Be a cake, in fact."

"Yes. I saw something of the sort in the booklet." . . .

“The Girl Scout’s motto,” said Lo rhapsodically, “is also mine. I fill my life with worthwhile deeds such as—well, never mind what. My duty is—to be useful. I am a friend to male animals. I obey orders. I am cheerful. . . . I am thrifty and I am absolutely filthy in thought, word and deed.” . . .

“*C’est bien tout?*”

“C’est. Except for one little thing, something I simply can’t tell you without blushing all over.” [*L*, 116–17]

In our first reading we take Dolly’s conversation in much the same way as Humbert does. He is deaf to her signals in the represented time, and the author makes him too tired and ill to note his own insensitivity at the time of memoir writing. Hence, we are not alerted to the urgency of Dolly’s private troubles. Among the things that we lose by this imposed misreading is not only the psychological complexity but also the exquisite comedy of the *double entendre*.

Later the same night Humbert is impatient for Dolly to fall asleep so that he can secretly indulge his craving for her. He does not wish to listen to her. Nor does the reader. Because explicit information about the Charley Holmes affair is delayed by Humbert (the revelation is used in lieu of an account of the erotic scene—“Anybody can imagine those elements of animality”: *L*, 136), the reader fails to realize that Dolly is trying to recover her sense of “norm” by casting Humbert in the role of a fellow conspirator who has sufficient authority to reassure her that sex is, indeed, a normal part of a tough youngster’s “furtive world” (*L*, 135). Another reason we fail at first to understand Dolly’s signals and doubts is that we still allow Humbert to infect us with his impatience and (let us be frank) his anticipation of an erotic scene:

I had almost to carry her into our room. There, she sat down on the edge of the bed, swaying a little, speaking in dove-dull long-drawn tones.

“If I tell you—if I tell you, will you promise [sleepy, so sleepy—head lolling, eyes going out], promise you won’t make complaints?”

“Later, Lo. Now go to bed. I’ll leave you here, and you go to bed. Give you ten minutes.”

“Oh, I’ve been such a disgusting girl,” she went on, shaking her hair, removing with slow fingers a velvet hair ribbon. “Lemme tell you—”

“Tomorrow, Lo. Go to bed, go to bed—for goodness sake, to bed.”

I pocketed the key and walked downstairs. [*L*, 124–25]

Repeated reading reveals that Dolly’s troubled inner life, although not conventionally pure, is by no means vulgar or callous. It is amaz-

ing, though, how often the effect of the first reading persists and how many critics never change their attitude to Dolly as an “exasperating brat” (*L*, 150), an attitude that they share with Charlotte Haze and with Humbert at his worst moments.⁸ Humbert does eventually realize that he has underestimated Dolly’s mind:

It struck me . . . that I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful 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 . . . for I often noticed that living as we did, she and I, in a world of total evil, we would become strangely embarrassed whenever I tried to discuss something she and an old friend, she and a parent, she and a real healthy sweetheart, I and Annabel . . . might have discussed—an abstract idea, a painting, stippled Hopkins or shorn Baudelaire, God or Shakespeare, anything of a genuine kind. Good will! She would mail her vulnerability in trite brashness and boredom, whereas I, using for my desperately detached comments an artificial tone of voice that set my own last teeth on edge, provoked my audience to such outbursts of rudeness as made any further conversation impossible, oh my poor, bruised child. [*L*, 286]

As is usual in Nabokov, immorality is incompatible with satisfactory metaphysics or aesthetics, “God or Shakespeare.” Humbert’s belated insight sheds a new light on Dolly’s demonstrative indifference to the landscape and her love for advertised goods and billboard offers (“She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer”: *L*, 150), with which also she eventually gets bored; all things are soiled for her by Humbert’s anti-Midas touch. We can now begin to see a complexity in Dolly’s character which, owing to erotic anticipation or to the more respectable “desire for the text,” we have not noticed before. We can begin to see the “garden” and the “twilight” and the “palace gate,” though whatever lies beyond the gate remains off limits for us. The change in our view of her character reveals how easily we can be tricked into an attitude similar to Humbert’s “habit and method to ignore Lolita’s states of mind” (*L*, 289) while ministering to his comforts. Indeed, Humbert’s charges against the Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury—including those implied in the allusion to Baude-

⁸For much-needed criticism of such misreadings, see Gladys M. Clifton, “Humbert Humbert and the Limits of Artistic License,” in Rivers and Nicol, *Fifth Arc*, pp. 162–65. Symptomatically, however, even Clifton refers to Dolly as “Lolita”—the name used only by Humbert, with little or no sanction on Dolly’s part.

laire's sarcastic fraternization with the *hypocrite lecteur* ("Reader! *Bruder!*": *L*, 264)⁹—are not undeserved: in our previous underestimation of the character's complexity we are now forced to recognize a germ of the same tendency that reduces people to "solipsized" objects (*L*, 62) in the novel's world.

III

The novel's cathartic reader entrapment, based on the use of the first-person narrative, is a technique fraught with problems. Exploration of the enchanted hunter's obsession, its seductiveness, the glamour of the mask, calls for an unregenerated focal character. Yet a sensitive presentation of the human price that such an obsession exacts requires a degree of genuine human warmth. Can the same narrative consciousness supply both the ingredients of the magic potion that the novel attempts to brew?

Genuinely beautiful emotion permeates the last meeting of Humbert and Dolly and the memories that crowd in upon his mind when he drives away from Coalmont. For the first time in his life Humbert really loves the woman who is no longer a "nymphet" and can therefore generously renounce her. The Coalmont episode thus seems to produce a therapeutic effect on the protagonist; symptomatically, as it were, the two very young girls whom he later sees in Pavor Manor excite nothing but pity and disgust—"so young, so lewd" (*L*, 307). His lust for Dolly has been replaced by a belated yet genuine compassion and love: "There she was . . . 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. . . . 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 cancelled and cursed" (*L*, 279–80).

Stridently apostrophizing his Lolita, Humbert claims that he loves her despite her pregnancy by another man, despite the pollution, the ravages that may be produced by childbirth: "I would go mad with tenderness at the mere sight of your dear wan face, at the mere sound of your raucous young voice" (*L*, 280). His conduct throughout the

⁹See also Appel's note 1 to p. 264 (*L*, 424).

Coalmont episode supports this claim. And yet his new vision of his “*grand pêché radieux*” as a “sterile and selfish vice” does not leave a sufficient imprint on the beginning and middle of his narrative. If Humbert is telling his tale after the Coalmont and the Pavor Manor episodes, a complete cure of pedophilia should have made it impossible for him to relive his former ecstasies at the time of the writing. “I cannot paint / What then I was,” says Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey” when he tries, and fails, to revive the raptures known by his former self. The fact that throughout more than half the book Humbert does not fail to paint “what then he was” means that despite his protestations he has not yet succeeded in canceling his obsession.

Indeed, though Humbert the narrator punctuates his memoirs with expressions of remorse and disgust with his former self (unlike the penitence of the novel’s closing chapters, this penance is somewhat self-indulgent), he time and again plunges into such an impassioned account of his erotic pursuits that the reader tends to forget their inappropriateness to their object.¹⁰ The self-flagellation does not signify a cure: Humbert knew remorse at the height of his perverted “romance.” His experience in writing the memoir actually reenacts the experience of the days when he had Dolly instead of “only words to play with” (*L*, 34) and when he oscillated between sexual urges, tender repentance, and renewed sexual urges that would call for more repentance upon being satisfied:

I recall certain moments, let us call them icebergs in paradise, when after having had my fill of her—after fabulous, insane exertions that left me limp and azure barred—I would gather her in my arms with, at last, a mute moan of human tenderness . . .—and the tenderness would deepen to shame and despair, and I would lull and rock my lone light Lolita in my marble arms, and moan in her warm hair, and caress her at random and mutely ask her blessing, and at the peak of this human agonized selfless tenderness (with my soul actually hanging around her naked body and ready to repent), all at once, ironically, horribly, lust would swell again—and “oh, no,” Lolita would say with a sigh to heaven, and the next moment the tenderness and the azure—all would be shattered. [*L*, 287]

If Humbert were, indeed, cured of his obsession, the tenderness of his remorseful memories of Dolly (“my poor, bruised child”: *L*, 286)

¹⁰Cf. Edmund White, “Nabokov: Beyond Parody,” in Gibian and Parker, *Achievements*, p. 13: “One of the most amusing paradoxes of *Lolita* is that the satyr Humbert Humbert becomes the minnesinger of courtly love for the twentieth century.”

would color the whole of his retrospective narrative and interfere with his presentations of pedophilia as incomparable bliss. That, however, would make it next to impossible to render the full intensity of the conflict between the ecstasy and the destructiveness of his misdirected quest.

The problem of reconciling Humbert's persistent perversity with the event that purports to have removed it must have been a major challenge for Nabokov. He found his solution in a crafty handling of dates that in effect untells Humbert's tale.

The deceptiveness of Humbert's seemingly straightforward retrospective narrative has been noticed only quite recently and has not so far found due appreciation in the critical community. In her 1979 article "Time in *Lolita*," an essay that should have exerted greater influence on Nabokov studies than it seems to have done, Christina Tekiner puts together certain significant facts.

Humbert is supposed to die immediately after completing his manuscript: his use of initials instead of names on the last page suggests haste, an awareness that his time is running out. In the John Ray foreword the date of Humbert's death is given as November 16, 1952. On the penultimate page of his memoirs (supposedly written on that day), Humbert notes that he began his literary labor fifty six days before. This means that he must have started writing the memoir on September 21 or 22. Yet September 22 is the day he received Dolly's letter from Coalmont and, according to the subsequent narrative, immediately set off on his frantic drive to meet Dolly, give her her "trousseau" (*L*, 280), and settle his account with Quilty; hence, he could not have had time to write on this or the following few days. Tekiner therefore concludes (a) that the meeting with Dolly Schiller and the murder of Quilty never happened; (b) that on receiving the letter, Humbert went to a psychiatric clinic and started writing his manuscript; (c) that the account of the final encounter with Dolly and the revenge on the rival were invented by Humbert in prison; and (d) that Humbert was on trial not for the murder of Quilty (indeed, John Ray's foreword never mentions a murder) but for statutory rape and carrying a minor across state lines. Tekiner's main conclusion is that just as earlier in the novel Humbert transformed Dolly Haze into a "solipsized" (*L*, 62) Lolita, so in the last nine chapters he loves not the real Dolly Schiller but a woman who is, still, his own creation.¹¹

¹¹See Christina Tekiner, "Time in *Lolita*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 25 (1979), 463-69.

Before examining the issue further, we must note that Nabokov's screenplay for *Lolita* (which Stanley Kubrick eventually rejected in favor of one more appropriate to Hollywood needs) does not support Tekiner's reading: it presents Humbert's ride to meet the pregnant Dolly Schiller and his murder of Quilty (the episode with which both Nabokov's screenplay and Kubrick's movie start) as taking place in Humbert's "reality" rather than in his imagination. But the screenplay, written about five years after the publication of the novel, is a totally new work. It contains a number of scenes that Nabokov had rejected while working on the novel, presents the material in a different sequence, and is timed in a new way: for instance, Humbert comes to America after World War II and not on the eve of the war, as in the novel.

The screenplay, therefore, cannot be used to settle moot points in the novel.¹² A comparison of the different editions of the novel, however, proves beyond a doubt that the logical impossibility of its denouement (the contradiction in dates) is a deliberate device. In the faulty 1958 edition Humbert receives Dolly's letter "early" in September 1952. Subsequently, Nabokov replaces the word "early" with "late."¹³ In his 1967 Russian translation Nabokov specifies the date—September 22, 1952—in the description of Humbert's going to the mailbox,¹⁴ whereas in the English original he mentions it three pages later (*L*, 269). This minor change is obviously calculated to emphasize that there is no span left between the receipt of the letter and the

¹²Nevertheless, I shall offer my explanation of why Nabokov should begin the screenplay with Quilty's murder. The viewer must, right from the start, be prevented from sympathizing with the character, who would be played by a handsome actor (whether or not Nabokov knew it would be Peter Sellers). In Kubrick's movie, sympathy for Humbert comes all the easier because his beloved looks eighteen rather than twelve years old. It is therefore appropriate for the murder scene to be as long as it is in the film; Nabokov had thought that it "should not last more than one minute." It is also interesting that in Nabokov's screenplay (from which Kubrick again deviated) the shooting takes place in "a silent shadowy sequence" (*LS*, 2) with strong visual images but, it seems, with the sound turned off. There is something dreamlike about it—perhaps an afterglow of the surrealism that colors this episode in the novel. In the original screenplay the viewer's potential sympathy for Quilty is also undermined by a shot of the "drug addict's implementa," from which the camera withdraws "with a shudder" (*LS*, 1). Yet for Nabokov murder is always the most terrible of crimes, no matter who its victim is.

¹³See Appel's note 5 to p. 266 (*L*, 426).

¹⁴See the Russian version of *Lolita* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1967), p. 245. Retranslated to English, the passage would read not "that particular morning, late in September 1952" (*L*, 266) but "that morning, September 22, 1952."

writing of the memoir. The trips to Coalmont and Pavor Manor were never made by Humbert; the account of these trips is a story-within-a-story, an inset imagined not only by Nabokov but also by Humbert. Humbert, moreover, does not seem to begin writing his memoirs with the Coalmont episode already in mind; he appears to invent or, rather, construct this episode *at the time of writing it*. He is completely unaware of having crossed the line between "reality" and illusion. Whereas Alexander Nolan in Borges's "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" plants clues by which posterity may unravel his deceptions, Humbert fails to remove such clues from his narrative.

What is the purpose of these clues? It is certainly not limited to canceling the story by exposing the cognitive unreliability of the narrator. In *Lolita* the reader's awareness of the narrator's unreliability and of the fictional nature of the story is much less important than in *Prnin*. In repeated readings Humbert's unreliability of course makes us more skeptical of, for instance, his self-image as an irresistible specimen of Hollywood manhood, yet as suggested above it is mainly in order to remove the self-contradiction of the narrative stance that Nabokov allows us to diagnose the logical impossibility of the novel's denouement: if the therapeutic Coalmont episode, which evokes a profound sympathy for both Dolly and Humbert (in contrast to the "impartial sympathy" recommended by his lawyer: *L*, 59), did not really take place before Humbert began writing his story, then in the bulk of the narrative the distance between Humbert the erring focal character and Humbert the penitent narrating voice does not have to be as great as it is in, say, Dickens's *Great Expectations*.¹⁵ Suggestively, when after his arrest Humbert receives a consignment of books from the prison library, he seems to dismiss both the Bible and a set of Dickens in preference to a "*Children's Encyclopedia* (with some nice photographs of sunshine-haired Girl Scouts in shorts)" (*L*, 33) and other items, including *Who's Who in the Limelight*.¹⁶

¹⁵Following Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, pp. 186–89, I use "voice" to mean a person who is supposed to be performing the narrative act: e.g., the mature Pip of *Great Expectations* or the third-person narrator in Nabokov's *Mary*. The "focus" is the character who provides the center of vision: e.g., the erring young Pip of *Great Expectations* or Ganin in the bulk of *Mary*.

¹⁶Tekiner ("Time in *Lolita*," 466–67) notes that it is with the help of this *Who's Who* that Humbert discovers Dolly's relationship with the playwright Quilty. To cover her tracks, Dolly had made him believe that Quilty was a woman, but *Who's Who* reveals that he is a man.

IV

The logical impossibility of the denouement also functions as part of the novel's rhetoric of reader entrapment. This trap consists, however, not in encouraging a lack of attention to narrative clues but, conversely, in producing a too diligent imaginative collaboration with them.

If Humbert sometimes tells more than he knows, he often also deliberately tells less. His so-called sexual frankness is accompanied by a crafty obliqueness that make the reader responsible for constructing or distorting the erotic scenes. Thus, for a long time most readers thought that in the famous couch episode Humbert has his lengthy orgasm while Dolly is sitting on his lap (see *L*, 59–63); not until the 1981 conference of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages did Alex E. Alexander make it clear that she is supposed to be lying on the couch with her feet in Humbert's lap. Likewise, in the Hourglass Lake episode one has to concentrate on picturing the scene to oneself in order to notice that Charlotte sits up topless (these are the modest late 1940s) expecting to arouse in Humbert (who has just reluctantly given up his plan to drown her) emotions of a totally different nature from those that the reader is invited to infer:

We sat down on our towels in the thirsty sun. She looked around, loosened her bra, and turned over on her stomach to give her back a chance to be feasted upon. She said she loved me. She sighed deeply. She extended one arm and groped in the pocket of her robe for her cigarettes. She sat up and smoked. She examined her right shoulder. She kissed me heavily with open smoky mouth. Suddenly, down the sand bank behind us, from under the bushes and pines, a stone rolled, then another.

"Those disgusting prying kids," said Charlotte, holding up her big bra to her breast and turning prone again. [*L*, 90]

Oblique sexual reference gains importance after the episode of Humbert's first night with Dolly in the Enchanted Hunters hotel. At this point, as is well known, the erotic escalation of the surface narrative is discontinued; however, the escalation continues behind the screen, in the spatial background whose presence is suggested by hints and eloquently reticent remarks scattered throughout the novel. Humbert notes that at first Dolly regards everything except kisses on the mouth and the stark sex act either as "romantic slosh" or as something

abnormal (*L*, 135). It takes him some time and some blackmail to coax her into more complex exercises, but by the time they settle down in Beardsley their nights contain “things that the most jaded *voyeur* would have paid a small fortune to watch” (*L*, 182). In the end Humbert starts giving Dolly money to make her agree to oral sex and, on one occasion, to under-the-desk contact in her classroom.

Humbert’s hunger, a metaphysical “itch of being” (*Gl*, xiii) mistaken for an obsessive pursuit of an eidolon, cannot be appeased by the possession of his “nymphet’s” body. In a sense it is fortunate for Dolly that, in his wish to go beyond the surface, Humbert thinks not about her heart (of which he despairs) or her mind (which he holds in low esteem) or her soul (in which he does not believe) but, weirdly in tune with Edgar Allan Poe, of her inner organs: “My only grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, . . . lungs, her comely twin kidneys” (*L*, 167).

Whether or not this remark suggests a touch of necrophilia, it definitely implies the possibility of violence. Violence also seems to escalate behind the curtain of the narrative. From between the lines it emerges that Dolly’s resistance to Humbert is at times very active: “Whose cat has scratched poor you?” inquires a lady of Humbert at a hotel table d’hôte (*L*, 166). At first he does not want to hurt her physically, but starting with the Beardsley period the element of violence in their conflicts steadily grows (see *L*, 207, 217, 229), so that references to Sade and his Justine acquire a menacing ring.¹⁷ Then a gun is introduced and likewise begins to “grow”—as another revolver does in *The Gift* (cf. *G*, 57): it is transferred from a box to a pocket so that Humbert may be ready “to take advantage of the spell of insanity” (*L*, 231) that he anticipates, not without pleasure. Upon placing Dolly in a hospital in Elphinstone, Humbert wonders whether he should “mention ” that his fifteen-year-old daughter had had a minor accident while climbing an awkward fence with her boy friend” (*L*, 242), making the reader wonder whether the loss of virginity is the only thing that Humbert wishes to explain away. In Elphinstone, moreover,

¹⁷See Appel’s note on allusion to Sade (*L*, 429–30). Unknowingly, Dolly also makes an allusion to Justine, who was killed by lightning: “I am not a lady and do not like lightning” (*L*, 222) she says during a storm. This is a reference to Quilty’s play *The Lady Who Loved Lightning*; Humbert does not realize that Dolly is upset about missing an appointment with Quilty rather than by the rage of the elements.

Dolly wants to “climb Red Rock from which a mature screen star had recently jumped to her after a drunken row with her gigolo” (*L*, 212). Ominously, the name of the place is a translation of the “Roches Roses,” the setting of young Humbert’s tryst with his Annabel Leigh, who died of typhus shortly afterward. At one point Dolly stops the car at the last minute on the brink of a precipice (*L*, 230–31), and it is on the verge of another precipice, a “friendly abyss” (*L*, 309) that Humbert pauses, after Dolly’s disappearance, to mourn the absence of her voice from the imaginary concord of children’s voices.

Is the reader expected to infer from these images that despite his assurances to the contrary, Humbert might after all have killed Dolly, or that she might have suffered an accident or committed suicide in a desperate attempt to escape from him? Both the temptation to offer such a detective-story solution of the novel’s missing-person case (*Dolores Disparue*) and the resistance to this temptation seem to be equally appropriate responses to *Lolita*. This paradox develops the complex demand made on the reader’s response in Nabokov’s short story “Signs and Symbols,” written in 1948—less than two years before he started work on *Lolita*. The son of the elderly couple whose day is described in this story is kept in a mental hospital because he suffers from “referential mania.” Everything in the world around him seems to be “a veiled reference to his personality and existence”: “Phenomenal nature shadows him wherever he goes. Clouds in the starring sky transmit to one another, by means of slow signs, incredibly detailed information regarding him. His inmost thoughts are discussed at nightfall, in manual alphabet, by darkly gesticulating trees. Pebbles or stains of sun flecks form patterns representing in some awful way messages that he must intercept. Everything is a cipher and of everything he is the theme” (*ND*, 64–65).

As William Carroll has observed, it is to a character in fiction rather than to a “real person” that everything around him refers.¹⁸ Therefore, if the reader regards the half-dead starling that has fallen out of its nest or the underground train that loses its life current at the beginning of the story as indirect evidence of the young man’s ultimate death, he gets trapped in that character’s own referential mania.¹⁹ It is true that

¹⁸See William Carroll, “Nabokov’s Signs and Symbols,” in Proffer, *Book of Things*, pp. 208–10.

¹⁹For this observation I am indebted to Paul J. Rosenzweig, “The Importance of

a novel's events do not always depend on causality: despite the authority of Novalis, character need not always be fate. Plot developments are not always products of plausibility or consequences of previous actions. They may also be brought about by the tendency of metaphors to turn into physical facts;²⁰ and one cannot but agree with Jorge Luis Borges that words and images have the power to attract, as if by sympathetic magic, words and images like them.²¹ This principle of composition, however, can retain its "magic" only so long as it does not turn into a convention. The recurrent imagery of death need not automatically lead the reader to interpret the open ending of the story as implying the hero's suicide; the escalation of violence and the reference to Red Rocks in *Lolita* need not automatically suggest the violent death of Dolly Haze, even though the reader's cooperative imagination has been activated by Humbert's game of *sous entendre* and even though the denouement offered by Humbert turns out to be logically impossible.

And yet, through persistent *sous entendre* Nabokov does stimulate the reader's cooperative imagination; through the game of cross-reference he does provide this imagination with definite subject matter.²² And he does leave clues to the fact that Humbert never met Dolly in Coalmont. Moreover, at the end of his imaginary account of the Coalmont episode there is a hint of the possibility of what Borges would have called "forking paths." It is as if for a moment Humbert's imagination were toying with the idea of his somehow making use of his gun after Dolly refuses to give him any hope that she may return to him, but then he immediately realizes that such an ending of the most beautiful scene in his whole memoir would be inappropriate:

"No," she said smiling, "no."

"It would have made all the difference," said Humbert Humbert.

Reader Response in Nabokov's 'Signs and Symbols,' " *Essays in Literature*, 7 (1980), 256–57. A similar point was more recently made in Richter, "Narrative Entrapment," 427–30. A different approach is suggested in John Hagopian, "Decoding Nabokov's 'Signs and Symbols,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, Spring 1981, 115–19.

²⁰A novel structured almost entirely on this principle is *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom* (Between dog and wolf) by Sasha Sokolov (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1980).

²¹See Jorge Luis Borges, "Narrative Art and Magic," *Triquarterly*, 25 (Fall 1972), 209–15.

²²Cf. the discussion of techniques for activating the imagination of the audience in E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London, 1962), p. 174.

Then I pulled out my automatic—I mean, this is the kind of fool thing a reader might suppose I did. It never even occurred to me to do it.

“Good by-aye!” she chanted, my American sweet immortal dead love; for she is dead and immortal if you are reading this. *I mean*, such is the formal agreement with the so-called authorities. [*L*, 282; my italics]

The episode is usually interpreted as making fun of the reader who, under the influence of Mérimée’s *Carmen* (to which an allusion is made several lines before), expects Humbert to kill his unfaithful love. This interpretation is certainly correct; however, the passage contains suggestions that Humbert may have “pulled out [his] automatic” on another occasion that is not recorded in the novel. “The intimate revelations of young men,” says Nick Carraway in Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby* (Humbert is not so young, but it does not matter), “are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions.”²³ The phrase “I mean,” with its possible connotations of insecurity after the references to the gun and to Dolly’s death, can be read as Humbert’s attempt to extricate himself from an embarrassment produced by two slips of his (“automatic”?) pen. At the same time, the pathos of the interview and the credibility of Humbert’s conduct throughout the episode almost completely neutralize such ominous notes.

In other words, the novel leaves a margin for an alternative denouement, yet it both invites and repels our imaginative contribution to its tourbook map of forking highways, both provokes and discourages our usurpation of the role of “Detective Trapp” (see *L*, 239–40). In still other words, the possibility of Dolly’s violent death hovers between the lines of the story and, even though strenuously denied in Humbert’s comments, becomes one of the things “that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen” (*SM*, 310). At the same time, no such death is allowed into the text; it remains a symbolically appropriate disembodied notion for which the reader is invited to assume full responsibility. If the invitation were to be accepted, Dolly would, for all practical purposes, be “killed” by the reader.

V

Although violent death is not Dolly’s fate in the text of *Lolita*, the reader knows that “in reality” violence and murder are very likely

²³F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 7.

in cases of child molesting—so likely that neither the novelist nor the reader need bother to invent them. Recalling Humbert's "Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me" (*L*, 131), the reader and the novelist do not want to imagine a violent end to Dolly's life, since (in the words of *Invitation*) by evoking it they would "grant it existence." If we do not insist on following the detective clues that would incriminate Humbert and overrule the protestations of this "dreadful inventor" (*P*, 185), it is because we want to grant Dolly at least some poetic justice before she makes her exit from the novel's world. So does Nabokov, or why else would he camouflage the impossibility of the Coalmont episode so carefully that it has taken his audience (and then only part of his audience) two decades to detect it?

There is an element of wish fulfillment in our acceptance of the Coalmont episode as a suitable denouement of *Lolita*, just as there is a controlled element of wish fulfillment in the endings of the best novels in history. The relationship between this episode and the previous parts of Humbert's story is oneiric rather than logical. At this point Humbert's life is almost a completed volume—a realization, as it were, of Schopenhauer's metaphor of the book:

Life and dreams are leaves of one and the same book. The systematic reading is real life, but when the actual reading hour (the day) has come to an end, and we have the period of recreation, we often continue idly to thumb over the leaves, and turn to a page here and there without method or connexion. We sometimes turn up a page we have already read, at others one still unknown to us, but always from the same book. Such an isolated page is, of course, not connected with a consistent reading and study of the book, yet it is not so very inferior thereto, if we note that the whole of the consistent perusal begins and ends also on the spur of the moment, and can therefore be regarded merely as a larger single page.²⁴

At the sunset of his life, a life begun by Nabokov "on the spur of the moment," Humbert indulges in a dream and "turns up a page" that contains the tenderness and self-sacrifice "still unknown" to him. The love and the tenderness (and the murder) are "from the same book," even if the psychological realism of the narration demands that they should be invented rather than experienced by Humbert. At the time of writing his memoir Humbert is too sick to read the book of life

²⁴Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, I:18.

consistently; its very pages are being turned for him, as it were, by Dolly's classmate Aubrey McFate,²⁵ the imp of pseudo randomness, of (to adapt "The Vane Sisters") the choice that mimics chance. Humbert's madness is much less lucid at the end of the novel than at the beginning: he is genuinely unable to distinguish his actual experience from fantasy, genuinely unable to realize that (as in *Invitation* or Joyce's *Ulysses*) the book itself has started to dream (cf. *LL*, 350).

The workings of the wish-fulfilling imagination that threatens to disconnect Humbert's inner life from the perception of outward events are already apparent in the account of September 22, 1952, the day of the momentous visit to the mailbox, yet it is not clear exactly when Humbert's wish-fulfilling imagination begins to converge with the dream of the book itself. It would be anti-intuitive to believe—as Tekiner seems to do—that Humbert, having received Dolly's plea for help, would not rush to meet her; that he would, instead, retire to write his memoir and daydream about a brief reunion. There are two ways to restore verisimilitude: (a) Humbert may have been arrested on the same day, almost immediately after reading Dolly's letter, and placed in a psychiatric ward "for observation" (*L*, p. 310) prior to being scheduled for trial; or (b) he may never have received any letter from his *Dolores Disparue*, just as he seems never to have gone to Coalmont or Pavor Manor. As in *Pnin*, the alternatives form a duality rather than an ambiguity: like humdrum "real life" and wish-fulfilling dreams, they coexist and complement each other.

There is in fact a measure of vagueness concerning the matter of the mail. When Humbert takes his letters out of the mailbox on September 22, he has the impression that one of them is from his current mistress's mother. The other letter is from the Ramsdale lawyer John Farlow, who tells Humbert about his new marriage and concludes with a conglomeration of news:

Since he was "building a family" as he put it, he would have no time henceforth for my affairs which he termed "very strange and very aggravating." Busybodies—a whole committee of them, it appeared—had informed him that the whereabouts of little Dolly Haze were unknown, and that I was living with a notorious divorcee in California. His father-in-law was a count, and exceedingly wealthy. The people who had been renting the Haze house for some years now wished to buy it. He sug-

²⁵See Appel's note 3 to p. 54 (*L*, 360–61).

gested that I better produce Dolly quick. He had broken his leg. He enclosed a snapshot of himself and a brunette in white wool beaming at each other among the snows of Chile. [L, 268]

The scraps of information about Farlow's affairs serve as conjuror's patter that almost succeeds in diverting the reader's attention from the threat of a police investigation if Dolly's whereabouts remain unknown. This patter is followed by a brief prelude to the text of "Dolly's letter." Symptomatically, Humbert never mentions opening this letter, as he does in the case of Farlow's epistle:

I remember letting myself into my flat and starting to say: Well, at least we shall now track them down—when the other letter began talking to me in a small matter-of-fact voice:

Dear Dad:

How's everything? I'm married. I'm going to have a baby
[L, 268]

The letter thus seems to be provided by Humbert's "Proustianized and Procrusteanized" fancy (L, 266), which is assigned the task of "tracking them down." The section opens with Humbert's remark on "harlequin light that fell through the glass upon an alien handwriting."²⁶ This light had often twisted the handwriting of other people "into a semblance of Lolita's script causing [him] almost to collapse as [he] leant against an adjacent urn, almost [his] own" (L, 265). On previous occasions the illusion was promptly dispelled, yet on the morning of September 22 it takes complete hold on Humbert's imagination because it is brought on not only by his longing for Dolly but also by his fear of legal trouble. The story imagined by Humbert then begins not with the drive to Coalmont but earlier, with the substitution of an imaginary letter from Dolly for an eclipsed one from Rita's mother.

Humbert's wish to "track them down" runs parallel to the wish (his own, Dolly's, the reader's, the book's) for a return to normality. This wish is largely granted in the Coalmont episode. It is as if to satisfy this choric wish that Dolly Schiller has given up Hollywood, adven-

²⁶Cf. Baroness Bredow (*bred* is the Russian for "delirium"), née Tolstoy, in Nabokov's *Look at the Harlequins!* (LATH, p. 9): "Trees are harlequins, words are harlequins. So are situations and sums. Put two things together—jokes, images—and you get a triple harlequin. Come on! Play! Invent the world! Invent reality!"

ture, excitement, and middle-class comforts for the normal hardships (at the age of seventeen) of working-class life. She has married a wounded veteran of World War II for whom she probably represents a return to normality; in the Coalmont episode she dresses the bruise of their one-armed neighbor, also a war veteran, while trying to forget her own invisible wounds. Having to appeal to Humbert for financial help, she struggles to maintain the attitude of an estranged daughter who pities her sick and lonely father, is grateful for the money he gives her, regrets having had to deceive him, but is in no position to offer him help. Blocking the reminders, however insistent, of a different relationship that has existed between them, she handles the difficult situation with sympathy and tact.

Dolly's chosen life and conduct are a natural sequel to the traits that one can, in repeated readings (the reader, Humbert's *Bruder*, now turns into a "brooder"), observe in her as a child, despite Humbert's distribution of emphasis. He himself is eventually forced to admit that the brashness and vulgarity of little Dolly Haze have been a mask, a "mail," for her vulnerability. When, after a quarrel, she rushes to kiss her mother's lodger goodbye before leaving for summer camp, he attributes this gift to her imitation of movies and ignores the genuinely affectionate nature of the girl who yearns for the love that her mother is withholding. He is amazed at Dolly's early loss of virginity and ignores the fact that she tries and fails to believe that clandestine sex between children is "normal." For a time he almost persuades her that their quasi-incestuous relationship is not an uncommon phenomenon, yet he cannot suppress her intuition for normality, which eventually makes her rebel against their driving across the country "doing filthy things together and never behaving like ordinary people" (*L*, 160). He enumerates his expenses and the tourbook attractions that he lavishes on Lolita but has to admit to the reader that she would sob "in the night—every night, every night—the moment [he] feigned sleep" (*L*, 178).

Upon leaving Coalmont, Humbert is shown recollecting scenes from his past life with Lolita, and these flashbacks are, structurally speaking, a disguised instance of the "sources" technique that is explicit in the last chapter of *Prin*. Indeed, they contain most of the motifs of which the Coalmont incident has been spun: Lolita's face with its expression of "helplessness so perfect that it seemed to grade into one of rather comfortable inanity" (*L*, 285); and Humbert's surges of self-denying, remorseful, almost parental tenderness, which made

him wish to fall “at her dear feet and dissolv[e] in human tears, and sacrific[e] [his] jealousy to whatever pleasure Lolita might hope to derive from mixing with dirty and dangerous children in an outside world that was real to her” (*L*, 286). Here too are his memories of her fear of loneliness and death (“what’s so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own”: *L*, 286), which makes her suicide unlikely; of her pain on observing the normally affectionate relationship of Avis Byrd and her “wonderful fat pink dad” (*L*, 288); and of her romanescque fantasies about her dead mother—one wonders with what ennobling features she might have retrospectively endowed the father figure ineptly impersonated by Humbert. Even if we do not register these connections consciously, they largely account for the aesthetic satisfaction provided by the ending of the novel. The new insights into Dolly’s character are, in fact, discoveries of the multiple links between the novel’s images and motifs. The pleasure yielded by such discoveries has an ethical dimension, since it coincides with the redress of an injustice done to a brash yet peculiarly bright and gently courageous girl, an Alice who outgrows her Wonderland. The Coal-mont episode is a melodramatic apotheosis in which Humbert gives money and the reader gives credit where the credit has been overdue.

This may of course be romanticizing Dolly, just as Dolly romanticizes her memories of Charlotte. Yet if one is to take responsibility for the coproduction of her story, one may just as well choose the most satisfactory script.

In the end Humbert comes to share Dolly’s desire for a return to normality—thus a bereaved person develops the features of a lost loved one. The reader’s habitual impulse to exonerate the “I” of a confessional narrative can now be indulged almost with impunity. The respite ends, however, in the scene of Quilty’s murder. For all the symbolism of the episode—Humbert is destroying his double, the darker side of himself—its details do not allow one to forget that it depicts a murder. As in *Mary*, the moral and aesthetic significance of the episode conflict: Humbert, who imagines the murder, is after all but an artist *manqué*. In addition to his other, more important faults, he is a pseudo-artist who, like Luzhin in *The Defense*, uses imagination as a substitute for life rather than as a part of it.

The alternative possibility, that Humbert actually receives Dolly’s letter and is arrested immediately afterward is suggested by John Ray’s reference to the death of Mrs. Richard F. Schiller on Christmas Day 1952 in Gray Star, Alaska. This reference confirms the news of Dolly’s

marriage, pregnancy, and plans to go to Alaska as reported in her letter. In other words, if the impression that Dolly's letter is a product of Humbert's wish-fulfilling imagination (and that we do not know what actually happened to her) is there to remind us of the possibly horrible fate that victims of child molestation do not always escape, the confirmation of her marriage and move to Alaska sanctions an outwardly less cruel finale: she may, indeed, have effected her return to normal life in exactly the way Humbert imagines her to have done. Dolly's move to Alaska and death in childbirth are supported by John Ray's evidence because they are integral parts of the symbolism with which Nabokov (and Aubrey McFate) infuse the story of Humbert.

VI

In his "Philosophy of Composition" Poe chooses the death of a beautiful woman as the most fruitful subject for poetry. The beautiful woman in question is the Lenore of "The Raven." "Lenore" is, likewise, one of the names with which Humbert addresses Dolly (see *L*, 209), though the allusion is to Gottfried August Bürger's ballad rather than to Poe's poem.²⁷ Moreover, in the penultimate paragraph, Humbert writes: "The following decision I make with all the legal impact and support of a signed testament: I wish this memoir to be published only when Lolita is no longer alive," thus preparing us for the elegiac tone of the famous last two sentences with their "aurochs and angels" (*L*, 310-11). This is a proper climax for the intertextual mold into which Humbert has been pouring his experience, a mold in which Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" and "William Wilson" accommodate the Humbert-Quilty relationship, whereas "Annabel Lee" and "Ligea" are used as direct and oblique precedents for Humbert's relationships with Annabel Leigh and Dolly Haze.²⁸

But, Dolly does not die for the sake of being immortalized in gushes of "romantic slosh." What, then, is the real function of her death in childbirth?

²⁷See Appel's note 5 to p. 209 (*L*, 400).

²⁸For Humbert's allusions to Poe, see Appel's note 2 to p. 11 (*L*, 330-33), which also cites earlier commentaries. Other interesting observations on the subject have been made in Lucy Maddox, *Nabokov's Novels in English* (Athens, Ga., 1983), pp. 74-75; and in Tamir-Ghez, "The Art of Persuasion in Nabokov's *Lolita*," pp. 170-71.

The epilogue-style information about Mrs. Schiller's death in Gray Star reestablishes Dolly's image in its proper dimensions: she is not Poe's nebulous *femme fatale* but a very real abused child. This does not diminish her stature, however: the fate of one "waif" (*L*, 289) is tragic enough to lend her the grandeur of the Outcast of the Universe, a figure of mythic proportions into which Hawthorne transformed his somewhat sordid middle-class Londoner by the name of Wakefield: "Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. Like Wakefield, he may become, as it were, the Outcast of the Universe."²⁹

Humbert has led Dolly too far astray to allow her a safe return to normality. The murder of Quilty objectifies a symbolic murder of Dolly. There is, of course, no necessary causal link between Humbert's molestation of her and her death in childbirth in Alaska about two years later. The later event is not the consequence of the earlier one but

²⁹Hawthorne, "Wakefield," in *Complete Novels and Selected Tales*, p. 926. I have no evidence that Nabokov had read Hawthorne prior to writing *Lolita*, though the changes made in preparing the manuscript of *Laughter in the Dark* (see Chapter 7 above) suggest that he is likely to have done so. Only once in a 1966 interview, did Nabokov refer to Hawthorne, whom he called "a splendid writer" (*SO*, 64); since he paid few compliments to other writers, this remark is not to be dismissed lightly. My essay "Nabokov and the Hawthorne Tradition" points out that upon Nabokov's arrival in America, certain techniques that he had always shared with Hawthorne developed with increased energy—as if catalyzed by a congenial tradition. Nabokov was certainly familiar with Melville by 1947: *Bend Sinister* quotes extracts from *Moby Dick* (see Appel's introduction: *L*, xlviii); and "Pierre Point in Melville Sound," in chapter 9, pt. 1, of *Lolita* (*L*, 35) is an allusion to bk. 9 of Melville's *Pierre* (I am grateful to Charles Feidelson for calling my attention to it). But the fact that Nabokov makes more allusions to Melville than to Hawthorne need not mean that Melville's literary method was closer to his own; on the contrary, his admiration for Melville is free from that touch of uneasiness which may have been produced by a reluctance to recognize a temperamental kinship between Hawthorne and himself. Nabokov shares with both writers a sense that "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload, as they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way" (Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, ed. Harold Beaver, [Harmondsworth, 1976], p. 540). For Melville, however, this significance was less dependent on subjective individual perception; hence the courage with which he pursued it, leaving the safe lee shore behind. For Hawthorne and Nabokov, the search for significance was more closely associated with the journey into the individual "self"; hence the element of diffidence that dampened their daring. Yet if what Hawthorne feared to encounter on a "voyage in" was Baudelairean evil (see Feidelson, *Symbolism and American Literature*, pp. 15–16), what Nabokov feared was overwhelming and unappeasable pain.

an emblem of the consequence: Dolly's death stands for the irreparability of the wrong that she has suffered.³⁰ In Nabokov's early work a woman's death in childbirth is associated with her displacement and waste. The displacement that falls to the lot of Nelly Zilanov in *Glory* or the unnamed heroine of "The Russian Beauty" is political exile; the displacement of Dolly Schiller is her loss of a natural place in her generation.

Humbert realizes the tragedy of this displacement when, soon after her disappearance, he halts on top of the suggestive "friendly abyss" and listens to a "melodious unity of sounds rising like vapor from a small mining town" below: "And soon I realized that all these sounds were of one nature, that no other sounds but these came from the streets of the transparent town, with the women at home and the men away. Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that . . . and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord" (*L*, 309–10). By pointing out the relationship between the word *concord* as "musical harmony" and as a synonym of "spectrum" with the French *concours*, Robert J. Levine has shown how intercourse with a "nymphet"—which for Humbert is an *hors-concours* (incomparable) sexual experience—results in depriving a real little girl of her childhood and thereby in pushing Humbert's "ultraviolet darling" outside the spectrum, away from her place in the harmonious system, the concord.³¹ Dolly Haze cannot regain her place in the system. Her departure from it is tragic not because it leaves a gap but because, again to adapt Hawthorne's "Wakefield," the gap closes behind her all too soon.³²

³⁰Diana Butler, "Lolita Lepidoptera," in Roth, pp. 59–74, claims that the most important passion recorded in *Lolita* is Nabokov's passion for butterflies. Butler goes on to make a statement frequently echoed in Nabokov criticism: "Nabokov tells us that the object of a passion is unimportant, but that the nature of passion is constant" (p. 69). This is not true. In Nabokov's novels, and in *Lolita* in particular, the object of passion is crucially important when it is a human being possessed otherwise than in the lover's imagination. And the nature of passion is not constant: the "itch of being" (*Gl*, p. xiii) felt by the self-sacrificing knight-errant in *Glory* is not the same as the urge of the solipsistic "enchanted hunter" whose hands "have hurt too much too many bodies" (*L*, 276). What Nabokov tells us is that a quest, even if misdirected, may be beautiful only when its inevitable cost is paid by self-sacrifice, not by the victimization of others.

³¹Robert J. Levine, " 'My Ultraviolet Darling': The Loss of Lolita's Childhood," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 25 (1979), 471–79.

³²See Hawthorne, *Complete Novels and Selected Tales*, p. 923.

Thus Dolly's death is the emblem of the irreversible isolation that she always feared: "What's so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own" (*L*, 286). However, it must be borne in mind that in Nabokov the recurrent conception of death is also that of a merger, a merger of the body with the surroundings and of the limited human consciousness with the "infinite consciousness" in which the boundaries of identity dissolve. Nabokov's healthy characters—like Pnin, whose heart attack in the Whitchurch park is a surmountable weakness of the body alone—abhor the threat of a merger. Before her first night with Humbert, Dolly likewise expresses a comic resentment of the idea by willfully misquoting what must have been the text of her Camp Q brochure: "We loved the sings around the fire in the big stone fireplace or under the darned stars, where every girl merged her own spirit of happiness with the voice of the group" (*L*, 116).

Merger—loss of identity, loss of discreteness—is death. "The cranium," Nabokov writes in *Pnin*, "is a space traveler's helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego" (*P*, 20). Normal life is not a merger but a harmony of individuals, with the borderlines between them defined. It is from this harmony that Dolly is pushed into an eventual merger—with the book that bears the name given her by Humbert. Like Vasilii Shishkov in Nabokov's eponymous prewar story, she dies, so to say, into the book.

Yet why in Alaska? Because "nymphets do not occur in polar regions" (*L*, 35)? But Dolly is no longer a "nymphet." Rather, it is because Alaska had a personal significance for Nabokov and his generation. It once belonged to Russia, and Alexander II parted with it as placidly as, after the revolution, the new regime parted with or destroyed the intellectual elite of its country. To adapt once again the language of *The Gift*, Russia pined for both when she came to her senses too late. In *Pnin*, Nabokov pays his tribute to the exiled Russian "intelligentsia." It is also not accidental that among the historical episodes he would like to have filmed, Nabokov mentions the *Lolita*-related scenes of "Poe's wedding" and "Lewis Carroll's picnics" and, immediately afterward, "The Russians leaving Alaska, delighted with the deal. Shot of a seal applauding" (*SO*, 61).³³ Alaska is an emblem

³³Immediately preceding these imaginary shots in the list is "Herman Melville at breakfast, feeding a sardine to his cat" (*SO*, 61). The image is similar to that of a

of the motif of displacement, the common denominator of *Lolita* and Nabokov's stories of émigré life. The use of this emblem expresses a belief that one infinity is no smaller than another: the story of one girl's life is not trivial, even though it comes on the heels of historical cataclysms that caused the suffering of millions.

In *Poems and Problems* Nabokov notes that the first strophe of his 1959 Russian-language poem "*Kakoe sdelał ya durnoye delo*" (What is the evil deed) "imitates the beginning of Boris Pasternak's poem in which he points out that his [*Doctor Zhivago*] 'made the whole world shed tears over the beauty of [his] native land.'" In a literal English translation, Nabokov's stanza runs as follows:

What is the evil deed I have committed?
Seducer, criminal—is this the word
for me who set the entire world a-dreaming
of my poor little girl?

[PP, 147]

The less comprehending members of the Russian émigré community were enraged by the substitution of a depraved little American for their long-suffering fatherland, yet Nabokov was far from betraying or forgetting his "roots."³⁴ He was just as far, however, from allowing that the fate of one girl should be eclipsed by the mass horrors of the revolution or war (symbolically, Humbert spends the World War II period shuttling in and out of psychiatric sanatoria). Even Humbert knows that if it can be proved to him "that in the infinite run it does not matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac," then "life is a joke" (*L*, 285). (This may be one reason for Nabokov's impatience with Hemingway's novels about Spain; see *SO*, 80.) The indignant émigré critics, trained to think "on a larger scale," might find themselves

tearful Ivonna Ivanovna carrying a saucer of milk for a cat after Fyodor's father's departure on his last expedition (in *The Gift*); and to that of Pnin feeding his dog after learning that he is soon to lose his job at Waindell (there is no reason "a human's misfortune should interfere with a canine's pleasures": *P*, 171).

³⁴The last stanza of the poem runs: "Amusing, though, that at the last indention, / despite proofreader's and my age's ban, / a Russian branch's shadow shall be playing / upon the marble of my hand" (*PP*, 147). In Nabokov's "Recruiting" the quivering shade of a linden branch seems to "erase" whatever it falls upon. It is the shade of a Russian branch that erases the coldly and somewhat funereally congealed hand that has constructed the world of *Lolita*.

having come full circle to the slogan of postrevolutionary Russia: "Chips fly when trees are cut."

The metaphysical background of *Lolita* is, as usual in Nabokov, inseparable from its ethical principle. Both proclaim that the destruction of a single life, or of a single childhood, is a crime of cosmic dimension. It does not eclipse the well-known mass crimes; rather, those infinite crimes emerge as one infinity multiplied by any number that extends endlessly beyond the threshold of consciousness. In the receding distance the individual worlds of the victims merge irreversibly, only seldom allowing our imagination to retrieve for a brief while the discrete identities of some. In Nabokov's novels the gradual evocation of the characters and their ultimate dissolution reenact the working of humanistic imagination when it wishes to pay a well-meaning yet inescapably, avowedly inadequate tribute to the shades that it conjures up from the mass grave of history. That is the intrinsic ethical dimension of his self-conscious art.