

Introduction

The *Lolita* phenomenon

What is here termed ‘the Lolita phenomenon’ is envisaged as something rather broader than just another glance at the text of this particular novel and its controversial reception. It also involves at least the noting of assorted pre-texts, a difficult publishing history, a screenplay by Nabokov, two film adaptations and an ever-raging debate over the ever-sensitive issues of paedophilia and child abuse.

SOME PRECURSORS

When publishing his third collection of short stories in English, in 1975, Nabokov claimed that he was “eerily startled to meet a somewhat decrepit but unmistakable Humbert escorting his nymphet in the story I wrote almost half a century ago” (TD 43). In the story in question, “A Nursery Tale” of 1926, we indeed encounter:

... a tall elderly man in evening clothes with a little girl walking beside – a child of fourteen or so in a low-cut black party dress. ... [the protagonist’s] glance lit on the face of the child mincing at the old poet’s side; there was something odd about that face, odd was the flitting glance of her much too shiny eyes, and if she were not just a little girl – the old man’s granddaughter, no doubt – one might suspect that her lips were touched up with rouge. She walked swinging her hips very, very slightly, her legs moved close together, she was asking her companion something in a ringing voice ... (TD 57)

Even earlier, in 1924, it is worth remembering, Nabokov had translated Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* into Russian. In *The Gift*, a decade or so later, Boris Ivanovich Shchyogolev has his own familial situation (with step-daughter Zina Mertz) in mind when he proposes the following plot for a novel:

From real life. Imagine this kind of thing: an old dog – but still in his prime, fiery, thirsting for happiness – gets to know a widow, and she has a daughter, still quite a little girl – you know what I mean – when nothing is formed yet, but already she has a way of walking that drives you out of your mind – A slip of a girl, very fair, pale, with blue under the eyes – and of course she doesn’t even look at the old goat. What to do? Well, not long thinking, he ups and marries the widow. Okay. They settle down the three of them. Here you can go on indefinitely – the temptation, the eternal torment, the itch, the mad hopes. And the upshot – a miscalculation. Time flies, he gets older, she blossoms out – and not a sausage. Just walks by and scorches you with a look of contempt. Eh? D’you feel here a kind of Dostoevskian tragedy? (G 172-3)

Here we have, almost in *mise en abyme*, two future works: *The Enchanter* and *Lolita*. The reference to Dostoevsky evokes Svidrigailov's dream in *Crime and Punishment* (involving temptation from the blandishments of a five-year-old girl), "Stavrogin's Confession" in *The Devils* (in which an abused girl of twelve commits suicide), and precocious sexuality in the lesser known and uncompleted *Netochka Nezvanova*. A novel from the Russian "Silver Age" treating somewhat similar themes is Fyodor Sologub's *The Little Demon* (1907).

What the above quotation from *The Gift* does, then, all but encompass – though without the disastrous ending tacked on – is Nabokov's novella *The Enchanter*, written in 1939 (as *Volshebnyk*), and forgotten or lost for many years before its publication in Dmitri Nabokov's English translation in 1986. It is clear from a letter of 1959 that Nabokov did himself contemplate reviving this work for print (see *SL* 282-3; *E* 15-16); it was scarcely, however, quite "the first little throb of *Lolita*", as seemingly recollected in 1956 – no more than it had been totally lost or destroyed, as then thought (*E* 11-12). The unnamed enchanter's ambition toward his twelve-year-old and cynically acquired stepdaughter is "to take disinterested care of her, to meld the wave of fatherhood with the wave of sexual love" (*E* 49). His voluntary death on the road, as Alfred Appel points out, is "in a manner which Nabokov will transfer [in *Lolita*] to Charlotte Haze" (*L* xxxviii). It also appears to be evoked in the later novel when, in a state of insomnia at the Enchanted Hunters hotel, Humbert is aware of "the despicable haunt of gigantic trucks roaring through the wet and windy night" (*L* 130).

"Around 1949, in Ithaca, upstate New York, the throbbing, which had never quite ceased, began to plague me again", Nabokov recalled (*E* 13). Other, perhaps minor, impulses had already restarted this throbbing a little earlier. Adam Krug, the protagonist of *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov's first novel written in America (in 1945-1946), experiences the following dream about his teenage housemaid (soon revealed as a spy):

On the night of the twelfth, he dreamt that he was surreptitiously enjoying Mariette while she sat, wincing a little, in his lap during the rehearsal of a play in which she was supposed to be his daughter. (*BS* 148).

Later, in an introduction (dated 1963) to the English version, Nabokov confirms that this amoral and treacherous young temptress had been consigned to the tender fate of gang-rape: "the dummies are at last in quite dreadful pain, and pretty Mariette gently bleeds, staked and torn by the lust of 40 soldiers" (*BS* 8). Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* is said to have haunted Krug, while *Lolita*-like vocabulary and motifs are clearly and admittedly visible (with hindsight), in sadistic association with lust and fatality (or, indeed, execution):

Death, too, is a ruthless interruption; the widower's heavy sensuality seeks a pathetic outlet in Mariette, but as he avidly clasps the haunches of the chance nymph he is about to enjoy, a deafening din at the door breaks the throbbing rhythm forever. (*BS* 10)

Mariette, who is mortally punished, may be reminiscent of Margot (of *Laughter in the Dark*), who is not.

Notwithstanding his verdict, in a letter to Edmund Wilson of 1947, on *What Maisie Knew* as "terrible" (*NW* 182), and his declared antipathy to Henry James, it

is difficult to believe that the closing stages, at least, of that novel, in which the barely teenage eponymous heroine proposes co-habitation to her stepfather Sir Claude, did not strike a chord with Nabokov, as author of *The Enchanter* and future creator of *Lolita* (and the word “terrible” may even be ambiguous).¹ In any event, Nabokov certainly parodied the Jamesian style on occasions and one may suspect that, in the case of James, as with Dostoevsky and certain others, Nabokov’s megaphoned distaste is at least partly attributable to a Bloomian anxiety of influence – the author in question having prematurely anticipated Nabokovian elements but without, of course, executing them quite to Nabokov’s satisfaction.

Almost at the very beginning of the composition of *Lolita*, in 1948, Edmund Wilson supplied Nabokov with volume six of Havelock Ellis’s *Etudes de Psychologie Sexuelle* (Paris, 1926), which contains a 100-page confessional document written in French by an anonymous southern Russian: “Havelock Ellis’s Russian sex masterpiece”, as Wilson terms it (*NW* 201), to which Nabokov rejoined:

I enjoyed the Russian’s love-life hugely. It is wonderfully funny. As a boy, he seems to have been quite extraordinarily lucky in coming across girls with unusually rapid and rich reactions. The end is rather bathetic. (*NW* 202)

This apparently authentic disclosure, written down for Havelock Ellis, purports to record the detailed sexual history of the scion of an upper-crust Russian family (resident in Kiev), who develops from precociously over-sexed adolescent debauchery, involving young females of all classes, through a lengthy period of abstinence in Italy, which finally degenerates into paedophilia, voyeurism and masturbatory obsession amid Neapolitan child prostitution. The raconteur, now known as “Victor X”, is remarkable (in Nabokovian terms) for his insistence on imagination as “the most important factor in sexual pleasure”, leading to his claim that “I can get no enjoyment unless I can imagine the woman’s enjoyment”.² Victor is unusually passive in his activities for much of his “career” and restrains himself from immoral compulsion when he encounters (thanks, as in the case of Humbert, to the helping hand of a rich uncle) the stricter *mores* of Italian society – until, that is, he allows himself to be entrapped in “the Babylon” of Naples.

While comparisons between Nabokov’s protagonists and Victor should not be exaggerated, there are undeniable common factors; as Donald Rayfield (Victor’s subsequent translator into English) has written, there is “the disastrous inability to find sexual arousal and satisfaction in anything but young girls” and, moreover:

The basic structure of *Lolita* and the confessions is similar: the contrast between the homeland (Russia or France) and the attempt to recreate lost expe-

1. Barbara Eckstein, “Unsquaring the Square of *What Maisie Knew*”, in *The Turn of the Screw and What Maisie Knew*, ed. Neil Cornwell and Maggie Malone (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, “New Casebooks”, 1998), 179-93, writes: “*Lolita* is surely a burlesque of *What Maisie Knew* and also an exercise in slippery self-parody”, at p. 190. On Nabokov and James, see Gregory (1984); plus Neil Cornwell, “Paintings, Governesses and ‘Publishing Scoundrels’: Nabokov and Henry James, *Nabokov’s World. Volume 2: Reading Nabokov*, ed. Jane Grayson, Arnold McMillin and Priscilla Meyer (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2002), 96-116.

2. Rayfield (1984), 74.

rience in exile (Italy or America). both Victor and Humbert Humbert are prisoners of their first childhood sexual experiences.¹

“Sexual confessions’ (in Havelock Ellis and elsewhere), which involve tiny tots mating like mad” are mentioned in *Speak, Memory* (SM 158), and were elaborated slightly further in the Russian version (*Drugie berega*), which refers to “a particularly Babylonian contribution from a landowner [from the Ukraine]”.²

MOMENTUM AND PUBLICATION

These proto-tales and pre-texts notwithstanding, *Lolita*, of course, took on an overwhelming novelistic momentum of its own: a switch from third-person to first-person narration, a new tone in a new world – that of the post-war America which Nabokov had experienced through the 1940s and was now to re-create in fictional form at the age of fifty. Nabokov later claimed to have written *Lolita* between 1949 and the spring of 1954 (L 312). As early as April 1947, however, he had told Wilson that he was writing “a short novel about a man who liked little girls – and it’s going to be called *The Kingdom by the Sea*” (N-W 188). In the early stages the heroine was to have been called “Juanita Dark” and Nabokov was now using his index-card method of composition, adapted from lepidopteral research; field trips for the latter also provided Nabokov with a detailed topographical knowledge of many American states, while he also undertook investigations into teenage slang and relevant criminal cases. Work progressed slowly, between academic and lepidopteral exertions, but a diary entry of December 6 1953 reads: “Finished *Lolita* which was begun exactly five years ago” (B Am 226).

Nabokov anticipated publishing difficulties and embarrassing repercussions from the start; accordingly, he proposed putting the novel out under an assumed name. A clue to its true authorship, however, was the inclusion of a minor character anagrammatically styled “Vivian Darkbloom” (later to achieve further renown as the annotator of *Ada*). In the course of 1954, five prominent American publishers turned the novel down – Simon and Schuster, for one, regarding it as “sheer pornography” (B Am 262). In August that year Nabokov had asked his French agent to find him a European publisher, and in February 1955 he sent the manuscript to Paris, hoping that Sylvia Beach might repeat her triumphant publication of *Ulysses*. Instead of the by now inactive Beach, however, *Lolita* attracted Maurice Girodias, proprietor of the Olympia Press. Girodias, who made his reputation in the 1950s by publishing avant-garde literary works in English of unorthodox content (including Beckett, Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell, William Burroughs; and Jean Genet in translation) as well as unashamed pornography of a much lower class, quickly offered terms and Nabokov accepted with alacrity. Thus began the lengthy saga of legal and financial wrangles that were to complicate the novel’s eventual appearance in America. Meanwhile, Cornell sensibilities notwithstanding, Nabokov had

1. Ibid. 141.

2. Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1990), 4, 250; see also Rayfield, 140. Dolinin (1993) adds a story by a minor émigré writer named Valentin Samsonov as another possible source; see also Ernest Machen’s letter in *TLS* (27 November, 1998), 17.

heeded advice that pseudonymous publication might prejudice American courts against *Lolita*.

In October 1955 Nabokov received his first advance copies (having corrected galleys, but not page proofs); typographical errors there still were, but author's copyright had been withheld. A literary row in Great Britain, following Graham Greene's advocacy of *Lolita*, and a contract for a French translation with Gallimard soon raised the novel's profile and American publishers began to bite. A package of *Lolita* excerpts with accompanying critical apparatus was devised for June 1957 publication in an occasional journal named *Anchor Review*. Copies of the Olympia Press edition, which had turned up on the black market in New York, were seized and then released by United States customs. A temporary French ban on an Olympia Press list that included *Lolita* struck a note of farce, at a time when a French-language edition was in legal preparation, along with translations for major presses in Germany and Italy. In 1958 the French ban was rescinded, Harris-Kubrick Pictures bought the film rights and, in August, with copyright problems now sorted out, *Lolita* was finally published by Putnam's in New York – only to become “the first book since *Gone with the Wind* to sell 100,00 copies in its first three weeks” (*B Am* 365). Having soon reached number one on the best-seller list, *Lolita* was displaced – greatly to Nabokov's fury – by *Doctor Zhivago*.

Obstacles to *Lolita*'s appearance in Britain continued a little longer. The passing of the Obscene Publications Bill, however, improved the legal climate at just the right time and Weidenfeld and Nicolson took a chance on publication of the novel in November 1959. Nigel Nicolson, himself a Conservative MP at the time, received an anonymous mid-launch-party tip-off that the book was not to be prosecuted. Although bans still came and went in a number of other countries (including France once again for a while), *Lolita* was now firmly on her way. By the mid-1980s worldwide sales had reportedly reached fourteen million copies (*B Am* 387).

SOME GUIDELINES TO READING

Lolita was, of course, greeted controversially on publication. There is no space here for a survey its reception;¹ neither, for that matter, can anything amounting to an overall analysis of the novel be attempted. In amplification of an outline history of *Lolita* as cultural phenomenon, however, some minimal basic guidelines and suggestions for approaching the text should be delineated.

Lolita is one of the richest texts in twentieth-century literature in its use of quotation and allusion. Extratextual references and internal reverberations, long since collated in force, continue to be pinpointed and elaborated.² Poe, Mérimée and Proust are usually considered the most relevant authors in this respect, with a mass of others (including Shakespeare, Goethe, de Sade, Joyce

1. See Olsen (1995), 16-25, for one recent account. On reactions at Cornell to *Lolita*, see Diment (1997) passim (but especially pp. 60-8 and 141-6).

2. See Appel's notes to *The Annotated Lolita (L)*. Proffer (1968), 21-3, lists over 60 names. Further notes have been supplied by Brian Boyd in *Novels 1955-1962* (1996), 873-91.

and T. S. Eliot) close behind. Although *Lolita* appears superficially one of the least “Russian” of Nabokov’s works, a rich subtext of Russian literature also lurks.¹ Taken to task within the texture, as ever, are Nabokov’s *bêtes noires*, Freud and Dostoevsky. The pickings in *Lolita* are rich for students of intertextuality and parody.² Also to the fore, more unusually, are the consumerism and popular culture of post-war America (in the period 1947-52); Fredric Jameson singles out Nabokov, “a foreigner to begin with”, for his timely handling of such material in *Lolita*, “which thereby at once became The Great American Novel”; for Angela Carter, *Lolita* was “the Camp masterpiece of its decade”.³

Clichéd as it may be to stress this, *Lolita* the novel – no easy soft-porn read to begin with – is heavily dependent, for any real level of textual comprehension, on (and expressly designed for) re-reading. And even this only serves to highlight a plethora of narratological problems. *Lolita* is ostensibly a first-person confessional narrative, composed in jail on the verge of a fatal heart attack by Humbert Humbert (a cultured European immigrant, French scholar and would-be *littérateur*): the quirky chronicle of his deviant obsession with pre- and early teenage “nymphetts”; his domination – and subsequent loss – of a cynically acquired step-daughter, Dolores Haze (“Lolita”, aged twelve to fourteen); and the murder in revenge of her supposed abductor, an American playwright named Clare Quilty.

Humbert’s narrative is prefaced by a “Foreword” from one “John Ray, Jr., Ph.D.”, editor of the manuscript. This Gothic device of the posthumous manuscript from jail is as problematic here in its effects as with its predecessors in sensational fiction. The extent of Ray’s “editing” cannot be known;⁴ Humbert’s “bizarre cognomen” is his [Its author’s] own invention (*L* 3); all names, except the heroine’s first name, are disguised. There is at least one chronological disparity (to which we shall return below). Although Humbert’s criminality is established by Ray’s Foreword, the first-time reader is unsure of the indictment until the end of the narrative; or, to put it another way, the novel is not a “who dunnit?”, but a “what dun he?”, with the name of the victim, rather than the killer, withheld. In addition, Humbert acknowledges bouts of institutionalised insanity. What weight does the reader attach to this insanity, and its recurrence, in endeavouring to measure the sincerity of a self-declared trickster and liar?

1. See Meyer (1988), 13-38, on Pushkin (*Lolita* and *Onegin*); other Russian writers (including Tolstoy and Lermontov) may also be discerned; the use made of numbers may derive from Pushkin (*The Queen of Spades*), and the attention to names from Gogol.

2. Neil Cornwell has since published two essays on intertextuality of relevance to *Lolita*: “‘A Dorset Yokel’s Knuckles’: Thomas Hardy and *Lolita*”, *The Nabokovian*, Number 54, Spring 2005 (54-64); “Intimations of Lo: Sirens, Joyce and Nabokov’s *Lolita*”, *Zembla: The official website of the Vladimir Nabokov Society* (posted 2006): <<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/cornwell.htm>>.

3. Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 147; Lorna Sage, *Angela Carter* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), 29. Linda Kauffman’s essay, “Framing *Lolita*: Is There a Woman in the Text?” (a rare feminist reading of *Lolita*), in Bloom (1993), 149-68, discusses *Lolita* as both consumer and consumed.

4. For a detailed discussion of John Ray, Jr.’s role as “editor”, serious attention should be paid to George Ferger’s extensive essay, “Who’s Who in the Sublimelight: ‘Suave John Ray’”, *Nabokov Studies*, 8 (2004): 137-98.

Anyone familiar with Nabokov's *oeuvre*, or with the techniques of Nikolai Gogol, should at least suspect the presence (or rather the absence!) of a story behind the story. How much of the "real" story do we get, and what can we trust of what we do get?

We have already stressed that *Lolita* purports to be Humbert's confession. It can equally therefore be seen as (fictional – but at what level?) autobiography or memoir. It also poses, at least, as a psychological case-study (both medical and criminological) and a legal disposition. It goes without saying that *Lolita* is generally read as a novel, although the apportioning of a romantic as against a realist emphasis is entirely another matter. It may be seen to play upon the picaresque or the crime novel; it may be imbued with romance, faery, or even lepidoptery. Mythic readings are also on the agenda; according to Lance Olsen, for instance, *Lolita* "reworks and perverts the Pygmalion myth".¹ Its prime impetus may come from the decadence of Nabokov's native Russian Symbolism, or equally from the Western tradition of Huysmans, Wilde and the prominently featured "Aubrey" (in the text as "McFate" and as the town of "Beardsley").

In an essay first published in 1989, Trevor McNeely divides critical argument on *Lolita* into two categories: that based on aesthetics and that based on character. The first, according to which Nabokov has constructed a devilishly cunning game, renders the novel (or so the argument goes) ultimately pointless. Those wishing to promote *Lolita* as a great literary work on the basis of Humbert's moral (character) development, for that matter, face an uphill struggle in avoiding implicit support for paedophile rights. The way out of this bind, taken by all too many a commentator in McNeely's view, is an unprincipled and selective blending of the two approaches. The calculated hoax perpetrated on a gullible literary and academic establishment and the resultant status still enjoyed by *Lolita* therefore represent "Nabokov's triumph as a trickster".² McNeely's resolution of what he calls "the *Lolita* riddle" may overstate its case, but it nevertheless raises interesting points.

There can be little doubt that a "straight reading" of *Lolita* (as a "realistic" confessional novel, taken at face value) leads to severe difficulties, narratological as well as ethical: whose face? and what value? Martin Amis calls it "both irresistible and unforgivable".³ Richard H. Bullock, in an article first published in 1984, clarifies a problem that has beset much *Lolita* criticism: the lack of discrimination by many commentators between Humbert as character and Humbert as narrator.⁴ This has led to much pointless speculation as to what Humbert (as character) understands within the narrative of Humbert (as narrator, recorder after the event or, indeed, novelist). Such confusion, no doubt, also chimes with the "having it both ways" analyses complained of by

1. Olsen (1995), 44; on "comic romance", see Long (1984): 135-51.

2. Trevor McNeely, " 'Lo' and Behold: Solving the *Lolita* Riddle", in Bloom (1993), 134-48, at 143.

3. Amis (1992), 109 See also Sarah Herbold, "Reflections on Modernism: *Lolita* and Political Engagement, or How the Left and the Right Both Have it Wrong", in *Nabokov Studies*, 3, 145-50, on the dilemma posed between "law and narrative desire".

4. Richard H. Bullock, "Humbert the Character, Humbert the Writer", in Bloom (1993), 90-104.

McNeely. Contradictory statements by Humbert, his own remarks on time, his admitted mental disturbance, an assortment of incoherencies and dubieties in verisimilitude (which cannot be listed in detail here, but surface in many a critical discussion of the novel) all combine to render any verification of authenticity an impossibility (as indeed in many a first-person narrative lacking in corroborative evidence). How, given all of this, can we test Humbert's claim that it was Lolita who seduced him, or that she was already no virgin, let alone the veracity or significance of his childhood (pre)history with Annabel Leigh or, for that matter, his ultimate "moral apotheosis" (Ray's "Foreword", *L* 5)?

The apparent chronological discrepancy, involving the number of days in which Humbert purportedly wrote his text, as against the number of calendar days that could have passed according to his narrative, leads some critics to suspect that the action proper in *Lolita* ceases on 22 September 1952, the day Humbert is supposed to have received a letter from Lolita (now Dolly, or Mrs Richard, Schiller).¹ The immediate consequence of such an interpretation is to remove the visit to Dolly Schiller, and indeed the subsequent murder of Quilty, into the realms of fantasy. Humbert might therefore have been jailed "merely" for some offence connected with child molestation. The role and "reality" of Quilty become even more speculative. Such a reading has recently won powerful critical backing.²

However, it could be that there is no need to stop there when working backwards to isolate a shift-point into fantasy. Ray himself, whose prose style is not merely Nabokovian but approximates to Humbertian *skaz*,³ may be an invention of the "real" narrator masked by the name Humbert Humbert.⁴ In this case the entire novel would be the work of "Humbert", who may not after all be in jail and may not (in 1955, as claimed) even be dead. The story behind the story may resemble *Lolita*, to a greater or lesser degree, or the chronicle may be a work of pure fantasy. In any event, as Dolinin argues, "[w]hat is criminal is not the protagonist's erotic reverie as such..., but his desire to impose it on the outside world"; on the other hand, his "real" past may be "too ugly, mean and meaningless for [Humbert's project of] 'Proustianization'".⁵

So, what would this leave us with? A poetic rhapsody of despair in the decadent tradition, all Humbert Humbert's, whoever he may really be and whatever may have happened in "reality" (for which there has been no shortage of suggestions). Humbert apart, "Lolita" – or Dolly Haze – may or may not have existed. Chronological difficulties have gone, as have those concerning the "realism" of

1. Identified in Bruss (1976); developed by Christina Tekiner, "Time in *Lolita*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 25 (1979), 463-9; discussed further by Toker (1989), 209-11.

2. See Alexander Dolinin, "Nabokov's Time Doubling: from *The Gift* to *Lolita*", *Nabokov Studies*, 2 (1995), 3-40; and Julian W. Connolly, "'Nature's Reality' or Humbert's 'Fancy'?": Scenes of Reunion and Murder in *Lolita*", in *ibid.*, 41-61.

3. *Skaz* here is a term adopted by the Russian Formalists to denote a type of narrative technique emphasising oral speech, usually in first-person discourse. See Neil Cornwell, "Skaz Narrative" in the *Literary Encyclopedia*: <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=1561>>

4. This possibility has been raised by Proffer (1968), 82; Bullock, 101; and Connolly, "'Nature's Reality'...", 44.

5. Dolinin, "Nabokov's Time Doubling...", 22 and 34.

Quilty and many other problematic details. The reliance on contrivance is, at one level at least, avoided, as are disputes over the verisimilitude and sincerity of Humbert's "performance"; the problem of his reliability recedes. A narratological hierarchy is thereby established, reaching from Humbert as character to Humbert as narrator, or even as author (who cannot be denied aesthetic credit for his artistic pretension *and* achievement, regardless of his ethical duplicity); at a close remove is the implied author of *Lolita*,¹ who is capable of such metafictional twists as the introduction of one "Vivian Darkbloom" and nods toward other Nabokov texts (such as *The Enchanter*: textual features that surely *are* beyond our Humbert). The reader, by the end of the novel, is forthwith catapulted back via John Ray to Humbert – as both character and narrator – in a circular process that mutates, with the benefit of initial read(s), into a (re)cognitive spiral.

RUSSIANISATION

This brings us directly to Nabokov's Russian version of *Lolita* – the only one of his English novels that he "Russianed", a process which he himself likened to "starting a new spiral" (SO 52). He regarded the result as, to an extent at least, disappointing.² Nabokov began what he found to be the difficult task of reverse translation in 1963, to avoid the day when, otherwise, "some oaf within or without Russia will translate and publish the book" (B Am 472); ironically, what he most feared very nearly came to pass, despite his efforts, when the novel was first considered for publication in the late Soviet period of *glasnost*.³ Nabokov's Russian *Lolita*, indeed, following its publication in 1967, met with a mixed reception among such Russians as managed then to read it. The subject matter, the use of anglicisms, and the reversion to a Russian prose style unfamiliar since the days of the Silver Age, the modernist prose of the 1920s and, not least, the works of Sirin, caused paroxysms in some. However, a number of influential Russian literati then as now, such as Nina Berberova (a leading member of Nabokov's own émigré generation) and commentators currently at the cutting edge of Anglo-Russian Nabokov studies hold his last Russian text in the highest esteem as a contribution to the evolution of Russian prose.⁴

What is more, in the view of Dolinin at least, a close study of the Russian version, which he considers "a *new redaction* of the novel" [Dolinin's emphasis], if anything, confirms the plausibility of the type of reading outlined above. Nabokov made some literary references explicit and inserted certain chronological minutiae (without, though, correcting the important "discrepancy" on which such a reading largely depends). He may also though, as Dolinin believes, have been exploiting "self-translation as a powerful tool for self-exegesis"

1. On this point, see Tammi (1985), 281.

2. "Postscript to the Russian Edition of *Lolita*", translated by Earl D. Sampson, in *5th Arc*, 188-94.

3. See Barabtarlo (1993), 115. As it is, some editions published in Russia have appeared without the John Ray "Foreword": for example, the "supplementary" vol. 5 (to the *Sobranie sochinenii* in 4 vols, Moscow 1990), under the imprint Ekopros (1992).

4. See Barabtarlo (1993), 115; and Alexander Dolinin, "*Lolita* in Russian", in *GCVN*, 321-30.

(*GCVN* 324). More problematic, perhaps, is the tendency to russify some literary allusions and, apparently, endow Humbert's consciousness with a more overt Russian cultural layer absent from the original. If one accepts the view that Nabokov's ideal bilingual reader would absorb and merge the two texts, then this can only strengthen the metafictional interpretation of interference and control within the fictional world by the implied author(s), at a chronological distance of a decade and more. Vivian Darkbloom transmogrifies into (the more Russian Symbolist but equally anagrammatic) "Vivian Damor-Blok" and so the spiral swirls on. However, the vast majority of Nabokov's readers will remain confined to either the English or the Russian *Lolita*.

ADAPTATIONS: FROM BROADWAY TO HOLLYWOOD

There was, improbably yet predictably, a Broadway musical of *Lolita* that duly flopped in 1971 (by Alan Jay Lerner and John Barry) and a later, equally unsuccessful, stage version (by Edward Albee: flopped 1981, published 1984). Adaptations have, however, played a colossal role in keeping *Lolita* in the public consciousness through the two film versions.

In the summer of 1958 Harris-Kubrick Pictures enquired about the film rights to *Lolita* and within weeks a deal had been done. The following summer Nabokov was invited to Hollywood to write the screenplay himself. A tentative visit to the film capital did not yield positive ideas, but an autumnal stay in Sicily did and financial terms were agreed, with an extra payment to be added if Nabokov received sole credit for the screenplay (which, indeed, he did). Six months were spent writing it, off Sunset Boulevard, in 1960, though rights to publish it were denied. After a certain amount of argument and a lot of cutting, James Harris and Stanley Kubrick declared it "the best screenplay ever written in Hollywood" (*B Am* 408): not that this prevented them from drastically reworking it and then adding extemporisations. The film opened in New York on June 13 1962, in Nabokov's presence; he praised the acting, but summed up the end product privately as "a lovely misty view seen through mosquito netting" (*B Am* 466). The film was a modest box-office success.

Kubrick's *Lolita* is indeed shot in a misty black and white and was, in the event, filmed in England – partly for financial reasons and partly due to Peter Sellers' commitments and his divorce case.¹ Sue Lyon is older than *Lolita* (fifteen at the time of shooting, though still a little young for her final scene), yet her kittenish performance remains striking. James Mason manages with considerable aplomb a suave, pedantic and obsequious European pose as Humbert (a role that Olivier had momentarily accepted). Shelley Winters makes the most of Charlotte. However, for most filmgoers, the show was stolen by Peter Sellers' bravura improvisations in the expanded role of Quilty. Much is, of course, telescoped or omitted (there is, for instance, no Annabel, Valechka or Rita, and no *Lolita* playing tennis). The setting has been moved forward a decade to the late 50s

1. See Corliss (1994), 47, 52; Baxter (1997), 153-9.

(obvious from the cars and the Nelson Riddle score and, were there to be any doubt, confirmed by the crack about Doctors Schweitzer and Zhivago); indeed, the subsequent published version of the screenplay was to tell us, upon Humbert's arrival at the Haze home, "It is now 1960" (*LS* 733). Any cinematic adaptation of a novel is forced to make interpretive choices and usually a straight realist reading will be suggested. Mistiness apart, the "reality" of the plot is not in question.¹ The shooting of Quilty, in a remarkable opening sequence that in itself justifies Pauline Kael's view of the film as "black slapstick",² frames the narrative, with vestiges of Humbert's narration being retained; instead of the "what dun he?" of the book, the film gives us a "why did he?". As a movie, Kubrick's production retains its interest, as its not infrequent television showings prove.

Commentators frequently wish that Kubrick had waited a few years to make *Lolita*, by which time the censorship restrictions would have eased. As it was, the 1961 shooting was closely attended by British censor John Trevelyan. The casting of an older Lolita, however, and the restriction of sexuality largely to whisper and innuendo resulted in little enough trouble. The overall effect, in Richard Corliss's view, was to transform Humbert's fixation into "an obsession but not a perversion" and Kubrick's *Lolita* into "the story of an abused stepfather". Adrian Lyne's 1990s remake was to be rather a different matter.

Meanwhile, Nabokov had finally (only in 1972) extracted permission from Kubrick to publish his original screenplay (except that it wasn't quite either of the originals) and this finally appeared in 1974. The screenplay, bearing Nabokov's name, as used in the Kubrick film, has never appeared in published form. Nabokov's original mammoth version languishes in the Nabokov archive and for a description of it we are dependent on Boyd (see *B Am* 408-14 on the screenplays). The only published *Lolita* screenplay is a further version of the shortened one that Nabokov had delivered to Kubrick and Harris (now labelled "Summer 1960 Los Angeles" and "revised December 1973 Montreux": *LS* 833). Reduced it may have been, it is still far too long for a film of normal length (*LS* 677-833 on the printed page, Nabokov's directions included; while Kubrick's film, at 152 minutes, is not exactly short). *Lolita: A Screenplay* includes many scenes dropped by Kubrick and not in the original novel. Dr John Ray appears as a sub-narrating character; a confusing number of extra minor characters are introduced; and additional Humbert-Quilty encounters cause a diminution of the latter's "spectral shimmer" (*B Am* 413). The first version, in Boyd's estimation, "is diffuse and often strangely pedestrian" (*B Am* 409). The published one Nabokov, in 1973, saw as "a vivacious variant of an old novel" (*LS* 676). Richard Corliss has called Kubrick's *Lolita* "a vivacious variant on a treacherous theme".³ Any film adaptation is, by definition, not the novel; neither, for that matter, can any screenplay version – even one by Nabokov himself – persua-

1. However, Corliss (1994), 86, has noted an apparent discrepancy in the repeat of Scene One at the end: "this time, something is missing: the liquor bottle that had teetered on Quilty's head and, with its crashing, announced his presence. The villain, it seems, has vanished. And Humbert has walked into a parallel nightmare, where his righteous revenge may never be satisfied".

2. Kael (1994), 205.

3. Corliss (1994), 86-7.

sively sway perceptions of the novel: *Lolita: A Screenplay* cannot have the textual status of the Russian *Lolita*, even if the latter can be admitted into textual complementarity. Nevertheless, one might hope some day for, say, a serialised television production of one of Nabokov's screenplays.

In 1990 the Carolco independent film company secured the remake rights to *Lolita* for \$1 million. Adrian Lyne was to direct and, financial problems apart, again there were complications over a screenplay (involving submissions by Harold Pinter, David Mamet and James Dearden), before the task fell to Stephen Schiff. Following the conclusion of shooting in 1996, the film encountered serious distribution problems, due to the climate of acute anxiety over child abuse developing through the western world from the 1980s. The timing of its completion coincided with fresh anti child pornography legislation in the United States and a series of current or recent sensational cases (by no means analogous – it goes without saying – to *Lolita*, ranging from Roman Polanski, to Amy Fisher, to Jon Benét Ramsey) in that country, as well as those in Great Britain and in Belgium. Denied a distributor in a number of countries, including the United States (where it was finally acquired by the Showtime cable channel), Lyne's *Lolita* began to be shown in Europe in September 1997 and opened in London in May 1998. Advance calls for a ban in Britain soon faded, giving way to a view that the film is too long and boring to provide unseemly encouragement to actual or potential paedophiles.

Of a comparable length to Kubrick's *Lolita* (in fact sixteen minutes shorter), Lyne's film, for all its not inconsiderable visual accomplishment, lacks the style, the wit, and in particular the tone achieved by Kubrick. This is due perhaps as much to the casting as to the direction: Jeremy Irons is far too English for the cosmopolitan European-accented Humbert, while Quilty (played by Frank Langella) is reduced to a sinister presence in the shadows, shorn of any charisma and most of his repartee. The schematic quality of the repellent execution scene, in which Humbert exorcises his dark self, and his emergence as a shivering but righteous wreck, serve to exacerbate the ethical blurring current in a society in which, as one reviewer has put it, "we sexualize the representation of children while demonizing those who respond sexually to them".¹ Lyne's film, by and large, sticks closer to the novel than Kubrick's: he does set the action where it belongs, back in the late 1940s, and he inserts a range of short scenes omitted by his predecessor. However, the "road movie" accentuation results in the omission or reduction of a number of Kubrick's more successful elements. The most notable inclusion is the Annabel Leigh prologue, but this is less than literally faithful to its original in the novel and Lyne unaccountably misses the opportunity to double Annabel with the actress playing Lolita (herself gamely enough essayed by Dominique Swain).

CONCLUSION

The name "Lolita", as well as the word "nymphet", has entered the language and both have acquired worldwide connotations while simultaneously achieving a dubious commercial (and in particular, of late, an Internet) exploitation. In

1. Linda Holt, "Pornograples", *TLS* (29 May 1998), 23.

1959 Nabokov began a poem, which parodied Pasternak's "The Nobel Prize", with the verse:

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)

He might well at that time not have suspected that the same question would still be needing to be asked on his behalf fifty years on.

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ENDNOTE

This introduction is an edited version of Chapter 5 ("The Lolita Phenomenon", 57-72), from Neil Cornwell's *Vladimir Nabokov, a title in the Writers and Their Work series*, published in 1999 by Northcote House, Plymouth, UK [the series is now published by Northcote House from Tavistock, Devon, UK].

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