Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

3 | 2010

Lolita : Examining “the Underside of the Weave”

A “Safely Solipsized” Life: *Lolita* as Autobiography Revisited

Anna Morlan

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1673>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.1673

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Anna Morlan, “A “Safely Solipsized” Life: *Lolita* as Autobiography Revisited”, *Miranda* [Online], 3 | 2010, Online since 26 November 2010, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1673> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.1673>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.

Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

A "Safely Solipsized" Life: *Lolita* as Autobiography Revisited

Anna Morlan

- 1 "As a book about the spell exerted by the past, *Lolita* is Nabokov's own parodic answer to his previous book, the first edition of *Speak, Memory*" (xxiii),¹ notes Alfred Appel, Jr. in his introduction to *The Annotated Lolita*, after bringing our attention to the "extent to which Nabokov consciously projected his own life in his fiction" (xxi). This statement should not be taken to imply an existence of a correlation between *Lolita*'s characters or plot and Nabokov's biography, but the possibility of approaching the novel as another version of the author's autobiography which attempts to recapture the feeling and theme of his experience rather than the experience itself, and does so by conveying them through fictional characters and invented stories. In the novel *Lolita* Nabokov succeeds in making his memory speak to us through Humbert Humbert, the novel's faulty narrator, and brings our attention to Nabokov's own experiences of loss and his struggle to recapture and preserve his past, granting himself—as well as the people and places of his past—a sort of immortality, over which he has the final word. In *The Annotated Lolita*, Appel goes on to argue that Nabokov deals with an autobiographical theme in the novel because "submitted to the imagination [it] thus takes on a new life: frozen in art, halted in space, now timeless, it can be lived with" (xxiii). I would add that once fictionalized, these themes stop being a part of the random and uncontrollable fate that governs Nabokov and become a part of his creation, "safely solipsized" (60), like Humbert Humbert's *Lolita*, and thus, supposedly, manageable.² However, just as *Lolita*, once created, gains agency and escapes her creator, questioning his authorship and his power over her, *Lolita* the novel may suggest that the past can never be tamed and will continue, instead, to hold the author in its grip.
- 2 In his afterword to *Lolita*, Nabokov gives us an important clue that may support this suggestion and connect him more closely to Humbert Humbert: Nabokov writes that the story was inspired by a

newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage. (311)

- 3 Just like this ape, writing from prison, Humbert the Artist finds that he can only write about the metaphorical bars of his cage—his obsession with nymphets and the spell that the past is holding him under. In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov writes that time is a prison (*Speak, Memory* 20); could he perhaps be thinking about his past that weaves itself into his writing time after time, even as he attempts to escape from it, changing countries and languages? The themes of loss and nostalgia, as well as attempts to recapture his past, are present in every one of his novels, and *Lolita* speaks to them even more poignantly than his autobiography, perhaps because in the novel the past does come alive in the character of Lolita. In one of the rare critical treatments of *Lolita* as an autobiography, Morris Dickstein writes in *Leopards in the Temple*: "What the past represents for the nostalgic biographer as he contemplates his blissful childhood, Lolita, the downy nymphet, incarnates for Humbert Humbert" (122). Let us begin then by examining that elusive butterfly that Humbert pins to the pages of his text, attempting to preserve the nymphet in all her beauty and unbounded sexual and literary potential. Who is Lolita, and what may she represent for Humbert and Nabokov?
- 4 In the first chapter of his confession, Humbert tells us that Lolita has a precursor—that "in point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had [he] not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child" (9). From that point on, the reader assumes that Humbert's obsession with Dolores Haze is his attempt to recapture his dead beloved, and that Lolita is his artistic representation of Annabel. However, Annabel Leigh herself is too clearly a fictional character to be regarded as Lolita's "real" model. Her name, her story, even the way she is addressed by Humbert Humbert are direct allusions to Edgar Allen Poe's famous poem, and as a character she is too literary to be believable. So if not Annabel, what part of his past could Humbert then be trying to recapture in his Lolita? In the early pages of his story he gives us a possible clue when he stresses that "the idea of time plays such a magic part in the matter," and then tells us that "there must be a gap of several years, never less than ten [...] between maiden and man to enable the latter to come under a nymphet's spell" (17). Humbert Humbert recognizes that when he "was a child and she was a child, [his] little Annabel was no nymphet to [him]" (17), so whose spell then did Humbert fall under?
- 5 Answering that question may require us to reconceptualize the term nymphet to mean more than just a precocious girl of a certain age. Early in the novel, Humbert Humbert uses spatial terms when he calls the age between nine and fourteen in girls an island of nymphets (16).³ Further along, as he forces himself to make love to Charlotte, he describes himself "tom-peep[ing] across the hedges of years, into wan little windows" to evoke the possible nymphet that Charlotte once was (76), suggesting that time—specifically, the past—can be regarded as a space. When later in the novel Humbert remembers his initial attraction to nymphets in his life before Lolita, he theorizes that
- it may well be that the very attraction immaturity has for me lies not so much in the limpidity of pure young forbidden fairy child beauty, as in the security of a situation where infinite perfections fill the gap between the little given and the great promised—the great rosegray never-to-be-had. (264)
- 6 This passage suggests that Humbert sees in a nymphet not just a girl, but primarily the distance between a promise and its fulfillment. When we thus regard a nymphet as a space in time which holds immeasurable potential, we discover that a nymphet's spell may go deeper into Humbert's childhood to the death of his mother—which was his

first true loss—and represent her ideal presence, kept safe from the inevitable disfigurement of time.

- 7 Now, Humbert (as well as Nabokov) would be the first one to negate such an easy explanation: Humbert claims that despite being able to vividly imagine his mother's death, "no yearnings of the accepted kind could I ever graft upon any moment of my youth, no matter how savagely psychotherapists heckled me in my later periods of depression" (287). However, his mother is too glaringly absent from his narrative—she is mentioned only twice in the text of his autobiography—which may indicate that Humbert is for some reason incapable of dealing with her death directly. The problem may lie in the absence of his memories of her that he could, potentially, set down on paper—Humbert writes that "save for a pocket of warmth in the darkest past, nothing of her subsists within the hollows and dells of memory" (10). What he has instead are photos of his "very photogenic mother"—note that he calls her photogenic, instead of beautiful, implying that he can only comment on her presence in his photographs. These are not his representations of her, but someone else's, while he has no cache of his own perceptions from which to reinvent her. In his essay "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," Nabokov suggests that memory is the tool that provides the initial inspiration, or rapture, which allows the necessary details of the past to fuse together and become the building blocks of artistic creation.⁴ It follows, then, that since Humbert does not have any memories of his mother, he cannot recreate her except by copying someone else's picture of her, so instead he attempts to recapture the *feeling* he associates with his mother, rather than her presence, through his own artistic representation—by fictionalizing his first love. He preserves his beloved as Annabel Leigh (called Miss Lee elsewhere in the text, in an even more direct allusion to Poe (167)),⁵ penning her down on paper, and thus attempting to immortalize her, at least in the world of his creation.⁶
- 8 For Nabokov, it was his father who needed to be immortalized—a task which the author attempted at least once by giving his father's characteristics to an angel in "The Word,"⁷ his first story to be published after his father's assassination. If we compare the story to a letter that Nabokov wrote to his mother on the third anniversary of his father's death, we will find that he uses words strongly echoing "The Word:
...every trifle relating to father is still as alive as ever inside me. I am so certain, my love, that we will see him again, in an unexpected but completely natural heaven, in a realm where all is radiance and delight. He will come towards us in our common bright eternity, slightly raising his shoulders as he used to do, and we will kiss the birthmark on his hand without surprise. (as quoted by Boyd 239)
- 9 In the passage above, the "radiance" of his father's heaven mirrors the "heavenly iridescence" (Nabokov 2005, 1) of "The Word"'s Paradise, and the pale birthmark on his father's hand—the angel's birthmark that lets the narrator know the former has not quite abandoned earth. Perhaps even more significant to our comparison is that in the story "The Word", the apparent trifles of the narrator's past allow him to connect with immortality through the angel, who offers the narrator salvation in a word that can save his country and his past, while similar "trifles" of Nabokov's memory keep the author's father alive in his mind, granting him a kind of immortality. This power of re-creating life by observing and putting into words seemingly trivial details is one that both Nabokov and Humbert, as writers, possess, and it may allow the two to preserve and immortalize their deceased parents, granting them a literary afterlife. "I have only words to play with!" (32) Humbert tells us.

- 10 However, just as in "The Word" the young narrator forgets the word the angel gave him, admitting, perhaps, that he does not yet have the words powerful enough to save his country and recover his past, Humbert's Annabel Leigh dies, and very early in Humbert's life, despite his attempts to make her come alive in his autobiography. Why? Perhaps it is because his skill as an artist is still undeveloped, and so instead of creating a literary representation of his first love, Humbert directly plagiarizes E.A. Poe's Annabel Lee, and creates a simple literary allusion that is too unrealistic even for him to believe in. Since from the very first reading of the text the reader can't help but recognize the reference, Annabel continues to exist only as Poe's literary character, while for Humbert she has no depth or development, and so she dissolves at the first test of her corporeality. When Humbert attempts to finally consummate their love, the couple is interrupted by a fairytale occurrence—"the old man of the sea and his brother" (13; characters of a popular Russian fairytale, allusions to which become even more apparent in Nabokov's Russian version of *Lolita*), who show up to spoil the scene with their crude remarks. Humbert and Annabel cannot have a successful love scene, since sex is a social physical act which requires at least two people, and in Humbert's solipsistic world Annabel is but a literary fantasy, even if she may be loosely based on a real girl preserved as a blur in a snapshot that Humbert claims to have lost, and that may or may not have existed. Since Annabel isn't real enough for Humbert to possess, she has to die—and her death of typhoid (a social disease) in Corfu sounds fictional as well. Humbert fails to immortalize her with his art, since Poe's Annabel remains much more memorable and original, and although in Humbert's fantasy Annabel may have loved him, she wasn't real enough to recapture the sensual presence of his mother.
- 11 In order to take charge of his past and preserve his own perception of his mother, rather than a photographer's pictures or another author's literary character, Humbert Humbert needs to develop as an artist—and the novel *Lolita* is in a manner a record of Humbert's development, as well as a reflection of Nabokov's struggle to become the artist capable of preserving his own childhood, pre-exile and death of his father. Humbert's notion of time as space then makes even more sense for Nabokov, an immigrant and an exile, for whom the past is a location that he may never revisit—his country taken over by a tyrannical government and his estate stolen from him. He realizes that he will never be able to come back to see even the setting of his memory, so for him the past is not just at a temporal, but also at a geographical distance, neither of which can be crossed, making his longing to recover and preserve those memories even greater. And while a passage of some time is necessary for nostalgia to develop, the spatial distance magnifies somehow the enjoyment of the recollected moment—just as it does for Humbert, who in describing himself watching from his balcony what appears like a nymphet undressing across the street, reveals that "thus isolated, thus removed, the vision acquired an especially keen charm" (20).
- 12 We will reexamine this concept of time in greater detail further along, but first let us return to Humbert's exercise in artistic expression. Annabel Leigh's death—Humbert's initial failure—teaches him a lesson by giving him a type to pursue, that of a prepubescent girl, and an understanding that as long as he doesn't try to achieve physical intimacy, his fantasy may remain intact. As Humbert later remembers his life before *Lolita*, the days when he was watching nymphets from a distance, he notes:
- There was in the fiery phantasm a perfection which made my wild delight also perfect, just because the vision was out of reach, with no possibility of attainment to spoil it by the awareness of an appended taboo. (264)

- 13 His delight in the distance between potential and its realistic outcome makes Humbert aware of the danger of contact with a nymphet, and until Humbert is finally seduced by *Lolita*, this love from a distance—and release through masturbation—is all that he yearns for, as he keeps reminding his reader. The distance allows him to create impressionistic renditions of his nymphets that do not have to stand the test of reality, and the solitude of his masturbatory pleasure allows, aside from his morals, his solipsistic world to stay intact. Without a direct sexual relationship, a nymphet, in her pre-sexual state, does not threaten the boundaries of Humbert's world as she remains a passive object, and never the initiator of the affair, an act which would give her more agency than her state as a fantasy would allow.
- 14 And so, Humbert's artistic success, as well as his success as the author of his autobiography, depends on him remaining within the solipsistic bubble of his world. According to Nabokov's essay "Good Readers and Good Writers", a great writer is parallel to God in the way he creates the world of his text and enchants us (and presumably himself) into believing in it,⁸ and so any intrusion from the "real" world of Humbert's life threatens his status as a creator. At least until he meets Dolores Haze and uses her to create his *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert doesn't succeed in inventing a story that he can believe in, and we are shown again and again how easily his illusions are destroyed: whether it is an image of a nymphet in a window across the street that transforms, upon a closer look, into an older woman, or his seemingly submissive wife Valeria, whom he tries to, but fails to control. Though all of them have literary predecessors—the list of nymphets that Humbert produces ranges from Virgil's creations to Dante's Beatrice, to Petrarch's Laureen (19)—none of them is the complex "tangle of thorns" (9) or literary allusions that his *Lolita* will become.
- 15 Humbert's representation of *Lolita*, on the other hand, is so intense that for quite some time he himself fails to recognize, or perhaps succeeds in ignoring, the real girl, Dolores Haze, that he "safely solipsizes" (60) into his *Lolita*. By conjuring her from a medley of literary allusions and backgrounds that Nabokov scholars have spent the last 50 years deciphering, Humbert Humbert manages to create a viable representation of his longing, someone whom he can immortalize to make up for his initial loss. Unlike Annabel, *Lolita* is not perfect—she is a moody, bratty preteen, who aggravates her mother, leaves her things around, and toys with Humbert Humbert's affection. Yet it is her flaws that make her real and believable—both for his audience and for him. He worships her rosy complexion after she cries, and admires her obstinacy and strong character, which allow her, at times, to stand up to her mother. But these are all outward descriptions; as Humbert's creation, *Lolita* is not allowed an inner world—"a garden, and a twilight, and a palace gate" (284)—the possibility of which Humbert glimpses for a moment in his darling's mind, and which would grant her agency and threaten to disrupt her crafted image.
- 16 With a recognition of her outward flaws and ignorance of her inner characteristics, Humbert makes his *Lolita* real enough to believe in, so real in fact that even when Dolores Haze tries to resist his solipsizing and seduces him, altering the image of her that he has created, his obsession with her does not waiver. Humbert, as he tells us, is "not concerned with so-called 'sex' at all" (134)—sex for him "is but the ancilla of art" (259), and the search for representation, being the real focus of his desire. As an artist, Humbert continues his portrayal of *Lolita*, while at the same time taking sexual advantage of his Dolores. The only problem, however, is that while he can enjoy his

passion for the image of a nymphet that he created, the real girl has to be begged, threatened and manipulated to indulge him. And so he makes it his endeavor to "fix", once and for all, this duality of a nymphet: the borderline between "the beastly and beautiful" (135), between Dolores and Lolita.

- 17 On the one hand, "fixing" a nymphet may mean preserving her, forever, on paper in her prepubescent state full of literary and sexual potential; this is what Humbert the Artist attempts to do by writing an autobiography that is supposed to immortalize his Lolita. On the other hand, if he sees this duality as a problem, "fixing" it may mean resolving it, or getting rid of the demonic and preserving the submissive, pliable Lolita willing to indulge Humbert's fancy. This in turn would "fix" the problem of his desire, since it is exactly that dual nature that makes a nymphet, as we learn earlier in the text, and without it Lolita would become a simple girl—a child, who can neither stir nor satisfy Humbert the Sexual Deviant's longing.
- 18 But Lolita escapes Humbert's attempts to "fix" her in any manner—by choosing to ignore her humanity, her very real pain and fear, Humbert fails to preserve the real Lolita, and instead pens down an imitation of her, though by far more developed than her predecessors. Humbert recognizes this himself when he laments the fact that he never filmed his Lolita playing tennis: "Idiot! Triple Idiot! I could have filmed her! I would have had her now with me, before my eyes" (231). The film, being more objective than Humbert's memory, could have produced a more dynamic image of Lolita than the snapshots of her that he has, in any case, burned, and a more accurate one than the memories of her that he possesses.
- 19 Nor can Humbert Humbert control his creation—eventually, his Lolita becomes so real that she runs away from him and finds love, which, even though it disappoints her, allows her to exercise her agency once again and find her inner-strength: when asked by her lover to engage in sexual acts she is unwilling to perform, she has the courage to resist, even though her refusal results in her being kicked out to fend for herself. She then has the strength to create that which was taken away from her—a relatively normal family life. Later in the text, Humbert notes in a belated realization that "even the most miserable of family lives was better than the parody of incest, which, in the long run, was the best I could offer the waif" (287). Despite the damage, Dolores manages to find this family life and live it as an adult, triumphing over the loss of childhood that Humbert has caused, and disrupting the fictionalized account of her that he has created.
- 20 Humbert Humbert's struggle with Lolita, who refuses to be safely solipsized, mirrors Nabokov's struggle with the English language that he falls in love with, yet feels he cannot master nor make his own, like the Russian language of his childhood (and his parents!), a language that he once possessed. In *Lolita*, Nabokov's infatuation with the English language is palpable—he tries to reinvent it, brings it at times to ecstatic heights, and exults in his childish joy as he plays with the newly discovered words: the number of anagrams and puns that are scattered throughout the novel is uncountable, and even the punctuation plays an important role in Humbert's narrative (see Duncan White's "Pregnant Parentheses"). But *Lolita* is not a cloudless "love affair"—just as Humbert Humbert has to use his words to beg, manipulate, and threaten Lolita into submission, Nabokov's tension with the English language becomes poignantly clear in his afterword to the novel, in which he laments the degree of magic that he loses because he is not using his native tongue:

My private tragedy, which cannot, and indeed should not, be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English. (316-317)

- 21 In her essay "Bilingualism" for the *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, Elizabeth Klosty-Beaujour brings out in much stronger terms the pain of this loss when she comments that

The emotional consequences of what [Nabokov] thought would be a permanent farewell to writing in Russian were [...] extremely painful. Nabokov experienced his abandonment of Russian as an apostasy, a personal tragedy, and described it through images of betrayal, amputation, and dismemberment. His complete switch to English was 'exceedingly painful—like learning anew to handle things after losing seven or eight fingers in an explosion' (*Strong Opinions* 54). As is the case with physical amputation, the missing members still seemed to be there and to hurt. (Klosty-Beaujour 39-40)

- 22 And it is here that we get to the heart of the matter, since within Nabokov's struggle with the English language, which leads to the metaphorical amputation of his Russian tongue, one can discern a deeper autobiographical theme—one of loss and nostalgia for the irretrievable past, seen here as a dismembered organ or a physical space he may never revisit. In the afterword to his Russian version of *Lolita*, Nabokov translates his original afterword—along with his lament over not being able to use his Russian language, which sounds somewhat absurd when read in Russian. He adds to it, however, a postscript in which he tells us of his disillusionment:

Alas, that 'wondrous Russian tongue' that, it seemed to me, was waiting for me somewhere, was flowering like a faithful springtime behind a tightly locked gate, whose key I had held in safekeeping for so many years, proved to be nonexistent, and there is nothing behind the gate but charred stumps and a hopeless autumnal distance, and the key in my hand is more like a skeleton key. (Postscript 190)

- 23 Having returned to his native tongue, Nabokov finds it missing, suggesting, yet again, that one's past cannot be kept safe from time or the whims of one's fate. It seems as well, that just like Humbert, who loves his nymphets for the promise of everything unattainable, Nabokov is drawn to the past (here represented by his Russian tongue) for the creative potential that it possesses:

the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions—which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way. (317)

- 24 And just like the magic of a nymphet is spoiled by an interaction with her, for bridging the distance spoils the illusion (and sex breaks the illusion apart), attempting an interaction with the past reveals it to no longer be there, its promise and its magic gone, questioning the possibility of preserving its illusive nature in any form of an autobiography. Yet at the same time, its spell continues to hold Nabokov captive, since no matter what language he writes in, the theme of loss and longing is kept alive in the frame of the novel.

- 25 Humbert is all the more unsuccessful in keeping charge of his illusive nymphet as outside the pages of Humbert's autobiography, revealed in the fictitious introduction by Dr. John Ray, Jr., Dolores continues to undermine Humbert's plans for her immortality. We find out that "Mrs. Richard F. Schiller" dies in childbirth, without a trace of the name that Humbert had given her—*Lolita*—or even one that she had been born under—Dolores, or Dolly. Even in death, she does not belong to Humbert and has nothing to do with the character that he has created. Note, too, that *Lolita*/Dolores dies

before becoming a mother, which could have associated her further with the memory of Humbert's mother, and before living out the 90 odd years that Humbert predicts for her, thus finally and completely disrupting Humbert's quest to create and preserve her.

- 26 This death, however, can also be read in a different light. Throughout the novel, Nabokov's voice intertwines very closely with Humbert Humbert's—although Humbert is the narrator of his autobiography, we are constantly reminded that Nabokov is the puppet master. In those instances when the literariness of the text supersedes its authenticity, such as in moments of re-enactment, uses of literary terminology, allusions to other texts, and language games, the reader can't help but wonder if these are a result of Humbert's "fancy prose" (9) or Nabokov's artistry. As Ellen Pifer points out in her essay "Lolita,"

From the reflexive patterns lurking in the patently artificial names—Humbert Humbert, Gaston Godin, John Ray, Jr. (J.R., Jr.)—to the thoroughly implausible coincidences that signal the operation of fate in their lives, the landscape of fiction calls attention to its origins. (Pifer 307)

- 27 Nabokov's authorial voice becomes especially clear in the coincidences which allow for further development of the narrative, while at the same time keeping in tune with Humbert's perception of himself. One such example is Charlotte's death, which is required for Humbert to get access to his Lolita, but which Humbert cannot carry out. He dreams about it, and gives us several hints of the imminence of this death, however, when he is set to commit a perfect murder and drown Charlotte in the lake, he finds that he cannot go through with it: "Poets," he tells us, "never kill" (88). Obliging, Charlotte is killed in unrelated circumstances shortly after, allowing Humbert to pursue Lolita without becoming a murderer himself (at least, before he's ready for it). Another example is Humbert's seduction by Lolita, after a night when he realizes his helplessness and his inability to possess her. He tells us that he "was still firmly resolved to pursue [his] policy of sparing her purity by operating only in the stealth of the night, only upon a completely anesthetized darling" (124), and since the sleeping pills do not put her to sleep, he doesn't dare to touch her. So again, very considerably, it is Lolita who seduces him. Both of these examples could of course be Humbert Humbert's inventions, lies created to justify his actions, especially since he does slyly take credit for the inventiveness of Charlotte's death. However, the accident that kills Charlotte has witnesses, and would have been very difficult for Humbert to orchestrate. Furthermore, when at the end of his autobiography he murders Quilty, he has no trouble admitting his crime, thus suggesting he has no reason to cover up his potential involvement in Charlotte's death. When read in this light, Lolita's death in the frame of the autobiography could be another example of an authorial invasion that points out the fictitiousness of the narrative it disrupts.
- 28 Throughout his story, Humbert misleads us by foreshadowing his murder of Lolita, which he never carries out, through his multiple allusions to Carmen, as well as his aside when he is leaving Dolly Schiller's house: "I pulled out my automatic" (280). However, Mrs. Schiller does die—albeit of natural causes—mirroring Dolores's death during the moment when Humbert "safely solipsizes" her into his Lolita, the moment after which her existence and her needs stop mattering to him. Humbert doesn't murder her, as the red herrings he throws us may lead us to believe, and yet, her death is necessitated by the publication of his memoir—since it cannot go to print before her death. Both Lolita's immortality and Humbert's memoir thus have to wait for Dolores's death, but thanks to Nabokov's intervention, the readers don't have to wait very long.

- 29 As a result of these authorial manipulations, the reader sees the text as “unreal”—as a fantastical, obsessive invention of Humber Humbert, and also as Nabokov's own creation. But reality, as Nabokov reminds us in his afterword, doesn't exist—at least not without the quotation marks.⁹ And so in *Lolita* he consistently questions Humbert's narrative, as well as the nature of our accepted reality, suggesting that if the focus of an autobiography can be the author's perception of events, it can diverge from objective narrative and still remain “real.” Thus, one's autobiography can be the authoritative final word one has about one's life that can fictionalize or even omit the workings of fate, taking charge of its terrifying randomness—Humbert Humbert's mother struck by lightning or Nabokov's father killed by a bullet meant for someone else. But does the author ever really succeed, or are there always gaps in the texture of his creation through which the ultimate puppet master peeks through and alters the order of events, and chooses to keep alive or kill off the author's characters? It is the author's questioning of his own authority that makes *Lolita* much more than a parody of Nabokov's attempts to recapture his past or a lesson in the dangers of falling under memory's spell, but an insightful look at what may happen when one endeavors to safely solipsize a life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexandrov, Vladimir E. *Nabokov's Otherworld*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- Dickstein, Morris. *Leopards In the Temple*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Grishakova, Marina. *The Models of Space, Time and Vision in V. Nabokov's Fiction: Narrative Strategies and Cultural Frames*. (Tartu Semiotics Library 5), Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2006.
- Klosty-Beaujour, Elizabeth. “Bilingualism.” *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. Ed. Alexandrov, Vladimir E. New York: Garland Publishing, 1995. 37-43.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita*. Ed. Appel, Alfred Jr.. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.
- . “The Art of Literature and Commonsense”. *Lectures on Literature*. New York: Harcourt, 1980. 371-380.
- . “Good Readers and Good Writers.” *Lectures on Literature*. New York: Harcourt, 1980. 1-6.
- . *Lolita*. In *Œuvres Romanesques Complètes*. Trans. Maurice Couturier. Paris : Gallimard, collection “La Pléiade”, 2010. 805-1144.
- . “Postscript to the Russian Edition of *Lolita*.” Trans. Earl D. Sampson. 26 August 2010. <http://www.csus.edu/indiv/m/maddendw/Lolita%20Preface.pdf>
- . *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966.
- . *Strong Opinions*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1973.

---. "The Word." Trans. Dmitri Nabokov. *The New Yorker* (26 December 2005): 2pp. 26 August-2010. http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/12/26/051226fi_fiction2?currentPage=1

Pifer, Ellen. "Lolita." *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. Ed. Alexandrov, Vladimir E. New York: Garland Publishing, 1995. 305-319.

Raguet-Bouvard, Christine. *Lolita : un royaume au-delà des mers*. Bordeaux, France : Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1996.

White, Duncan. (I have camouflaged everything, my love): Lolita's Pregnant Parentheses." *Nabokov Studies* 9 (2005) : 47-64.

NOTES

1. All references to *Lolita* are from *The Annotated Lolita*. New York: Vintage, 1991.
2. In an early chapter of *Speak, Memory* Nabokov laments: "I have often noticed that after I had bestowed on the characters of my novels some treasured item of my past, it would pine away in the artificial world where I had so abruptly placed it. Although it lingered on in my mind, its personal warmth, its retrospective appeal had gone and, presently it became more closely identified with my novel than with my former self, where it had seemed safe from the intrusion of the artist. [...] The man in me revolts against the fictionist" (95). While this statement seems to make a distinction between fiction and non-fiction, Nabokov blurs that line in Chapter 11 of *Speak, Memory*, when he refers to "Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical friend" (218) of his, who should be familiar to us not only because her name is an anagram for Vladimir Nabokov, but also for her incredible similarity to Vivian Darkbloom, a character in *Lolita*. It should also be noted that the concept of "cosmic synchronization" (218) that Vivian Bloodmark presents us with can be useful in explaining the many coincidences present in Nabokov's fiction, as well as his view of fate. (For an in-depth exploration of "cosmic synchronization" see Vladimir Alexandrov's Nabokov's *Otherworld*.) Furthermore, a few decades after first having written those words on fiction stealing elements of the author's past, in his 1962 interview for BBC Television, Nabokov qualifies the statement above by commenting that "some recollections, perhaps intellectual rather than emotional, are very brittle and sometimes apt to lose the flavor of reality when they are immersed by the novelist in his book, when they are given away to characters. [...] But, for instance—oh, I don't know, the freshness of the flowers being arranged by the undergardener in the cool drawing-room of our country house, as I was running downstairs with my butterfly net on a summer day half a century ago: that kind of thing is absolutely permanent, immortal, it can never change, no matter how many times I farm it out to my characters, it is always there with me" (Nabokov 1973, 12). And so it seems problematic to me to base an argument about the way fiction treats memory on Nabokov's own, somewhat contradictory, words. Instead, I would simply like to suggest that in both his fiction and non-fiction Nabokov consistently attempts to preserve the trifles of his past—those most treasured of his memories—in his body of work, in order to give them a kind of literary immortality and situate them within the realm of his authority, while *Lolita* questions the efficacy of that attempt.
3. While I am only using the equivalence of time and space in *Lolita* to reinterpret the nature of a nymphet, more in-depth exploration of this correlation throughout Nabokov's work has been carried out by others, namely Christine Raguet-Bouvard, in her *Lolita: un royaume au-delà des mers*, and more recently Marina Grishakova, in her *The Models of Space, Time and Vision in V. Nabokov's Fiction*.
4. "A passerby whistles a tune at the exact moment that you notice the reflection of a branch in a puddle which in its turn, and simultaneously, recalls a combination of damp green leaves and

excited birds in some old garden, and the old friend, long dead, suddenly steps out of the past, smiling and closing his dripping umbrella [...]. In my example memory played an essential though unconscious part and everything depended upon the perfect fusion of the past and the present" (Nabokov 1980, 377-378, emphasis mine).

5. Later on the same page Humbert addresses Lolita as "Dolores Lee, alias Loleeta "(167), stressing both the Poe/Annabel and Annabel/Lolita connections.

6. Ellen Pifer talks about Humbert's goal to immortalize Lolita "in the hard-won 'refuge of art'" (319) in her essay "Lolita" for *The Garland Companion* to Vladimir Nabokov.

7. In the short story "Slovo" ("The Word"), written in January 1923, and finally translated and published in *The New Yorker* on December 26th, 2005, the narrator finds himself in Paradise, his "soul seized by a sense of heavenly iridescence, freedom, and loftiness "(Nabokov 2005, 1). He attempts to catch the attention of the angels passing by, in order to tell them of his country, "dying in agonizing darkness" (Nabokov 2005, 1), and with their help bring back to his land "such joy that human souls would instantly be illumined, and would circle beneath the plash and crackle of resurrected springtime, to the golden thunder of reawakened temples" (Nabokov 2005, 1). He finally manages to catch the attention of one of the angels, who "had not yet totally abandoned earth," which the narrator can tell because of the "network of azure veins on his feet and one pale birthmark" (Nabokov 2005, 1). This gives the narrator hope that this angel would be more likely to understand his prayer, but as he begins, he cannot find the words that would either describe the wonders of his land or the horrors of its downfall. Instead, babbling and repeating himself, he can only come up with what he feels are trifles: "some burned-down house where once the sunny sheen of parquet had been reflected in an inclined mirror [...] old books and old lindens [...] knickknacks [...] his first poems in a cobalt schoolboy notebook [...] some gray boulder, overgrown with wild raspberries, in the middle of a field filled with scabiosa and daisies [...], of rooms in a cool and resonant country house, of lindens, of [his] first love, of bumblebees sleeping on the scabiosa "(1), and though to the narrator these things seem mundane and unimportant, unable to convey the full scope of his sorrow, to his surprise, the angel understands. Responding to the narrator, the angel utters just one word, but that word seems to be the answer to his prayer. At the end of the story, however, as the narrator awakes to the "greenish dawn" (Nabokov 2005, 2) of reality, he cannot remember the word that the angel told him.

8. In "Good Readers and Good Writers," Nabokov tells us that what differentiates a great writer from a minor one is that "the real writer, the fellow who sends planets spinning and models a man asleep, and eagerly tampers with the sleeper's rib, that kind of author has no given values at his disposal: he must create them himself "(Nabokov 1980, 2), thus comparing a great writer to God in the moment of creation. Further on, Nabokov adds that "it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer "(Nabokov 1980, 5), so that with "a pleasure which is both sensual and intellectual we shall watch the artist build his castle of cards and watch the castle of cards become a castle of beautiful steel and glass" (Nabokov 1980, 6), as we are enchanted into believing in the world of his creation.

9. "'reality' (one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes "(312).

ABSTRACTS

“As a book about the spell exerted by the past, *Lolita* is Nabokov's own parodic answer to his previous book, the first edition of *Speak, Memory*” (xxiii), notes Alfred Appel, Jr. in his introduction to *The Annotated Lolita*, after bringing our attention to the “extent to which Nabokov consciously projected his own life in his fiction” (xxi). This statement should not be taken to imply an existence of a correlation between *Lolita*'s characters or plot and Nabokov's biography, but the possibility to approach the novel as another version of the author's autobiography that focuses on Nabokov's experiences of loss and his struggle to recapture and preserve his past, granting himself—as well as the people and places of his past—a sort of immortality, over which he has the final word. Once fictionalized, these themes stop being a part of the random and uncontrollable fate that governs Nabokov, and become a part of his creation, “safely solipsized” (60), like Humbert Humbert's *Lolita*, and thus, supposedly manageable. However, just as *Lolita*, once created, gains agency and escapes her creator, questioning his authorship and his power over her, *Lolita* the novel may suggest that the past can never be tamed and will continue, instead, to hold the author in its grip.

Dans son introduction à l'édition américaine annotée de *Lolita*, Alfred Appel Jr. remarque : “En tant que roman de l'ensorcellement exercé par le passé, *Lolita* est la réponse auto-parodique de Nabokov à son précédent ouvrage, la première édition de son autobiographie, *Speak, Memory* (*Autres Rivages*)” (xxiii). Cette remarque vient après qu'Appel a attiré notre attention sur la “manière dont Nabokov projetait de manière consciente sa propre existence dans sa fiction” (xxi). Cette affirmation ne saurait être interprétée comme impliquant une corrélation entre les personnages et l'intrigue de *Lolita* et la biographie de Nabokov, mais plutôt comme la possibilité d'envisager le roman comme une version autre de l'autobiographie de l'auteur, qui se concentre sur les expériences de la perte de Nabokov, et sur ses difficultés à retrouver et préserver son passé, s'accordant ainsi à lui-même—ainsi qu'aux personnes et lieux de son passé—une sorte d'immortalité, sur laquelle il a le dernier mot. Une fois fictionnalisés, ces thèmes cessent d'appartenir au destin hasardeux et incontrôlable qui préside à la vie de Nabokov, pour devenir l'un des éléments de sa création, tout aussi “définitivement solipsisés” (*Lolita*, trad. M. Couturier 2010, 867) que l'est *Lolita* par Humbert, et donc, maîtrisables, du moins en principe. Cependant, tout comme *Lolita*, une fois créée, acquiert son indépendance et échappe à son créateur, remettant en question son autorité d'auteur et son pouvoir, le roman *Lolita* peut suggérer que le passé ne peut jamais être apprivoisé, et ne cessera au contraire de tenir l'auteur enchaîné.

INDEX

Keywords: *Lolita*, autobiography, memory

AUTHORS

ANNA MORLAN

Lecturer
Pace University
anna.morlan@nyu.edu