Journée d’études « Les Soixante ans de Lolita » / “Lolita’s Sixtieth Anniversary”
Université de Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense, 24-25 September 2015

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Journée d’études « Les Soixante ans de Lolita » / “Lolita’s Sixtieth Anniversary”

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Conference Overview

This conference was organized by Julie Loison-Charles, Agnès Edel-Roy, Marie Bouchet and Yannicke Chupin for the French Vladimir Nabokov Society “Les Chercheurs Enchantés”, and it was hosted by Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense. It included an exhibition running for a month at The American Library in Paris and a theatrical performance at Théâtre Bernard Marie Koltès (Université de Nanterre).

Celebrating an Anniversary

The title of the conference is likely to elicit smiles: who ever thought that Nabokov’s little “brat” would some day turn into a sixty-year-old lady, catching up with Umberto Eco’s Nonita, its avatar and parody? The French context of the first publication of Lolita made it particularly relevant for the French Nabokov Society to celebrate this anniversary, which also prolonged the thread unfolded by its previous conference « Nabokov and France » organized in 2013.

Context and Posterity

Preparing another conference on the iconic figure, the organizers of the conference wanted to avoid repetition and to focus on novel issues generated by this now canonical object of literary studies. To that end, participants were asked to contextualize the history of Lolita’s publication and to contrast it with our context of reception as well as to examine the posterity of Lolita in 2015. Many French Nabokovians had gathered for the occasion but to the usual crowd were added figures from outside the academic world, such as a French lawyer, a novelist and journalist at Le Monde, as well as a publisher in London, all adding new dimensions to the kaleidoscopic portrait of a 21st-century Lolita.

New Critical Material

Adding to this orientation was the possibility of unraveling some unpublished critical material. For the occasion indeed, the French Gallimard publishing house had granted the society’s members access to their Nabokov archives, composed of Nabokov’s letters with his agent and various translators at Gallimard.

The Exhibition

Publicized by the Parisian American Library’s network, the opening of the exhibition dedicated to Lolita’s sixtieth anniversary gathered an unusual mix of Nabokovian scholars and Paris-based American belletrists, including a former gardener at Cornell when Nabokov was a professor there, as well as Ivan Nabokov, the son of the writer’s first cousin, and his wife.

The books and manuscripts on display for a month at the library centered around the history of Lolita, from its first publication sixty years ago to rewritings up to 2015.
Besides a series of Lolita covers from Europe, Russia, and the United States, the shelves displayed a few historical documents (letters from Gallimard archives), numerous literary and cinematographic avatars, collector's items (the film posters, red heart-shaped glasses) as well as proliferating critical studies centered on Nabokov's masterpiece since Carl Proffer's first publication of his Keys to Lolita in 1968.
An Overview of the Papers

Maurice Couturier (Université de Nice), “Nabokov and Paris: A Love-Hate Relationship”

To honor the launching of this exhibition, the French pioneer in Nabokov studies Maurice Couturier gave a conference to a packed room on “Nabokov’s love-hate relationship” with Paris and France. Recently published Letters to Vera were additional material for Maurice Couturier to elaborate on the thesis offered in his book Nabokov, ou La Tentation Française, according to which Nabokov’s relationship with France was more intense than what had been appreciated before in the various biographical studies on the author.

Including many of Nabokov’s mixed and sometimes stereotypical impressions about Paris, the Parisians and the French in general, the presentation elicited many a smile from the audience as Maurice Couturier went through Nabokov’s sometimes flippant appreciations of a country he was always deeply attracted to while resisting its appeal for permanent residence.

The audience then took advantage of the speaker’s first-hand knowledge as a translator and literary scholar to question him on the difficulties of translating Lolita, and asked him to pin down what really made the Russian-American Nabokov a great writer. To that difficult question, Maurice Couturier answered that it was the “over-determined” quality of his texts that were so minutely chiselled that the readers had not choice but to follow the tyrannical path paved for them by the writer.

The Lolita Case – 1955-1960

Julie Loison-Charles (Université Lille 3), “Nabokov and Censorship” (« Nabokov et la Censure »)

Julie Loison-Charles gave a meticulous account of the censorship issues that have shadowed the publication of Lolita from the 1950s—reviewing the many twists the novel had to endure before becoming one of the top-rated novels in the history of literature. The presentation offered a multicultural approach to the subject, contrasting the nature of the censorship exerted by the Russians (political) and the Americans (moral). Interestingly, it also reviewed the countries that had been most sensitive to its transgressive nature, such as Argentina, Birmania and Australia, which banned the book in 1955 while, today, in the United States and in Russia, the books are still regularly taken down from certain libraries’ shelves and condemned “as novels that justify pedophilia”.


Agnès Edel-Roy retraced the stormy and complicated relationship of Vladimir Nabokov with the French translator of Lolita, Eric Kahane, also the brother of Maurice Girodias, as the challenging translation of Lolita into French for Gallimard was slowly progressing from 1956 to 1959. Disclosing unknown exchanges between Nabokov’s agent at Gallimard, Michael Mohrt, the translator and Vladimir or Vera Nabokov, Agnès Edel-Roy emphasized the dramatic and quasi-epic dimension of this triangular and transcontinental exchange, marked by threats of contract breach and complications brought about by staff shifts and post office delays.


Praising the thorough knowledge and documentation of the author Vladimir Nabokov in the matter of law, French lawyer Nicolas Guerrero used his field of expertise to explore the legal issues and semantic implications of the legal terminology used in Lolita, as well as its consequences for the novel’s reception.

Géraldine Chouard (Université Paris Dauphine), “From one Lolita to the Next: Portraits of a Icon” (« D’une Lolita à l’autre: portraits d’une icône)

Do we still judge a book by its cover? Treating the audience with a coruscating tour of the countless covers of Nabokov’s bestseller through the decades and countries, Géraldine Chouard gave a stimulating analysis of the iconicity of Lolita as represented by publishers’ choices. Decoding the visual signs—the colors, fonts, characters, body parts and props selected—Géraldine Chouard questioned the effect of a book cover on its interpretation through the years and countries. Is Lolita the eternal victim of misreadings because of so many misleading book covers?

Posternity: The Legacy of Lolita in Contemporary Literature

Maurice Couturier (Université de Nice), “Lolita, a French Love Story” (« Lolita, un amour français »)

After retracing his personal history as a Nabokovian reader and scholar from his youth and first reading of Lolita to his present life as a retired scholar after a lifetime research devoted to the American-Russian writer, Maurice Couturier announced that he was working on a novelistic rewriting of Lolita to be published in 2016 in which the readers will be introduced to the real model for the character of Humbert Humbert.

Florence Noiville (French writer) about her novel L’Attachement (2012)

The shadow of Lolita—the book and the girl—looms in most pages of Florence Noiville’s novel, L’Attachement, published in France in 2012. The novel relates a star-crossed love story between a middle-aged professor of literature and his young student, Marie. Florence Noiville, a novelist and literary critic at Le Monde, had been invited to share
her experience as the author of a 21st-century novel explicitly inspired by Lolita. Contrasting the world of Lolita with the new forms of culture that surround today’s disillusioned teenagers, Florence Noiville discussed the difficulty of writing a romantic love story in the 21st century.

Yannicke Chupin (Université de Cergy-Pontoise), “The ‘Lolita Variations’ in 21st-century Literature”

When creating a new version of Lolita in the 21st century, what do authors retain from Nabokov’s masterpiece? Is it the myth and the icon or is it the diegetic thread? Is it the extravagant prose or the transgression and taboo? To answer these questions Yannicke Chupin reviewed three recently published novels that claimed close affinities with Lolita. The most typical case is exemplified by Alissa Nutting’s Tampa (2013), which exploits to the bone the juicy theme of transgression by creating a feminine and enraged Humbert craving for sex with teen boys. At the opposite end of the palette stands Amity Gaige’s Schroder (2013), which poetically revisits the theme of European exile and of the illicit father-and-daughter roadtrip, yet without a hint of nympholepsy. Yannicke Chupin finally selected Darling River, Les Variations Dolores (2011) by Swedish author Sara Stridsberg, an intensely personal and multilayered rewriting of Lolita, to show how Lolita’s avatars were still able to further reveal the complexity of their original.

**Lolita, a Multitextual Novel**


Marie Bouchet had chosen to focus on the texts in Lolita that stray from the purely literary field, such as magazine columns, advertisements and pop songs. First observing the cultural gap between the refinements of Nabokov’s scholarly life in Cornell and the world of suburban teens in the 1950s, Marie Bouchet discussed the amount of external documentation Nabokov had to gather before writing Lolita. Relying on her notes taken from Nabokov’s documentary index cards held at the Library of Congress, on which Nabokov had handcopied many a magazine title or slogan, Marie Bouchet focused on the integration and transformation of the literal text into its poetic rewriting by Nabokov.


Stanislav Shvabrin’s presentation gave the audience the opportunity to relish the Nabokovian joy of discovering another possible intertext to Lolita. After giving an overview of Nabokov’s close affinity with the French poet and novelist Jules Supervielle whom Nabokov had translated into English, Stanislav Shvabrin explored the premises of a new lead linking Supervielle’s protagonist, Philemon Bigua, in his 1926 novel Les Voleurs d’Enfants, to the genealogy of Nabokov’s most celebrated villain, Humbert Humbert.
Michaël Federspiel (Université de Toulon), "When Aristotle Meets with Nabokov: the Tragic Apparatus of Lolita" (« Aristote s’invite chez Nabokov: le ressort tragique dans Lolita »)

Inspired by the notions of tragedy and catharsis as analytical keys to the reading of Lolita, Michaël Federspiel gave a minute and thorough exploration of the structure of Lolita as a close match to the mechanics of tragedy as delineated in Aristotle's Poetics. These perfectly orchestrated mechanics are, according to Michaël Federspiel, what enables the readers to overcome the transgressive and sometimes repulsive spirit of Lolita and to find in the unusual itinerary of the characters an echo of familiar human concerns that generate both pity and terror, the two fundamental pillars of catharsis in Greek tragedy.

H.H. The Confession of a White-Widowed Male, a stage adaptation of Lolita

The conference ended on an entertaining note, for the organizers had invited the audience to attend a recent stage adaptation of Lolita performed by an Italian company composed of students and semi professional actors, at Théâtre Bernard Marie Koltes in Nanterre. The play was also attended by high school students as well as theater students, which enriched the final perspectives in the ensuing debate with the company, which was animated by Lara Delage-Toriel (Université de Strasbourg).

Anyone trying to adapt Lolita to the stage knows they will be confronted with the thorny difficulty of transforming the writerly logorrhea of Humbert's confessions into the language of visual arts. Aldo Augieri, the director of the company, did not shun this issue. First, this adaptation takes up the challenge of compressing a 400-page book into a one-hour play without losing track of the complicated structure and confessional mode of Lolita. The character of Humbert is introduced by Sam Piposki—the director of a hospital from which Humbert tells his story—in a manner that echoes the foreword
of the novel and the character of John Ray. But in the end, this man winds up impersonating Quilty. This reads as a clever trouvaille, for it recreates from the start the ever-looming presence of Quilty in Nabokov’s text and gives an accurate portrait of him as both an alter ego and an antagonist. The adaptation follows an intense rhythm by overlapping several temporal frameworks, mingling memories and nightmares with the timeline of the story in a way that aptly recreates the dual perspective of Humbert as a narrator and Humbert as an actor in his manuscript.

23 The most surprising choice of this adaptation might yet reside in its visual and auditive aesthetics. The intensely gaudy and sonorous scenography might read as Aldo Augieri’s response to Nabokov’s extravagant prose style. On the one hand, the mike-amplified and over-articulated voices of the actors, their garish costumes, the snappy lines of dialogues, the colorful panels and projected images and videos, seem to link this Italian adaptation to a 21st-century version of the commedia dell’arte burlesque. But there is more to it, for such stylistic excess ends up creating a dense and tense atmosphere that echoes the jarring and disturbing combination of Humbert’s humor and tragedy in Nabokov’s text.

24 Yet, one may regret that the burlesque somehow obfuscates the poignant quality of the confession’s climax. It is easy to be amused but hard to be moved by this version of Humbert—and yet the subtle intricacy of both feelings is one of the novel’s most powerful strings. The virtuosity at the expense of emotion is what elicited questions from the audience in the ensuing debate. The treatment of the character of Humbert for example was questioned. Why does he appear as such a caricature, a high school student wanted to know. Aldo Augieri insisted on the oniric and phantasmagoric dimension he wanted to lend to his adaptation, therefore emphasizing the mental and nightmarish intricacies of the original. To that purpose, characters had to seem slightly distorted and unreal. Ultimately, dialogues with the actors and their relation to Nabokov’s text confirmed what had emerged from the entire conference, that in the 21st century, to the younger generation, Lolita is as transgressive a text as ever.

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