

FICTION/LITERATURE

The Annotated Lolita is the definitive annotated text of the modern classic, written by one of the most punning and allusive writers in English since James Joyce. It assiduously glosses Lolita's extravagant wordplay and its frequent literary allusions, parodies, and cross references.

"As with Joyce and Melville, the reader of Lolita attempts to arrive at some sense of its overall 'meaning,' while at the same time having to struggle, often page by page, with the difficulties posed by the recondite materials and rich, elaborate verbal textures. The main purpose of this edition is to solve such local problems and to show how they contribute to the total design of the novel."

-From the Preface by Alfred Appel, Jr.

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ANNOTATED LOLITA



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**LOLITA**  
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introduction

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future critics of Nabokov. Many of the novel's most important motifs are lionized by brief cross-references. Humbert's vocabulary is extraordinary, its range enlarged by the busy portmanteau words he creates. Puns, coinages, and comic etymologies, as well as foreign, archaic, rare, or unusual words are defined. Although some of the "unusual" words are in collegiate dictionaries, they are nevertheless annotated as a matter of convenience. Not every neologism is identified (e.g., "truckster"), but many that should be obvious enough are noted, because the rapidly moving eye may well miss the vowel on which such a pun depends (speed-readers of the world, beware! *Lolita* is not the book for you). Because many American students have little or no French, virtually all the interpolations in French are translated. In a few instances, readers may feel an annotation belabors the obvious: I well remember my own resentment, as a college sophomore, when a textbook reference to Douglas MacArthur was garnished by the footnote "Famous American general (1880- )". Yet the commonplace may turn out to be obscure. For instance, early in *Lolita* Humbert mentions that his first wife Valeria was "deep in *Paris-Soir*" (p. 26). When in 1967 I asked a Stanford University class of some eighty students if they knew what *Paris-Soir* was, sixty of them had no idea, twenty reasonably guessed it to be a magazine or newspaper, but no one knew specifically that it was a newspaper which featured lurid reportage, and that the detail formulates Valeria's puerility and Humbert's contempt for her. In 1967, most of them knew what a "zoot suit" and "crooner" are; this is no longer true, so they've been glossed (only twelve of one hundred 1970 Northwestern University students could define a crooner or zoot suit, a new wrinkle in *The Crisis in the Humanities*). Several notes are thus predicated on the premise that one epoch's "popular culture" is another's esoterica (see Note 148/1).

Most of the Introduction is drawn from parts of my previously published articles in *The New Republic* ("Nabokov's Puppet Show—Part II," CLVI [January 21, 1967], 25-32), *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* (1967), *The Denver Quarterly* (1968), and *TriQuarterly* (1970). Several Notes are adapted from the two middle articles and my interview with Nabokov in *Wisconsin Studies* (see bibliography for full entries). The first edition was completed in 1968, save for eleventh-hour allusions to *Ada*, and published in 1969, but the vagaries and vagrancies of publishing delayed its appearance. In the meantime, Carl R. Proffler's *Keys to Lolita* was published (1968). Two enchanted hunters (see Note 108/1) working independently of each other, Mr. Proffler and I arrived at many similar identifications, and, excepting those which are readily apparent, I have tried to indicate where he anticipated me.

The text of *Lolita* corrections made were approved by various editions of its Notes, should 50 reader will be offer

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Part Two

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<sup>1</sup>New York, 1944,  
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was Minister of Justice under two tsars and implemented the court reforms, while Nabokov's father was a distinguished jurist, a foe of anti-Semitism, a prolific journalist and scholar, a leader of the opposition party (the Kadets), and a member of the first parliament (Duma). In 1909 he took his family into exile, co-editing a liberal émigré daily in Berlin until his death in 1911 (at age fifty-two), at a political meeting, where he was shot while trying to shield the speaker from two monarchist assassins. Young Nabokov went to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1911 taking an honors degree in Slavic and Romance Languages. For the next eighteen years he lived in Germany and France, writing prolifically in Russian. The spectral émigré communities of Europe were not large enough to sustain a writer, and Nabokov supported himself through translations, public readings of his works, lessons in English and tennis, and, fittingly, the first Russian crossword puzzles, which he composed for a daily émigré paper. In 1920 he and his wife and son moved to the United States, and Nabokov began to write in English. The frequently made comparison with Joseph Conrad denies Nabokov his signal achievement; for the Polish-born author was thirty when he started to write in English, and, unlike the middle-aged Nabokov, he had not written anything in his native language, let alone nine novels.<sup>1</sup>

In America, Nabokov lectured on Russian literature at Wellesley (1941-1948) and Cornell (1948-1958), where his Masterpieces of European Fiction course proved immensely popular. While at Wellesley he also worked on Lepidoptera in the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard. Nabokov's several books in English had meanwhile earned him the quiet respect of discerning readers, but *Lolita* was the first to attract wide attention. Its best-sellerdom and film sale in 1958 entailed Nabokov to resign his teaching position and devote himself to his writing in Montreux, Switzerland, where he took up residence in 1960. When the first edition of *The Annotated Lolita* went to press, he was working on a new novel (*Transparent Things*) and a history of the butterfly in Western art, and planning for the future publication of several works, including his Cornell lectures, his screenplay of *Lolita* (only parts of which were used in Stanley Kubrick's 1967 film), and a selection of his Russian poems, translated by Nabokov and about to be published, together with his chess problems, as *Poems and Problems*.

*Lolita* had made Lolita famous, rather than Nabokov. Although praised by influential critics, *Lolita* was treated as a kind of miracle of spontaneous

generation, for Nabokov's Russian novel went out of sight, lurking in those eleven years. Nabokov writes to his Russian, three volumes (1962), the monograph (1964), *Speak, clearly revised and* *Conclusive Evidence* (1950) celebrated his *Glory* (1950), the Nabokov's son, novels.

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<sup>1</sup>Brian Boyd's *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, 1990), the first volume in an anticipated two-volume biography, is recommended.

<sup>1</sup>John Updike, " (1964), 15. Reprinted

has been exercised. Quite the opposite happens in Nabokov's fiction: his art must be seen as artifice, even when its verisimilitude is most convincing and compelling, as in *Lolita*; and the fantastic, a-realist, and involuted forms toward which even his earliest fictions evolve make it clear that Nabokov had always gone his own way, and it was not the way of the novel's Great Tradition according to F.R. Leavis. But Nabokov's eminence signaled a radical shift in opinions about the novel and the novelist's ethical responsibilities. A future historian of the novel may one day claim that it was Nabokov, more than any of his contemporaries, who kept alive an exhausted art form not only by demonstrating new possibilities for it but by reminding us, through his example, of the variegated aesthetic resources of his great forebears, such as Flaubert and the Joyce who was a parodist rather than a symbolist.

In addition to its qualities as a memoir, *Speak, Memory* serves, along with Chapter Five in *Gogol* (1944), as the ideal introduction to Nabokov's art. For some of the most lucid criticisms of Nabokov is found in his own books. His most overtly parodic novels spiral in upon themselves and provide their own commentary; sections of *The Gift* (1937-1938) and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) limpidly describe the narrative strategies of later novels. Nabokov's preoccupations are perhaps best projected by bringing together the opening and closing sentences of *Speak, Memory*: "The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness." At the end of the book he describes how he and his wife first perceived, through the stratagems thrown up to confound the eye, the ocean liner waiting to take them and their son to America: "It was most satisfying to make out among the jumbled angles of roofs and walls, a splendid ship's funnel, showing from behind the clothesline as something in a scrambled picture—Find What the Sailor Has Hidden—that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen." *The Eye* (1930) is well titled; the apprehension of "reality" (a word that Nabokov says must always have quotes around it) is first of all a miracle of vision, and our existence is a sequence of attempts to unscramble the "pictures" glimpsed in that "brief crack of light." Both art and nature are to Nabokov "a game of intricate enchantment and deception," and the process of reading and rereading his novels is a game of perception, like those E. H. Gombrich writes about in *Art and Illusion*—everything is there, in sight (no symbols lurking in murky depths), but one must penetrate the *tramp-linè*, which eventually reveals something totally different from what one had expected. This is how Nabokov seems to envision the game of life and the effect of his novels: each time a "scrambled

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misunderstood. Of course Nabokov did not write the kind of thinly disguised transcription of personal experience which too often passes for fiction. But it is crucial to an understanding of his art to realize how often his novels are improvisations on an autobiographic theme, and in *Speak, Memory* Nabokov good-naturedly anticipates his critics: "The future specialist in such dull literary lore as auto-plagiarism will like to collate a protagonist's experience in my novel *The Gift* with the original event." Further on he comments on his habit of bestowing "treasured items" from his past on his characters. But it is more than mere "items" that Nabokov has transmogrified in the "artificial world" of his novels, as a dull specialist discovers by comparing Chapters Eleven and Thirteen of *Speak, Memory* with *The Gift*, or, since it is Nabokov's overriding subject, by comparing the attitudes toward exile expressed in *Speak, Memory* with the treatment it is given in his fiction. The reader of his memoir learns that Nabokov's great-grandfather explored and mapped Nova Zembla (where Nabokov's River is named after him), and in *Pale Fire* Kinbote believes himself to be the exiled king of Zembla. His is both a fantastic vision of Nabokov's opulent past as entertained by a madman and the vision of a poet's irreparable loss, expressed otherwise by Nabokov in 1945: "Beyond the seas where I have lost a sceptre, / I hear the neighing of my dappled nouns" ("An Evening of Russian Poetry"). Nabokov's avatars do not grieve for "lost banknotes." Their circumstances, though exacerbated by adversity, are not exclusive to the émigré. Exile is a correlative for all human loss, and Nabokov records with infinite tenderness the constrictions the heart must suffer; even in his most parodic novels, such as *Lolita*, he makes audible through all the playfulness a cry of pain. "Pity," says John Shade, "is the passport." Nabokov's are emotional and spiritual exiles, turned back upon themselves, trapped by their obsessive memories and desires in a solipsistic "prison of mirrors" where they cannot distinguish the glass from themselves (to use another prison trope, drawn from the story "The Assistant Producer" [1943], in *Nabokov's Dozen* [1958]).

The transcendence of solipsism is a central concern in Nabokov. He recommends no escape, and there is an unmistakable moral resonance in his treatment of the theme: it is only at the outset of *Lolita* that Humbert can say that he had Lolita "safely solipsized." The coldly unromantic serenity which his exiles endure is often overlooked by critics. In *Pain* the gentle, addlepated professor is seen in a new light in the final chapter, when the narrator assumes control and makes it clear that he is illicitly Poin's job but not, he would hope, his existence. John Shade asks us to pity "the exile, the old man / Dying in a motel," and we do, but in the Commentary,

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sentence would simply read, "I am a sentence," and John Barth's short stories "Title," "Life-Story," and "Menelaus" (in *Last in the Forebourn*, 1968) come as close to this dubious ideal as any fiction possibly can. The components of "Title," for example, sustain a miraculous discussion among themselves, sometimes even addressing the author: "Once upon a time you were satisfied with incidental felicities and niceties of technique."

Characters in involuted works often recognize that their authenticity is more than suspect. In Raymond Queneau's *Les Enfants du Limon* (1938), Chambernac is a lycée headmaster who has been collecting material for a monumental work on "literary madmen," *L'Encyclopédie des sciences inex-actes*. By the last chapter he has abandoned hope of getting it published, but he then is approached in a café by "un type" (Queneau, as it turns out, who identifies himself by name) and offers to turn the manuscripts over for use in a novel Queneau is writing, one of whose characters is a headmaster, and so forth. A similar infinite regress exists in Chapter Four of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), the creator's (and Creator's) role now played by the sleeping Red King. When Alice moves to waken the King, Tweedledee stops her:

"He's dreaming now," said Tweedledee: "and what do you think he's dreaming about?"

Alice said, "Nobody can guess that."

"Why, about you?" Tweedledee exclaimed, clapping his hands triumphantly. "And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?"

"Where I am now, of course," said Alice.

"Not you!" Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. "You'd be nowhere. Why you're only a sort of thing in his dream!"

"If that there King was to wake," added Tweedledum, "you'd go out—bang!—just like a candle!"

"I shouldn't!" Alice exclaimed indignantly. "Besides, if I'm only a sort of thing in his dream, what are you, I should like to know?"

"Ditto," said Tweedledum.

"Ditto, ditto!" cried Tweedledee.

He shouted this so loud that Alice couldn't help saying "Hush! You'll be waking him, I'm afraid, if you make so much noise."

"Well, it's no use your talking about waking him," said Tweedledum, "when you're only one of the things in his dream. You know very well you're not real."

"I am real," said Alice, and began to cry.

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<sup>1</sup>Raymond Queneau's *Les Enfants du Limon* are mine.—A.A.  
<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

bled at will. But characters are not always as uncomplaining as Cincinnati. In the next-to-last box of a 1936 daily strip, Chester Gould pictured his hero trapped horribly in a mine shaft, its entrance blocked by a huge boulder. The balloon above Dick Tracy's stricken face said, "Gould, you have gone too far." The concluding box was to have shown a kindly eraser-bearing hand, descending to remove the boulder; but *The Chicago Tribune's* Captain Patterson, no doubt a disciple of Dr. Leavis, thought Gould had indeed gone too far, and repeated that strip. Considerably less desperate is Shakespeare's direct address to Joyce in *Nighttown*: "How my Oldfellow choic'd his Thursdaynoonun," that moment being Bloomsday, this book, and Joyce's stab at greatness: "O Janses let me up out of this," pleads Mully Bloom to Joyce,<sup>2</sup> and in the hallucinated *Nighttown* section the shade of Virag says, "That suits your book, eh?" When in acknowledgment his throat is made to twitch, Virag says, "Slapbang! There he goes again."<sup>3</sup> Virag is quite right to speak directly to Joyce, because the plantations of *Nighttown* are the artist's. Virag accepts the truth that he is another's creation, and does so far more gracefully than Alice or poor Krug in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, who is instantaneously rendered insane by the realization. On the other hand, this perception steels Cincinnati, who is waiting to be beheaded, since it means he cannot really "die."

Nabokov's remarks on Gogol help to underscore this analogical definition of involution. "All reality is a mask," he writes (p. 148), and Nabokov's narratives are masques, stagings of his own inventions rather than recreations of the naturalistic world. But, since the latter is what most readers expect and demand of fiction, many still do not understand what Nabokov is doing. They are not accustomed to "the illusions to something else behind the crudely painted screens" (p. 122), where the "real plots behind the obvious ones are taking place." There are thus at least two "plots" in all of Nabokov's fiction: the characters in the book, and the consciousness of the creator above it—the "real plot" which is visible in the "gaps" and "holes" in the narrative. These are best described in Chapter Fourteen of *Speak, Memory*, when Nabokov discusses "the inneldest and most arrogant" of the émigré writers, Simin (his émigré pen name): "The real life of his books flowed in his figures of speech, which one critic [Nabokov?] has compared to windows giving upon a contiguous world . . . a rolling corollary, the shadow of a train of thought." The contiguous world is the

<sup>1</sup>James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York, 1962), p. 567.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 764.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 573.

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organism of a new truth" (p. 361). Humbert goes to live in Charlotte Haze's house at 342 Lawn Street; he and Lolita inaugurate their illicit cross-country tour in room 342 of The Enchanted Hunters hotel; and in one year on the road they register in 342 motels and hotels. Given the endless mathematical combinations possible, the numbers seem to signal his entrapment by McFate (to use Humbert's personification). But they are also a patent, purposeful contrivance, like the copy of the 1946 *Who's Who in the Limelight* which Humbert would have us believe he found in the prison library on the night previous to his writing the chapter we are now reading. The yearbook not only prefigures the novel's action, but under Lolita's mock-entry of "Dolores Quine" we are informed that she "Made New York debut in 1904 in *Never Talk to Strangers*"—and in the closing paragraph of the novel, almost three hundred pages later, Humbert advises the absent Lolita, "Do not talk to strangers," a detail that exhibits extraordinary narrative control for an allegedly unrevised, first-draft confessional, written during fifty-six chaotic days. Clearly, "Someone else is in the know," to quote a mysterious voice that interrupts the narration of *Invitation to a Beheading*. It is no coincidence when coincidences extend from book to book. Creations from one "reality" continually turn up in another: the imaginary writer Pierre Delalande is quoted in *The Gift* and provides the epigraph for *Invitation to a Beheading*; Pain and another character mention "Vladimir Vladimirovich" and dismiss his entomology as an affectation; "Hurricane Lolita" is mentioned in *Pale Fire*, and Pain is glimpsed in the university library. Mythic or prosaic names and certain fabled numbers recur with slight variation in many books, carrying no burden of meaning whatsoever other than the fact that someone beyond the work is repeating them, that they are all part of one master pattern.

**PATTERNING.** Nabokov's passion for chess, language, and lepidoptery has inspired the most elaborately involved patterning in his work. Like the games implemented by parody, the puns, anagrams, and spoonerisms all reveal the controlling hand of the logomachist; thematically, they are appropriate to the prison of mirrors. Chess motifs are woven into several narratives, and even in *The Defense* (1930), a most naturalistically ordered early novel, the chess patterning points to forces beyond Grandmaster Luzhin's comprehension ("Thus toward the end of Chapter Four an unexpected move is made by me in a corner of the board," writes Nabokov in the Foreword). The importance of the lepidopteral motif has already been suggested, and it spirals freely in and out of Nabokov's books: in *Invitation*

to a Beheading, just a giant moth; in minute before he transparent white minutes to live; in seeing in Paris, just a least of chivalry; and suspends the window and decid night for nothing; accident that in N in 1947, thus sustain enabling him to p substratum of the career. "I confess the ecstatic butter carpet, after use, upon another."

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*The Primatic Bezel*, "a rollicking parody of the setting of a detective tale." Like an Elizabethan play-within-a-play, Quilty's play within *Lolita*, *The Enchanted Hunters*, offers a "message" that can be taken seriously as a commentary on the progression of the entire novel; and *Who's Who in the Limelight* and the class list of the Ramakale school magically mirror the action taking place around them, including, by implication, the writing of *Lolita*. The a-novelistic components of *Pale Fire*—Foreword, Poem, Commentary, and Index—create a mirror-lined labyrinth of involuted cross-references, a closed circuit that can only be of the author's making, rather than the product of an "unreliable" narrator. *Pale Fire* realizes the ultimate possibilities of works within works, already present twenty-four years earlier in the literary biography that serves as the fourth chapter of *The Gift*. If it is disturbing to discover that the characters in *The Gift* are also the readers of Chapter Four, this is because it suggests, as Jorge Luis Borges says of the play within *Hamlet*, "that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious."<sup>1</sup>

THE STAGING OF THE NOVEL. Nabokov wrote the screenplay of *Lolita*, as well as nine plays in Russian, including one of his several forays into science fiction. *The Waltz Invention* (1931), which was translated and published in 1966. It is not surprising, then, that his novels should proliferate with "theatrical" effects that serve his play-spirit exceedingly well. Problems of identity can be investigated poetically by trying on and discarding a series of masks. And, too, what better way to demonstrate that everything in a book is being manipulated than by seeming to stage it? In *Invitation to a Beheading*, "A Summer thunderstorm, simply yet tastefully staged, was performed outside." When Quilty finally dies in *Lolita*, Humbert says, "This was the end of the ingenious play staged for me by Quilty"; and in *Invitation to a Beheading* (1932), "The wage manager whom Rex had in view was an elusive, double, triple, self-reflecting Proteus." Nabokov the protean impersonator is always a masked presence in his fiction: as impresario, scenarist, director, warden, dictator, landlord, and even as bit player (the seventh Hunter in Quilty's play within *Lolita*, a Young Poet who insists that everything in the play is his invention)—to name only a

<sup>1</sup>J. L. Borges, "Partial Magic in the Quixote," in *Labyrinths* (New York, 1964), p. 136. For an excellent analysis of involuted or self-reflective fiction, see Robert Alter, *Paranoid Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975).

few of the disguised own creations like ancestor (he and I) being wise made *Invitation to a Beheading's* wood and These our actors, at. into thin air"

AUTHORIAL VOICE—"an author it—which intrud strikingly at the e notable exception) begins a narrative scene of "return" it around to project ment or exhaust the characters have "e all is a fiction: and it breaks apart at characters is dim behind an impious [stage] melodrama (as in the case of

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theater, which clattered onto the floor, unslapping into a heap of cardboard, wood, and cloth—leaving me crouched, peering out at the room, my head now visible over the couch's rim, my puppeted hands, with their naked wrists, poised in mid-air. For several moments my children remained in their open-mouthed trances, still in the story, staring at the space where the theater had been, not seeing me at all. Then they did the kind of double take that a comedian might take a lifetime to perfect, and began to laugh uncontrollably, in a way I had never seen before—and not so much at my clumsiness, which was nothing new, but rather at those moments of total involvement in a nonexistent world, and at what its collapse implied to them about the authenticity of the larger world, and about their daily efforts to order it and their own fabricated illusions. They were laughing, too, over their sense of what the vigorous performance had meant to me; but they saw how easily they could be tricked and their trust belied, and the shrillness of their laughter finally suggested that they recognized the frightening implications of what had happened, and that only laughter could steel them in their new awareness.

When in 1966 I visited Vladimir Nabokov for four days in Montreux, to interview him for *Miscellanea Studia* and in regard to my critical study of his work, I told him about this incident, and how for me it defined literary involution and the response which he hoped to elicit from his readers at "the end" of a novel. "Exactly, exactly," he said as I finished. "You must put that in your book."

In parodying the reader's complete, self-indulgent identification with a character, which in its mindlessness limits consciousness, Nabokov is able to create the detachment necessary for a multiform, spatial view of his novels. The "two plots" in Nabokov's puppet show are thus made plainly visible as a description of the total design of his work, which reveals that in novel after novel his characters try to escape from Nabokov's prison of mirrors, struggling toward a self-awareness that only their creator has achieved by creating them—an involuted process which connects Nabokov's art with his life, and clearly indicates that the author himself is not in this prison. He is its creator, and is *above* it, in control of a book, as in one of those Saul Steinberg drawings (greatly admired by Nabokov) that show a man drawing the very line that gives him "life," in the fullest sense. But the process of Nabokov's involution, the global perspective which he invites us to share with him, is best described in *Speak, Memory*, Chapter Fifteen, when he comments on the disinclination of

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2. BA

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<sup>1</sup>See Nabokov's *art* 1967, 37-41.

remote today, and was definitively settled in France not long after its publication. I was Nabokov's student at Cornell in 1953-1954, at a time when most undergraduates did not know he was a writer. Drafted into the army a year later, I was sent overseas to France. On my first pass to Paris I naturally went browsing in a Left Bank bookstore. An array of Olympia Press books, daringly displayed above the counter, seemed most inviting—and there, between copies of *Unsil Sbe Screams* and *The Sexual Life of Robinson Crusoe*, I found *Lolita*. Although I thought I knew all of Nabokov's works in English (and had searched through out-of-print stores to buy each of them), this title was new to me; and its context and format were more than surprising, even if in those innocent pre-Grove Press days the semi-literate wags on fraternity row had dubbed Nabokov's Literature 111-322 lecture course "Dirty Lit" because of such readings as *Ulysses* and *Madame Bovary* (the keenest campus wits invariably dropped the *B* when mentioning the latter). I brought *Lolita* back to my base, which was situated out in the woods. Passes were hard to get and new Olympia titles were always in demand in the barracks. The appearance of a new girl in town thus caused a minor clamor. "Hey, lemme read your dirty book, man!" insisted "Stockade Clyde" Carr, who had justly earned his sobriquet, and to whose request I acceded at once. "Read it aloud, Stockade," someone called, and skipping the Foreword, Stockade Clyde began to make his remedial way through the opening paragraph. "Lo . . . lita, light . . . of my life, fire of my . . . loins. My sin, my soul . . . Lo-lee-ta: The . . . tip of the . . . tongue . . . taking . . . a trip . . ." — *Damn!* yelled Stockade, throwing the book against the wall. "*By God-damn Literature!*" Thus the Instant Pornography Test, known in psychological-testing circles as the "IPT." Although infallible, it has never to my knowledge been used in any court case.

At a double remove from the usual review media, *Lolita* went generally unnoticed during its first six months. But in the winter of 1956 Graham Greene in England recommended *Lolita* as one of the best books of 1955, incurring the immediate wrath of a columnist in the *Sunday Express*, which moved Greene to respond in *The Spectator*. Under the heading of "Albion" (suggesting a quaint tempest in an old teapot), *The New York Times Book Review* of February 26, 1956, alluded briefly to this exchange, calling *Lolita* "a long French novel" and not mentioning Nabokov by name. Two weeks later, noting "that one mention of it created a flurry of mail," *The Times* devoted two-thirds of a column to the subject, quoting Greene at some length. Thus began the underground existence of *Lolita*, which became public in the summer of 1957 when the *Audobon Review* in New York

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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 gear. 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 miscarriage. Time flies, he gets older, she blossoms out—and not a sausage. Just walks by and scowches you with a look of contempt. Eh? D'you feel here a kind of Dostoevskian tragedy? That story, you see, happened to a great friend of mine, once upon a time in fairyland when Old King Cole was a merry old soul . . ." (pp. 176-77)

Although the passage<sup>1</sup> seems to anticipate *Lolita* ("It's queer, I seem to remember my future works," says Fyodor [p. 194]), *Laughier in the Dark* (1912) is mentioned most often in this regard, since Albert Albinus sacrifices everything, including his eyesight, for a girl, and loses her to a hack artist, Axel Rex. "Yes," agrees Nabokov, "some affinities between Rex and Quilty exist, as they do between Margot and Lu. Actually, of course, Margot was a common young whore, not an unfortunate little Lolita [and, technically speaking, no nymphet at all—A.A.]. Anyway I do not think that those recurrent sexual oddities and morbilities are of much interest or importance. My *Lolita* has been compared to Emmie in *Invitation*, to Mariette in *Band Sinister*, and even Colette in *Speak, Memory*. . ." (*Wisconsin Studies* interview, see Bibliography). Nabokov is justly impatient with those who hunt for Ur-Lolitas, for a preoccupation with specific "sexual morbilities" obscures the more general context in which these oddities should be seen, and his Afterword offers an urgent corrective. The reader of this Introduction should turn to that Afterword, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," but not before placing a bookmark here, one substantial enough to remind him to return—a brightly colored piece of clothing would be suitable (the Notes to pages 305-306 are particularly recommended). Now please turn to page 306. **☛**

Having just completed the Afterword, the serious reader is familiar with Nabokov's account of *Lolita*'s origins. That "initial shiver of inspiration"

<sup>1</sup>Also pointed out by Andrew Field, in *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (Boston, 1967), p. 35, and Carl R. Proffer, *Key to Lolita* (Bloomington, 1988), p. 5.

resulted in a novella and published past the first of the two passages first time in what is

A violet-clad girl and firmly on skin she raised and lowered his bench through as long as the sequence very moment, her liveliness of her large, slightly varnished berries; her merry so that two large lower lip; the sniffling foxlike hairs running her still narrow blouse her skirt moved, the mess and glow of

She stopped in to rummage in some bread with a piece of butter, chewing rapidly than the entire world. Then, recurring a instantaneous sense recognizable as that tandy, now with done with the bare arms, flashing in light beneath the

The "enchanted" man the girl's mother has

"Is this where I when, struggling thinks, he replied holding and limp

<sup>2</sup>New York, 1986.

"There we are," said he after the old man had dragged in their mittases and left, and there remained in the room only the pounding of his heart and the distant throbbing of the night. "There, now it's time for bed."

Reeling with sleepiness, she bumped into the corner of an armchair, at which point he, simultaneously sitting down in it, took her by the hip and drew her close. She straightened, stretching up like an angel, for a split second tensed every muscle, took another half step, and softly descended onto his lap. "My sweetheart, my poor little girl," he spoke in a kind of general mist of pity, tenderness, and desire, as he observed her drowsiness, her wooziness, her diminishing smile, palpating her through the dark dress, feeling, through the thin wool, the band of the orphan's garter on her bare skin, thinking how defenseless, abandoned, warm she was, reveling in the animate weight of her legs as they slithered apart and then, with the faintest corporeal rustle, recrossed at a slightly higher level. She slowly entwined a somnolent arm, in its snug little sleeve, around his neck, engulfing him with the chestnut fragrance of her soft hair. . . . (pp. 81-82)

But the narrator fails as both enchanter and lover, and soon afterwards dies in a manner which Nabokov will transfer to Charlotte Haze. While the scene clearly foreshadows the first night at The Enchanted Hunters hotel, its straightforward action and solemn tone are quite different, and it compresses into a few paragraphs what will later occupy almost two chapters (pp. 109-133). The narrator's enjoyment of the girl's "animate weight" suggests the considerably more combustible lap scene in *Lolita* (pp. 48-61), perhaps the most erotic interlude in the novel—but it only suggests it. Aside from such echoes, little beyond the basic idea of the tale subsists in *Lolita*; and the telling is quite literally a world apart.

*The Enchanter* went unpublished not because of the forbidding subject matter, but rather, says Nabokov, because the girl possessed little "semblance of reality."<sup>1</sup> In 1949, after moving from Wellesley to Cornell, he became involved in a "new treatment of the theme, this time in English."

"One should remember that the story would have been read by a Russian émigré audience, notes Andrew Field, who quoted the same two passages in his own translation, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-30. Strongly erotic (as opposed to pornographic) themes have been used "seriously" far more frequently by Russian writers than by their English and American counterparts. Field points to Dostoevsky (the suppressed chapter of *The Possessed*), Leskov, Saltykov, Kuzmin, Rozanov, Kuprin, Uilyak, Babel, and Bunin (*ibid.*, p. 33).

Although *Lolita* Nabokov had everything, however, he did not have a professional diary to follow by Elmore's scene in which he filled in the gaps of the rest of the afternoon with an interview with Lolita by John Ray's Fox.

Especially new to Nabokov was the first person, which gave the problem of how to relate his own experience by the understanding of the world would necessarily be One wonders whether it is Nabokov's narrator. While in *Lolita* (Lushin, Poin, All Humbert who is among Nabokov's and murderous narrator properly as victim) himself the kind of *Memory when in Lolita*, he compares one of these intricate set himself certain obstacles that he su from the most unbi bings."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> And speaking sp composition of a be time, since one is a r

America, and at the age of fifty Nabokov now had to set about obtaining "such local ingredients as would allow me to inject a modicum of average 'reality' (one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes) into the brew of individual fancy. "What was most difficult," he later told an interviewer, "was putting myself . . . I am a normal man, you see."<sup>1</sup> Research was thus called for, and in scholarly fashion Nabokov followed newspaper stories involving pedophilia (incorporating some into the novel), read case studies, and, like Margaret Mead coming home to roost, even did research in the field: "I travelled in school buses to listen to the talk of schoolgirls. I went to school on the pretext of placing our daughter. We have no daughter. For Lolita, I took one arm of a little girl who used to come to see Dmitri (his son), one knee-cap of another,"<sup>2</sup> and thus a nymphet was born.

Perspicacious "research" aside, it was a remarkable imaginative feat for a European émigré to have re-created America so brilliantly, and in so doing to have become an American writer. Of course, those critics and readers who marvel at Nabokov's accomplishment may not realize that he physically knows America better than most of them. As he says in *Invitation to a Beheading*, his adventures as a "Jepist" carried him through two hundred morel routes in forty-six states, that is, along all the roads traveled by Humbert and Lolita. Yet of all of Nabokov's novels, *Lolita* is the most unlikely one for him to have written, given his background and the rarefied nature of his art and avocations. "It was hardly foreseeable," writes Anthony Burgess, "that so exquisite and scholarly an artist should become America's greatest literary glory, but now it seems wholly just and inevitable."<sup>3</sup> It was even less foreseeable that Nabokov would realize better than any contemporary the hopes expressed by Constance Rourke in *American Humor* (1931) for a literature that would achieve an instructive alliance between native materials and old world traditions, though the literal alliance in *Lolita* is perhaps more intimate than even Miss Rourke might have wished. But to have known Nabokov at all personally was first to be impressed by his intense and immense curiosity, his uninhibited and imaginative response to everything around him. To paraphrase Henry James's famous definition of the artist, Nabokov was truly a man out whose nothing

<sup>1</sup>Penelope Gillian, "Nabokov," *Vogue*, No. 1170 (December 1962), p. 126.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>Anthony Burgess, "Poet and Pretext," *The Spectator*, March 24, 1967, p. 336. Reprinted in *Urgent Copy* (New York, 1969).

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evidenced by the four-volume translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, with its two volumes of annotations and one-hundred-page "Note on Prosody"—held out for the Ed Sullivan show.

Not only was nothing lost on Nabokov, but, like the title character in Borges's story "Funes the Memorious," he seemed to remember everything. At dinner the first evening of my 1966 visit, we reminisced about Cornell and his courses there, which were extraordinary and thoroughly Nabokovian, even in the smallest ways (witness the "bonus system" employed in examinations, allowing students two extra points per effort whenever they could garnish an answer with a substantial and accurate quotation ("a gem") drawn from the text in question). Skeptically enough, I asked Nabokov if he remembered my wife, Nina, who had taken his Literature 312 course in 1955, and I mentioned that she had received a grade of 96. Indeed he did, since he had always asked to meet the students who performed well, and he described her accurately (seeing her in person in 1968, he remembered where she had sat in the lecture hall). On the night of my departure I asked Nabokov to inscribe my Olympia Press first edition of *Lolita*. With great rapidity he not only signed and dated it but added two elegant drawings of recently discovered butterflies, one identified as "*Flammea patula*" ("Pale Fire") and, below it, a considerably smaller species, labeled "Bonus bonus." Delighted but in part mystified, I inquired, "Why 'Bonus bonus'?" Winkling his brow and peering over his eyeglasses, a parody of a professor, Nabokov replied in a mock-stentorian voice, "Now your wife has me!" After four days and some twelve hours of conversation, and within an instant of my seemingly unrelated request, my prideful but passing comment had come leaping out of storage. So too was Nabokov's memory able to draw on a lifetime of reading—a lifetime in the most literal sense.<sup>1</sup>

When asked what he had read as a boy, Nabokov replied: "Between the ages of ten and fifteen in St. Petersburg, I must have read more fiction and poetry—English, Russian, and French—than in any other five-year period of my life. I relished especially the works of Wells, Poe, Browning, Keats, Flaubert, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Alexander Blok. On another level, my heroes were the Scarlet Pimpernel, Phileas Fogg, and Sherlock Holmes. In other words, I was a perfectly normal trilingual child in a family with a large library. At a later period, in Can-

<sup>1</sup> A photograph of these drawings appears in *Times*, May 21, 1969, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> For several reminiscences of Nabokov, see *Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute*, edited by Peter Quennell (New York, 1980).

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indignant force, that I have been rolling out and on ever since. True, I have lived to become that appetizing thing, a "foul professor," but at heart I have always remained a lean "visiting lecturer." The few times I said to myself anywhere: "Now that's a nice spot for a permanent home," I would immediately hear in my mind the thunder of an avalanche carrying away the hundreds of far places which I would destroy by the very act of settling in one particular nook of the earth. And finally, I don't much care for furniture, for tables and chairs and lamps and rugs and things—perhaps because in my opulent childhood I was taught to regard with amused contempt any too-earnest attachment to material wealth, which is why I felt no regret and no bitterness when the Revolution abolished that wealth" (*Playboy* interview).

Professor Morris Bishop, Nabokov's best friend at Cornell, who was responsible for his shift from Wellesley to Ithaca, recalled visiting the Nabokovs just after they had moved into the appallingly vulgar and garish home of an absent professor of Agriculture. "I couldn't have lived in a place like that," said Bishop, "but it delighted him. He seemed to relish every awful detail." Although Bishop didn't realize it then, Nabokov was learning about Charlotte Iaze by renting her house, so to speak, by reading her books and living with her pictures and "wooden thingamabobs" of commercial Mexican origin.<sup>4</sup> These annual moves, however dismal their circumstances, constituted a field trip enabling entomologist Nabokov to study the natural habitat of Humbert's prey. Bishop also remembered that Nabokov read the *New York Daily News* for its crime stories,<sup>5</sup> and, for an even more concentrated dose of bizarerie, Father Divine's newspaper, *New Day*—all of which should recall James Joyce, with whom Nabokov has so much else in common. Joyce regularly read *The Police Gazette*, the shabby magazine *Titbit* (as does Blum), and all the Dublin newspapers; attended burlesque shows, knew by heart most of the vulgar and cannically obscene songs of the day, and was almost as familiar with the work of the execrable lady lending-library novelists of the *fin de siècle* as he was with the classics, and when he was living in Trieste and Paris and writing *Elyzer*, relied on his Aunt Josephine to keep him supplied with the necessary non-literary materials. Of course, Joyce's art depends far more than Nabokov's on the vast residue of erudition and trivia which Joyce's insatiable and equally encyclopedic mind was able to store.

Nabokov is very selective, whereas Joyce collected almost at random

<sup>4</sup>In *Pale Fire*, Charles Kinbote spies John Slade seated in his car, "reading a tabloid newspaper which I had thought no poet would deign to touch" (p. 22).

and then ordered Nabokov does not a conscious choice suggest.<sup>6</sup> In singling the century, Nabokov less-than-brilliant references." Yet Nabokov's "Joycean" profusion from books or drama their efforts in this (Borges) among the capital out of their stuff one associates such as Burton's *A* those unclassifiable *Gargantua and Pantagruel* kinds of learning, selected out of verbiage the catalogue, the periodicals for the pleasure contribute to the lucidly a sense of wit. A hostile review of *Commentary's* about Russia some 150,000 ports to telescope look Russia and is an extension of significant recalls how early at Cornell Library, that Nabokov had purchased

"The course in question," MWF, 12 (from Dickens's *Black House*); second term: Turgenev's *The Fathers and Children*, in that order 1933-1934 and can be seen in New York, 1960.)



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