

## Rethinking *Lolita*

Lowell,

I enjoyed it a lot, though I had remembered not enjoying it – in fact, never finishing it – as a young man. As an overly-serious young fellow I was bored by the hyper-sophisticated urbane tone, the self-deluding and often ridiculous intellectual snobbism of Humbert, and so on. It is still ridiculous, of course, but I got more pleasure out of seeing how Nabokov pulled all this together. I think it is an intellectual's - or perhaps more accurately, an intellectual snob's - delight, because there is much more fascination in the making than in what was made; in the intricacies of novelistic illusion and deceit than in the characters and their shoddy plight.

This time, what hit me most strongly was a kind of disbelief that persisted throughout most of the book, that anyone could create so many of those rather extraordinary, and extraordinarily delicate, English sentences, phrases, and word-images.

From the start, his foreward/apologia is a tongue-in-cheek thing, mocking both the reader and society at large by feigning embarrassment, floating the idea that the book is actually a warning of “dangerous trends and potent evils.” The book censors of the time must have wondered what to make of that! Especially because the foreward – and the book itself – is laden with specious psychobabble: I suppose it was Nabokov's way of sending that up, too. And it is interesting how he frames the story. He attempts to exempt it from serious criticism by so many clever devices and literary ruses: unreliable narrator; crazy narrator; uncertainty whether scenes or characters are real, or imagined (whether by the narrator, or by characters imagining a story about a man imagining a story, etc. etc.)

He gets a lot of mileage from the tensions he sets up between the outward claims and inner realities of his characters. Humbert starts off by telling us about the “fire” in his loins, or again later, his “hell furnace of localized lust.” But he doesn't strike us at all as a passionate man, in the sense of one whose whole being is transported by real passion. It is just his loins, as he rightly puts it. And he is tormented by it, and not truly transported. And so his is a dud passion, I mean – a masturbatory one. Throughout, he uses *Lolita* as a masturbatory implement. This is the deepest sadness and gives a sense of pervasive spiritual emptiness throughout the book. Of a profound lowness of character. What he loves is his own sensuality, not really Lo's at all. And certainly not *theirs*.

The only exception, and the only scene in the whole book that was truly erotic - and greatly so - was the “unsuccessful first tryst” with Annabel. Unbelievable evocations there. Perhaps one of the greatest sexual titillation scenes in all of English literature – at least of the modern sort. I mean, it was not really great in the sense that the deepest sexual passion, or sexual love is evoked. They are just kids. Each remains ever in his or her own world. A concatenation of hot and wilfull glands. But they think it is the deepest thing possible because it is so disembodily aethereal. And I think Nabokov captures

that sensual disembodiment so well - a sense those of us who have experienced it never really recapture after those first transformative moments in which our senses seem to be taking charge in the most electric way and our understanding gives up trying to follow ... actually, is wandering quite dizzily, about ten miles back! In that sense it is a very great piece of writing. As great – close at least, to the similar sensual evocations in Proust (especially the Overture to *Swann's Way*, which is as sensual, but much more rapturous). And I think that sensual scene plays a strange role in the book, for there is nothing even close after that. Everything is downhill. In fact, there is a growing gap between Humbert's increasingly strong protestations of desire, and the emptiness and mechanicalness of his "sexual" (or rather, as I say, really only his sensual) performance. Lolita crying in bed every night after he has used her gives a feeling of the wretchedness of what he has been doing, and insight into his uncaring and shabby person (viz: "I would lead my reluctant pet to our small home for a quick connection before dinner"). Sounds like he was plugging in the refrigerator.

That English was not Nabokov's first language, is hard to believe. Though one gets a bit put off by the latinate language structures (trains of abstract polysyllabic latin-root words, rather than solid anglo-saxon ones) that give a feeling of over-adornment to a lot of the book; to wit: "... because that frenzy of mutual possession might have been assuaged only by our actually imbibing and assimilating every particle ..." etc., (when he meant that only fornication would put out his fire). Strikes me that the latinate language is a distancing device that prevents the reader from feeling what he is actually doing and thus helps him keep our instinctive disgust at bay. And, strangely, he gets away with so many alliterative strings; viz: "...she managed to deceiVe the Vicious Vigilance of her family . In a nerVous and slender-leaVed mimosa groVe at the back of their Villa ..." etc. By the way, the other truly astonishing bit of writing (I think these are the two great stylistic set-pieces in the book) in addition to the Annabel scene, is the "tennis-stroke" scene, in Part 20. Though once again, it is a disembodied video stop-motion scene done with consummate skill.

But in this, too, Nabokov gets away with it because, we sense, Humbert's style is really his own. A question arises of course: with a narrator/character who can write so transcendently well, why is he not, in his own story, transcendent, so to speak, or above it all? I felt throughout the book a weird sense of disparity between the kooky and banal perversities of the narrator and the elevated language sensibility in which those things are described. The two didn't go together. I think Nabokov realizes this danger and tries to compensate for it with Humbert's intellectual snobbery and farce.

As a story – I think this is why I gave up at a younger age – it seems all farce (viz: the ridiculous seriousness of the anthropology experiment studying people who crawl on all fours, etc.), there is rather an overload of thin intellectual detritus intended to make Humbert seem interesting. But it doesn't work well, for me at least. Humbert often refers to himself as an out-of body, third person character in the story he is telling about himself. So I get this pervasive sense of anaesthesia. Lots of visuals, again, like watching a video with no sound track, and we are lectured quite endlessly on the meaning of things and relationships, but these meanings do not seem to spring from the characters themselves, from their actions or words – unless in the farcical mode (the murder of

Quilty, for example. We are curious, but don't really care if he murders Quilty or not. It is a mechanical thing for which we are un-aroused. Actually, it is funny). So if Nabokov's purpose was to trap the reader inside the mind of a sexual psychopath and show how weirdly anaesthetic he is, that device succeeded. But if he wanted our sympathy for this person, it did not. For I think the device uprooted itself. It distances us from the world Humbert lives in, but also from Humbert as a narrator, so that it is difficult to keep on caring about whatever is going to happen to him. Also, it became clear in the going, that anything might happen because the author is playing with precisely that. I mean, with the fact that any action could arise because none was essential to anything that had been built up so far. Lots of *deus ex machina*. The confusion over who is following whom, etc. adds to the sense of disorientation we are meant to feel, but again I had to push myself to want to bother to sort out the psychological games and mirrors. Perhaps that is why I said at our wonderful dinner here that I think Nabokov was an extraordinary writer, but not a great novelist. I found myself wishing he had chosen a more profoundly meaningful subject and some serious instead of farcical characters. What he did reminds me of those violinists we sometimes make the mistake of admiring who are technical virtuosos, but whose music leaves us very cold. Aficionados don't go to be moved by the music, they go to be impressed by the virtuosity. Music gets derailed this way, and I think novels do, too. Joyce's *Ulysses* falls in this category for the same reasons.

Which brings me to our terrific dinner debate (which son Franklin still recalls with pleasure!).

And the question: is it possible to write a great novel about a terrible act? I am more convinced now than I was then, that it is not. For I think there is something in our nature that repudiates the artistic embellishment of evil. You argued (I think you did, but there was a lot of wine going down!) that the two things, style and substance, are separate. But I reject that. And so did you, when I asked you if it would be acceptable to write an incredibly beautiful novel about the pleasure someone takes in torturing Jews.

Lolita was 11 and a half when they started out. And his excusing-device that it was actually she who seduced ugly, seedy old Humbert, is simply not plausible, though he tries to make it so. I remember the old chestnut about how a good novelist will try to make the improbable possible, and not the impossible probable. In the various movies made of this novel, they coped with this problem by making Lolita a sexy 14 year old. They had to lie to pull it off. So did Nabokov.

At any rate, it is obviously possible to write beautifully about things inherently evil (pathetic seduction of small children, kidnapping, murder, torture). Nabokov is the master of that.

But is it possible to write a *great* novel about these things? I think not. I think a morally repugnant subject matter tends to repel whatever aesthetic form is used to embody and excuse it. Like oil and vinegar.

Anyway, this has been fun. I haven't thought about novels for a very long time. Perhaps it shows!

Some thoughts, to a close friend, on Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*  
2000

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