

VLADIMIR NABOKOV

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MARTIN AMIS ON *LOLITA*

*L*ike the sweat of lust and guilt, the sweat of death trickles through *Lolita*. I wonder how many readers survive the novel without realizing that its heroine is, so to speak, dead on arrival, like her child. Their brief obituaries are tucked away in the 'editor's' Foreword, in nonchalant, school-newsletter form:

'Mona Dahl' is a student in Paris. 'Rita' has recently married the proprietor of a hotel in Florida. Mrs. 'Richard F. Schiller' died in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl, on Christmas Day 1952, in Gray Star, a settlement in the remotest Northwest. 'Vivian Dark-bloom' has written a biography ...

Then, once the book begins, Humbert's childhood love Annabel dies, at thirteen (typhus), and his first wife Valeria dies (also in childbirth), and his second wife Charlotte dies ('a bad accident'--though of course this death is structural), and Charlotte's friend Jean Farlow dies at thirty-three (cancer), and Lolita's young seducer Charlie Holmes dies (Korea), and her old seducer Quilty dies (murder: another structural exit). And then Humbert dies (coronary thrombosis). And then Lolita dies. And her daughter dies. In a sense *Lolita* is too great for its own good. It rushes up on the reader like a recreational drug more powerful than any yet discovered or devised. In common with its narrator, it is both irresistible and unforgivable. And yet it all works out. I shall point the way to what I take to be its livid and juddering heart--which is itself in prethrombotic turmoil, all heaves and lifts and thrills.

Without apeing the explicatory style of Nabokov's famous Lectures (without producing height-charts, road maps, motel bookmatches, and so on), it might still be as well to establish what actually happens in *Lolita*: morally. How bad is all this--on paper, anyway? Although he distances himself with customary hauteur from the world of 'coal sheds and alleyways', of panting maniacs and howling policemen, Humbert Humbert is



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without question an honest-to-God, open-and-shut sexual deviant, displaying classic ruthlessness, guile and (above all) attention to detail. He parks the car at the gates of schoolyards, for instance, and obliges Lo to fondle him as the children emerge. Sixty-five cents secures a similar caress in her classroom, while Humbert admires a platinum classmate. Fellatio prices peak at four dollars a session before Humbert brings rates down 'drastically by having her earn the hard and nauseous way permission to participate in the school's theatrical programme'. On the other hand he performs complementary cunnilingus when his stepdaughter is laid low by fever: 'I could not resist the exquisite calorificity of unexpected delights--Venus febriculosa--though it was a very languid Lolita that moaned and coughed and shivered in my embrace.'

Humbert was evidently something of a bourgeois sadist with his first wife, Valeria. He fantasized about 'slapping her breasts out of alignment' or 'putting on [his] mountain boots and taking a running kick at her rump' but in reality confined himself to 'twisting fat Valechka's brittle wrist (the one she had fallen upon from a bicycle)' and saying, 'Look here, you fat fool, *c'est moi qui décide*.' The weakened wrist is good: sadists know all about weakspots. Humbert strikes Lolita only once ('a tremendous backhand cut'), during a jealous rage, otherwise making do with bribes, bullying, and three main threats--the rural fastness, the orphanage, the reformatory:

In plainer words, if we two are found out, you will be analysed and institutionalized, my pet, *c'est tout*. You will dwell, my Lolita will dwell (come here, my brown flower) with thirty-nine other dopes in a dirty dormitory (no, allow me, please) under the supervision of hideous matrons. This is the situation, this is the choice. Don't you think that under the circumstances Dolores Haze had better stick to her old man?

It is true that Humbert goes on to commit murder: he kills his rival, Clare Quilty. And despite its awful comedy, and despite Quilty's worthlessness both as playwright and citizen, the deed is not denied its primal colorations. Quilty is Humbert's 'brother', after all, his

secret sharer. Don't they have the same taste in wordplay and women? Don't they have the same voice? 'Drop that pistol,' he tells Humbert: '*Soyons raisonnables*. You will only wound me hideously and then rot in jail while I recuperate in a tropical setting.' Quilty is a heartless japer and voyeur, one of the pornographers of real life. Most readers, I think, would assent to the justice of Humbert's last-page verdict: 'For reasons that may appear more obvious than they really are, I am opposed to capital punishment... Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges.' Quilty's death is not tragic. Nor is Humbert's fate. Nor is *Lolita*. But *Lolita* is tragic, in her compacted span. If tragedy explores thwarted energy and possibility, then *Lolita* is tragic--is flatly tragic. And the mystery remains. How did Nabokov accommodate her story to this three-hundred-page blue streak--to something so embarrassingly funny, so unstopably inspired, so impossibly racy?

Literature, as has been pointed out, is not life; it is certainly not public life; there is no 'character issue'. It may be a nice bonus to know that Nabokov was a kind man. The biographical paraphernalia tells us as much. Actually, everything he wrote tells us as much. *Lolita* tells us as much. But this is not a straightforward matter. *Lolita* is a cruel book about cruelty. It is kind in the sense that your enemy's enemy is your friend, no matter how daunting his aspect. As a critic, Nabokov was more than averagely sensitive to literary cruelty. Those of us who toil through Cervantes, I suspect, after an initial jolt, chortlingly habituate ourselves to the 'infinite drubbings' meted out and sustained by the gaunt hidalgo. In his *Lectures on Don Quixote*, however, Nabokov can barely bring himself to contemplate the automatic 'thumbscrew' enormities of this 'cruel and crude old book':

The author seems to plan it thus: Come with me, ungentle reader, who enjoys seeing a live dog inflated and kicked around like a soccer football; reader, who likes, of a Sunday morning, on his way to or from church, to poke his stick or direct his spittle at a poor rogue in

the stocks; come... I hope you will be amused at what I have to offer.

Nevertheless, Nabokov is the laureate of cruelty. Cruelty hardly exists elsewhere; all the Lovelaces and Osmonds turn out, on not very much closer inspection, to be mere hooligans and tyrants when compared to Humbert Humbert, to Hermann Hermann (his significant precursor) in *Despair*, to Rex and Margot in *Laughter in the Dark*, to Martha in *King, Queen, Knave*. Nabokov understood cruelty; he was wise to it; he knew its special intonations--as in this expert cadence from *Laughter in the Dark*, where, after the nicely poised 'skilfully', the rest of the sentence collapses into the cruel everyday:

'You may kiss me,' she sobbed, 'but not that way, please.' The youth shrugged his shoulders ... She returned home on foot. Otto, who had seen her go off, thumped his fist down on her neck and then kicked her skilfully, so that she fell and bruised herself against the sewing-machine.

Now Humbert is of course very cruel to Lolita, not just in the ruthless *sine qua non* of her subjugation, nor yet in his sighing intention of 'somehow' getting rid of her when her brief optimum has elapsed, nor yet in his fastidious observation of signs of wear in his 'frigid' and 'ageing mistress'. Humbert is surpassingly cruel in using Lolita for the play of his wit and the play of his prose--his prose, which sometimes resembles the 'sweat-drenched finery' that 'a brute of forty' may casually and legally shed (in both hemispheres, as a scandalized Humbert notes) before thrusting 'himself up to the hilt into his youthful bride'. Morally the novel is all ricochet or rebound. However cruel Humbert is to Lolita, Nabokov is crueller to Humbert--finessingly cruel. We all share the narrator's smirk when he begins the sexual-bribes chapter with the following sentence: 'I am now faced with the distasteful task of recording a definite drop in Lolita's morals.' But when the smirk congeals we are left staring at the moral heap that Humbert has become, underneath his arched eyebrow. Irresistible and unforgivable. It is complicated, and unreassuring. Even so, this is how it works.

Lolita herself is such an anthology piece by now that even non-readers of the novel can close their eyes and see her on the tennis court or in the swimming pool or curled up in the car seat or the motel twin bed with her 'ridiculous' comics. We tend to forget that this blinding creation remains just that: a creation, and a creation of Humbert Humbert's. We have only Humbert's word for her. And whatever it is that is wrong with Humbert, not even his short-lived mother--'(picnic, lightning)'--would claim that her son was playing with a full deck. (Actually his personal pack may comprise the full fifty-two, but it is crammed with jokers and wild cards, pipless deuces, three-eyed queens.) A reliable narrator in the strict sense, Humbert is not otherwise reliable; and let us remember that Nabokov was capable of writing entire fictions--*Despair*, *The Eye*, *Pale Fire*--in which the narrators have no idea what is going on *at all*. *Lolita*, I believe, has been partly isolated and distorted by its celebrity. 'The greatest novel of rapture in modern fiction,' states the cover of the first Penguin, which also informs us, on the back, that Humbert is English.

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