

The Artist *Manqué*: Nabokovian Techniques in *Money*

by Matthew Dessem (©1997)

While others have had many stylistic imitators, Vladimir Nabokov's writing has arguably done more to transform narrative strategy than anyone's since Joyce. It isn't surprising, then, that Nabokovian techniques show up in much post-*Lolita* fiction. First and foremost among contemporary authors using similar narrative structures is British novelist Martin Amis. Over the course of Amis's career, both his thematic concerns and narrative techniques (even, at times, his syntax) have shown affinities with Nabokov's work. Of course, Amis isn't merely duplicating literary feats already accomplished by Nabokov or reading only Nabokov; the poetry of Philip Larkin (his brother's godfather) provided much of the nihilism found in Amis's early novels, and *Night Train*, his latest, draws heavily on the "hard-boiled" stylings of Hammett and Chandler. Nevertheless, particularly in the informal trilogy of *Money*, *London Fields*, and *The Information*, Nabokovian techniques are omnipresent. Of these three, *Money* is perhaps the most obviously Nabokovian. In the paragraphs that follow I will compare this novel to Nabokov's *Lolita*, examining the ways in which Amis draws from Nabokov's techniques and thematic concerns, and how Amis transforms these techniques in his own work.

Before directly comparing *Money* with *Lolita*, however, it is important to consider Amis's understanding of *Lolita*. Amis's reading of the novel in his "*Lolita Reconsidered*" is unconventional in many regards; he has surprisingly little to say, for example, about Nabokov's treatment of love in a book *Vanity Fair* dubbed "the only convincing love story of our century."¹ The essay was originally written as part of a series of reconsiderations of classic novels that Amis wrote for *The Atlantic*, however, and was at least partly a response to Amis's father's dismissal of the novel (see Self). It seems reasonable, therefore, to suppose that Amis accepts much of the conventional reading and chooses to focus on the places where his understanding of the novel diverges from mainstream criticism.

Here, then, are Amis's points of departure. Most importantly, Amis disagrees vehemently with the school of thought recently articulated by Roger Angell that feels that Nabokov "forestall[s] . . . our outrage at his nasty hero" (158). Lionel Trilling's early review of *Lolita* is perhaps the best example of this reading of the novel, which holds, more or less, that Humbert Humbert's transformation of his love for Lolita into art mitigates his moral status; that "Humbert is perfectly willing to say that he is a monster; we find ourselves less and less eager to agree with him" (in Angell 158). In Angell's reading of the novel, we are forced into an ambiguous moral relationship with Humbert because he succeeds in convincing us that he truly loves Lolita. Angell states that "this is a love story, after all—an unexpected grand romance," and feels that readers "can forgive [Humbert], perhaps even tearfully," by the end of the novel because they see his pursuit of Lolita as deluded and tragic (159).

Amis, in contrast, has very little interest in forgiving Humbert anything. He remains unconvinced that Humbert has any feelings for Lolita (though he notes that "the love shared by Humbert and Humbert. . . is unquestionably the real thing" (Amis, "*Lolita* Reconsidered" 111). Humbert begins and ends the novel as a monster. For Amis, *Lolita* is ultimately a moral tale (though not one with a "moral," John Ray aside); the end of the novel impresses Amis *not* because of the moving qualities of Humbert on the mountaintop or his last conversation with Lolita (Angell devotes the last section of his piece to accounting the emotional effect of this scene (159)), but because of the "finality and justice" of Humbert's suffering (Amis, "*Lolita*" 115). Furthermore, it's crucial to Amis that the morality at the novel's end is not a surprise or a contrivance (he compares it in this light to the psychiatrist who appears at the end of *Psycho*), but a force that runs throughout the book. Amis points to scenes such as Humbert's attempt to secure a nymphet in Paris and receiving "a monstrously plump, sallow, repulsively plain girl of at least fifteen. . . nursing a bald doll," (Nabokov 24) as examples of the "travesties of familial feeling" that permeate the novel and prepare the reader for Humbert's capture and demise after his travesty of fatherhood leaves Lolita dead in Gray Star (Amis, "*Lolita*" 115).

Of course, Amis isn't the first to champion *Lolita* on moral grounds; Brian Boyd is equally unconvinced by Humbert's case for the defense. In fact, Boyd sees the novel as a sort of warning about the ways eloquent minds can rationalize their crimes; he specifically points to Trilling as an example of a reader who has fallen into Nabokov's trap by allowing Humbert's command of language to sway him (232).

Amis doesn't completely parrot Boyd here, though, and this is where Amis's reading becomes interesting. Trilling, Angell, and Boyd agree that Humbert, by telling his story, transforms his life into art; while Trilling and Angell are swayed by this feat and Boyd is not, not even Boyd sees the "yearning for something more than life" that compels Humbert to write *Lolita* as anything but a triumph of the human imagination. Though Boyd recognizes that Nabokov deliberately allows readers to feel that Humbert may have found a way to transcend mundane existence in order to confront them with their complicity, he never questions Humbert's motives for or method of seeking immortality (Boyd 228). For Amis, on the other hand, Humbert's attempt to transform his life into art is his worst perversion. Amis describes Humbert as "the artist *manqué*," a type who, "because they cannot make art out of life, make their lives into art" ("*Lolita*" 117). This reading moves a step beyond Boyd's; it isn't just that Humbert's defense is unacceptable. Humbert is being punished not for the facts of the case or for his failure to convince, but above all because writing *Lolita*, an artistic account of *his* life (as opposed to "life"), represents an inversion of art's very purpose. In artistic representations, there is no culpability; it would be absurd to claim that Nabokov committed acts of pedophilia by describing them. Humbert, according to Amis, is taking refuge in art, but since what he's describing *actually happened* (at least from his position), his transformation of his life (and Lolita's, and Quilty's, and Charlotte's) into art is unforgivable ("*Lolita*" 118). By writing *Lolita*, Humbert is not just defending himself; he is creating the situation he's always dreamed of ("Darling, it's only a game!"): a place where he cannot be held responsible for his actions. For Amis, this inversion (which appears throughout

Nabokov's work—think of *Kinbote* or even *Shade*) is far from the praiseworthy act of transcendence most criticism portrays it as; it's a perversion of the worst kind.

With Amis's unique reading of *Lolita* in mind, we can turn with new insight to the Nabokovian devices and concerns present in *Money*. And present they are; *Money* is very similar to *Lolita* both structurally and thematically. If John Self, Amis's narrator, isn't as refined or calculating a villain as Humbert Humbert, he makes up for it through excess. Self is a connoisseur of excess, a man who orders four pots of black coffee on a day he's trying to take it easy on himself,² a man who's *always* smoking another cigarette (Amis 13), a drunk, a genius of pornography, fast food, and money: an aggregate of the worst the twentieth century has to offer. Rather than one perversion which he is desperate to justify, Self has them all (excepting nymphet-love); he is Humbert Humbert minus both culture and restraint.

Amis grants him a first-person narrative voice, and it functions in much the same way as Humbert's first-person narration. Angell, in one of his better moments, expresses very well the way this works for Nabokov: letting Humbert speak for himself (and eloquently) "set[s] loose an ironic playfulness that deepens and disarms horror" (Angell 157) This is equally accurate in *Money*; Self's cheerful (and witty) recognition of the harm his depravities do himself and others (though, to be fair, he is mostly interested in the harm he does himself) makes it very difficult for readers to judge him. Amis has also learned from Humbert's wildly vacillating style; Self goes from a prose style that's cruelly, unforgivably blasé (one chapter begins: "There has recently been a wavelet of fag murders in my neighborhood. . . It is whore-murdering time too," (Amis 219)) to passages fancy and moving enough to make any murderer proud (as when the grayness of the London sky makes him speculate that "at such moments, the sky is no more than the sum of the dirt that lives in our human eyes." (Amis 73)). Self never allows the reader to become comfortable; he accomplishes this (as does Humbert) by rapidly shifts in style. Consider the scene in which he attempts to rape his girlfriend, Selina Street: we are given an account of the first attempt in a very straightforward, matter-of-fact manner; Self acts more as a sports commentator than a rapist, criticizing his effort and expounding "the proper way to rape girls." After he fails, the language becomes more eloquent as Self apologizes to Selina (and to the reader), until she forgives him and, repentant, Self "lay there with the breathing bundle in my arms, and sadly listened to the subsidence of her sighs." It's a gorgeous sentence, and the reader is lulled to sleep by the alliterative rhythm and Self's moral repentance. There's a blank line, and then we get the following single-sentence paragraph: "Then I tried to rape her again." By following this unforgivable, unforgettable sentence with a long paragraph of sports-commentary, Self rattles the reader as thoroughly as Humbert at his best; we are left with no firm ground to stand on (Amis 236-237).

The difference between Humbert and Self's narrative voice is structural rather than effectual. Humbert, as a cultured European, accomplishes his stylistic changes through a whirlwind of literary pastiches ("a furry warmth, golden midges" (Nabokov 10)) because his language is informed by the written word (and he's producing a written narrative). Self doesn't read; *Money* is in the *skaz* tradition because it has to be. It's no mistake that

most of Self's stylistic imitations are the voices of television. Despite this difference, however, the stylistic shifts are employed to exactly the same effect. It's reasonable to suppose that Amis expects us to be as distrustful of Self's Self-aggrandizing narrative as he is of Humbert's; although Self's verbal acuity is irresistible, the facts of his life remain unforgivable.

Structurally, *Money* also resembles *Lolita* in many ways. *Lolita* opens with John Ray announcing Humbert's death; it's also the only time we are told that Humbert's section of the novel had a subtitle: *The Confession of a White Widowed Male* (Nabokov 3). On a first reading, our knowledge that Humbert is dead makes it somewhat easier to feel sympathy for him (even if this is a trap Nabokov has devised). *Money*, of course, also has a subtitle: *A Suicide Note*, and we are told in its introduction that "This is a suicide note. By the time you lay it aside (and you should always read these things slowly, on the lookout for clues or giveaways), John Self will no longer exist. Or at any rate that's the idea" (Amis 6). Suicide notes are perhaps the ultimate form of confession, and the introduction in both cases sets up the tone of what is to follow. The admonition to look for clues is straight Nabokov; the most important clue in *Lolita* is John Ray's account of the death of "Mrs. 'Richard F. Schiller'" (Nabokov 4). For Amis, remember, the important clues in *Lolita* are not the ones which point toward Quilty, since these have been planted by Humbert for his own ends, but rather those which give shade and meaning to Lolita's death, the "travesties of familial feeling" (Angell 116). This is, to say the least, a problematic stance; since Humbert has no knowledge of Lolita's death (except his condition that the novel not be published until she is gone), he cannot be responsible for scenes which foreshadow the conditions of her demise. Though Humbert believes Quilty to be the mastermind behind his plight (and this is the reading often suggested; Boyd spends pages on the scene in which Quilty's identity is revealed, emphasizing the ways in which Quilty's control over Humbert is portrayed, and in *The Annotated Lolita*, Alfred Appel painstakingly lists his every appearance),³ Amis knows better. The only possible suspect is Vladimir Nabokov, and to be interested in "what forms and colorations Nabokov gives this stark silhouette [Lolita's death, italics mine]" (Angell 115) is to be interested in the relationship between Humbert and his creator.

Amis's interest in Nabokov (or at least Vivian Darkbloom) as ultimately responsible for Humbert's situation sheds much light on *Money*. Nabokov's ghostly, anagrammatized presence in the novel as a character, and his equally ghostly appearances as author of the text (in the passages Amis points to, which have resonances that cannot be attributed to anyone inside the action of the novel), are made explicit by Amis in *Money*. Martin Amis appears in the novel as a character named, not surprisingly, Martin Amis (apparently it doesn't have an elegant anagram). Self, like Humbert, feels that he is being controlled by someone. At the novel's opening, he announces that "Recently my life feels like a bloodcurdling joke. Recently my life has taken on *form*" (Amis 9). His real insight here is that his life is taking on an artistic aspect; it's a clue that he doesn't follow up on. Fielding Goodney's scheme to trap Self, which on first reading seems the focus of the novel, is as much of a false lead as Quilty's seduction of Lolita. Amis unfolds this plan in a manner that consciously echoes *Lolita*: we are given clue after clue that points to Goodney before his name is revealed; Amis is as reluctant as Nabokov to reveal his

identity; we are told that the clues were there all along and encouraged to look for them. Self, at least at first, feels that Goodney is indeed the presence responsible for the joke his life has become, just as Humbert blames Quilty. And then something fantastic happens. Martin Amis and John Self are playing (fittingly) chess, after Self's financial dissolution (which might as well be death), and immediately before Self's suicide attempt (which, if it had been successful, would have given Amis the form he has attempted to impose on Self's life, validating the subtitle) when Self sees the larger structure. Amis has been gloatingly describing the details of Fielding's plot (a good joke—Amis as detective discovering the clues he's left himself), and Self suddenly realizes Amis's role as author. "I'm the joke. I'm it! It was you. It was you," he tells Amis; he's realized his status as character (Amis 353). It's an extraordinary moment, and his reaction to this realization (he takes a swing at Amis) is surely every post-Shelly artist's worst fear. When Self's suicide attempt fails, he manages to foil Amis's imposed form and narrates the last section of the novel from a position outside the novel as a piece of art, with the imposed symmetry that entails. Amis shows up again briefly, only to be told by Self to "fuck off out of it" (Amis 364). Amis's status as artist has been vehemently rejected by his creation.

Which brings us to the artist *manqué*. At first reading, John Self seems to be the emblem of this type, and he's certainly an example. The film he's attempting to make is certainly a wrongheaded attempt to transform life into art; Self wants to make it to immortalize his version of his early life, just as Humbert immortalizes his version of Lolita. It also seems that *Money*, which is mostly Self's monologue, can be seen as an attempt to transform life into art. But what's crucial here is that Self is not imposing artistic order on his life, Martin Amis (the character) is. Amis in this novel is the truest example of artist *manqué*, and it is he who is responsible for Self's condition (as well as his very existence). If *Money* ended with Self's suicide attempt, an artificial order would have been imposed on his last days; his death at the end would, for Amis (the author), be as false as Humbert's planned execution of Quilty. Quilty foils Humbert, though, and Self foils Amis.

It is impossible to underestimate how important the idea of artist *manqué* is to Amis's work; even his first novel ends with its protagonist's first attempt to turn his life into art, and he hasn't written a single novel that doesn't explore this idea. It's brought to the front above all in *Money*, *London Fields* (whose narrator is writing down events exactly as they occur), and *The Information* (in the figure of Richard Tull, whose art protects him from unmediated experience). Not coincidentally, these are his most Nabokovian works in structural terms. Amis's understanding of Nabokov's work is crucial to these three novels, but particularly to *Money*. Much of the criticism of the novel has focused on Self's monologue (much as criticism of *Lolita* misses the trap Nabokov has set up through Humbert's eloquence), dismissing Amis's presence in the novel as a postmodern trick. Amis's reading of *Lolita* suggests that more attention should be paid to Amis as a character in *Money*, given his interest in Nabokov's presence in *Lolita*. John Self has little or no interest in Fielding Goodney's motives, but he's very interested in Martin Amis's reasons for creating and entrapping him. The uneasy relationship between creator and created in *Money* makes sense in light of the specific forms Amis's interest in Nabokov takes; it's a logical extension of some of the ideas Amis sees working in the background

of *Lolita*. It is this relationship that I take to be *Money*'s main concern; it is this relationship that informs all of Amis's work.

Notes

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), cover. All further references to this text will be cited parenthetically.

² Martin Amis, *Money: A Suicide Note* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), p. 17. All further references to this text will be cited parenthetically.

³ See Boyd, p. 243-250

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