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Couturier Maurice

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Censorship and the Authorial Figure in *Ulysses* and *Lolita*

Maurice Couturier

University of Nice-Sophia Antipolis

In his essay “What is an author?” published in 1969,¹ Foucault examined the relationship between the text and its author and the “manner in which the text points to this ‘figure’ that, at least in appearance, is outside it and antecedes it.”² Yet he still subscribed to some of the major structuralist dogmas at the time, acknowledging that “writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression,” and that the “mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence,”³ if only because writing is intimately linked with death which it purports to foil. Being more interested in the reception than in the production of the text, he articulated his theory around the concept of the “author-function,” which he considered as the “principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning,”⁴ claiming that “literary anonymity is not tolerable,”⁵ and that each reader needs to “refigure” the text as a discourse to defeat the endless proliferation of meaning.

Barthes, who, a year before, in “The Death of the Author,” had proclaimed that “the birth of the reader has a price: the death of the author,”⁶ came to adopt a theory which was close to that of Foucault in *Le Plaisir du texte*, published in 1973: he admitted that, as a reader, he desired the author, not so much the existential person as his figure in the text:

The text is a fetish, and that fetish desires me [...]. As an institution, the author is dead [...] but in the text, somehow, *I desire* the author: I need his figure (which is neither a representation, nor a projection), as it needs mine (if I don't want to babble).⁷

He had no intention of going back to Sainte-Beuve, of course, but he confessed that he needed an interlocutor fashioned by him in the act of reading.

Reading does not mean appropriating the text or projecting one's symptom upon it; it is a sophisticated type of exchange between two subjects separated in time and space. Literature, like any other art, is a form of communication, not so much in terms of binary data as of intersubjective relation. The authorial figure, which is reconstructed by the reader as the chief enunciative source of the text, is inextricably linked to censorship. It is because the author seeks to promote his ideal ego to the rank of the super ego in the eyes of the reader and absconds as completely as he can from his text while giving the illusion that the ambiguous desires of his protagonists have nothing in common with his own, that the authorial figure arises in the reader's imagination.

The censorship enforced by the book industry, by the police or by the courts strongly encourages the author to abscond as a liable subject and to conceal himself under the mask of his textual figure. That was indeed what Foucault suggested when he said that “Texts, books and discourses really began to have authors (other than mythical ‘sacralized’ and ‘sacralizing’ figures) to the extent that authors became subject to punishment that is, to the extent that discourses could be transgressive.”⁸ The novelist wants to give free rein to his desires but

¹ “Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?” *Bulletin de la société française de philosophie*, LXIII (1969), 3, 73-104. It was published in English in *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979). The references to the essay are keyed to the 1979 English version.

² *Ibid.*, p. 141.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 142 and 143.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁶ *Le Bruissement du langage* (Paris: Seuil, Collection Points, 1984), p. 69.

⁷ *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), pp. 45-6.

⁸ *Textual Strategies*, p. 148.

explains at the same time that he should not be blamed for the sins committed by his narrators and protagonists. There is a great deal of bad faith involved here, not only on the part of the author but also of the institutions, the critics and the readers themselves: the novel is a powerful machine which inextricably binds the fate of all those who play with it or try to suppress it, as I am now going to show briefly by analyzing two cases, that of *Ulysses* and that of *Lolita*.

1 - Ulysses

The very text of *Ulysses*, especially the last chapter, probably owes something to institutional censorship. After the New York court decision of 1921 against the *The Little Review* which had been serializing *Ulysses* since 1918, no one dared to publish the book in the United States or in England. When Sylvia Beach and Maurice Darantière signed the contract to publish the novel in book form, they were not aware that the novel was not finished, as Gabler explains:

Indeed, the publishing contract may have been the decisive catalyst that fused the energies necessary to give it final shape during those most intense phases of work, which saw not only the extensive revision and expansion of the sixteen episodes that existed at the time of its signing (“Telemachus” to “Eumaeus”), but also the writing of the two that did not. These were “Ithaca” and “Penelope”, which together were to run to 113 pages, or almost one sixth of the printed book.⁹

If Joyce had not known in advance that his novel was coming out in France, would he have chosen to end it with Molly’s mad soliloquy? Probably not; one can therefore assume that the text as we know it today owes something to what could be called the differential of censorship between France, England, and the United States at the time: by writing Molly’s soliloquy, Joyce was in a way taking his revenge upon the American judges who had suppressed his novel and upon the English publishers who had refused to publish it.

This complex novel poses difficult problems to the censors who, being generally indifferent to the complexities of novelistic enunciation, constantly run the risk of attributing to the author and/or one of his characters the words or thoughts of some other character. Hence, perhaps, the New York judges’ hesitation to refer too directly to the text itself, and their final decision to declare the text, taken as a whole, obscene. Quinn, the defending attorney, experienced the same difficulties; he based his defense upon three writers’ testimonies, declaring, somewhat helplessly, at some point: “I myself do not understand *Ulysses*; I think Joyce has carried his method too far,” to which one of the judges answered: “Yes, it sounds to me like the ravings of a disordered mind. I can’t see why anyone would want to publish it!”¹⁰

Rereading “Nausicaa,” the most objectionable chapter for the judges, one can easily understand all the actors’ discomfort. Since the beginning of this chapter, the text had been focused on Gerty and her friends. To be sure, one faceless “gentleman” had been mentioned a number of times (“he could see all the end of her petticoat”¹¹), but the reader had no way to tell who the gentleman was. The passage describing Gerty’s growing sexual excitement contains no markers of free indirect style, as if the description was provided from beginning to end by an external observer capable of guessing Gerty’s inner feelings and sensations. The more intensely aroused the girl and the “gentleman” are, the more floating the enunciation is: Gerty’s confusion is not described from inside but from outside (“a tremour went over her,” “she revealed all her graceful beautifully shaped legs like that, supply soft and delicately rounded”).

Gerty cannot be considered as the only reflector unless one imagines that she can see herself from outside, that is from the point of view of the “gentleman” whose obvious desire serves as

⁹ *Ulysses: A Critical and Synoptic Edition* (New York: Garland, 1984), p. 1886.

¹⁰ Quoted by De Grazia in *Girls Lean Back Everywhere* (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 12.

¹¹ *Ulysses* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 295.

a mirror; this kind of projection appeared earlier in the novel, for example in Chapter 4 when Bloom pictured himself as seen through the cat's eyes. It is easy to understand how the censors came to consider this erotic passage as a comparatively neutral description assumed by the authorial instance, even though, later in the passage, there are a few signs indicating that the narrative is focused on Gerty, like, for instance, the semi-modal "seemed" and the verb of consciousness "knew".

The evocation of Gerty's and Bloom's simultaneous orgasm is also enunciatively ambiguous:

She would fain have cried to him chokingly, held out her snowy slender arms to him to come, to feel his lips laid on her white brow, the cry of a young girl's love, a little strangled cry, wrung from her, that cry that has rung through the ages. And then a rocket sprang and bang shot blind blank and O! O! in raptures and it gushed out of it a stream of rain gold hair threads and they shed and ah! they were all greeny dewy stars falling with golden, O so lovely, O, soft, sweet, soft!¹²

There is a clear shift of focus in the phrase: "that cry that has rung through the ages." Only an outsider who would have witnessed this strange love scene could have adopted such a stance towards the events. The same phenomenon occurs in the first love scene in *Madame Bovary*: an outsider, who does not belong in the black box of the book, interferes in the scene to put it into perspective and to goad us into perceiving the unspeakable confusion of the girl.

Joyce could not, under penalty of writing a crude text, represent the scene from his unrefined protagonists' points of view; yet, he had adopted a narrative strategy which compelled him to use reflectors throughout, and more particularly in the scenes with a high emotional tension. Let us not forget that this chapter belongs to an earlier version of the novel, one that was written before the author signed his contract with Sylvia Beach: at that stage, Joyce had no choice but to censor himself if he wanted to publish his novel.

Shortly after this, Bloom is named in a passage which was apparently difficult to negotiate: "He was leaning back against the rock behind. Leopold Bloom (for it is he) stands silent, with bowed head before those young guileless eyes. What a brute he had been! At it again?"¹³ The present tense in the parenthetical obviously points to the authorial instance which intervenes to name Gerty's silent and distant lover and to describe his attitude in interior focus. The exclamations and the questions which follow represent, in free indirect style, the reproaches Bloom levels at himself, with considerable bad faith, while he tries to persuade himself that the girl will not denounce him. In the following paragraphs, he replays the scene in his imagination and reinterprets it now that he has found out about Gerty's infirmity; also, he thinks of Molly who, he knows, made love with Boylan earlier in the day, probably at the time when his watch stopped.¹⁴

The biographical explanation, easy to guess, would add little to the understanding of the text: Joyce's epiphany on the beach, recycled at the end of Chapter 4 of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* where Stephen comes across the bird-like girl, is now attributed to a libidinous adult. It was no doubt a strong fantasy for the author who insisted on lending it to his characters. This explanation chronologically describes the process which no doubt led to this meshing of desires inside the text, but it tells us nothing new about the text itself. We had understood, while analyzing the text proper, that the author, who had done his best to disentangle himself from these meshes and to pose as a neutral observer in front of his protagonists, had partly failed to achieve this goal because his own desires were too intimately linked with theirs.

Yet, this partial failure is a blessing in disguise: Joyce, who went further than any of his predecessors to distance himself from his desires, remains intensely present to us as a figure, and we try hard to make contact with him beyond the interface of the text. It is because there

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 300.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

remain enough traces of his desires within the text, particularly in the enunciative breaks, that we want to interact with him and undertake such a meticulous analysis, in the hope that we may be found worthy of the brilliant author who created such a powerful novel.

The last chapter does not pose the same problems as “Nausicaa” because Molly’s fantasies are presented in the first person, without any intervention on the part of another enunciative instance, without any apparent discursive break. This type of discourse is somewhat reminiscent of the autobiographical discourse adopted by the two most notorious whores in English literature, Moll Flanders and Fanny Hill. Yet, it is considerably more complex and constitutes a real challenge to our understanding because of the absence of punctuation marks, of the great number of deictics whose referents are hard to identify at first, and of the lack of obvious causal links between Molly’s various non-utterances. This kind of narrative discourse compels the reader to enter the disturbing logic of Molly’s incandescent imagination and thereby to overlook the subject responsible for this logic, namely the author himself. It is a sutureless text. The fascination triggered by this extraordinary character totally indifferent to our judgment largely prevents the emergence of the authorial figure which still loomed big through the discursive breaks and the changes of focus in the previous seventeen chapters. To be sure, Joyce’s poetic achievement in this chapter would not have reached such a peak without the discursive games of the previous chapters. This soliloquy constitutes the crowning point of a poetic strategy whose obvious purpose was the fading away of the authorial figure. This question of the authorial figure played a central role in Judge Woolsey’s famous decision of December 7, 1933 in favor of *Ulysses*. Considering the “difficulty of reading it,” he said, “a jury trial would have been an extremely unsatisfactory, if not almost impossible method.”¹⁵ He read it through a first time and then reread the incriminated passages more carefully, trying in fact to find out what the author’s intentions were:

The reputation of “Ulysses” in the literary world, however, warranted my taking such time as was necessary to enable me to satisfy myself as to the intent with which the book was written, for, of course, in any case where a book is claimed to be obscene it must first be determined, whether the intent with which it was written was what is called, according to the usual phrase, pornographic, that is, written for the purpose of exploiting obscenity.¹⁶

This argument already constituted a revolution since it contradicted the principles instituted during the Victorian period in English law by the famous Hicklin Test which insisted that the author’s intention was irrelevant and that only the effect produced by the text mattered.

Judge Woolsey was not interested in the effect of the book but in the author’s stance such as it could be inferred from the text itself: “But in ‘Ulysses,’ in spite of its unusual frankness, I do not detect anywhere the leer of the sensualist. I hold, therefore, that it is not pornographic.”¹⁷

This is a reader’s testimony, not a legal argument: reading the novel, he did not feel that the author intended to write a crude erotic book or that he was taking pleasure in writing the sexually explicit passages, and this evidence was enough for him to decide that the book was not pornographic.

Then he embarks upon an apologia of Joyce as a writer, acknowledging that he “sought to make a serious experiment in a new, if not wholly novel, literary genre.” He compares the technique of the novel with that of cinema, and examines the question of Joyce’s literary sincerity: “It is because Joyce has been loyal to his technique and has not funk’d its necessary implications, but has honestly attempted to tell fully what his characters think about, that he has been the subject of so many attacks and that his purpose has been so often misunderstood and misrepresented.”¹⁸ Here again, the argument is totally literary. Judge Woolsey adopts the

¹⁵ In Edward de Grazia, *Censorship Landmarks* (New York: Bowker, 1969), p. 95.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

same kind of criteria as did Flaubert when he claimed that his novel was highly moral: it suffices that the author should stick to the enunciative principles he adopted from the beginning, that he should let his characters express themselves according to their respective psychologies, for the book to be moral. Judge Woolsey considers that the coarse words must be forgiven because they are “old Saxon words known to almost all men,” and because they are spoken by the characters themselves. His justification of the obsessive evocation of sex is even more open to criticism: “In respect of the recurrent emergence of the theme of sex in the minds of his characters, it must always be remembered that his locale was Celtic and his season spring.”

Then he examines the question of the audience, a question that English and American judges generally refused to take into account. At this point, he does quote the official definition of obscenity: “Tending to stir the sex impulses or to lead to sexually impure and lustful thoughts,” but only to question it:

Whether a particular book would tend to excite such impulses and thoughts must be tested by the court’s opinion as to its effect on a person with average sex instincts — what the French would call *l’homme moyen sensuel* — who plays, in this branch of legal inquiry, the same role of hypothetical reagent as does the “reasonable man” in the law of torts and “the man learned in the art” on questions of invention in patent law.

Judge Woolsey indirectly explains that women and children are not the intended readers of such a novel as *Ulysses*, and he argues that the law has no right to forbid *l’homme moyen sensuel* from reading such a book simply on account that it might scandalize or deprave the vulnerable people who would happen to come across it, though they do not constitute its intended audience.

In order to test the likely effect of the novel on *l’homme moyen sensuel*, Judge Woolsey asked two of his friends to read it. Here is their verdict as reported by the Judge:

I was interested to find that they both agreed with my opinion: That reading “Ulysses” in its entirety, as a book must be read on such a test as this, did not tend to excite sexual impulses or lustful thoughts, but that its net effect on them was only that of a somewhat tragic and very powerful commentary on the inner lives of men and women.

Instead of asking famous writers to testify in favor of the book — a practice which had been adopted during the first trial of *Ulysses* and which will reappear in the trials of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *Naked Lunch*, or *Tropic of Cancer* — Judge Woolsey had preferred to defer to the opinions of the two anonymous readers whom he took to be ideal specimens of *l’homme moyen sensuel* as well as good representatives of Joyce’s intended audience.

Before rendering his verdict, he briefly acknowledged that the novel was likely to scandalize many people:

I am quite aware that owing to some of its scenes “Ulysses” is a rather strong draught to ask some sensitive, though normal, persons to take. But my considered opinion, after long reflection, is that, whilst in many places the effect of “Ulysses” on the reader undoubtedly is somewhat emetic, nowhere does it tend to be an aphrodisiac.

His bad conscience and his bad faith surface clearly in this cautionary note: he is aware that the novel is likely to cause nausea in many people but insists that it is unlikely to have any erotic effect. If he meant that *Ulysses* does not belong in the same category as *Fanny Hill* for instance, he was right of course: the complexity of the novel is sufficient to discourage the most inveterate aficionado of pornographic literature. Yet, one cannot say that the novel produces no erotic effect whatsoever: the passages analyzed above, and many others, clearly tend to arouse *l’homme moyen sensuel*, and probably many women, too. With considerable puritan bad faith, the judge was claiming that he had only been interested in the poetic achievement and that he had totally overlooked the fact that the book could also arouse sensual pleasure — a kind of pleasure which he obviously considered as contemptible.

Ulysses was condemned in 1921 because its author was considered as a pornographer; Judge Woolsey cleared it in 1933 because he considered its author as a genuine artist. In both cases, it was the authorial figure, reconstructed differently by these two sets of readers, which was on trial, not the text itself. Or rather two different desires expressed by that authorial figure: the erotic, on the one hand, and the artistic, on the other. Neither judges were really good readers, since they censored either the erotic or the poetic contents of the novel. The good reader is caught in an even more paradoxical situation since he must take both aspects of the book into consideration; the authorial figure which he reconstructs is, of course, considerably more intimidating.

2 - Lolita

In *Lolita*, the authorial figure begins to appear very early through the prefacer's denials. John Ray, who claims to be simply the editor of this text, passes judgment on Humbert as if he wanted to program our reading of the text. He feels he must stigmatize the protagonist's misbehavior which cannot be sanctioned, but he cannot help admiring the narrator's style. This foreword, which betrays John Ray's bad faith, is a parody of the preface of a picaresque novel like *Moll Flanders* where the editor serves as a screen between the immoral protagonist turned narratrix and the author who does not want to be blamed for her crime.

The most erotic passage in the novel is no doubt the description of the Sunday morning scene on the davenport. Here, the narrator takes endless precautions, begging us to sympathize with him as a protagonist and to participate in the scene:

I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay; I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is if viewed with what my lawyer has called, in a private talk we have had, 'impartial sympathy.'¹⁹

This is a somewhat ambiguous request: Humbert the narrator claims that he is aware of the reader's desire as a voyeur and he thinks he can depend on his indulgence, nay on his complicity. The signs of unease and self-censorship are obvious; yet, it is neither the author, nor even the protagonist who are supposed to experience such feelings, but the narrator while he is writing and imagining his reader's reactions. Humbert the narrator, aware that the scene he is about to replay is going to hurt many readers' feelings, dissociates himself from Humbert the protagonist by presenting him as a somewhat grotesque theatrical character.

At the climax of the scene, the narrator vanishes behind his protagonist self who then addresses the members of the jury: "and my moaning mouth, gentlemen of the jury, almost reached her bare neck, while I crushed out against her left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known."²⁰ Humbert does not simply apostrophize the members of the jury who will have to try him for murdering Quilty, but another court of justice which he begs to render its verdict against him for defiling Lolita. He neither accuses himself nor makes amend but jubilantly glorifies his sexual experience which, he claims, had no precedent in nature and therefore cannot be judged by any human court of law. To be sure, he tries to vindicate himself morally, fooling himself into believing that he has not soiled the "lady's new white purse."²¹ Yet, he knows as a narrator that the intensity of his pleasure at the time owed a great deal to his conviction that he was actually defiling Lolita.

The authorial figure looms big in this scene in which Humbert's erotic experience is transmuted into a work of art. By confronting Humbert the narrator with Humbert the protagonist, Nabokov obviously wants us to adhere totally to this beautiful text in which the gradual eroticization of the language eventually creates a poetic ecstasy. There is no

¹⁹ *The Annotated Lolita* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. 59.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

separation any more between signifier and signified, between the pretext and the present text; the obstacle which prevented novelistic language from representing the sexual act is magically abolished, even though sex still remains a powerful source of anxiety. It is not the sexual interdict, no matter what its true nature is, which is transgressed, but the esthetic one. As Humbert later acknowledges, “sex is but the ancilla of art,”²² it cannot be its main subject. The last page of *Lolita* confirms this interpretation. To be sure, Humbert is sorry for defiling Lolita and passes judgment upon himself: “Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges.”²³ At the same time, he wants to harvest the benefits of his sin: he considers that the poetic image which he has been composing by writing his story erases the lascivious images of Lolita that he himself had conceived in his aroused imagination, and that Quilty had put into writing in his play, *The Enchanted Hunters*.

Like *Madame Bovary* and *Ulysses*, *Lolita* was confronted with institutional censorship. On December 20, 1956, the *Journal Officiel* announced the Minister of the Interior’s decision to prohibit the sale and circulation of this novel along with that of twenty-four others published in English by the Olympia Press. Girodias decided to take his case before the *Tribunal Administratif* whose main task is to protect French citizens against abuses committed by the administration. He campaigned mostly in favor of *Lolita*, which was clearly much easier to defend on artistic grounds than many of the other works, and wrote *L’Affaire Lolita* whose subtitle, *Défense de l’écrivain*, hardly conceals his bad faith: Girodias was not trying so much to defend Nabokov as his own publishing house.

In his chapter on censorship, Girodias stressed the fact that the Minister of the Interior had suppressed books on the list, like Donleavy’s *The Ginger Man* or Harris’s *My Life and Loves*, which had been authorized in England and which were circulating freely in French translation in France.²⁴ He also made a brief history of censorship and acknowledged the fact that Humbert’s sexual practices were actionable, but he claimed that the book was not:

[...] this book depicts odious practices, and its hero belongs to a category of sexual maniacs whom Society has the best possible reasons to prosecute. And yet, this book has an undeniable artistic quality. The subject is not fortuitous, nor replaceable: it is this subject precisely, and none other, which inspired the author to write this work whose originality and greatness was readily acknowledged by many authorized critics.²⁵

Girodias, like John Ray and most critics, admitted that he was caught in a double bind: his defense, which tends to be confused at the end, was not legally tenable, and he knew it, hence his reference to another authority, that of the literati.

Nabokov declined to help Girodias, though the latter claimed to be fighting in the interest of the authors. By then, he was aware of Girodias’s reputation as a publisher of sulfurous and often pornographic books; in a letter to Jason Epstein written on 20 February 1957, he said:

I am rather loath of exposing myself in the company of The Olympia Press. But I am also rather at a loss to find a point of view from which to consider the whole thing. I have to take into account the fact that so far Cornell has been very tolerant [...]. On the other hand, I wish, of course, to give every possible support to Olympia, though personally I do not care if the ban will be lifted or not, since Gallimard is going to publish the French translation anyway.²⁶

The arguments put forward by Nabokov are interesting though not totally convincing: he was refusing to back Girodias for fear of being considered as a pornographic author and of hurting his reputation at Cornell where he was teaching; however, he acknowledged that he should

²² *Ibid.*, p. 261.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *L’Affaire Lolita* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1957), p. 55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²⁶ *Selected Letters* (San Diego, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1989), p. 203.

perhaps help Girodias who, after all, had brought out the novel, though his intervention was perhaps no longer necessary since, despite the suppression of the book in its English version, Gallimard was about to publish a translation of the novel made by Girodias's own brother, Eric Kahane.

One must also point out that, at the time, Nabokov was in conflict with Girodias about copyrights: according to American law, he was going to lose all his rights on the book for the United States (and Girodias with him) if the book was not published in the United States within five years of its first publication in Paris.²⁷ The stakes were tremendous, considering the huge success of 1958 American edition of *Lolita*. Any help he could bring to Girodias in this struggle for the release of the book could be used against him by his American publisher, Putnam's, who was about to sign the contract.

To be sure, there are two texts by Nabokov, in French translation, in *L'Affaire Lolita*: an extract from the novel and the article published earlier in the *Antioch Review*, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*". This preface after the fact is reminiscent of the one written by Gide for the second edition of *L'immoraliste*. Its status is ambiguous, especially as Nabokov always insisted on including it in later editions of the novel; it is now as much part of the novel, almost, as John Ray's foreword.

Nabokov was acutely aware of aping John Ray, and he says so in the first paragraph:

After doing my impersonation of suave John Ray, the character in *Lolita* who pens the Foreword, any comments coming straight from me may strike one — may strike me, in fact — as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book. A few points, however, have to be discussed; and the autobiographic device may induce mimic and model to blend.²⁸

His bad faith is somewhat similar to that of John Ray, his chief purpose being to give a good image of himself after the attacks levelled against him. He insists that the novel contains none of the ingredients of the pornographic novel.

Basically, he wants to show that his intentions were pure. He was not seeking to arouse lascivious thoughts in his readers but to create a highly poetic object. The paragraph on this subject is marred by a strange break: it begins with a general statement about the "exact demarcation between the sensuous and the sensual" which, he rightly points out, depends largely on each individual's psychological make-up; therefore he cannot be held responsible for the erotic effect the book may have on his readers. Then he says he does not want to write didactic fiction:

There are gentle souls who would pronounce *Lolita* meaningless because it does not teach them anything. I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray's assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. There are not many such books.²⁹

Between the evocation of the erotic effect and this beautiful presentation of his esthetic theory, there is a logical break which betrays his bad conscience. Here is John Ray's assertion concerning the didactic dimension of the text:

*and still more important to us than scientific significance and literary worth, is the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader; for, in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac — there are not only vivid characters in a unique story: they warn us of dangerous trends [...].*³⁰

²⁷ Letter to Girodias of 5 March 1958. *Selected Letters*, p. 208.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

John Ray did not say that it was Humbert Humbert's intention; he spoke only of the moral impact of the book on normal people like him. In the afterword, on the other hand, Nabokov writes about his intention, not about the effect of the book, which is another story of course. His line of defense is all the more ambiguous as nobody ever accused him of writing a didactic book.

Some critics have claimed that the book had a didactic intent. In *Nabokov's Otherworld*, Vladimir Alexandrov explains that Nabokov turns against his too complacent reader at the end of the novel: "if beauty is a function of accurate perception, then the careless reader is immoral."³¹ After quoting the passages in the novel where Nabokov openly criticizes Humbert's perverseness and immorality, he concludes that the reader is immoral if he has allowed himself to be so fascinated by the erotic scenes at the beginning as to be unable to take into account the protagonist's remorse at the end. Nabokov naturally speaks through his narrator who writes his story in prison and who, like all picaresque narrators, tries to redeem his past sins by confessing them in writing, that is also by reliving them through his still desiring imagination.

In his letters and his interviews, Nabokov always tried to underestimate the sexual dimension of the novel. In a letter to Edmund Wilson written in 1954, he acknowledged the sensual dimension of the novel but insisted upon its artistic quality: "I consider this novel to be my best thing in English, and though the theme and situation are decidedly sensuous, its art is pure and its fun riotous."³² Incidentally, all the paragraph from which this quotation is taken is bracketed and marked in the margin: "all this is a secret." A year after the publication of the book in Paris, he tried to vindicate it in a letter to his friend and colleague Morris Boship:

I know that *Lolita* is my best book so far. I calmly lean on my conviction that it is a serious work of art, and that no court could prove it to be 'lewd and libertine'. All categories grade, of course, into one another: a comedy of manners written by a fine poet may have its 'lewd' side; but *Lolita* is a tragedy. 'Pornography' is not an image plucked out of context; pornography is an attitude and an intention. The tragic and the obscene exclude each other.³³

Nabokov probably meant that obscenity, in such a case, is redeemed by the tragic and is not the *raison d'être* of the book, merely an instrument. Like Flaubert before him, he insisted upon the purity of his intentions but the syllogism he constructed is somewhat lame since he uses a different word in his premise and his conclusion ("pornography" and "obscenity") in order to demonstrate that there is no vulgarity in his novel. In an interview published in *Playboy* in 1964, he explained that he was not interested in sex proper: "Sex as an institution, sex as a general notion, sex as a problem, sex as a platitude — all this is something I find too tedious for words. Let us skip sex."³⁴ This declaration is somewhat tainted with bad faith. What he meant, I suppose, was that he refused to use sex as an easy means of identification between readers, narrators and characters, but rather as a poetic challenge. And his bitter indictments of Humbert in his interviews ("Humbert Humbert is a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear 'touching'. That epithet, in its true, tear-iridized sense, can only apply to my poor little girl."³⁵) sounds also a little suspicious. He is too harsh on Humbert whose devouring passion he has taken so much pain to describe; the tragic element of the novel does not concern only *Lolita* but also Humbert, both as a narrator-poet and as a protagonist. He tries too hard to vilify Humbert and to distance himself from him. In answer to an interviewer's question about the cruelty and perversity of some of his characters, he once said:

³¹ *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 185.

³² *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980), p. 285.

³³ *Selecter Letters*, p. 184.

³⁴ *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Some of my characters are, no doubt, pretty beastly, but I really don't care, they are outside my inner self like the mournful monsters of a cathedral façade — demons placed there merely to show that they have been booted out. Actually, I'm a mild old gentleman who loathes cruelty.³⁶

The poetic image he uses may contain his most open confession as to the dialectic relation existing between himself and Humbert. In all these declarations, he tries to show that he is endowed with a strong moral sense and that he does not confuse his chimeras with reality.

Nabokov is a very talented novelist who creates plurivocal and open poetic objects. He complacently describes the subtleties of perversion, the seductions of forbidden love objects, the rapture of uncensored eroticism, and, once he has cast a spell on his reader and has foisted his private fantasies upon him — fantasies which acquire a strong poetic value and legitimacy thanks to his extraordinary style — he makes his text bifurcate towards an erotically disappointing ending where the Nemesis is at work. The poetic level of *Lolita* is so high that one is spontaneously tempted to grant it an ethical goal, the beautiful and the good being traditionally linked in our minds.

This study of these two great masterpieces shows the intimate link between writing, reading and censoring. Author, reader and censors turn out to be bound to each other by an almost occult pact of which they are not aware: consciously or unconsciously, each tests the other two's tolerance or forbearance before rendering his verdict. If the author wants to create a genuine work of art and be read by the kind of public he respects (and to which he belongs since he is always a little his own ideal reader, of course), he must exert himself particularly in the sexually explicit passages which, if badly negotiated, run the risk of discouraging or disappointing his good readers. He must constantly show his good taste, otherwise he may lose his good image and betray the vulgarity of his desires and of his imagination.

The reader is squeezed between institutional censorship which is responsible for defending morality, and the authorial law which is harder to identify. Structuralism and deconstructionism have totally ignored the latter law, claiming that the reader had to impose his authority over the text, but such an attitude does not seem defensible anymore: the literary text is not a blank space upon which the reader can freely project his desires, be they governed by the pseudo-scientific grids of semiotics, but a communicational interface where the author's and the reader's desires interact with each other. The reader who wants to avoid imposture must respond to the text's expectation and therefore to the author's desires, even if the latter was largely unaware of their true nature.

The desiring text constitutes a law for the reader who, behind it, perceives the presence of a demanding authorial figure which prevents him from appropriating the text as he likes. This logic is even more compelling when the text has a strong sexual content; the reader must then resist two contradictory temptations: the libertarian temptation which would induce him to accept anything under the assumption that art has nothing to do with life and morality, and the repressive (or puritanical) temptation which would lead him to reject a number of excesses because art is supposed to be intimately linked with real life. To solve this dilemma, it is necessary to try and recreate the internal logic of the text, to put aside one's prejudices as long as possible, and therefore to reach for the authorial figure which looms behind the text and is different from the real author.

This figure is the projection of the author's ideal ego; through its cracks, one catches glimpses of the very desire he unconsciously smuggled into his book. But whereas a Freudian (like Brandon S. Centerwall in the case of Nabokov³⁷) would consider that the identification of this

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁷ Brandon S. Centerwall, "Hiding in Plain Sight: Nabokov and Pedophilia." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, XXXII, 3 (Fall 1990), 468-484.

desire provides the ultimate meaning of the text, I simply consider it as the pivot on which hinges my interaction with him. The authorial figure is the enduring trace of the author's law as fantasized in the act of reading, and therefore a constant incentive to read and reread this over-determined text with humility, knowing in advance that we will never totally master it. The authorial figure is indeed, as Foucault put it, the "principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning."³⁸ That was basically what I meant when I subtitled my previous book on Nabokov "the author's tyranny". Contrary to what Brian McHale claims in a forthcoming review of that book and of my previous one, *Textual Communication*, this approach does not condemn the critic to a descriptivist study, as the present paper again clearly shows; it simply shields him against imposture.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 159.