



Worlds Under Erasure: Lolita and Postmodernism

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In his two books on postmodernism, McHale provides the anxious and puzzled reader with a luminous definition of postmodernist fiction.¹ According to him postmodernist fiction is organized in terms of an ontological dominant in contrast with modernist fiction which he sees as organized in terms of an epistemological dominant. Proceeding on that definition he then characterizes *Lolita* as the last of Nabokov's modernist novels since its narrator is a typically unreliable modernist narrator (in the great modernist tradition exemplified by James, Conrad, Faulkner) and since that unreliability raises the modernist epistemological questions of the accessibility and circulation of knowledge.

However, if Humbert's narrative is undeniably modernist by McHale's definition of modernism, it can be argued that this modernist text is in fact radically subverted, *placed under erasure*, to use one of McHale's own favorite formulas, by Nabokov who as I shall try to show definitely foregrounds the process of world-making in a manner that McHale would regard as postmodernist. The starting point of my analysis is the duplicity of the novel: there are actually *two* texts, Humbert's and Nabokov's. *Lolita* is really *Lolita Lolita*. By failing to refer *Lolita* to its implied author McHale missed the postmodernism of the novel.

McHale's failure to identify the duplicity of the novel might be said to be an exemplification of the failing of a theory that denies any relevance to the implied author. Characteristically, McHale argues that "some theories of narrative have sought to interpolate an "implied author" in the model of narrative communication but this is mistaken for the implied author is not a party to an act of communication (see Bal, 1981: 202-10; Genette 1983: 93-107)."² To me the exclusion of the implied author smacks of positivism since it suggests that the "true party to the act of literary communication" is a "real" man existing independently from the reader's reconstruction, whereas I believe that this "true party" is always the author *such as* the reader is led to imagine him. What I would like to do here is to show how the reader's assumptions as to who wrote *Lolita* constitute a primary act of interpretation but one that is bound to remain tentative and provisional.

1. Procedural writing

McHale undoubtedly answered the question "who wrote the book?" with the name of its narrator (or rather saw the aesthetic pursuit of Nabokov as congruent with that of his narrator) since he saw the novel as based on a representational conception of literature. Indeed, Humbert's "Confessions" promise the reader a faithful account of events as they really happened and establish with the reader what Lejeune called an "autobiographical pact." Thus in the first page of his confessions Humbert adores the empty shell of a name deserted by a girl who has now turned into an unrecognizable Mrs Richard F. Schiller and poetically associates it with images, feelings and literary allusions thereby forcing the reader to "connect" the name to the rest of the novel and to other literary texts in a manner that McHale would call modernist.

However, the connections between the name "Lolita" and the novel are so numerous that one begins to suspect that the name "Lolita" has generative instead of just representational value. I shall try to show here how the whole novel seems to expand the narrative possibilities contained in the word "Lolita." One should not forget that this principle of composition was

¹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987) and *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992).

² Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 90.

one that was followed by Poe who in his *Philosophy of Composition* claimed that “The Raven” logically, rationally, mathematically sprang from the seed-word “nevermore.” The many allusions to Poe in *Lolita* would thus indicate the hidden structural principle that organizes the novel. Obviously, this Poesque strategy destabilizes the world projected by Humbert and foregrounds the process of world construction in a way that is defined as typically postmodernist by McHale, even though that would mean seeing Poe as a postmodernist too in so far as his “Philosophy of Composition” similarly destabilizes the world projected by the narrator of “The Raven.”

From the moment when the reader begins to suspect this Poesque principle at work in *Lolita*, two concomitant and contradictory logics begin to vie for the reader’s attention. Thus in the opening page of Humbert’s confessions, the dissociation of the name’s three syllables (Lo-Lee-Ta) represents Humbert’s attempt at transcribing the correct pronunciation of his lover’s name, and expresses Humbert’s delight in saying her name aloud. However, to the reader who suspects a Poesque writer these three syllables actually point to the three nymphets to whom Lolita owes her existence, that is, to the fact that Humbert’s nymphet is a purely loliterary creature. Thus Lo is Melville’s Loo, who in *Omoo*, is a 14-year-old Polynesian girl living on an (enchanted) island whom Melville calls a nymph and with whom the mature friend of the narrator, a doctor, vainly falls in love.³ Her “hazel” eyes possibly gave Lolita the family name that is used in Humbert’s manuscript (all the more so as “Haze” only rhymes with her real name) while the name of her father translated into English (Jeremiah in-the-dark), possibly gave her the name she had in Nabokov’s manuscript (Juanita Dark). The Polynesian for Jeremiah-in-the-dark is Ereemar Po-po, which nicely introduces the second intertextual allusion to Humbert Humbert’s favorite poet-poet and his Annabel Lee hiding in the second syllable of Lolita’s name. Finally the last syllable of Lolita’s name rhymes with Mérimée’s Carmencita to whom there are quite a few allusions in the novel.

Humbert himself is obviously aware of his Lo’s literary ancestors. After all, Humbert is among other things a literary historian who enjoys tracing the history of literary motifs and flaunting his awareness of the literary commonplaces he is drawing on just like Nabokov himself did in his *Eugene Onegin*. Thus he seems to be trying to find as many instances as possible of the “girl on an enchanted island” motif, tracing it in *Omoo*, in *Annabel Lee* or in *The Tempest*. These stories present him (and the reader) with frames through which to sift his own story: thus for example Humbert will often compare himself to Miranda’s father, a magician and chess player, leaving it to the reader to compare Quilty to Caliban.

However in Nabokov’s novel these allusions are not simply ornamental as they are in Humbert’s confessions but functional. Humbert falls in love with a girl named Annabel Leigh *because* his story is fashioned after Poe’s *Annabel Lee*. He journeys through America *because* he is fashioned after one of the travellers in *Omoo*, a word which in Polynesian means “the wanderer.”

Such literary allusions must be seen as the novel’s basic components, components that are submitted to the processes of condensation and displacement that Freud of all people saw as typical of dreams. The name Lolita is a case in point as it suggests that the novel *Lolita* condensates the stories written by Melville, Poe and Merimée but also displaces them: it has often been noted that the allusion to Merimée turns out to be misleading in so far as Humbert will not kill *his* Carmen.

The generative power of the name “Lolita” also derives from the puns it lends itself too. Those puns seem to provide Nabokov with narrative food. Lo, plain Lo, is plain water (*l’eau* is water in French) and thus introduces the crucial water motif in the novel, a motif that was already present in Poe, Melville and Shakespeare. Nymphs are water creatures of course, and

³ At one point (*Lolita*, Penguin, 1984, p. 244), Humbert queerly notes “if I felt probably Polynesian”; this curious remark possibly constitutes a hint at Melville’s *Omoo*.

the opening page really stages the way Lolita emerges Venus-like from the watery kingdom of the poet's mouth whose presumably white teeth and pink gums are echoed through the novel's many white pebbles and "red rocks." Thus it can be argued that the whole story literally emerges from that poetic mouth that creates in the same breath Lolita, Quilty the redresser of teeth, and his cousin Quilty the redresser of the wrongs done to poetry when the forbidden boundary between fancy and reality is crossed at the Hotel of the Enchanted Hunters. This pun (*Lo-l'eau*) generates the numerous sea resorts, lakes, pools, toilets in the novel. By a rather simple law of derivation water leads to ice (hence Alaska, the North Pole, icecubes, fridges) and ice to fire (storms, thunders, the fire simultaneously raging in Humbert's body and in the McCoos' house, fire escapes, and so on...). As a matter of fact Lolita, a nymph, a water creature, is immediately identified in Humbert's manuscript as "the fire" of his life. Thus the word "Lolita" with its water, light and fire contains the essential elements with which the creator will construct his universe. Similarly in *Ada* the names of the characters refer to the water (Aqua, Marina), fire (Demon, Lucette, Ada), air (Van) and earth (terra, antiterra) with which Nabokov built his world not as a bachelardian dreamer but as a deliberate god-like engineer.

The paranoid reader shall even suspect that the name's three syllables (Lo-Lee-Ta) are responsible for the importance of ternary structures in the novel.⁴ In the opening page, the tongue takes a trip of three little steps down the palate while in the rest of the novel Lolita sends Humbert on three long trips (away from Ramsdale, away from Beardsley, in search of Lolita);⁵ there are three nymphets lurking in Lolita's name (a name that appears three times in the first paragraph) and there are two nymphets flanking the main one in Humbert's pre-Lolita past (Annabel Lee) and in his post-Lolita period (Rita);⁶ Humbert was three times as old as Lolita was when he met her and as he himself was when he loved Annabel Lee. The structure of the novel is ternary too as Humbert is first an enchanted hunter pursuing his nymphet, then a hunted enchanter from the moment when he biblically knows his nymphet at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel and begins to be tracked down by Quilty, the author of a play entitled either *The Enchanted Hunters* or *The Hunted Enchanters*, and finally a disenchanting hunter in quest of his Lolita and her abductor. Incidentally, the hunter-prey motif owes much to Melville's *Moby Dick* to whom the name of Lolita's husband alludes as well as the strange title of Humbert's manuscript if one accepts to hear the echo of a "white whale" in Humbert's queer subtitle "the confessions of a white widowed male." From that viewpoint, the intertextual allusion to Melville's Loo paves the way to other intertextual allusions to Melville by a law of free association.

Thus Lolita is really a toy, a "dolly" as Humbert puts it, to be played with linguistically as Humbert played with her sexually. The various equivalents for Lolita's name given by Humbert in the opening page represent various degrees of intimacy with Lolita in Humbert's manuscript (formal names and informal nicknames), but in Nabokov's novel they point to the many transformations that the name undergoes to provide yet more narrative food. The little nymph, just like a butterfly, goes through a great many metamorphoses, from Lo, to Lola, to Dolly, to Dolores, to Mrs Richard Schiller (the name of a German poet who was also an entomologist, and also the name of Pushkin's Russian teacher). The final metamorphosis occurs when the name of dead Lolita becomes the title of a novel and when a mere word turns into a full-fledged novel.

⁴ McHale very interestingly suggests that the typical modernist reader is a paranoid reader. Does it mean that one can be a modernist reader of a postmodernist novel?

⁵ There are also three trips that are not connected with Lolita: to America, to Arctic Canada, to Ramsdale.

⁶ I am only alluding to the nymphic or pseudo-nymphic creatures with whom he has a long lasting affair. Humbert actually gets to know as many women as Blue Beard (to whom he compares himself at the end of the novel).

Her various names also function as guides to a proper understanding of the novel; thus for example whereas Humbert associates “Dolores” with Ronsard’s “adolori d’amoureuse langueur” (a sensation often referred to in the novel through the word “swoon”) Nabokov invites the reader to associate it with Lolita’s sufferings as a counterbalance to Humbert’s own laments and tendency to exhibit his “tangle of thorns.” Curiously here Humbert identifies himself with Christ while Nabokov, through a name that evokes the *Mater Dolorosa*, identifies Lolita to the Virgin Mary: the father and daughter relationship on which the novel rests staggeringly turns into a mother and son relationship. I don’t think that this reversal betrays Humbert’s or Nabokov’s unconscious but rather that it reveals the hidden aesthetics of the novel, in so far as this reversal of causalities ties in with Nabokov’s procedural writing: because the name Lolita generates the novel in which Humbert is a character Lolita must be regarded as Humbert’s genitrix.⁷ It is then no chance if the name also seems to generate the names of other characters, in particular that of Rita (lo-rita), and above all that of Charlotte herself (Charlolita), as if Lolita had engendered her own mother. Of course this creational logic that I have opposed to Humbert’s representational logic only becomes apparent on re-reading the text, so that it could be argued that the novel’s postmodernist dimension of the novel is only available to the re-reader.

However I must now face the possibility that the “clues” that allowed me to identify the novel’s generative technique are nothing but “figments of my persecution mania, recurrent images based on coincidence and chance resemblance,” to use Humbert’s own words.⁸ Of course, Humbert is wrong when he ascribes the dimly felt pattern to chance resemblance, but does it mean that we are right when we are as paranoid as he, or that we are wrong when we suspect that we are wrong?

2. Nabokov’s world under erasure?

The difficulty one faces as one tries to identify the poesque, or oulipoesque principle, at work in *Lolita* lies in the fact that Nabokov never wrote about it as Poe in his *Philosophy of Composition* or as Raymond Roussel in his *Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres*. In *On a Book Entitled Lolita* Nabokov does deny that his novel has any “moral in tow” (thereby suggesting that responding to the book as if they were the “confessions” Humbert’s title proclaims them to be is to miss the point) but he does not reveal the creational logic which I, as a free reader, saw at work in *Lolita*. What’s more the afterword reveals that the name of Humbert’s nymphet was originally “Juanita Dark” so that the idea that the author developed the narrative possibilities contained in the name can no longer hold water. What’s more, the illusion of a purely creational logic at work in the novel is dispelled by Nabokov’s account of the genesis of the novel which derived not from a name but rather from a motif (the adult-nymphet theme) to be found in *The Enchanter* and one might add in *The Gift* and possibly also in *A Nursery Tale*.⁹ Incidentally, it could also be argued that the novel fills in the blank in Stavroguine’s confessions so that the novel can be regarded as the story Dostoevski did not write in *The Possessed*. This would account for Humbert’s “Dostoevskian grin” each time a fetching nymphet catches his eye.

These extra-textual considerations show that the Poesque Nabokov that I have been describing is a textual illusion that a genetical approach contradicts. This has crucial importance for if the author who erased Humbert’s world is just a textual illusion, then there is no justification in ascribing greater ontological value to the world created by this model

⁷ I wonder to what extent this can account for Humbert’s (and through him Nabokov’s) reversal of the Freudian view of art as a secondary sexual characteristic.

⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 237.

⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, “A Nursery Tale” (1926) in *Tyrants Destroyed* (New York: Mcgraw-Hill, 1975). See p. 54-5.

author. As a result it can be argued that in just the same way as Nabokov's *Lolita* erases Humbert's *Confessions*, Humbert's *Confessions* erase Nabokov's *Lolita*.

As indeed they must if the novel is to function at all. As I said, the Poesque principle invites the reader to look for the laws of associations, displacement and substitution seemingly at work in the novel and discourages him from an emotional, ethical and clinical reading of the novel. Readings resting on the "human interest" of the novel are foreseen (through the first readers of Humbert's manuscript, Humbert's lawyer and his editor) and denied both implicitly by the text's mechanism and explicitly by the afterword. To answer Ray's question in the foreword, the senses do not make sense in *Lolita* and *Lolita* herself is only "an aboli bibelot d'inanités sonores" (her name seems contained in the expression "aboli bibelot"; incidentally Mallarmé was the well-known author of "the afternoon of a faun(let?)" and his aesthetics have much to do with Poe's and Nabokov's).

However, how is the reader to be interested in this "aboli bibelot d'inanités sonores?" Why should the intelligent reader care for sounds that mean nothing (inanités sonores)? After all, didn't Emerson have a point when he took the implied author of "The Philosophy of Composition" at face value and reproached Poe with being a mere "jingle man?" Finally, what is left to the hunter who has found his prey and no longer gasps at the no longer hidden nymphets in *Lolita*'s name (to take just one example of a technique that so heavily rests on the shock of recognition)? As a result, it seems that Humbert's narrative is desperately needed to involve the reader in the book; and it is not simply a point of historical relevance that *Lolita* probably owed its extraordinary appeal to Humbert's seductive tale much more than to the criticism of representational aesthetics carried out by Nabokov in this novel as in most of his other writings.

What is more Nabokov's *Lolita* is placed under erasure not simply by Humbert's greater appeal but by the fact that Humbert's erotic enjoyment of his lover's name seems to exemplify the way the real reader is meant to enjoy it too. Thus the way he erotically savours the name of his beloved in the opening page of his confession curiously echoes the way Nabokov thought literature should be enjoyed:

Literature, real literature, must not be gulped down like some potion which may be good for the heart, or good for the brain, the brain, that stomach of the soul. Literature *must be taken and broken to bits, pulled apart, squashed*, then its lovely reek will be smelt in the hollow of the palm, it will be munched and rolled *upon the tongue* with relish. Then and only then its rare flavour will be appreciated at its true worth and the broken and crushed parts will come again together in your mind and disclose the beauty of a unity to which you will have contributed something of your own blood.¹⁰

Sensuous enjoyment, not rational analysis, seems to be the right way to respond to the novel so that the "good" reader of the novel plays the part of Humbert's model reader, not Nabokov's! The way the "real" author here contradicts the implied author to echo the narrator that the implied author placed under erasure is rather striking. From that viewpoint, it must be said that part of the difficulty (or say, the duplicity) of this novel lies in the way the author's own eyes often seem to shine through the slits in the mask of his narrator.

As a result, the way Nabokov denied any importance and even relevance to the reader's emotions and to his identification with the characters is bound to appear at best rather hypocritical. Similarly the stance adopted by Poe in his *Philosophy of Composition* was altogether unconvincing as the starting point of his supposedly mathematic or "mademathic" demonstration was in fact a purely subjective and personal emotion, his own feeling that what is saddest is most beautiful, and what is saddest is the death of a beautiful woman so that what is most beautiful is the death of a beautiful woman. The fact that the whole narrative in *Lolita*

¹⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1981), p. 105.

hinges on the death of beautiful Annabel Lee suggests that the organizing principle is not playful combination but sorrowful emotion.

Given that the “extra-textual implied author” contradicts the intra-textual implied author, the reader is implicitly meant to look for the “real” author beyond the novel and not just for the image of the author as can be reconstructed from the novel. This constitutes the second striking instance of the way the generative logic of *Lolita* is denied since the notion that the structure of a book arises from internal necessity would make the search for the author altogether irrelevant. As Mallarmé repeatedly noted the poet speaker disappears when the initiative is left to words.

And so for the second time then Humbert unexpectedly figures as a model for the “good” reader of *Lolita* since the way he pursues Quilty in the novel stages the way the reader should pursue the real author of the novel. The many clues pointing to Nabokov as a real man constitute as many invitations to the reader to engage in the same kind of (necessarily vain) quest as Humbert did when he looked for the man who organized his destiny by taking Lolita away from him, who wrote about his destiny in his play, and who figures as a stand-in for Nabokov through his anagrammatic partner Vivian Darkbloom. And obviously, Nabokov’s belief that the “good” reader is one who identifies not with characters but with the mind who composed the book substantiates the idea that Nabokov, the real Nabokov, did not want his readers to take the notion that the author is “just a machine” too seriously.

This does not mean that one should revert to biographical positivism; but rather that we should not dismiss the notion of the “real author” simply on the grounds that this real author is bound to remain out of the reader’s reach. After all Nabokov himself did not give up the search for the “real” Pushkin or the “real” Gogol simply because the search was futile and vain.

To conclude, I have tried to demonstrate how *Lolita* resists the reader’s tentative definition of its implied author since a Poesque postmodernist author is placed under erasure by an extra-textual one about whom however nothing much can be said except that he looks very much like the narrator that the Poesque model author placed under erasure. This double erasure, this resistance to the reader’s interpretation is possibly that which is truly postmodernist about Nabokov if we accept McHale’s idea that postmodernist fiction builds “provisional realities which are always liable to be contradicted and cancelled out.”¹¹

The fact that McHale himself should have missed the postmodernism of *Lolita* leads me to this final hypothesis: perhaps the definition of postmodernism in terms of an ontological dominant misses the fact that all texts are ontologically unstable in that their existence depends on the interaction between the author and his readers. From that viewpoint does postmodernism as defined by McHale define specific texts or specific relationships to texts? Can his postmodernism point to anything else but the reader’s acceptance of provisional interpretations, to the reader’s desire to resist his own closures and keep on rereading the novel as modernist Humbert after all so seductively invited him to?

¹¹ Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 66.