



# “Had I Come Before Myself”: Illegitimate Judgments of Lolita and Despair

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"Had I Come Before Myself":  
Illegitimate Judgments of *Lolita* and  
*Despair*

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The title of this paper derives from one of the strangest moments in *Lolita* (1955), near the very end of Humbert Humbert's confession, when he imagines how he would have judged his own criminal case: "Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert thirty-five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges" (308). It would have been logically impossible for Humbert to "come before [him]self," of course, as indicated by his clumsy use of the subjunctive mood and awkward shift in pronouns. By means of this statement, however, he finally—if obliquely—admits that he is guilty of raping Dolores Haze. Humbert's attempt to determine his culpability or innocence in a criminal case (which completes the imaginary trial that he has conducted throughout the preceding narrative) coincides with his equally suspect attempt to evaluate the artistic merits of his own confession, which he has just read. The novel's moral and aesthetic design depends, in fact, on the futility of Humbert's efforts to become his own criminal judge and his own critical reviewer. In this sense, *Lolita* presents a more sophisticated version of a stratagem that Nabokov had already employed in *Despair* (1934) twenty years earlier: Hermann, too, at the very end of that novel, tries to pronounce judgment on both his crime and the narrative he has written about it. Hermann and Humbert are similar, of course, to many of Nabokov's other unreliable narrators—including Smurov in *The Eye*, "V." in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and Kinbote in *Pale Fire*—who try in vain to escape the contingencies of their own lives through fiction. Like those other narrators, Hermann and Humbert ultimately fail because they are,

after all, only narrators and not the author himself.

Nevertheless, their efforts to judge the moral and aesthetic significance of their confessions cannot help but recall Nabokov's own propensity for pronouncing definitive and authoritative judgment on the moral worth and artistic accomplishment of his works. To what extent do Nabokov's self-appraisals present a similarly impossible situation, in which he too attempts to "come before (him)self" as his own editor, critic, reviewer, and reader? In order to tease out the implications of this parallel, I will compare Nabokov's evaluation of both *Lolita*—in "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" (1956)—and *Despair*—in his foreword to the English translation (1965)—to the respective narrators' comments on their own criminal confessions within those two novels.

Twenty-five years ago, Dale Peterson called Nabokov's forewords to the translations of his Russian novels "those peculiar literary vestibules," with the author himself as "intimidating receptionist" (824). Several years ago, in the first issue of *Nabokov Studies*, Charles Nichols established a four-part "paradigm" for such forewords (115), beginning with Nabokov's essay "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," which now appears as an afterword in most editions of the novel. Meanwhile, in a forthcoming essay, Marilyn Edelstein asks whether readers should ever assume that Nabokov's authorial pronouncements are "authoritative, especially in such a rhetorically powerful position as a preface" or postface (3).<sup>1</sup> I want to add to this conversation by comparing two instances in which Nabokov's first-person narrator (within the text) and Nabokov himself (in a paratextual foreword or afterword) issue similarly disingenuous evaluations of the same narrative—which readers have just read, or are just about to read. My title derives from that strange moment in the final chapter of *Lolita* when Humbert imagines judging his own case: "Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert thirty-five years for rape"

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<sup>1</sup> Edelstein points out that "Because of this paratextual persona and Nabokov's complex assertions of his presence within his novels, Nabokov criticism has been especially susceptible to authorial manipulation and control" (7).

(308).<sup>2</sup> This sentence describes an impossible situation, of course. Even if it were physically feasible for Humbert to “come before” himself, any criminal sentence he pronounced would be illegitimate, according to Austin’s theory of performative speech, because he is not authorized to utter it. Humbert’s doomed attempt to determine his legal culpability coincides with his equally problematic evaluation of his confession’s literary merit. The novel’s moral and aesthetic design depends, in fact, on the futility of Humbert’s efforts to become his own criminal judge and his own critical reviewer. *Lolita* thus presents a more sophisticated version of a device that Nabokov employed twenty years earlier in the final chapter of *Despair*: Hermann, too, tries to pronounce judgment on both his crime and his confession.<sup>3</sup> Humbert and Hermann resemble other unreliable narrators in Nabokov’s works who try to escape the contingencies of their own lives through fiction, especially in *The Eye*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and *Pale Fire*. Their efforts always fail, precisely because they are narrators and not the author himself. Even so, Humbert’s and Hermann’s attempt to determine the criminality of their behavior and the credibility of their confessions seems oddly congruent with Nabokov’s tendency to pronounce judgment on the moral worth and artistry of his works. He once identified himself, after all, as his ideal reader: “the audience an artist imagines, when he imagines that kind of a thing, is a room filled with people wearing his own mask” (SO 18). That absurd scenario epitomizes other situations in which Nabokov, too, tries to “come before [him]self” as his own editor, reader, commentator, critic, or reviewer. In order to tease out the

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<sup>2</sup> When citing Nabokov’s works, I abbreviate their titles as follows: *Lo* for *Lolita*; *SL* for *Selected Letters*; and *SO* for *Strong Opinions*; similarly, I abbreviate the titles of Boyd’s two-volume biography, *Vladimir Nabokov*, as *VNRY* and *VNAY*, for *Russian Years* and *American Years*, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> *Lolita* and *Despair* qualify as “book-cases,” in which a protagonist’s criminal behavior at the level of plot (projecting his fantasies onto someone else) recurs at the level of narration (claiming authority over the fictional text). As I explain elsewhere, “the tales’ would-be criminal and detective masterminds confuse these two levels; that is, they fail precisely because they cannot distinguish the subjunctive from the indicative, the figurative from the literal, the hypothetical from the real, or the story of a crime from the crime itself. Each protagonist tries to get out of his own case by supposing another. By doing this in actuality rather than in imagination, however, he places himself in two cases at once” (Sweeney, “Subject-Cases” 249).

implications of this parallel, I will compare his assessment of *Lolita* (in “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*”) and *Despair* (in his foreword to the English translation) to Humbert’s and Hermann’s final comments on their criminal confessions. At the same time, I will draw on narratology, reader-response criticism, speech-act theory, and cognitive linguistics to describe exactly how Nabokov and his narrators stage their judgments of themselves. In each case, the moment of self-appraisal becomes an admittedly impossible, hypothetical, but highly stylized performance, variously figured as reading a telltale manuscript, sentencing a difficult criminal case, or distinguishing between saints and sinners on Judgment Day. Meanwhile, each narrator or author deploys identical strategies to elide the illegitimacy of such self-judgment, especially by combining frames of possibility—according to Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner’s theory of “conceptual blending”—through subtle shifts in grammatical person, agency, mood, or tense.

While Nabokov’s readers may not find such strategies disarming, or such verdicts convincing, they cannot help becoming more aware of their own ethical and aesthetic judgments of his novels. In each case, after all, the narrator or author rereads his own text in order to foretell, forestall, and control how others might interpret it. Nabokov told his students that “one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it” (*Lectures* 3). These scenes of self-judgment, in fact, seem designed to prompt a reader’s reconsideration of the text, rather like those climactic moments when a fictional detective, such as Poe’s Auguste Dupin, sums up the evidence before revealing his solution. Such rereading leads both Humbert and Hermann to change the endings they had originally planned for their narratives. And it led Nabokov himself to rewrite both *Lolita* and *Despair*—after the books had already been published—by adding a foreword or afterword that further extends each novel’s themes and strategies.

These overlapping forereadings, rereadings, and rewritings make organizing my argument difficult, however. I could follow the order in which the texts and paratexts came into print: *Despair* in 1934, *Lolita* in 1955, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*” in 1956, and the foreword to *Despair* in 1965. I could trace the sequence of nested hermeneutic encounters from the inside out: first the narrator’s reading of his manuscript; then his allusions to fictitious readers, editors, or printers;

and finally Nabokov's remarks on his own novel. I could trace the same sequence from the outside in. Or I could simply start with whatever appears first in each book, assuming that a "good reader" begins at the beginning. But each of these strategies feels artificial: my rereading of *Despair's* foreword, for example, reflects my familiarity with a novel not yet read by the reader Nabokov addresses. My position, as I outline these possibilities, seems as precarious, speculative, and disingenuous as that of Nabokov or his narrators. At any rate, I will begin with *Lolita*—where my argument actually originated—and end with Nabokov's own comparison of the two novels in his foreword to *Despair*.

## Coming Before Oneself in *Lolita*

After Humbert sees Dolores once more, at the end of *Lolita*, he finds it increasingly difficult to deny that he has harmed her. Unable to bear his memories, "now unfolding themselves into limbless monsters of pain" (284), he tries, sentences, and executes Quilty for the very crimes he committed. This episode of vigilante justice foreshadows another attempt at self-judgment, after his arrest, when he constructs his confession as a mock trial that anticipates, and supplants, the actual criminal proceedings. And that confession, in turn, leads to the moment when Humbert, after rereading his own narrative, passes judgment upon it as well as himself.<sup>4</sup>

Humbert first admits that he has already examined the text his readers are still perusing: "This, then, is my story. I have reread it." Although he describes it as a piece of damning forensic evidence, with "bits of marrow sticking to it, and blood," he still doesn't specify either the crime or the victim that it entails. He suggests, in fact, that his confession may even deceive its own author: "At this or that twist of it I feel my slippery self eluding me" (308). Humbert's ambiguous assessment of the text—especially with regard to how it resolves the question of his guilt—anticipates the responses of actual readers. Meanwhile, he has changed his mind about its fate: he decides not to use it in his own defense at the trial, but instead to publish it posthumously as a memoir.

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<sup>4</sup> For an extensive analysis of Humbert's self-judgment in *Lolita*, see my essay "Executing Sentences in *Lolita* and the Law" (193-97).

After judging his confession's reliability and artistic merit, Humbert shifts to assessing his legal case. Despite earlier exhortations to imaginary jurors, he now assumes that a real jury will find him guilty and wonders only what penalty the judge will mete out. He trusts, however, that "the sentencing judge" will share his opposition to capital punishment. Once Humbert invokes this hypothetical like-minded judge, he announces the sentence that he considers appropriate for his own behavior: "Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges" (308).

This statement acknowledges its illegitimacy as a performative declaration, in Austin's terms, even as it attempts to finesse that condition. More precisely, according to Fauconnier and Turner's "conceptual blending" theory, Humbert's statement invokes several conceptual frameworks—some less likely or less legitimate than others—and combines them.<sup>5</sup> In one frame, Humbert assumes that a jury will find him guilty of some crime; in another, he speculates that a sentencing judge will share his values; in another, he imagines the possibility of becoming his own judge; and in another, he describes the actual sentence that he would have given himself. By conflating and elaborating upon these conceptual frames, Humbert can express, albeit indirectly, his profound sense of guilt. The notion of "conceptual blending" not only helps to elucidate the distinct stages of his thinking, but because it originates in studies of "theory of mind"—that is, the ability to imagine what someone else thinks—it also seems especially appropriate to a complex cognitive situation in which Humbert pretends to be someone else and assumes that he can predict that person's judgment.

The blending of these conceptual frames, in Humbert's thought process, is duplicated by the grammatical contortions of his sentence. The sentence shifts from the first person ("Had I come before myself") to the third ("I would have given Humbert"), underscoring the effect of the novel's *Doppelgänger* themes on grammatical person as well as agency. Nabokov's narrator occasionally refers to himself in the third person, but in this instance, having just reread his own narrative—in which he assigns himself the pseudonym "Humbert

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Brian Boyd for pointing out the relevance of conceptual blending theory to my argument.

Humbert”—he may also be responding to “Humbert” as the protagonist of that story, in the same way that readers often assess a fictional character’s thoughts or actions (as this narrator, in fact, continually asks them to do).<sup>6</sup> Humbert’s sentence also employs the subjunctive mood, as required in clauses describing counterfactual situations. However, he chooses the phrase “Had I come before myself”—instead of “If I were to...” or “If it were possible to...”—as if he simply did not happen to appear before himself, even though such a proceeding would be physically, logically, legally, and ethically wrong. The subjunctive mood demands the past tense for conditions contrary to fact, but Humbert uses the past perfect—“I had come” and “I would have given,” not “I came” and “I would give”—as if describing a completed action. No trial has occurred, but the past perfect implies that he has already been tried, judged, and sentenced by someone else.<sup>7</sup> And yet, despite such conditional qualifications, grammatical elisions, and slippery temporal markers, this sentence nevertheless provides the most direct statement of Humbert’s guilt in the entire narrative. He finally admits to rape, if only obliquely, and seeks extensive punishment for it.

Once Humbert acknowledges his guilt, in fact, there is little left to say—since his confession was generated by his need to defend himself—and the novel rapidly concludes. By commenting on his narrative, he has already dissolved the implicit gap between past events and the present moment in which he records them. Now, suddenly, he reveals that neither he nor Dolores will be “alive when the reader opens this book” (309). At the very moment when readers feel most pressured to assess his case, they learn that he is already dead. Turning the novel’s final pages, readers may still be deciding

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<sup>6</sup> Humbert describes himself in the third person—“Humbert Humbert tried hard to be good” (19)—and occasionally combines first and third person references, especially when incorporating other characters’ perspectives (as he imagines them) into his narration: “She looked tremendously pleased with the bonus of fifty I gave her as she trotted out into the April night drizzle with Humbert Humbert lumbering in her narrow wake” (23). Recounting Quilty’s murder, he conflates first and third persons, in both singular and plural forms, even more strikingly: “I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us” (299).

<sup>7</sup> As an audience member at the Nice conference pointed out, Humbert may use the past perfect because he assumes that his trial is over by the time readers read his manuscript.



whether they find Humbert guilty, or innocent, or incorrigible, or repentant, or somehow redeemed. In the midst of this interpretive process, the revelation of his death seems like a *fait accompli*: a capital punishment that Humbert has already announced in his own confession, and that his editor confirms.

## Entitlement in an Essay “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*”

I now turn to Nabokov’s afterword to *Lolita*. (I don’t have space to discuss the novel’s fictitious foreword, although its self-appraisal combines several disparate frameworks, from the pronouncements of imaginary social scientist John Ray, Jr., to an actual judgment about the purported obscenity of Joyce’s *Ulysses*.)<sup>8</sup> Nabokov’s essay invokes and conflates various positions for himself as both author and reader of *Lolita*, even as it comments, self-reflexively, that such an approach “may allow mimic and model to blend” (“On” 311).

The essay’s title—“On a Book Entitled *Lolita*”—immediately suggests a false, if playfully ironic, remoteness. The passive construction glosses over Nabokov’s role in writing this controversial novel, let alone titling it. And the essay’s opening sentence develops such feigned remoteness even further: “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” (311). Although this sentence charmingly admits the absurdity of coming before oneself to be judged, it also wields various rhetorical stratagems and grammatical ploys, not unlike Humbert’s, to justify such an illegitimate stance. When Nabokov remarks, for example, that his own comments—including, of course, that very sentence—“may strike one...as an impersonation,” the conditional tense and the vague, indeterminate “one” acknowledge that “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*”

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<sup>8</sup> Ray focuses on the novel’s ethical and aesthetic significance, although sometimes it seems the opposite of Nabokov’s. His justification for the novel’s sexual content, however, may present Nabokov’s own defense—enacted in advance, like Humbert’s mock trial—against a possible obscenity charge, especially because it even invokes a legal precedent: Woolsey’s “monumental decision” regarding the artistic value of another novel, Joyce’s *Ulysses* (4).

could be deemed unreliable, even as they emphasize that such an interpretation is only a possibility. This hypothetical assessment becomes still more tenuous when Nabokov replaces “one,” by means of a parenthetical insertion, with “me.” He thus ends up obliquely alluding to how his own comments may possibly strike himself. Characterizing those comments, therefore, as “coming straight from” Nabokov—to himself?—seems facetious. In any case, the essay’s opening sentence stages another elegantly impossible instance of self-judgment.

The next sentence uses a second passive construction (“A few points have to be discussed”) to finesse Nabokov’s own position, once more, as the person who determines those points and conducts the discussion about them. The following paragraphs, in which such crucial matters are discussed, establish the basic structure for Nabokov’s subsequent forewords, according to Nichols (115): first, an account of the novel’s composition and publication, from its “initial shiver of inspiration” to *The Enchanter* and then *Lolita* (Nabokov, “On” 311); second, miscellaneous statements defending the novel; third, polemical paragraphs attacking the usual suspects; and finally, elliptical remarks about the novel’s plot, such as those “secret points... by means of which [*Lolita*] is plotted” (316).

What interests me, however, is that Nabokov’s afterword emphasizes not only the gradual development of *Lolita*—from initial concept to published volume—but also his own evolving, increasingly favorable judgment of the novel. Following that artful account of self-impersonation in the first sentence, for example, Nabokov describes himself, in the second paragraph, as “the kind of author who in starting to work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book” (311). After summarizing the plot of *The Enchanter*, he remarks—inaccurately, it turns out—that he “was not pleased with the thing and destroyed it.” Two paragraphs later, tracing the slow progress of *Lolita*’s composition, he says: “Once or twice I was on the point of burning the unfinished draft.” Even after completing “the thing” (312), he still planned to publish it anonymously, if at all, until at last he decided to acknowledge *Lolita* as his own. At this point, Nabokov shifts to the difficulty of finding a publisher for such a daring book. He skillfully uses reviewers’ responses from various presses to defend *Lolita* against the charge of pornography, arguing

that their responses indicated careless, unobservant reading. That defense of the novel leads, in turn, to his famous remarks that “*Lolita* has no moral in tow” and that, for him, “a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss” (314). Only after making this general pronouncement about the nature of literary art does Nabokov issue his final verdict on *Lolita*: that it offers him just such bliss. He now describes his relationship to the novel as “comforting,” “private,” “familiar,” and “companionable,” although his tone still remains guarded; he muses, for example, about how a typical “serious writer” might feel about “this or that published book” (315). And since there are certain parts of “one’s book” that “one evokes more eagerly and tenderly” (315-316), Nabokov’s self-assessment inevitably leads to a stylized rereading, as in the endings of his novels, that touches on key moments of *Lolita*. When “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*” first appeared in *Anchor Review*, this brief synopsis had to substitute for the novel itself (then still unavailable in the United States); now that the essay has become an afterword, Nabokov’s overview recapitulates the narrative that readers have just finished. At any rate, as the essay describes Nabokov’s own experience of reading *Lolita*, it shifts from speculation about what one might evoke in “one’s book” to recounting, in the first person, the actual scenes in this particular novel that he always seems “to pick out for special delectation” (316). Rather than coyly invoking Nabokov’s authority, as it did at the beginning, the afterword now candidly acknowledges his affection for the novel he once wrote. In order to emphasize how this judgment gradually evolved, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*” traces the progression from Nabokov’s initial urges to “get rid of,” destroy, burn, or deny the manuscript to his ultimate appreciation of the completed book: “a delightful presence now that it quietly hangs about the house like a summer day which one knows to be bright behind the haze” (311, 316).

## Forereading in the Foreword to *Despair*

Although the foreword to *Despair* is the one that most closely resembles *Lolita*’s afterword, according to Nichols (117), significant differences remain. In the opening paragraphs—the first part of Nichols’ paradigm—Nabokov doesn’t describe his composition of *Otchaianie*, the original Russian text, at all, and only briefly mentions

its 1934 serialization in Paris, its 1936 book publication in Berlin, and its subsequent prohibition in the Soviet Union. Instead he discusses his initial translation of the novel, which he calls his “first serious attempt [...] to use English for what may be loosely termed an artistic purpose.” He focuses on the reaction of its first reader—a “rather grumpy Englishman,” hired to correct the translation, who refused to read beyond Chapter One because “he disapproved of the book; I suspect he wondered if it might not have been a true confession” (xi; cf. Boyd, *VNRY* 421-22). This anonymous Englishman, who doesn’t finish the text, reads it too literally, and makes unwarranted assumptions about it, echoes the American publishers in “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*” who misinterpreted that novel. Indeed, the Englishman’s misreading anticipates a subsequent pastiche of possible misinterpretations of *Despair*—corresponding to the third part of Nichols’s paradigm—that appears later in the foreword.

Meanwhile, Nabokov explains that that initial translation (published by John Long in 1937) isn’t the text his reader is about to read anyway, although he speculates, in another instance of oddly self-reflexive conceptual blending, about the observations of “Lucky students who may be able to compare the three texts”: the Russian novel, its initial English translation, and the new translation. Indeed, the existence of such fortunate readers seems unlikely, or else possible only in some remote future, because Nabokov also points out that he probably owns the sole extant copy of the first English edition—a remark that introduces themes of authorial privilege and textual inaccessibility developed throughout the foreword (xii).<sup>9</sup> At any rate, the new text not only improves upon that earlier translation but also revises the entire novel, even adding “an important passage [...] stupidly omitted in more timid times”: a scene describing Hermann’s dissociation while making love with Lydia (xii; cf. *Despair* 27). Nabokov’s allusion to a previously omitted passage invokes another prior and, to most readers, inaccessible version: the manuscript itself. This allusion also implies an earlier instance of authorial judgment, as well as a later decision to revoke it. If Nabokov deleted the passage when he first published his novel, as he claims, then such self-censorship suggests—as in the case of *Lolita*—that concern over the

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<sup>9</sup> The Berg Collection at the New York Public Library includes a copy of the 1936 English edition; another was recently advertised for sale on eBay for \$8,500.

book's sexual content may have shaped its structure, its thematic emphasis on criminal speech, and even its presentation as a mock confession.<sup>10</sup> *Despair's* foreword, like *Lolita's* afterword, thus emphasizes the author's evolving assessment of his own novel.

This account of the first English translation serves, in fact, as a pretext for Nabokov's evaluation of the translation readers are about to peruse, another version of *Despair* that he has already read and judged. The translation's provenance—which entails Nabokov reading and redacting his own work at several removes—complicates his evaluation, however, because it involves judging his younger self as both writer and translator. Nabokov adds yet another chiasmus when he imagines his younger self, in turn, approving the current revision: “I also know how pleased and excited I would have been in 1935 had I been able to foreread this 1965 version” (xii). Nabokov employs the same formulation that Humbert uses in *Lolita*—basically, “had I come before myself”—to conflate several conceptual frames into another hypothetical situation. Just as Humbert conceives of physically appearing in front of himself, so Nabokov speculates about chronologically preceding himself in time. In this case, too, the conceptual blending produces an impossible scene of self-judgment (since the younger Nabokov could not have read the later version) which nevertheless asserts a specific verdict (since the older Nabokov claims to know how the younger would have responded). Imagining that the younger Nabokov could “foreread” the present version is especially appropriate, because this archaic word means not only to “read beforehand” but also to “foretell” or even “predestine.” Because of such intimations of future significance, the notion of forereading the current version of *Despair* reinforces its supremacy. Nabokov caps these appraisals of the text's various incarnations—none of which, presumably, has been read by the reader he addresses in the foreword—

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<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Joanna Trzeciak, who told me that the “dissociation” passage does not appear in the manuscript of *Otchaienie*; she concludes that it was neither excised nor reinstated, but simply added, along with other changes, when Nabokov revised his translation in 1965. See Boyd, *AY* 489 and Nabokov, *SL* 373 on Nabokov's extensive alterations in this version, including a new final paragraph in which Hermann, cornered by police, imagines escaping by telling the crowd that they are extras in a film and must keep the police from apprehending him—thus adding another level to the novel's deceptive mise-en-abyme. Proffer lists other additions that make this version more explicitly sexual than the original.

by extolling the superiority of *his* judgment, and *his* version, over those of his earlier self: the young writer's imagined admiration "is not reciprocated by the older man," who "has nothing but an impatient shrug for the bungling apprentice of his youth" (xii).

## Doubled Reading in *Despair*

In the foreword to *Despair*, then, Nabokov's self-judgment takes the form of competition between various versions of the same text, produced by different versions of himself: master and apprentice. Nabokov's gambit prepares readers for various doublings within the novel, especially the narrator's rivalry with his wife's cousin (and lover), a painter named Ardalion; with his supposed lookalike, a tramp named Felix; with the police; and with an unnamed émigré novelist who may help him publish his confession. More specifically, this gambit prepares readers for the moment when Hermann, in the final chapter of *Despair*, also rereads what he has written. Hermann even uses the same stratagem to get around the difficulty of judging himself, when he explains that his narrative was actually written by an alter ego—"that singular associate of mine: memory" (203).

Throughout the novel, Hermann has identified his supposedly perfect murder with an artistic "masterpiece," especially a literary one. He clings to this analogy even more desperately as his narrative's end approaches. When he realizes that the police have misunderstood his motive, for example, Hermann complains that "they behaved just as a literary critic does, who at the mere sight of a book by an author whom he does not favor, makes up his mind that the book is worthless" (191), or who, after first jumping to a "groundless conclusion" about the book's intrinsic design, then perceives "mistakes" in its execution (194). He characterizes the police as careless readers, in other words, like that grumpy Englishman mocked in the foreword to *Despair*. Hermann explains, in fact, that he began writing his confession to defend himself against such possible misinterpretation: "And so, in order to obtain recognition, to justify and save the offspring of my brain, to explain to the world all the depth of my masterpiece, did I devise the writing of the present tale" (195).

But Hermann, like Humbert, is unable to convince himself with the very defense that he wants others to find convincing. To alleviate such

“intolerable forebodings” about the success of both his criminal scheme and his written confession, he decides, “before penning the two or three final sentences,” to read over the whole narrative (200). He finds it difficult, however, to divide his consciousness sufficiently in order to do this, even though he makes a show of hefting the manuscript and “mutter[ing] a facetious ‘well, well!’” as if performing before an imaginary audience. By the time he is settled comfortably in bed, and ready to review the manuscript, his “delicious foretaste” has become “a horrible apprehension” (201). Once he glances at the first page, however, such forereading, foreboding, and foretasting turns into rereading. As Hermann scans the opening pages, he provides the kind of retrospective summary that often models thoughtful consideration of the text for Nabokov’s readers: “I went on reading [...] And again I wove my spell about him, and had him in my toils but he slipped away, and I feigned to give up my scheme, and with an unexpected potency the story blazed forth anew, demanding of its creator a continuation and an ending” (202).

At this instant, Hermann suddenly perceives the crucial oversight in his perfect crime: a walking stick bearing his victim’s name, left behind at the scene. He realizes, therefore, that both his criminal and his literary “masterpiece” are irreparably flawed: “I smiled the smile of the condemned and in a blunt pencil that screamed with pain wrote swiftly and boldly on the first page of my work: ‘Despair’; no need to look for a better title” (203-204). And yet such self-judgment seems like an additional imposture, in which he smiles someone else’s smile. Indeed, Hermann’s statement provides another artful example of conceptual blending. It establishes at least three distinct frames—his condemnation of his own flawed manuscript; the death sentence that he could possibly receive for committing what he thought was the perfect crime; and his search for the perfect title—and combines them so neatly that his pencil, writing down the titular “Despair,” “scream[s] with pain” as if it were his own physical body suffering that imagined capital punishment. A few pages later, as Hermann anticipates his imminent capture by the police, he speculates about the various punishments he might receive (from beheading to being “sentence[ed] to a spell of hard labor”), and outlines an unconvincing legal defense based on a series of hypothetical analogies (“Let us suppose, I kill an ape. Nobody touches me. Suppose it is a particularly

clever ape. [...] By ascending these subtle steps circumspectly, I may climb up to Leibniz or Shakespeare and kill them, and nobody will touch me, as it is impossible to say where the border was crossed"). Like Humbert, he finds that such attempts to judge himself, with all their assumptions, syllogisms, and sophistries, cannot suppress his awareness of his own guilt: "What on earth have I done?" (210).

As in the case of *Lolita*, too, Hermann's anxiety about his manuscript's moral and artistic significance parallels Nabokov's tendency to appraise his own work. Although *Despair* does not include, like *Lolita*, a fictitious foreword in which another persona pronounces judgment on the text, Nabokov's self-assessment nevertheless shapes its narrative frame. Surely "that Russian author," "the well-known author of psychological novels," to whom Hermann's manuscript will be "forwarded when the time comes" (80)—just as Humbert's manuscript is sent to John Ray, Jr., in *Lolita*—is an avatar of Nabokov himself. This mise-en-abyme provides yet another instance of complex self-judgment in *Despair*, since Hermann not only appraises the Russian author's plots—"artificial, though not badly constructed"—but imagines the other's response to his narrative, in turn: "What will you feel, reader-writer, when you tackle my tale? Delight? Envy? Or even... who knows? ... you may use my termless removal to give out my stuff [...] for the fruit of your own crafty [...] and experienced imagination" (80-81). Although readers of *Despair* never do find out what the "Russian author" thought of Hermann's narrative, he clearly liked it enough to publish it as his own.

## The Creator's Judgment

Later in the foreword to *Despair*, after Nabokov has discussed his novel's probable reception with characteristic coyness—rejecting interpretations that focus on social commentary, spiritual concerns, psychoanalysis, or existentialism; cautioning that it has "less White-Russian appeal" than his other works; and even recommending its "plain structure and pleasing plot"—he contrasts the work of his younger and older selves once more. Although he confidently forestalls other interpretations, Nabokov seems perturbed by those that might relate this novel to his subsequent work. "I am unable to foresee and to fend inevitable attempts to find in the alembics of *Despair*



something of the rhetorical venom that I injected into the narrator's tone in a much later novel" (xiii).

At first glance, this statement seems to avoid the counterfactual impossibilities of Nabokov's other self-appraisals. And yet even as he states that he cannot "foresee" such interpretations of *Despair*, he describes them as "inevitable." To say that he cannot "fend" them, moreover, implies that they may be justified. Indeed, he even outlines a possible comparison between *Despair* and *Lolita*, suggesting that the novels' narration is similar in tone. Nabokov may have hoped that potential readers of *Despair* would consider its likely affinity to his most famous book. He may even have found it difficult not to compare them himself, because in March 1965, when he wrote this foreword, he had spent the previous two months translating *Lolita* into Russian at the same time that he revised the English translation of *Despair* (Boyd, AY 489).

At any rate, despite his claim that he cannot forefend such readings, Nabokov proceeds to establish two contexts for them that assert his own interpretive authority. First, he states that "Hermann and Humbert are alike only in the sense that two dragons painted by the same artist at different periods of his life resemble each other," a pronouncement that echoes Ardalion's remarks on an artist's perception of differences, rather than resemblances, in *Despair* itself.<sup>11</sup> This statement is tantamount to claiming that Nabokov's own artistic development—here, again, he distinguishes between his younger and older selves—is the only appropriate framework for evaluating his fiction (xiii).<sup>12</sup>

Second, Nabokov implies, immediately afterwards, that these two protagonists are nevertheless comparable in another context. They can also be distinguished from one another in terms of their relative wickedness—a proposition, Nichols remarks, which seems "somewhat incongruous in view of Nabokov's claim [...] to have 'no social comment to make'" (117). I am interested, however, in how Nabokov

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<sup>11</sup> Ardalion tells Hermann, for example, that "In the whole world there are not and cannot be, two men alike" and "what the artist perceives is, primarily, the *difference* between things."

<sup>12</sup> The preceding metaphor—in which a venom distilled in *Despair* has been "injected" into *Lolita*—also emphasizes Nabokov's own artistic development as the context for comparing the novels (xiii).

formulates this hypothetical comparison: “Both are neurotic scoundrels, yet there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year; but Hell shall never parole Hermann” (Foreword xiii). This statement may be the most daring of all his illegitimate self-appraisals. Here Nabokov claims a right to judge others’ ultimate moral worth which is not only traditionally accorded to God—who is thought to determine what “is permitted,” who is “parole[d],” and where individuals spend eternity—but which is supposedly exercised in the future, on Judgment Day, after the world ends. Humbert and Hermann are fictional characters, of course, and their creator can dispose of them as he sees fit. It is significant, however, that he does so by imagining another judgment—the ultimate judgment, in more than one sense—despite counterfactual conundrums involving both identity and temporality (since Nabokov is not God, and since Judgment Day has not yet occurred). This time, however, he does not acknowledge such impossibilities, let alone explain them away.

When Nabokov discusses Hermann’s similarity to Humbert, then, he does so by imagining possible judgments of their relative artistic significance and moral worth—a context that invites further comparison of attempts to “come before [one]self” in *Despair* and *Lolita* as well as in the paratexts that accompany them. As I have shown, these texts stage their scenes of self-judgment in identical ways, especially by combining different conceptual frames and by engineering subtle grammatical shifts in person, agency, mood, or tense. But Nabokov’s narrators and authorial personae do not only wield the same rhetorical strategies. They also share a slightly defensive, facetious, even antagonistic tone, as if they are haunted by the prospect of being judged by someone else. Indeed, the congruence of such self-appraisals—in different pairings of fictional text and authoritative paratext—may reflect Nabokov’s own anxiety about others’ evaluation of his work. And yet it also suggests his interest in confession as a psychological tendency, narrative genre, and rhetorical strategy; his curiosity about how identity is formed by imagining that one is someone else; his delight in extending his novels’ formal and thematic concerns into the textual apparatus that surround them; and his devotion to a continual process of forereading, reading, rereading, and revision.

For Hermann and Humbert, meanwhile, to appoint themselves the criminal judges of their own cases and the critical reviewers of their own manuscripts is to repeat their original crimes, in which they denied other characters' humanity and autonomy. Hermann and Humbert eventually realize, however—and at the same point in each narrative—that they cannot determine their own legal and literary fates. Both acknowledge, in the end, that someone else will judge them (even though each rationalizes that he will somehow manage to escape the death penalty). Both accept the fact, too, that someone else will read and evaluate their manuscripts (although each tries to dictate the terms under which his confession will be edited and published). Even as Hermann and Humbert admit the impossibility of assessing themselves, then, their ultimate judgment is still displaced to a hypothetical space and time beyond the texts they have written. It is deferred in another way, too, since each attempt at self-judgment is repeated in the foreword or afterword appended to the novel. And within those paratexts, Nabokov, too—despite all the possible misreadings that he tries to anticipate and subvert ahead of time, just as Hermann and Humbert try to forestall their own probable fates—must acknowledge his readers' subsequent, independent, scarcely imaginable assessments of his fiction at yet another level.

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