



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

15 | 2017

Lolita at 60 / Staging American Bodies

Introduction

Marie Bouchet, Yannicke Chupin, Agnès Edel-Roy and Julie Loison-Charles



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/11253>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.11253

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Marie Bouchet, Yannicke Chupin, Agnès Edel-Roy and Julie Loison-Charles, "Introduction", *Miranda* [Online], 15 | 2017, Online since 09 October 2017, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/11253> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.11253>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.



Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Introduction

Marie Bouchet, Yannicke Chupin, Agnès Edel-Roy and Julie Loison-Charles

- 1 It has been over sixty years since *Lolita* first appeared in its green-clad double volume in 1955 in Paris, published by Maurice Girodias (Olympia Press). During those six decades, the nymphet that Nabokov carved out of American *posh* lust has made her way through all the clichés of magazines and tabloids, but also through the history of literature and the history of language (one can now look up the noun “lolita” in dictionaries). *Lolita* has also shaped a very specific way of being a reader, mainly because of its intertextual layering which plays with the stereotypes of Romantic poetry and detective novels, and because of its very unique narrative stance and traps. This way of being a reader has in its turn influenced writers, as can be traced in the novel’s numerous ripples in contemporary literature.
- 2 Yet, what could one hope to say about *Lolita* that has not been said in six decades of criticism, annotations and commentaries? As Brian Boyd states in his 2008 essay “*Lolita*: What We Know and What We Don’t,” critics have probably not yet unraveled all the threads of the delicate and intricate weave of the text: “There is much, much more we need to learn about *Lolita*” (Boyd 17).
- 3 Some light had been shed on the dark zones of the text in the third issue of *Miranda*¹ back in 2010, but following the conference² and events organized in September 2015³ to celebrate the 60th anniversary of *Lolita*’s publication in Paris, the French Vladimir Nabokov Society invited scholars to provide new readings or elements of research so far unknown or not yet exploited by critics. The essays in this *Miranda* issue renew our perspective on *Lolita* through three different angles: history, intertextuality, and literary posterity. The first two essays contextualize the history of *Lolita*’s publication, so as to contrast it with our context of reception. They are grounded on new research material coming from the archive of the French publishing house Gallimard in Paris, to which Agnès Edel-Roy and Julie Loison-Charles were granted access for the first time.
- 4 If Nabokov often claimed his indifference to social or political issues, his work has seldom triggered indifference among his contemporaries. In her contribution entitled “Nabokov et la censure” / “Nabokov and censorship,” Julie Loison-Charles envisions the various forms of censorship, whether they be political or moral, endured by

Nabokov's novels, from a renewed perspective. Indeed it is now established that *Lolita* was "the heroine of all censorships," according to the novel's first publisher, Maurice Girodias (*Le Monde*, July 15, 1977). Loison-Charles shows however that the banishment of Nabokov's novels is somehow the quintessential form of their relationship to politics, since Nabokov's works published in Russian as an émigré were forbidden in soviet Russia. Later on, the political censorship in Russia was mirrored by censorship within the émigré community, when the fourth chapter of *The Gift* was denied publication by *Sovremennye Zapiski*, because the editors disagreed with Nabokov's vision of Nikolay Chernychevsky⁴ in it. After World War 2, it is with his novel written in English, *Lolita*, that Nabokov, now an American citizen, spurred a raging controversy over "a novel you cannot put in anyone's hands" (Alain Nicolas, « Nabokov ou la méprise », *L'Humanité*, November 25, 1999). Thanks to her work on the Gallimard archive in particular, Loison-Charles reconstitutes Girodias's long struggle against the French moral censorship, but she also focuses on the international aspects of *Lolita*'s censorship, and on Nabokov's own stance, repeatedly rejecting the idea that the novel was obscene. According to him, the novel should only be judged by aesthetic/literary standards—which today's puritan Russia still refuses to do.

- 5 If the novel in English met with many problems when it was published in France because of censorship, it took three years for the French version of *Lolita* to be published, but for a variety of different reasons. Agnès Edel-Roy retraces the stormy and tense relationship of Vladimir Nabokov with the French translator of *Lolita*, Eric Kahane, also the brother of Maurice Girodias, while Kahane was painstakingly and slowly translating *Lolita* into French for Gallimard, from 1956 to 1959. Quoting so-far unpublished exchanges between Nabokov's agent at Gallimard, Michel Mohrt, the translator and Vladimir or Vera Nabokov, Edel-Roy presents the dramatic dimension of this triangular communication across the Atlantic Ocean, marked by threats of contract breach and complications brought about by staff shifts and postal delays. In her contribution Edel-Roy also underscores the part played by important literary figures such as Queneau, Sartre or Pasternak—a part they played more or less consciously.
- 6 Focusing then on the reception of *Lolita*, yet this time not by institutions but by academic critics, Suzanne Fraysse interrogates for the first time the practice of annotating *Lolita*. Indeed *Lolita* is Nabokov's first novel to have been published in an annotated form, as early as 1970, with notes based on Appel's and Proffer's academic work⁵, all reviewed by Nabokov himself⁶, and while the notes themselves triggered various debates among Nabokov scholars, the very practice of annotating the novel has never been questioned. Fraysse argues that annotations constitute a preeminently political field where the issues of authority and legitimacy are constantly rehearsed, and in which dealing with the desire-driven narrative appears to be tricky to handle.
- 7 Many annotations of *Lolita* unveil the intertextual references carefully woven into the text's network of patterns, and the contribution by Wilson Orozco follows one of *Lolita*'s referential threads, by exploring the novel's relationship to a hypotext up-to-now largely ignored, *Possessed*, by Curtis Bernhardt (1947), one of the two movies Humbert actually claims he saw with *Lolita*⁷. Orozco's paper shows how *Possessed*, another story of obsession and love, provides a reference that embeds the plot of *Lolita* and therefore creates a *mise en abyme* effect. His paper also unveils some striking similarities between the film and the novel, especially regarding the unreliability of the narrative source,

and the importance of psychoanalytical confession in both works, from a structural and thematic point of view.

- 8 As for Marie Bouchet's paper in this issue, it provides an insight into a different type of intertextual game, as it does not focus on literary, artistic or filmic allusions, but delves into Nabokov's integration of non-literary material taken from post-World War 2 American mass culture into the textual fabric. Thanks to the preparatory notes to the novel kept at the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, Bouchet not only analyzes Nabokov's techniques of absorption of the non-literary material—production of reality effects, parody, intermedial games, puns, pattern-building—but also compares them with his more traditional intertextual practice, so as to consider anew the role of popular culture in his aesthetics.
- 9 Going through the intertextual looking-glass, and examining the posterity of *Lolita* some sixty years later, the last two papers of this *Miranda* issue deal with how *Lolita* became a hypotext for other novels published after 1955. In her article, Corjanus underlines the literary connections between *Lolita* and the first chapter of Michel Tournier's *Le Roi des Aulnes*, which focuses on Martine's alleged rape by Abel Tiffauges. The genesis of Tournier's book is crucial as his first chapter was first drafted in 1958, which is only three years after *Lolita* was published in Paris. Corjanus sheds light on lexical and stylistic similarities between Nabokov's and Tournier's languages, such as the male equivalent of Nabokov's "nymphet," the "faunlet". Corjanus goes on to show that Tiffauges's perception of Martine is highly reminiscent of the way Humbert sees *Lolita*, as Tiffauges sexualizes and solipsizes Martine. Corjanus also reveals that the two books are connected through a third text, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, which weaves the intertextual references between Nabokov and Tournier even more tightly.
- 10 Looking at *Lolita* and its legacy nowadays also invites to reflect upon the impact the novel has had over 21st-century writers who drew their inspiration from what Yannick Chupin calls the "*Ur-text*". In her paper dedicated to three novels published some sixty years after Nabokov's most famous novel—Alissa Nutting's *Tampa* (2013), Amity Gaige's *Schroder* (2013), and Sara Stridsberg's *Darling River, Les Variations Dolores* (2011)—Chupin observes that recent rewrites of *Lolita* tend to veer away from the political and feminist nuances that tinted many *Lolita*-inspired novels in the 1990s to seize more literary elements of Nabokov's novel, whether it be its transgressive plot, its many-layered structure, its narrative intricacies or its unreliable narrator, showing how such variety in the variations on the *Lolita* theme reflects the novel's core richness and complexity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Appel, Alfred Jr.. "Backgrounds of *Lolita*". *Triquarterly*: 17 (1970): 17-40. This essay appears in a somewhat remodeled form in his introduction to *The Annotated Lolita*. New York: Vintage, 1995. xxxiii-lv.

Appel, Alfred Jr.. "Notes". *The Annotated Lolita*. New York: Vintage, 1995. 319-457.

Boyd, Brian. "Lolita: What We Know and What We Don't". *Cycnos*: 24, 1 (2007): 215-246. Egalement disponible en ligne. 11 août 2017:

<http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/index.html?id=1079>

Chupin, Yannicke. « Journée d'études « Les Soixante ans de *Lolita* » / "*Lolita's Sixtieth Anniversary*". *Transatlantica*: 1 (2015). Mis en ligne le 14 décembre 2015, consulté le 11 août 2017: <http://transatlantica.revues.org/7563>

Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsestes*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita*. Preface and notes by Alfred Appel Jr. (1970). New York: Vintage, 1995.

Proffer, Carl. *Keys to Lolita*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968.

NOTES

1. <https://miranda.revues.org/323>
2. <https://transatlantica.revues.org/7563>
3. <https://www.vladimir-nabokov.org/association/manifestations/2016-01-25-15-09-59>
4. Chernychevsky was one of the spiritual forefathers of the Leninist doctrine.
5. Alfred Appel Jr.'s "Backgrounds of *Lolita*", "Notes", and Carl Proffer's "Keys to *Lolita*" (see works cited).
6. Nabokov played with the function and figure of the annotator in *Pale Fire* (1962) and as Vivian Darkbloom in *Ada* (the set of footnotes he wrote for the 1969 novel was published for the first time with the second edition of the book, in 1970).
7. "Anyway, I was literally gasping for breath, and one corner of the book of doom kept stabbing me in the stomach while I scanned and skimmed... *Brute Force* and *Possessed* were coming on Sunday, the 24th, to both theatres" (Nabokov, 262).