

The question is which is to be master: Notes on Nabokov and Freud

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"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master - that's all."

[Lewis Carroll Alice Through the Looking-Glass]

I

Let me begin by citing a selection from the numerous and vehement attacks on Freud and psychoanalysis scattered throughout Nabokov's non-fictional writing:¹

- let me say at once that I reject completely the vulgar, shabby, fundamentally medieval world of Freud, with its crankish quest for sexual symbols... and its bitter little embryos, spying, from their natural nooks, upon the love life of their parents. [SM p18]

- Of course, we know what the Viennese Quack thought of the matter. We will leave him and his fellow travelers to jog on, in their third-class carriage of thought, through the police state of sexual myth... [SM p230]

- One of the greatest pieces of charlatanic, and satanic, nonsense imposed on a gullible public is the Freudian interpretation of dreams. [SO p47]

- all my books should be stamped Freudians, Keep Out... ['Foreword' BS p11]

Although it is fairly clear that the gentleman doth protest too much, a number of problems emerge when we attempt to understand the dynamics generating this type of statement. Firstly, what exactly is being attacked: Freud's writings, American psychoanalytical institutions, psychoanalytical readings of literature, or the concept of the unconscious itself? It is difficult to decide since the attacks are more fans of machine-gun fire than carefully-aimed pistol shots. And Nabokov's writings reveal little direct evidence concerning his familiarity with either Freud's work in particular or psychoanalytical practice in general. In an interview, Nabokov confesses to 'bookish familiarity, only' with the practice of psychoanalysis in America [SO p23]; aside from that, a letter to Edmund Wilson, revealing a knowledge of Freud's letters to Wilhelm Fliess [NWL p300], is about all in the way of direct evidence. Secondly, what are the grounds of the attack? The accusations which recur are: poshlost' (vulgarity, cheapness and nastiness), mediaevalism, charlatanism, and satanism, what amounts merely to a collection of 'weasel' words. The attack is almost always in the form not of argument but invective. But what is clear from the vehemence and the frequency of these outbursts is that the distaste is inextricably mingled with fascina-

tion. Indeed, on occasion, Nabokov himself is not averse to indulging in the ambiguous delights of sexual symbol spotting, as witnessed by another letter to Wilson, in which Nabokov analyses the passion for flag-poles of a 'little man' at the Lincoln memorial [NWL pp87-8]. What is equally apparent is that the vehemence increases markedly the closer the analysis gets to Nabokov's own writing. Nabokov's review of William Woodin Rowe's discussion (in Nabokov's Deceptive World) of sexual puns and symbols in Lolita and Ada reveals this tendency most markedly.² It is, then, perhaps not surprising that in a number of Nabokov's English-language novels (particularly Lolita, Pale Fire, and Ada) the reader encounters a curious combination of overt delight in puns and language games with strong sexual overtones and insistent rebuttal of anticipated Freudian interpretations, elements which come together in the distinctively late Modernist narrative strategy of auto-interpretation.

What, then, is the budding Freudian interpreter to do in the face of this provocation, this simultaneous invitation and refusal? Two obvious reactions are: to follow Nabokov's directive and 'Keep Out'; or to call the bluff and analyse the aetiology of the intrusive narcissism and/or paranoia of Nabokov's narrators or Nabokov himself. The first will obviously produce no responses that we can investigate here, although we may note that the bulk of the output of the Nabokov critical industry has assiduously followed the lesson of the master and avoided any hint of 'Freudian rot'. The second is encountered in LR Hiatt's essay, 'Nabokov's Lolita: A "Freudian" Cryptic Crossword',³ which I wish to examine in a little detail.

Hiatt 'call[s] Nabokov's bluff' and argues that 'despite his professed antipathy to psychoanalysis, he knowingly but surreptitiously endows Humbert with classical symptoms of the Oedipus complex... The submerged core... is something like this. Humbert's obsession with nymphets in general, and Lolita in particular, is an attempt to re-experience the fresh, unspoiled love of his mother during infancy. Quilty represents his father' [p361]. The evidence for this reading is provided by close analysis of certain areas of the text, relying heavily on 'standardised symbols' (such as the gun, lightning, and chess pieces) and proper names. The second, and much briefer, part of Hiatt's thesis concerns 'why Nabokov should have taken such pains to camouflage' this hidden structure. This is accounted for by the author's 'sympathetic imagination': 'Nabokov has given... [Humbert] an Oedipus complex; he has also given him a set of defences against self-understanding. He has, in addition, thrown up a smoke-screen to hide his hero's secret from public gaze. It is a strange game for an author to play. If he wins, his reader loses the point of the book' [p370]. At this point, just as the argument seems about to engage with real complexity, the paper ends. The major contradiction of Hiatt's position is that while a clear

distinction is made between the character Humbert's conscious and unconscious knowledge, such a procedure is not applied to the author's own 'knowing'. The myth of the total and conscious control of the artist is thus preserved. This allows the interpreter to demonstrate his own knowledge of the secret (and thus his superiority to the uninitiated 'public gaze') without challenging the power of the master who possesses and indeed has generated the secret.⁴ Yet if we go beyond the analysis of the character to penetrate the unconscious 'knowing' of the creator, we become engaged immediately in a power game the terms of which have already been laid down by the auto-interpretative strategies of the narrative itself. It seems to me that the only way in which we can escape from this double bind (the choice between the Charybdis of sharing the power of the master or the Scylla of becoming the master oneself) is to attempt an analysis which at once questions the metaphysics of depth which permits this struggle for a unitary meaning and goes beyond the tyranny of the discrete, single subject.

The framework for such an approach has already been outlined variously in the theoretical writings of Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser,⁵ but here we can approach these questions most economically through Allon White's reading of the fiction of early Modernism⁶ which deploys the insights of Lacan and Althusser in ways both sensitive and suggestive for our purposes here. White examines the simultaneous emergence at the turn of the century through the 'fractures of realist fiction' of what Althusser has termed 'symptomatic reading'⁷ (here represented not so much by Freud as by Nordau, Lombroso, Mallarmé, and Vernon Lee) and new forms of textual obscurity in fiction - of style, narrative, scene, and symbolic structure - seen particularly in Meredith, Conrad, and James. White summarises: 'Literature without displacement is unthinkable, but literature written for readers alerted to this fact is inevitably self-obscuring' [p3]. White's procedure is significant in four respects: (1) it foregrounds the complex dialectical relationship between modes of writing and reading at a specific historical conjuncture; (2) it recognises that at such a conjuncture, textual obscurity functions both as a defence and as a guarantee of creative possibility, that fiction remains both symptom and literary object, and at the same time; (3) it recognises that displacement both conceals and reveals not only psychic but also ideological contradictions; and (4) it considers the extent to which the critical method employed is itself engaged with the cultural history which it describes. Following White's procedure, then, we may be able to engage with both the specificity of Nabokov's fictional writing and wider cultural questions, in a way that escapes the double-bind of the power-games outlined above. This first of all necessitates the recognition of a different historical conjuncture constructed by and constructing new modes of writing and reading.

Here we might juxtapose the writings of, among others, Nabokov, Beckett, Borges, and Robbe-Grillet in the period following the end of the second world war under the heading of late Modernist fiction. This category is preferred to the term 'Postmodernist' now coming into critical fashion, since it is suggested that continuities between the two moments are more marked than the disjunctions. Modes of symptomatic reading have undergone not so much a radical change as a radical proliferation, a development which is intimately involved with the markedly increased professionalisation of culturally dominant critical practices. The available psychoanalytic models have increased both in number and in sophistication (including the foregrounding of the social and linguistic formations in relation to the psychic formation). The invitations in Freud's later writings to extend the area of the analysed from the psychopathological to the cultural norms themselves have been increasingly accepted. The widespread development of courses given to the critical reading of literary texts in an exponentially increasing number of educational establishments in the present century has produced an almost total professionalisation, indeed an industrialisation, of acts of symptomatic reading. The author, as one of the principle raw materials of this industrial process, has increasingly moved into a position also to take a share in the profits, through various interview modes, or through engagement in the production of critical writing, not infrequently within the educational establishment itself. Not insignificantly, Borges and Nabokov have been among the most willing to participate in the interview sub-industry; and we might recall here that Nabokov was employed as a lecturer at more than one American university over a period of almost twenty years.

Modes of Modernist writing, then, may be seen as contiguous with these developments, both a cause and an effect. Textual difficulty has thus undergone a transformation in the direction not so much of increased obscurity (as we may associate that term with the writings of Mallarmé and the late James), as towards the foregrounding of its own processes, a development which includes the elements of both high self-consciousness and game. The textual strategies most obviously associated with this process are those of auto-interpretation and auto-cancellation, the latter seen at its most extreme in the 'affirmations and negations invalidated as soon as uttered, or sooner or later' of Beckett's *Unnameable*.⁸ While these devices obviously have a certain defensive role, they frequently reveal an overt aggressiveness towards the potential interpreter which is absent from Jamesian obscurity.

Let us now return more specifically to the writings of Nabokov in the light of the above clarifications. If it is there that the battle for control of meaning between writer and reader reveals its most aggressive aspect, we note also that the aggression is consistently displaced on to the forms of game,

albeit those most war-like and intellectual struggles, chess and bridge. The Russian's love of chess and card games is evident throughout his writing, both fictional and non-fictional. But, significantly, the concern is more often with the chess problem (of which Nabokov has published a number of examples)⁹ rather than with the game itself. Chess or bridge problems are, like many detective stories, one-sided games, the strategy of the composer being pre-determined. 'I'm not interested in games as such. Games mean the participation of other persons; I'm interested in the lone performance', Nabokov is on record as saying [SO p117]. There is an interesting passage in Speak, Memory relating to this point:

It should be understood that competition in chess problems is not really between White and Black but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world), so that a great part of the problem's value is due to the number of "tries" - delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray. [SM p223]

It seems clear that the bracketed analogy to fiction is not merely a chance association, since Nabokov goes on to write of 'the ecstatic core of the process [of producing a chess problem] and its points of connexion with various other, more overt and fruitful, operations of the human mind', such as writing fiction. Yet Nabokov never makes clear exactly what these points of connexion might be. And the above passage remains ambiguous as to whether the analogy between the 'competition' and the 'clash' is only a general one or remains valid in the later details concerning the value of the problem. There is a crucial distinction to be made here in the realm of fiction between playing games with the reader, and playing games on the reader. The former would imply a joint exploration of the problems of narrative and mystery, time and desire. The second would suggest something like Stephen Dedalus's author-God, remaining 'within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails',¹⁰ the affirmation of the total control of the artist over the narrative process. In the field of chess, in both the above passage and the following description of a specific chess problem [SM pp223-4], Nabokov overtly supports the autocracy of the problem creator, and seems to suggest that the "tries" of the hypothetical solver are, in some way, pre-determined. It is of the highest importance to be clear to what extent this may be true in the field of Nabokov's fictions also. It seems to me that in the best of Nabokov's fiction, narrative is exploration, a game with the reader, but that the dangers of narcissism and aestheticism are never far away from his

writing, and that this often produces the flaunting of authorial power through narratives which play games on the reader.

I hope to analyse the first option in the later detailed discussion of Lolita. We might discuss the second through close attention to the later novels Pale Fire and Ada, but for the sake of brevity, we may merely note its operation in a rather different field of discourse where power relations between writer and reader are irreducibly asymmetrical: the university examination question. The following are representative examples from university exams set by Nabokov on Bleak House and Madame Bovary:

- The social side ("upper class" versus "lower class" etc) is the weakest one in Bleak House. Who was Mr George's brother? What part did he play? Should a major reader skip those pages, even if they are weak?
 - What character in Madame Bovary behaves in very much the same way as a character in Bleak House does under somewhat similar circumstances? The thematic clue is: "devotion".
 - Although the construction of Bleak House is a great improvement on Dicken's previous work, still he had to conform to the exigencies of serialization. Flaubert ignored all matters extraneous to his art when writing Madame Bovary. Mention some of the structural points in Madame Bovary. [LL pp384-5]
- Despite the immense controlling power already inherent in the discourse of the examiner, what we see here in this curious combination of dictum, instruction, and invitation is the consistent attempt to control not only the content but also the discursive assumptions of the examinee's response. Nevertheless, these acts of textual aggression, foregrounded also in Nabokov's fictional writing, clearly perform also a significant defensive role. This also may be seen sub specie ludi as a form of preemptive bidding, getting in first with a form of parodic auto-interpretation which forces the critic to withdraw or risk overstating the case. Although this can still be seen most clearly in his preempting of psychoanalytical approaches, further, Nabokov seems to raise a shield of protective irony to ward off all exegetical attacks, including Marxist or other sociologically oriented readings, and even the most conventional of attempts to outline literary precursors and influences.

II

Let us now return to Lolita in order to investigate these dynamics of writing and reading in a more specific context. We may begin by remarking how here the clash or competition is present not only at the level of the narration, between implied author and implied reader, but also at the level of the narrated, between the narrator/protagonist and his 'brother' or opposite, Quilty; H and Q share a 'brotherhood' not only in being sexual rivals, but also in their love of

verbal puzzle. The basic structural pattern of Humbert's narrative is indirection followed by direction, a pattern which occurs twice. In Part One, the international wanderings in search of a love object lost in childhood give way, after the encounter with Lolita, to Humbert's pellmell chase after sexual fulfillment; and, following that fulfillment, in Part Two, the narrative once again loses its way in the aimless criss-crossing of the United States, until, with Lolita's disappearance, it reverts to breakneck pursuit and a second ambiguous fulfillment in the murder of Quilty. Both indirection and direction are embodied as journey; the battered Haze automobile is one of the crucial figures in Lolita. And, since narrative is also journeying, the reader's forward drive through the fiction may also be in suspenseful expectancy of the fulfillment of desire. That journey proves to be something of a switch-back ride. The forward movement generating suspense and desire is accompanied by the backward look generated by enigma and curiosity. Here, however, the sexual underpinnings of curiosity and suspense are foregrounded in a manner not usually encountered in more conventional mystery stories.

Here the narrative voice is of paramount importance. Let us listen for a moment to the opening of Humbert's narrative:

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.

She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita.

Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain girl child. In a principedom by the sea. Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer. You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this crown of thorns. [L p11]

Now, I am aware that to write of 'listening' to a series of black marks on a piece of white paper involves a number of assumptions that are open to question, and that Derrida, most notably, has already subjected to scrutiny.¹¹ Yet it is obvious from the above passage that, despite his manifest awareness of writing at the end of the Gutenberg era, Nabokov exhibits a positive pleasure in knowing that he can play with such auditory qualities of writing, or more precisely, in challenging the reader to say that he cannot. More specifically, in addition to belonging to Wayne Booth's class of 'unreliable narrators',¹² Humbert explicitly

associates himself with the modern form of the 'Gentle Reader' tradition, with which many of Beckett's narrators (more markedly in the English-language versions) can also be associated. Yet this strategy does not necessarily imply the full presence of the speaking voice, for it is consistently opposed by the drawing of attention to the textuality of the narrative, thus problematising as much as fostering collusion between writer and reader. In addition, the narrative forces the compliant reader into a bewildering variety of contradictory roles and attitudes, thus problematising the relation between speaker and hearer, and the notions of speaking and hearing themselves in this context.

Despite this variety, the courtroom scene is the most frequently evoked setting for Humbert's monologue which strives so often to be a dialogue. Readers are thus invited to take on the role variously of judge, court official, the gentlemen and 'frigid gentlewomen' [p131] of the jury; and are asked to judge, forgive or condemn. And Humbert is not only an unreliable but also an unstable narrator, taking up even more roles than the reader is asked to assume; in the courtroom scene, he conducts his own bewildering defence. During the course of the narrative, he dons masks and assumes voices with Protean ease and mercurial rapidity. When, at the vital moment in the bedroom scene in the 'Enchanted Hunters' lodge, Lolita, awaking all too easily from her drugged slumbers, sleepily addresses Humbert as 'Barbara', he immediately becomes Barbara for an instant: 'Barbara, wearing my pyjamas which were much too big for her, remained poised motionless over the little sleep-talker. Softly, with a hopeless sigh, Dolly turned away, resuming her initial position. For at least two minutes I waited...' [L p127]. A more extended example would be the earlier prefigurement of fulfillment in the Sunday morning scene on the couch [L p58ff], which is presented initially in the form of a drama including a cast list and stage directions before reverting to first-person narration. As both these examples illustrate, the device involves rapid movement from first person to third person and back again, and from an 'inside' to an 'outside' perspective, which disrupts narrative continuity.

This uncertainty also disturbs the status of the world Humbert's narrative creates, since the code of realism is insistently contested. In 'On a book entitled Lolita', Nabokov indicates his concern to capture a 'modicum of average "reality"' of the United States, just as he had done previously with Russia and Western Europe. It is clear that his patient accumulation of detail of the motel world while on butterfly-hunting trips contributes to the novel. Yet Humbert's world is also overtly a landscape of desire, with its 'Lake Climax', 'Conception Park', 'Insomnia Lodge', 'Killer Street', 'Miss Opposite', 'Headmistress Pratt', etc. Pathetic fallacy is also used, as after Humbert's final farewell to Lolita: 'I was driving through the drizzle of the dying day, with

the windshield wipers in full action but unable to cope with my tears' [L p273]. Humbert's poetic musings on Lolita's class list show how able he is to appropriate the most unpromising of 'realistic' details for other purposes. In addition, Humbert's narrative explores the tension between conspiracy and paranoia, particularly in the second part, where Humbert moves rapidly from open confession of delusion ('it was becoming abundantly clear that all those identical detectives in prismatically changing cars were figments of my persecution mania' L p233) to certainty of the existence of a plot to capture Lolita ('all were in the plot, the sordid plot' L p238). This tension between what is inside and what is outside Humbert's head is echoed in the contrast between interior and exterior scene. Here what we might term 'incongruous metaphor' plays a large part. Immediately after the 'Barbara' incident already cited, the narrative continues: 'For at least two minutes I waited and strained on the brink, like that tailor with his home-made parachute forty-years ago when about to jump from the Eiffel Tower' [L p127]. A large part of the shock (and humour, for in Nabokov they generally go together) generated by this simile is due as much to the incongruity between the claustrophobic indoor scene and the free winds of heaven to which we are so suddenly transported, as to Humbert's flirtation with phallic symbolism in the form of the tower. Such contrary movements remain unsynthesised even at the end of the novel, and the offered status of the narrative remains ambiguous.

This sense of the instability of fictional space is echoed in the narrative's temporal fluidity. *Lolita* manifests repeated small-scale temporal shifts backwards and forwards which delay or preempt conventional narrative ordering, and which we may term 'delayed decoding' and 'premature ordering'.¹³ The former occurs most frequently with regard to the pattern of references to Quilty which can only be deciphered retrospectively. For example, well before the account of his pursuit of Q, Humbert quotes from 'a learned book' about young girls: '...the normal girl is usually extremely anxious to please her father. She feels in him the forerunner of the desired elusive male ('elusive' is good, by Polonius)...' [L p148]. Such casual interpolation is also used to leap forward in time, deflating the process of suspense, as in: 'A few more words about Mrs Humbert while the going is good (a bad accident is about to happen soon)' [L p79]; or 'Lo, leaving the dog as she would leave me some day, rose from her haunches...' [L p118]. The gaps generated by these shifts often remain unfilled. These then are some of the Nabokovian modes of auto-cancellation which contribute to the narrative switch-back ride, which alternatively attracts and repels, turns the reader on and off.

Before turning to the auto-interpretative aspects of the novel, we must note how intimately such games are bound up with Humbert's own memories and desires,

in case it may seem that these sudden narrative shifts and disturbances are merely a cat-and-mouse game played on the reader by a Joycean Humbert, who remains above the narrative, 'paring his fingernails'. For the temporal fluidity is also an echo of the gap between the time of the narrated and the time of the narration. The games played thus rely on discrepant awareness not only between the reader and Humbert, but between Humbert the participant and Humbert the narrator. And Humbert the narrator's greater awareness is bought at a tremendous cost, for the tensions between inside and outside are the reflection of a world of freedom seen from inside the bars of a prison. Constantly the gap between the time of the drama and the time of the narration is suffused with the sense of loss. The first introduction to Lolita on the Haze 'piazza', a compellingly vivid scene, is immediately followed by awareness of Humbert, in his role as prisoner at the bar, presenting his diary to the court:

Exhibit number two is a pocket diary bound in black imitation leather, with a golden year, 1947, en escalier, in its upper left-hand corner. I speak of this neat product of the Blank Blank Co, Blankton, Mass, as if it were really before me. Actually, it was destroyed five years ago and what we examine now (by courtesy of a photographic memory) is but its brief materialization, a puny unfledged phoenix. [L p41]

The jaunty, irrepressible tone serves only to accentuate the sense of loss; and, in this context, it is clear that what is at stake is not the loss of the diary itself so much as what it represents, the time spent with Lolita. A similar effect suffuses Humbert's final farewell to Lolita: "'Good by-aye!" she chanted, my American sweet immortal dead love; for she is dead and immortal if you are reading this. I mean, such is the formal agreement with the so-called authorities' [L p273]. Here the gap between the act of writing and the act of reading, between the work as process and as product, is engaged intimately with the overwhelming sense of loss, the shortfall between memory and desire.

Thus, the very existence of Humbert's narrative is a witness to the finality of loss. This helps to explain the constant exploration of the counter-pulls of the narrative as 'real', out-there, the full presence of the speaking voice, and as fiction, in-here, made only of words, black marks on a page, or manipulations of the vocal organs. Martin Amiss's contention in the face of 'highbrow admirers' of Nabokov that the Russian 'spins a jolly good yarn, with believable characters, a strong-story line, and vivid, humorous prose'¹⁴ represents one half of this tension in Lolita. This aspect is obviously difficult to illustrate briefly, though we might cite the vividness of the simple listing of Lolita's various names in the opening paragraphs cited above. The sense of the narrative as artifice, as verbal construct, is rather easier to demonstrate. In the same passage, the name Lolita is reduced to a group of syllables, a series

of movements of the tongue in the mouth. The obsession with puns, often multi-lingual ('the distinction between passport and sport' L p234), in particular, draws attention to language as sound system. Equally, verbal games draw attention to the narrative as text. Neologisms ('mauvemail' p71, a lighter shade of blackmail), anagrams ('Vivian Darkbloom' the writer, is an anagram of the author's name), and word linking ('lame, lamentably lame' p64) serve to emphasise words as arbitrary signs. Pleas to the copy editor ('please do not correct it, Clarence' p33), instructions to the printer ('Repeat till the page is full, printer' p109), and suggestions to the prospective film director ('If you want to make a movie out of my book...' p217) all foreground the novel's artificiality. Thus, the games played with the reader are not the arbitrary whims of a malevolent monster, but dramatise the tensions of Humbert's agonised cry 'Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!' [L p33]. For the words themselves, the only hope of fulfillment through memory, by their very existence betoken the failure of desire.

In the light of this recognition, we can now go on to look at the auto-interpretative aspects of Lolita, which further complicate the games that Humbert plays with the reader. For before encountering Humbert's narrative, the reader faces John Ray Jnr's Foreword, which, besides giving a number of details concerning the drama itself (which again serve both to generate enigma and deflate suspense) offers a brief psychological/moral interpretation of Humbert's account. And, issued in Nabokov's own name, 'On a Book entitled Lolita', which has been appended to Humbert's narrative in all editions (including translations)¹⁵ since the Putnam edition of 1958, offers a further critique not only of Humbert's account but also of Ray's Foreword. In addition, in the 1959 Weidenfeld and Nicholson and many subsequent editions, Lolita ends with an appendix of international critical comments justifying the novel's publication in the face of moral outrage. Importantly this movement towards an infinite regression of interpreting voices is sparked off by Humbert's own exercises in auto-interpretation, beginning with 'You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style' from the opening passage, and resumed in numerous analyses (stylistic or otherwise) of his previously quoted letters, diaries, and poems, and even, as in the first example, of the words he has just uttered. This strategy frequently preempts recognition of the effects I have been trying to describe in the preceding pages. Thus, Humbert is by no means unaware of the nature of his landscape of desire: 'his address was, let me see, 10 Killer Street (I am not going very far for my pseudonyms)' [L p261]. There are two related foci for this strategy of tantalising and preempting the interpreter - the reader as detective and the reader as psychoanalyst. I will briefly touch on the first and give rather more detailed attention to the second.

Lolita is a variation on the murder mystery, where the enigma concerns the identity not of the murderer but of the victim. Just as Humbert the narrated is teased by his opposite Quilty throughout the 'cryptogrammatic paper chase' with which a considerable portion of Part Two is occupied, so Humbert the narrator tantalises the reader throughout the novel with a pattern of unacknowledged references to Quilty himself. That these references remain implicit is not in itself unusual, since mystery narrative conventionally develops by means of economy in the revelation of significant information, but what is different in Lolita is the positive delight taken in frustrating the reader. The set-piece example occurs when Humbert visits Lolita after the long interval following her disappearance, desperate to learn his rival's name. Lolita teases Humbert the narrated but finally gives the name, whereas Humbert the narrator further withholds the information from the reader for a considerable period. Carl Proffer has already described in some detail this process of strip-teasing the reader, including its cryptogrammatic and esoteric literary aspects.¹⁶ In being made by Humbert the narrator to share in this way the experience of Humbert the narrated, the reader is encouraged in the process of reading to recognise the desires for a final order, a lasting fulfillment, to acknowledge a certain 'brotherhood' with Humbert. 'Reader! Bruder!' [L p255] is one of Humbert's appeals to the hypothetical audience. In the following plea, Humbert suggests how closely the reader's ambiguous journey from innocence to experience parallels his own: 'I now warn the reader not to mock me and my mental daze. It is easy for him and me to decipher now a past destiny; but a destiny in the making is, believe me, not one of those honest mystery stories where all you have to do is keep an eye on the clues' [L p206].

Turning then to the related notion of the reader as psychoanalyst, Nabokov also contrives to mock the simple-minded Freudian, and to preempt symptomatic reading. Humbert's self-consciousness extends to hypothesised readings of his own unconscious drives. Early in his narrative, Humbert describes how he discovered a new game in the sanatorium:

I discovered there was an endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists: cunningly leading them one; never letting them see that you know all the tricks of the trade; inventing for them elaborate dreams, pure classics in style (which make them, the dream extortionists, dream and wake up shrieking); teasing them with fake 'primal scenes'; and never allowing them the slightest glimpse of one's real sexual predicament. [L pp35-6]

The game of 'trifling with psychiatrists' is, of course, played also with the symptomatic reader who is cunningly led on (by a trail of references to Poe's 'Annabel Lee')¹⁷ to diagnose the need for a scene of fulfillment on the beach to release Humbert's lifetime obsession, but Humbert is there first: 'Well, com-

rade, let me tell you that I did look for a beach...' [L p163]. Similarly any 'spotting' of the 'standardized symbols of the psycho-analytical racket' [L p278] - key, purse, tower, gun, etc - is preempted and held up to derision, for example: 'I could very well do with a little rest before I drove to wherever the beast's lair was - and then pulled the pistol's foreskin back, and then enjoyed the orgasm of the crushed trigger: I was always a good little follower of the Viennese medicine man' [L p267]. Now if this strategy complicates the role of the 'vulgar' Freudian interpreter, seeking through the spotting of 'standardised symbols' to penetrate to the psychic and sexual origins of the dis-ease of a single subject (whether Humbert as character, or Nabokov as author, or both), it does not entirely let Nabokov's narrative off the hook. Just as professional analysts are not themselves exempt from the workings of unconscious processes, so high self-consciousness must have unconscious origins. If Nabokov's violent attacks on psychoanalysis often generate unforegrounded contradictions in his narratives, in Lolita, in contrast, I would argue that, if Humbert's self-consciousness prevents psychoanalytic reading from assuming unproblematically the role of master discourse, it also disrupts the myth of the entirely conscious artist and prevents Nabokov also from assuming the master-discourse in the narrative published under his name. In this sense 'On a Book entitled Lolita' holds no privileged status in the text. Since the specific object of Nabokov's anti-Freudian gestures remains uncertain, the possibility remains open that Lolita may involve (only) the beginnings of an exploration of unconscious processes beyond the discrete subject, an exploration of the inter-subjective forces that narrative both conceals and reveals. It is important not to push too hard here. Nabokov is not Lacan in disguise. Nevertheless, I hope that the above analysis has suggested that in Lolita, to a certain extent at least, both the writer and the reader experience a strong encouragement in and, at the same time, a prompt denial of the powerful desire to stand above or outside the narrative process, to assume the indifferent, uncommitted stance of judge, spectator, detective, or analyst. Both Humbert and the reader are continually drawn back into the arena, brought face to face with desire and decision.

There are, then, two mysteries in Lolita: the finally soluble plot-mystery of the identity of Humbert's opposite; and the insoluble mystery of Lolita herself. In the act of reading the reader becomes aware that the attempt to possess Lolita closely parallels Humbert's attempt to possess Lolita. In Divagations, Mallarmé likens the act of reading to a sexual assault: 'Le repliement vierge du livre, encore, prête à un sacrifice dont saigna la tranche rouge des anciens tomes; l'introduction d'une arme, ou coupe-papier, pour établir la prise de possession'.¹⁸ Instead of this barbarous custom, Mallarmé anticipates a mode of

reading that will be a sharing, that will preserve the virginity of the book, an act of love based on impotence. In contrast, in Lolita, the attempt to possess is itself the focus of attention, for only in the repeated failure of that attempt does the book live. Early in his narrative Humbert speaks of the rising of the 'red sun of desire and decision (the two things that make a live world)' [L p71]. Without the attempt at possession, without both desire and decision, Lolita cannot exist. The passage of time in the act of reading is central here. For Lolita's attraction is precisely that she is 'out of reach'. The aging Humbert can only glimpse but not inhabit that 'intangible island of entranced time where Lolita plays with her likes' [L p19]. And only in the time spent in reading Lolita can we, briefly, reach across the gap between 'the little given and the great promised' [L p257].¹⁹ And this writing is not a 'master-discourse' either and must fail in its attempt to possess Lolita. The risk is great of falling into a form of second-level allegorising, where Humbert becomes a type of the writer and reader, and Lolita a type of the book, both 'standardised symbols'. Yet perhaps here too, since the commentator also has only words to play with, failure is a condition of the exploration, although it will remain important to distinguish different categories of failure.

By way of summary, we may say that the concept of transference will remain of the highest importance in psychoanalytic approaches to literary texts. In the apt and succinct formulation of Hindess and Hirst:

Theory is not applied to the concrete in a relation of 'knowledge'. Similarly, psychoanalytic theory is not applied in analysis to 'know' and 'uncover' neuroses. The idea that analysis is a relation of knowledge imposing the truth of the unconscious upon consciousness is a classic misreading of Freud. Firstly, it reduces sexuality to an object known and the analyst to a technician of knowledge. Secondly, it involves a simple rationalist conception of knowledge as enlightenment. This misreading denies transference by confining sexuality to a 'problem' of the analysed subject. Transference destroys the notion of analysis as a relation of 'knowledge'; it is a relation in which the displacement of sexuality and the displacement of that displacement is what is at stake. It is a social/sexual relation in which the analyst is as much at stake as his client.²⁰

The act of interpretation also has its own hidden history.

Notes

1. Fictional works by Nabokov cited (English-language versions only) are: Lolita (Paris: Olympia, 1955; London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1959) and Bend Sinister (New York: Henry Holt, 1947), Penguin ed (Harmondsworth: 1974). All specific citations are to the last mentioned edition in each case and are incorporated into the text using the abbreviations L and BS respectively. All prefatory essays by Nabokov will be referred to in the same editions. Other non-fictional works by Nabokov referred to are: Strong Opinions (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973); Speak, Memory revised and expanded ed (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1967), Penguin ed (Harmondsworth: 1969); The Nabokov-Wilson Letters ed Simon Karlinsky (New York: Harper and Row, 1979); Lectures on Literature ed Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980). Specific citations are incorporated into the text using the abbreviations SO, SM, NWL, and LL, respectively.
2. WW Rowe Nabokov's Deceptive World (New York: New York UP, 1971). Nabokov's review is reprinted in SO pp304-7.
3. LR Hiatt 'Nabokov's Lolita: A "Freudian" Cryptic Crossword' American Image 24 (1967) pp360-70.
4. Frank Kermode's argument in The Genesis of Secrecy (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1979) obviously influences this formulation of the problems of power and interpretation.
5. Cf, particularly: Jacques Lacan Écrits (Paris: Seuil, 1966); and Louis Althusser Pour Marx (Paris: François Maspero, 1965).
6. Allon White The Uses of Obscurity: The Fiction of Early Modernism (London: RKP, 1981).
7. The best brief introduction in English to Althusser's concept of 'lecture symptomale' can be found in Ben Brewster's glossary to his translation of Pour Marx: Althusser For Marx (London: New Left Books, 1977) pp249-58.
8. Samuel Beckett Three Novels (London: Calder & Boyars, 1959) p293.
9. Cf Vladimir Nabokov Poems and Problems (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970) for the complete collection of Nabokov's chess problems.
10. James Joyce A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960) p215.
11. Derrida's questioning of the assumptions of 'phonocentrism' underlies the whole of his work, but cf especially De la grammatologie (Paris: Minuit, 1967).
12. Cf Wayne Booth The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1961) pp390-1.
13. The former term is borrowed from Ian Watt's analysis of temporal shifts in Conrad's narratives in 'Pink Toads and Yellow Curs: An Impressionist Narrative Device in Lord Jim' in Roza Jablowski (ed) Joseph Conrad Colloquy in Poland 5-12 September 1972 (Warsaw: Polish Academy of Sciences, 1975) pp11-31.
14. Martin Amis 'The Sublime and the Ridiculous: Nabokov's Black Farces' in Peter Quennell (ed) Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1979) pp73-87; here p73.
15. Cf SO p74.
16. Carl Proffer Keys to 'Lolita' (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968) pp57-80.
17. Cf Proffer *ibid*.
18. Mallarmé 'Variations sur un sujet' Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Pléiade, 1945) pp353-420; here p381.
19. This line of argument closely parallels that of Gabriel Josipovici in 'Lolita: Parody and the Pursuit of Beauty' The World and the Book (London: Macmillan, 1971) pp210-29.
20. Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst Mode of Production and Social Formation (London: Macmillan, 1977) p61.