

# [ Hemingway's posthumous fiction and Nabokov's *Lolita*: A cross-textual reading ]

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**[Abstract]** *Some of Hemingway's posthumous fiction engages in dynamic intertextual relations with Lolita. The study identifies some of these protean links but goes further, pointing out the structural and ethical differences between the two authors' work, Nabokov's being rooted in a logic of perversion, while Hemingway's dramatizes what can be called perverse temptation combined with sublimation. The study, which is based on intertextuality but not limited to it, proves helpful for a better understanding of the tension generated between desire and non-normative sexuality, thus engaging in a debate with the perversion-oriented criticism that tends to situate Hemingway's work in perverse clinical categories.*

**[Keywords]** *Writing; perversion; sublimation; intertextuality; poetics of desire; enjoyment*

Hemingway's unfinished novel *The Last Good Country* (1986), which was published as a Nick Adams story by Philip Young, has often been read as the writer's Americana, especially through its connection with Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Young 105–106, Bloom 3). The dominating paradigm in the affiliation with Twain is idealism and the triumph of the spiritual over the sensual. This idealistic assumption seems radical in the approach of Sandra Whipple Spanier, who sees in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* a possible "source" for *The Last Good Country* (Spanier 35). The love that Nick and Littless feel for each other is, like Salinger's siblings', "innocent and selfless. Hints at physical attraction only serve to show how pure their actual relationship is" (38).<sup>1</sup> Mark Spilka also gives grounds for the American innocence paradigm when he considers this attachment to be the expression of a "genuine tenderness and loving care" (156), the whole story being "a healthy stage of emotional growth for Nick as well as for his sister" (156).

This moralist palladium is all the more necessary as many critics consider Littless as a representation of Hemingway's own sister or sisters. Even if her age is uncertain in the novel (she is eleven *or* twelve), commentators like David R. Johnson affiliate her with Hemingway's eleven-year-old sister Madelaine, who kept her brother company when the incident upon which the plot is built occurred (319).<sup>2</sup> To Philip Young, Madelaine and Ursula form one unique biographical source for Littless (105). Mark Spilka goes even further when he considers her as the synthesis of all Hemingway's sisters (143).

In contrast, the biographical trail may serve to subvert the innocence paradigm in studies focused on incest. Kenneth Lynn, for instance, identifies the biographical archetype of Littless in Ursula, Hemingway's favorite sister (57) and most likely to provide the phantasmatic output necessary for the conception of the character. Nancy Comley and Robert Scholes, interested rather in androgyny in this case, contend that Littless "resembles Hemingway's sister Carol, the one who looked most like him" (70). Stephen Gilbert Brown, who focuses on the themes of both incest and androgyny, sees in Nick's sister the image of the "androgynous twin" (147). This diversity of interpretations underlines Littless's evanescence as a biographical referent and, by way of contrast, her complexity as a character, which is all the more emphasized by the numerous channels of communication that bring her close to Nabokov's Dolores, alias *Lolita*.

Indeed, one of the most intriguing features of *The Last Good Country*, but also *The Strange Country* (1987), and, to some extent, *The Garden of Eden* (1986), are the dynamic intertextual links that correlate them in varied degrees to Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955). Reynolds suggests vaguely in the 5th volume of his Hemingway biography a possible connection between *The Garden of Eden* and *Lolita*: "That winter in Ketchum, Ernest worked steadily on the complex relationships between artists and women in *The Garden of Eden*... [O]n his night table lay a newly minted copy of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, in which Humbert Humbert's fascination with his prepubescent stepdaughter was more sexually outrageous than anything Ernest's triad did in the dark" (1999, 318–319). It is interesting, then, to wonder if reading Nabokov's novel gave wing to the new literary project Hemingway was engaged in during the 1950s. Did he find some inspiration in the fictionalized unhinged fantasies of a fellow writer while his own were striving to take a satisfactory

shape on the page? It becomes necessary, then, to examine this hypothesis through a precise textual cross-analysis between *Lolita* and not only *The Garden of Eden*, but especially the two other aforementioned narratives. The groundbreaking poetics and thematics of *Lolita*, where “aesthetic bliss” (358), as Nabokov puts it in the Postface, and fetishistic fixation feed upon each other, may have indicated to Hemingway a possible literary and modern framework for exploring a theme that had haunted his fiction for decades, but that he had never previously explored to the full. Used economically and suggestively up to that point, his transgressive erotic impulses gathered momentum in the early 1950s, starting with *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950) before reaching their full expression in the three unfinished novels *The Garden of Eden*, *The Strange Country*, and *The Last Good Country*. Of the three, the last is the one that bears the most imprints from *Lolita*.

## [1] Hemingway and *Lolita*: biographical connections

*Lolita* was published in 1958 by Putnam after the four major American publishers to which Nabokov had submitted his manuscript rejected it. However, The Olympia Press, a publishing house located in Paris and specializing in erotic and experimental fiction, had published the novel in 1955. The French edition would, however, be censored during the following year. The publication of the novel brought to the forefront the issue of literary freedom in light of the inevitable entanglements of poetics and erotics, radicalized in the plot of this novel which stages consensual sexual intercourse between Humbert Humbert, a forty-year-old francophone immigrant, and a twelve-year old American girl he has nicknamed Lolita. The American publication, as Orville Prescott writes, “has been preceded by a fanfare of publicity,” which was not due to *Lolita*’s “underground reputation” as Prescott thinks, but rather to its recognition as a great *literary* achievement by British writer Graham Greene, who selected it in *The Sunday Times* of December 1955 as one of his best books of the year (Sherry 36). Greene’s praise triggered a heated intellectual squabble in Britain. One of Hemingway’s closest correspondents, the *New York Times* columnist Harvey Breit, mentioned the dispute in his *Times Book Review* column “In and Out of Books” (26 February 1956), and one month later in his column he acclaimed the high literary qualities of the novel (March, 8). Immediately after, four major American publishers approached Nabokov, whose novel was now “on the move,” while “in New York, Olympia Press copies were selling for up to twenty dollars” (Boyd 296). Actually, copies of the banned edition could be found everywhere in the USA, as “bookshops all over America were rapidly selling under-the-counter copies of the Olympia Press *Lolita*...” (Boyd 314). Moreover, in 1957 one third of the novel had already been published in the *Anchor Review*.

It is highly probable that Hemingway read the initial French edition in 1956 or 1957. It is certain that he owned a copy of the American Putnam edition (Brasch and Sigman 264).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Hemingway, accompanied by his wife Mary, made a stop in New York City

in late August 1956 while on their way to France. As Reynolds writes, the Hemingways “stayed in the borrowed quarters of Harvey Breit to avoid the press” (1999, 298). That was another likely opportunity for Hemingway to hear about *Lolita* and to acquire it. A few weeks later, the Hemingways stayed in Paris for ten days during September, and then, after a trip to Spain, they returned to the French capital where they stayed for several weeks, from November 1956 to January 1957. The French ban order on *Lolita* was issued on December 20, 1956; so Hemingway had ample time to acquire and maybe already start reading the Paris edition, long before the American edition mentioned by Reynolds was published.

The manuscripts of *The Last Good Country* bear three dates: 1952, 1955, and 1958 (Young and Mann 47, Spanier 35). If the first date refers to the year when Hemingway started working on the novel, what do the other two dates correspond to? Strangely enough, they coincide exactly with the publication dates of *Lolita*, respectively the French censored edition and the later American authorized edition. Whatever the reasons, the dates refer to quite a long period of time for writing another Nick Adams narrative. The difficulties come partly from the triviality of the incident (shooting a deer out of season), which produces complicated and unmanageable effects both at the affective, the moral and the structural levels. The two siblings run away from the law (whose full authority is not recognized from the start), and the more they venture further into the wilds and get away from civilization and family life, the more the incestuous temptation grows. The scope of action shrinks to a critical situation as the more and more daring interplay between brother and sister can now morph into a real incestuous relationship in the heart of the wilderness.<sup>4</sup> This is why Hemingway has recourse to flashbacks or to parallel subplots, namely the inchoative Doppelgänger plot which might develop into a crime plot and hence divert the sex drive into a different channel.

## [2] Epidermal desires and fetishistic fixations

The name “Littless” strikes an odd note in Hemingway’s onomastics, but the phonological adjacency with both “Dolores” and “Lolita” is already indicative of their literary closeness. The intertextual relation becomes all the clearer when we bear in mind Hemingway’s initial intention to entitle his narrative *Littless* (Reynolds, 1991, 121; Flora, 83n),<sup>5</sup> a choice that would have emphasized the centrality and singularity of the sister as a forbidden object of desire, the way Nabokov centralized Humbert Humbert’s fetish in the figure of Lolita as a “nymphet.”<sup>6</sup>

The qualities that typify Lolita as a fetish are her brown tanned skin, her long eyelashes, and more generally her *unwomanly* forms: slim waist, flat hips, and narrow buttocks. The pervert gaze of Humbert Humbert unremittingly epitomizes the body he is infatuated with: “... for I simply love that tinge of Botticellian pink, that raw rose about the lips, those wet, matted eyelashes” (71).<sup>7</sup> The bodily detail is regularly invested with libidinal energy from the voyeur’s eyes: “God, what agony, that silky shimmer above her temple grading into bright brown hair. And the little bone twitching at the side of her dust-powdered ankle” (44). These and other recurrent fetishistic compressions, frag-

mented as they might be, possess a power of their own inasmuch as they have total properties and hold absolute meanings for Humbert Humbert, who is permanently invaded by the “fantastic power” (16) of the fetishized body that so fascinates the “bewitched traveller[s]” he assumes he is (15).

The color brown is particularly eroticized in the novel, where it holds a power of attraction acting almost irrationally upon the senses of Humbert Humbert, who feels continually “intoxicate[d]” by Lolita’s “brown fragrance” (46). The synesthetic construction of this expression underlines the intensity of the “languisher’[s]” obsession with his fetish’s “brown limbs” (47) or “rich brown hair” (72). When he thinks of Lolita, whom he is about to pick from a summer camp before trapping her into a long, meticulously designed trip, it is the brownness of her skin that comes first to his mind: “Suddenly I imagined Lo returning from camp – brown, warm, drowsy, drugged – and was ready to weep with passion and impatience” (88).

Fetishistic properties such as tan are elevated to the level of a criterion in taxonomies he has invented and self-imposed. Contrary to her mother’s repulsive “glossy whiteness” and “so little tanned [face] despite all her endeavors” (97), Lolita’s “honey-brown body [where] the white negative image of a rudimentary swimsuit [was] patterned against her tan” (141) is a necessary component in the erotic system of the pervert, whose sexual imagination is dependent upon fetishistic fixations such as tan. Thus, the brown and “smoothly tanned” skin (182) of *his* “frail, tanned, tottering, dazed rosedarling” (138), has become the sensual “trademark” of the erotic object he is intoxicated with.

These epidermal fetishes are also remarkable intertextual connectors. Tanned skin, for example, is a striking figure that signals an intensification in the register of desire proper to Hemingway’s perception of feminine sensuality in 1950s fiction. If brown skin is an attractive feminine characteristic Hemingway began writing about from the outset, the tan of the partner is quite new in the sensual palette of his poetics. While brown is a given, tan underlines the willed orientation of desire toward a specific object, and the fantasized – or fictionalized – possibility to handle it. Moreover, we can notice a major paradigmatic shift in Hemingway’s novels and stories from the athletic masculine arena, where tan refers to good manly health, to the sensual feminine one where it now connotes the flames of desire. Indeed, in the earlier fiction, the adjective “tanned” is systematically attributed to male characters like Jim in “Up in Michigan,” Mike Campbell in *The Sun Also Rises* (who looks healthy upon arrival in Paris) or some of the Basque people Jake and Bill met during their bus ride through the Pyrenees. Sometimes the athletic categorization intersects with a military one, as shown by the tan of Colonel Cantwell in *Across the River and into the Trees*, or Dr. Valentine’s in *A Farewell to Arms*.<sup>8</sup>

In the posthumous fiction, tanned skin has become an object of desire that circulates on the beautiful lover’s already brown body, testifying to an increase in the register of feminine sensuality. In *The Strange Country*, Roger’s attention focuses not only on Helena’s “lovely brown face,” but also on her “tanned face” (618). Not unlike Lolita, Catherine Hill radiates the sensual and obscure undertones of suntan – analogically related to the figure of fire, and hence of burning desire – as her “dark tan” (62) connotes the growing

will for transformation and erotic domination. Indeed, in *The Garden of Eden* tanning is part of a dark sensuality that undergoes a crescendo in the narrative as an indication of the progressive intensification of the lovers' transgressive impulses, as if tanning is now the measure of the erotic transgressions the two lovers revel in. The "beautiful body" of the young woman, now "tanned evenly" (12), has become somehow a sensory surface where the dark forces of eroticism spread out, bringing out into the open the inner transformations that eventually lead Catherine Hill to the realm of the tragic.

The brownness of Catherine's skin in *The Garden of Eden* is beautifully emphasized by the sunlight that comes from the outside: "When [David] had worked for a time, he looked at Catherine, still sleeping, her lips smiling now and the rectangle of sunlight from the open window falling across the brown of her body and lighting her dark face..." (42–43).<sup>9</sup> A similar lingering gaze appears in *The Last Good Country*, when Nick watches his sister sleep, admiring "her high cheekbones and brown freckled skin light rose under the brown..." (535). In both excerpts, "brown" is used substantively, a choice that suggests the idea of the permanence of the attribute, now emphasized by tan.<sup>10</sup>

Littless' physical features bring into focus not unambiguously her intimate sensual affinities with the archetypal Hemingway lover. The insisting references to her brownness and her tan are not restricted to Nick's point of view; these sensual features are brought out from the outset by the narrative voice: "His sister was tanned brown and she had dark brown eyes and dark brown hair with yellow streaks in it from the sun" (504). Later on, one of the game wardens describes her in a strikingly economical way that once again establishes intertextual channels with *Lolita*: "...Brown hair and brown eyes. Freckles. Very tanned. Wearing overalls and a boy's shirt. Barefooted" (520). Littless's surface qualities unmistakably call to mind *Lolita*, whose freckles, brown skin, high cheekbones, and other such features as tanned skin, long eyelashes or boyish outline, constitute fetishistic elements that heighten the erotic intensity of the narrative, and correspond, according to Humbert Humbert, to the archetypal or "basic elements of nymphet charm..." (215).

### [3] *She-boy, again!*

On another note, the city of Sheboygan can be seen as an intertextual signifier that brings together the two works. The city is referred to four times in *The Last Good Country*, twice by the game wardens and twice by Littless. But should this not be Cheboygan, the city located in the northern part of Michigan, and not Sheboygan, which is situated in Wisconsin? A misspelling seems implausible, as Hemingway knew the region quite well. This being said, if the word is improper in the geographic reality of the referent, it is quite appropriate in the erotic geography of the subject. Phonologically speaking, this impressionistic compound coalesces the two genders into one relevant portmanteau word: *she-boy(-gan)*, while the third morpheme can be seen as a contraction of the signifier of repetition and wished permanence of the object of desire: *again*. The utilization of the word by Littless draws upon a network of fantasies whose relevance is underlined by

the verbal context, where it proves significant as the desire of the androgynous *she-boy* surges through. Considered as a signifier operating in an interactive verbal chain and not as the simple ancillary of an external referent, “Sheboygan” releases powerful meanings pointing to the unconscious work of desire in the creative process, as the insistent use of the signifier “boy” in the following dialogue shows:

“...Now I’m your sister but I’m a boy, too. Do you think it [the new haircut] will change me into a boy?”...

“Thank you, Nickie, so much. I was trying to rest like you said. But all I could do was imagine things to do for you. I was going to get you a chewing tobacco can full of knockout drops from some big saloon in some place like Sheboygan.”

“Who did you get them from?”

Nick was sitting down now and his sister sat on his lap and held her arms around his neck and rubbed her cropped head against his cheek.

“I got them from the Queen of the Whores,” she said... (531-532)

With her hair cut in such a way as to pass for a boy, Littless stages the fantasy of the *girl-boy* not only in her own imaginary world but also in her own brother’s. Not unlike David in *The Garden of Eden*, Nick does not have to give voice to his innermost desires; he lets them take shape in the words and demeanor of his feminine partner, who has thus become the vehicle and voice of his own secret unspoken desires.

What anthropology calls “magical thought” is part of the mechanics of desire in *The Last Good Country*, where it thins out the limit between the word and the thing, giving to the former powerful performative potentialities. The conversation between brother and sister in the risqué scene quoted above again pushes the limits of innocence, bringing the tension to a sensual crescendo that reaches its peak at night. What is particularly interesting here is the powerful, *immediate* effect the ‘magic’ word “Sheboygan” produces on Nick. Much is said in the misleadingly silent erotic subtext. When Littless starts speaking about the saloon in Sheboygan, Nick sits down and lets her seat herself upon his lap (and not his knees!), as if the word triggered a wish for more physical intimacy. On the contrary, when Littless pronounces the same word again, but this time connecting it to the implied voice of the “main whore,” Nick tells her to get off him because, as the reader is meant to understand, the situation has reached a critical phase:

“I’m the sister or the brother of a morbid writer and I’m delicately brought up. This makes me intensely desirable to the main whore and to all of her circle.”

“Did you get the knockout drops?”

“Of course. She said, ‘Hon, take these little old drops.’ ‘Thank you,’ I said! ‘Give my regards to your morbid brother and ask him to stop by the Emporium anytime he is at Sheboygan.’”

“Get off my lap,” Nick said. (532)

The linkage of action and expression suggests a growing erotic pressure. In the first excerpt, the word functions as a seductive key used by Nick’s sister who has “‘imagin[ed]

things to do for'” him. Letting his sister sit on his lap shows that he has given in to the perverse temptation that is present. In the second excerpt, the erotic power of the word “Sheboygan,” combined with whoredom and the quite suggestive “knockout drops,” which refer suggestively to the “sleeping pill” Humbert Humbert gives Lolita in order to sexually abuse her in her sleep, has become too attractive and threatening. In order to defuse its more and more awkward effects, he puts an end to the ambiguous physical closeness, and proposes to prepare dinner, hence resorting to his symbolic role as the caring and protective brother. Nick's reaction confirms the power of sublimation at work in the narrative as an efficient means for diverting and symbolizing the sexual drive and the incestuous fantasy that feeds on it.

Significantly enough, “Cheboygan” is used in *Lolita* as the name of a ferry (the *City of Cheboygan*, 178) that the two characters take during their trip across the United States. In the textual network of the book, “Cheboygan” resonates with the signifiers of Humbert Humbert's sexual obsessions, where “boy” belongs to a system of fantasies centered on the figure of the *girl-boy* that brings out all the more the phobic rejection of womanhood. Lolita's clothes are a metonymic object that partly reveal her sexual predator's erotic complex. The quadragenarian protagonist and narrator of the novel is attracted by the girl's “rough tomboy clothes” (52), or her “white wide little-boy shorts” (262). He once let surreptitiously his hand “creep up [his] nymphet's thin back and feel her skin through her boy's shirt” (49). The power of the boy fantasy is manifest in the way it permeates not only the so-called nymphet's physical quality, such as her “beautiful boy-knees” (135), but also her conduct, which has become, according to her abductor, “tough in a boyish hoodlum way” (166). In a similar fashion Littleless, who now enjoys “practicing being a boy” (533), speaks like a ‘hoodlum’ when she declares her intention “to take three spikes, one for each of [their trackers], and drive them into the temples of those two and that boy while they slept’” (533).

## [4] Tantalizing slumbers

The entanglement of the themes of sleep, eroticism, and manipulation is an important element in the perverse system of *Lolita*, a novel that is associated with Poe's necrophilic poem “Annabel Lee.” The novel explores the phantasmatic possibilities of thanatophilia through the theme of sleep, and the underlying fantasy of the sexually passive and available partner the pervert would love to keep forever “imprisoned in her crystal sleep” (139). Throughout the novel, Lolita's sleep is not mentioned as a simple fact, but always implies some suggestive quality that triggers a sensual and aesthetic reverie. When Humbert Humbert thinks of or looks at his sleeping beloved, his mind indulges in a reverie of sorts: “The house was full of Charlotte's snore, while Lolita hardly breathed in her sleep, as still as a painted girl-child” (78). The simile does not only introduce an aesthetic thought in the description. but also lets in the thanatophilic drives that whip up the protagonist's fantasies, while the mother's noisy snorting functions as the undesirable reminder of the reality principle and its restrictive *rhythms*, restraining the pleasure-world



that Humbert Humbert would love to keep intact and unconstrained forever. The silent still child is the frozen image of that infantile paradise unknown to time, a persistent idea that flashes through Humbert Humbert's troubled and yet genially artistic mind when he alludes to *Sleeping Beauty* (227) or – through striking hypallagic expressions – to Lolita's "silent hands" (136), also described as "Florentine hands" (228), one among a number of references to the "still life" dimension of the young girl.

In the fiction published during Hemingway's lifetime, sleep is dealt with as a simple fact, or it is associated prosaically with the sexual act (for instance, the sleeping-bag scenes in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* [1940]). However, in *Across the River and into the Trees* the germ of a thematic and aesthetic development of this figure appears when Colonel Cantwell, thinking of Renata in her sleep, exclaims: "Oh Christ, he said, I wonder what she looks like now sleeping. I know how she looks, he said to himself. Wonderful. She sleeps as though she had not gone to sleep. As though she were just resting" (170). Expression is awkward here, almost tautological, as if the Colonel were embarrassed by what he might be feeling. On the contrary, in the narratives written a few years later, watching the partner sleep releases the observer's aesthetic reverie and excites his erotic fantasies into motion. Hence Nick enjoys looking at Littleless sleeping; he does not simply look at her but "watch[es] [her] sleeping" (535), an expression that underscores the intensity of ocular pleasure surging through him. Because this gaze implies enjoyment, Nick does not want to wake her up: "There's no sense waking anyone up, he thought" (535). This odd-sounding thought barely hides the real ocular pleasure behind the reluctance to wake his sister up, just like Roger vis-à-vis Helen.

Indeed, not unlike Nick, Roger, who has just risen from bed, prefers to let the young woman sleep and watches her do so. The thanatophilic fantasy testifies to the way in which Hemingway has integrated into the sensual and aesthetic register of *The Strange Country* some of *Lolita*'s fetishistic properties mentioned above:

...Helena was still sleeping when Roger woke and he watched her sleeping, her hair spread over the pillow, swept up from her neck and swung to one side, her lovely brown face, the eyes and the lips closed looking even more beautiful than when she was awake. He noticed her eyelids were pale in the tanned face and how the long lashes lay, the sweetness of her lips, quiet now like a child's asleep, and how her breasts showed under the sheet she had pulled up over her in the night. He thought he shouldn't wake her and he was afraid if he kissed her it might, so he dressed and walked down into the village. (618)

Helena, whom Roger enjoys calling "daughter," has a quiet childish sleep reminiscent of *Lolita*, who looks "as still as a painted girl-child" (78) during her sleep. The thanatophilic drives are nonetheless more controlled by the aesthetic vision of Roger – which, on the whole, does not lose sight of a certain ethics of decency. The erotic reverie remains subtle and balanced by the sharp awareness of the partner's otherness. On the other hand, Nick is more daring than Roger in exploring and exploiting the erotic possibilities of sleep, though to a lesser degree than Humbert Humbert, who seems to have whispered the idea in his ear.

One of the most central scenes in *Lolita* occurs in a motel called The Enchanted Hunters, where Humbert Humbert intends to carry out a plan he has patiently hatched. After having picked up Lolita in a summer camp, he takes her to the motel where he sneakily gives her a sleeping pill so he can fondle her safely. In order to quiet his nerves and to let the sleeping pill take effect, he leaves the room for a while. When he comes back, he wastes no time fulfilling his fantasy: “And less than six inches from me and my burning life, was nebulous Lolita! After a long stirless vigil, my tentacles moved towards her again, and this time the creak of the mattress did not awake her. ...And again the situation remained the same: Lolita with her curved spine to Humbert, Humbert resting his head on his hand and burning with desire and dyspepsia” (147).

As in *Lolita*, the sleep scene in *The Last Good Country* takes place after a short interval. The two siblings have taken their dinner, and then right after, Littless, just like Lolita, quickly falls fast asleep, unlike Nick who still has some time ahead of him before sleeping. Thus, Nick stays up to wash the dishes and to drink some whiskey “very slowly” (535). Similarly, Humbert Humbert spends nearly “half an hour” (144) wandering in the hotel before joining Lolita in the room. It is not only to let the sleeping pill work that Humbert Humbert left the room, but also because he “needed a drink” (141). Likewise, Nick had to let his sister sink into sleep and take a drink before sneaking up next to her.

In *The Last Good Country*, the thin interspace between the two siblings lying in bed can be seen as a metaphor for the weak and yet efficient signifier of prohibition and symbolical law, in a world where the father is absent but not totally missing. That line suggests also the slight difference between the denoted facts and the connoted eroticism. Yet, in this equivocal nocturnal proximity, Hemingway's mindful language remains awake to the implied presence of a symbolic third party that operates as a force of separation and constraint, likely to keep a close watch on the ongoing intimate activities. Thus, contrary to Humbert Humbert, who expresses his sexual appetite shamelessly, Hemingway's embarrassed narrator merely understates his desires as if trying to circumvent the vigilance of the uncertain and yet efficiently internalized symbolical law. This oscillation characterizes many passages where the perverse temptation is both checked and released.

In the following excerpt, the narrative voice presents a quantity of plain-sounding information, where trenchant realistic details centered on care and tenderness bring about effects of familiarity and normality. Yet this simple and matter-of-fact presentation is actually deceptive, and it hardly masks the presence within its folds of a scene where the forces of desire are at work, building up possibilities for the pressing need for the drives to be satisfied: “When he came back from the spring his sister was in the bed asleep, her head on the pillow she had made by rolling her blue jeans around her moccasins. He kissed her but she did not wake and he put on his old Mackinaw coat and felt in the packsack until he found the pint bottle of whiskey” (535). The definite article determines “bed” as a common object whose special function has already been established. The expected ambiguous physical closeness between the two siblings is suggested in even more subtle ways. The information on Littless' trousers transformed into a pillow serves this purpose: what the narrator is alluding to is the nakedness of her legs

under the blanket. This play on concealment is further underlined by the return of the same apparently realistic detail, when the narrator informs us that Nick, who has just slid under the shared covers, has made himself a pillow using his own moccasins and trousers: “In the night he was cold and he spread his Mackinaw coat over his sister and rolled his back over closer to her so that there was more of his side of the blanket under him... Now he lay comfortable again feeling the warmth of his sister’s body against his back and he thought, I must take good care of her and keep her happy and get her back safely. He listened to her breathing and to the quiet of the night and then he was asleep again” (535).

Why should Nick *listen* to Little’s breathing if not to make sure that she is sound asleep? This immediately brings to mind the underhand tactics Humbert Humbert deployed in the Enchanted Hunter episode: “[Lolita’s] faint breathing had the rhythm of sleep. Finally I heaved myself onto my narrow margin of bed, stealthily pulled at the odds and ends of sheets piled up to the south of my stone-cold heels” (145). The allusion to the warmth of Lolita’s body in this scene is yet another intertextual indication about the impact of Nabokov’s text on Hemingway’s novel: while the young girl is sound asleep, Humbert Humbert tries to fondle her stealthily: “I managed to bring my ravenous bulk so close that I felt the aura of her bare shoulder like a warm breath upon my cheek” (147). Hemingway maintains the power of suggestion by producing meaning on a line that his poetics can stretch so tight between fact and cunning innuendo that a fragment like “get her back safely” from the above-quoted passage has the poetic capacity to generate a striking, if not disturbing and almost imperceptible, double entendre: the expression sounds factual and innocent if “back” is considered as an adverb, but, when read with *Lolita* and especially the Enchanted Hunters scene in mind, “back” may be read as the direct object of “get,” a turn of phrase that releases unsuspected subversive power.

## [5] Animalistic regressions

Simply pointed to through the metaphor of the “enchanted hunter” in *Lolita*, the association between eroticism and wildness is made concrete in *The Last Good Country* and in *The Garden of Eden*, where sensual scenes alternate with others focusing on hunting in wild environments. More intrinsically, Hemingway’s writing testifies to a process of animalization of the female partner. In truth, Hemingway’s tendency to attribute animalistic characteristics to his female characters is not new, but the process becomes intensified in the posthumous fiction, where it functions in the overall network of fantasies that this study has been examining so far, some of which were inspired by *Lolita*, a book that helped Hemingway understand and voice some of his innermost desires. In *The Last Good Country*, the erotic imaginary is all the more stimulated by wild nature and by a temporal regression into the recesses of pre-civilized times. Yet in both novels, animalistic fantasies are regularly enacted: “He watched his sister sleeping with the collar of the warm Mackinaw coat under her chin and her high cheekbones and brown freckled skin light rose under the brown. ...He wished he could draw her face and he watched the way her

long lashes lay on her cheeks. She looks like a small wild animal, he thought, and she sleeps like one. How would you say her head looks, he thought" (535).

In Nick's eyes, Littleless looks also like a pet when she sits on his lap, "rub[bing] her cropped head against his cheek" (532).<sup>11</sup> The reference to animality suggests the fantasy of an unbridled sexuality and the artistic possibilities to ignore symbolical law. This is probably what calling Littleless a "monkey" insinuates (531). It also informs the fantasy of mastering the other, the power to control or *tame* the feminine and keep it under control. This said, in *The Last Good Country* this does not extend over the entire field of desire, but remains subordinated to the sublimative restrictions and transformations of Hemingway's writing.

In *Lolita*, comparing the young girl to an animal, and even sometimes perceiving her as such, gives voice to Humbert Humbert's obsessive illusions of possessiveness and his will for the sexual power he thinks he can exercise over "[his] golden pet" (266), "dreamy pet!" (135) or "reluctant pet" (185), and especially his "precocious pet" (49), a reference to the girl's fantasized sexual power, also projected into her fetishized "monkeyish feet" (55).

Yet the sexual object is also an aesthetic object. The 'enchanted hunter' frequently endows his sexual prey with artistic qualities that momentarily transform her into an abstraction. The young girl is regularly associated with Florence, one of Europe's capitals of high art. The young girl's libidinized "little hot paw" (55) is also aestheticized when her offender notices how she ("...put[s] her narrow Florentine hands together, batting her eyelashes..." 228), or when he thinks of her as a "painted girl-child" (78). The erotic and the aesthetic, the monstrous and the beautiful, go hand in hand and seem to be linking up their different meanings throughout. In the following example, *Lolita* is seen as an artistic representation:

Standing in the middle of the slanting room and emitting questioning "hm's," she made familiar Javanese gestures with her wrists and hands. ...I say "familiar" because one day she had welcomed me with the same wrist dance to her party in Beardsley. We both sat down on the divan. Curious: although actually her looks had faded, I definitely realized, so hopelessly late in the day, how much she looked—had always looked—like Botticelli's russet Venus—the same soft nose, the same blurred beauty. (308)

Like *Lolita*'s "Javanese" gestures (308), Littleless' gestures too call up the same exotic geography when Nick compares her to "a wild boy of Borneo" (531). The two novels present an oscillation between erotic reverie and aesthetic reverie, between the power of physical attraction and the symbolical effects produced by artistic comparisons that channel the drive toward other forms of gratification. Similes may take a sharp sexual turn, too, and unfold an imaginary space for desire.

In both novels, however, these possibilities of realizing one's wild and unorthodox desires and fantasies are held back by the real or imagined disruptions of a disproportionate force that plagues the two protagonists, taking the form of a hostile, unpredictable rival whose nature appeals to the figure of a *Doppelgänger*, an incarnation of guilt in one case, and corruption in the other.

## [6] The Doppelgänger

Just like the plot of *Lolita*, *The Last Good Country*'s plot becomes complicated after the introduction of a figure with which Hemingway's work was previously unfamiliar. In the course of the story, there appears a combined form of sameness and otherness that places Nick's mental integrity in danger; the enigmatic other is an ungraspable figure that starts to invade, even through its invisibility, the whole subjective space.

In the beginning, Nick is upset by a pursuer whom he calls the Evans boy, the son of the game warden who witnessed the offense that started it all. Being tracked by a rival who is about his age confirms the generic tonality of the narrative as an adventurous flight tale. Yet in the course of the narrative, the Evans boy metamorphoses into the obsessive and evanescent figure of a double, and Nick's anxiety turns into anguish, so much so that the alleged tracker acquires spectral qualities. When Littless asks Nick if he thinks their pursuer knows where their hiding place is, he "feel[s] sick" (541). He is so troubled that he can literally "see" him (541). When Littless says that the Evans boy might have already found their camp, Nick tells her angrily not to speak that way again, unless she "want[s] to bring him" (541).

Nick's irrational reactions border on magic thought and the belief in the incantatory power of words, and yet he is sensible enough to try and control himself, so that he will "not get in a panic about it" (542). In fact, the problem goes beyond the current spatio-temporal context. Nick speaks of the Evans boy as of a person endowed with special powers, who has always haunted Nick ("All that bastard cares about is trailing me" 542), a belief shared by Suzy, the maid, who knows that the Evans boy "...trails around after Nick all the time. You never see him..." (527). Nothing in the narrative explains the reasons for this continuous and certainly mysterious 'trailing.' But as Littless well knows, the only way out for Nick is probably to kill him (542).

What makes Nick feel particularly nervous is probably the unconscious meaning of the figure of the double, which actually gives shape to his feelings of guilt about his incestuous desires. The tracker, who follows Nick like a shadow and seems to know him from inside himself, bears witness to all the offenses of the young man, maybe even those he has been forecasting. It is probably in order to underline his function as a double that his name remains unknown throughout. From this point on, the ambiance of the narrative changes. Nick not only feels nervous, but is also alarmed to see how fragile their situation is. Though he "made a careful search of the country" (542), he still feels worried, realizing how far their *hunter* controls the situation. Nick becomes a tracked-down animal, likely to be shot just like the deer he himself killed earlier. Ironically, he tells his sister that they will have to behave like "the deer": "Why did you change?" 'He won't be around here at night. He can't come through the swamp in the dark. We don't have to worry about him early in the mornings and late in the evening nor in the dark. We'll have to be like the deer and only be out then. We'll lay up in the daytime'" (543).

Littless' question is double-edged. Literally, it is about Nick's decision to wait and cook at night instead of now, as he previously planned. Yet underneath the factual

simplicity of meaning is an edge of bitterness and a sense of disappointment that will crescendo. Littless gives voice to a metatextual truth when she points up the change in the course of the narrative, now shifting from the plot of flight and forbidden love to one of a Doppelgänger and crime. The double has invaded the minds of the two characters and introduced a rupture in the dramatic line of the narrative, thus controlling space, time, and action. Littless, who knows that their story is about to change, is worried about the nature of the denouement to come:

“But I can stay though, can't I?”

“I ought to get you home.”

“No. Please, Nickie. Who's going to keep you from killing him then?”

“Listen Littless, don't ever talk about killing and remember I never talked about killing. There isn't any killing nor ever going to be any.”

[...]

“I never even thought about it.”

No, he thought. You never even thought about it. Only all day and all night. But you mustn't think about it in front of her because she can feel it because she is your sister and you love each other. (543)

The Evans boy has become a fixed idea, and killing him has grown into an obsession which might culminate in his murder, a change of direction that could have meant, at the metafictional level, an important sub-generic modification. The novel *Kidnapped*, which Littless took along with *Wuthering Heights* and *Lorna Doone*, out of the three books mentioned in *The Last Good Country*, is the only one that Nick thinks is not “too old” for Littless to read (511). This familiar and direct connection between Littless and the novel might be a reference to Nick's anguish that his sister might be *kidnapped* by his rival, just like *Lolita* is by Quilty. Indeed, evanescent, ghostly, elusive, threatening and well-informed, the Evans boy calls to mind Quilty, the Doppelgänger in *Lolita*. Quilty, who is the same age as Humbert Humbert and sounds as erudite and eloquent, craves *Lolita* too, and eventually kidnaps her. The mysterious and ghostly apparitions of Quilty tracking the two lovers, the fact that he seems to know too much about the allegedly well-concealed offenses of Humbert Humbert, have turned obsessive. Like Dorian Gray's portrait, Humbert Humbert's mirror image represents the even darker side of his troubled self. At the end, killing him has become a therapeutical necessity.

Hemingway stopped his “American novel” at this point in the plot, where the course of action gets out of Nick's control as he has become increasingly obsessed with his shadowy follower. The unfulfilled storyline is heading inevitably toward a pathological and criminal denouement, seemingly the only way out of this paradoxical situation akin to a double-bind (“...I won't kill him, he thought, but anyway it's the right thing to do” 542). The psychological conflict that endangers Nick's mental coherence can be identified in the inevitable release of the death drive as the only “right thing to do,” in an astonishing reversal of the meaning of symbolical law.

Yet the narrative stops with Nick about to read aloud some passages from *Wuthering Heights* to Littless, a happy issue that can be considered as the symbolical denouement of

the narrative. This literary 'conclusion' confirms the successful outcome of sublimative activity, all the more so as Nick assumes here the role of the protective father, lulling his daughter to sleep and recognizing the authority of symbolical law. Just like the two siblings' story, *Wuthering Heights* develops a story of impossible love, which sounds like a warning that points out the necessity to bring the perverse temptation to a halt.

## [7] Conclusion

This intertextual and cross-textual reading of Hemingway and Nabokov has disclosed both the underlying analogies and differences between the works of these two major writers. The focus on the behavior and diction of the protagonist and narrator of *Lolita* brought into contrast two different ways of dealing with sensuality in the two novels. Nabokov's is rooted in a predominant logic of perversion, while Hemingway's draws structurally on sublimation. This does not mean that there are no perverse *traits* in Hemingway's writing, but they do not constitute a *system* as they do in perversion-oriented texts such as Nabokov's. The eccentricities that appear in Hemingway's writings are not only part and parcel of the modernist ethos, but they also constitute a desire complex in which the violent drives, unleashed through the act of writing, keep morphing into symbolical and certainly original forms that bear the trace of the sublimative forces at work as well as the necessity that presides over their generation. Consequently, it is possible to say that Hemingway's fiction remains foreign to the world of perversion in the clinical sense of the word. His writing testifies to the indefectible and continuous interplay of desire and sublimation in the general framework that I have called perverse temptation, which implies the thrill of exploration, testing, experimenting with new sensual possibilities for transgressing the father's law, but not fixation or subduing. While perversion negates desire, Hemingway's world, by contrast, manifests the dramatized will for confirming the generative power of desire – and the symbolic law it feeds on – in the face of perversion which fixates on the sexual object or subject, deriving its pleasures from the manipulation of symbolical law.

If the contours of the fetish are well defined in *Lolita*, where the fetishistic object (the nymphet as such) is both a black hole absorbing sexual energy and a star radiating lust, this is not the case in Hemingway's work, where one can identify the generative dynamism of the *object of desire*, not the ossifications of the fetish. Nabokov's protagonist realizes his fantasies; Hemingway's acts them out. The small hard breast or the short haircut, which are important components of Hemingway's sensual system, are erotic preferences, *not prerequisites*. This is why Hemingway's sensual palette comprises black-haired and blond-haired partners; if Brett Ashley's hair is remarkably short (*The Sun Also Rises*) Catherine Barkley's is quite long (*A Farewell to Arms*) just like Helena's (*The Strange Country*), as seen above. Lovers can be Anglo-Saxon, Native, Latin or African. In Hemingway, the object of desire possesses a power of its own, but it is neither isolated from the substrata of reality, nor does it become a transfixing object. On the contrary, desire circulates in a chain of metonymic objects that lessen the anesthetizing impact of affect, for there is a *diversity* of fantasies in Hemingway's work that prevents fetishistic

fixations. Moreover, the object of desire (the haircut in “Cat in the Rain” or in *The Garden of Eden*, for instance) belongs to the order of language, not only as a means of signification (to say something) but also of communication (to say something to *an other*). It is thus talked about by the two partners, exchanged verbally, negotiated, and therefore submitted to evolution, contingency, and the risk of refusal.

## [Notes]

- 1 See also Reynolds (1999, 256).
- 2 Hemingway, accompanied by Madelaine, shot a heron out of season and had to hide for a while before paying a fine that straightened out the problem. His mother handled the situation heroically, calling for her shotgun when the game wardens appeared in front of the family summer cottage and behaved in an ungentlemanly manner.
- 3 According to Michael Reynolds, Hemingway ordered a copy from the Scribner Book Store and received it by mail when he was in Ketchum on October 24, 1958 (1999, 402n).
- 4 Robert W. Trogon notes that the published version of *The Last Good Country* was “sanitized to excise references to [...] more explicit intimations of an incestuous relationship between Nick and Littleless, and instances when Nick uses obscene language” (144–45).
- 5 The nostalgic title “The Last Good Country” was given by Mary Hemingway, who took it from the passage where Nick tells his sister that ““this is about the last good country there is left”” (516).
- 6 Nabokov introduced the word “nymphet” in *Lolita*, meaning a sexually attractive and precocious young girl. It comes from the French “nymphette,” which means a little nymph.
- 7 Even the spied-on “nymphets” have “matted eyelashes” (15).
- 8 Exceptionally, tanned skin unites the couple of “The Sea Change,” a story about sexual transgression.
- 9 Toni Morrison is one of the first authors to have tackled substantially the issue of the brownness of skin in Hemingway's fiction, and especially in *The Garden of Eden*. According to her, all the fantasies related to skin color change, cross gender, or incest, are played out in the “Africanist field,” where the white subject's own terror, darkness, otherness, chaos... are projected into a strange, black, or, as it is the case here, “blackened” character (86–90). Not unlike Morrison, who sees in what she calls “coloring gestures” *codes* imposed by Catherine on David “to secure the sibling-twin emphasis that produces further sexual excitement” (87), Nancy Comley and Robert Scholes consider the activities related to the darkening of skin color in *The Garden of Eden* as “codes of miscegenation” (97, 90). Carl Eby sees in skin color yet another form of fetishism (172). In my perspective, tanning and brownness are neither codes obeying Hemingway's ideological vision or reflecting his social conditioning, nor are they “fe-



*tish objects*" (Eby 172), but rather they are objects of desire that function in a complex network of dark, unconventional forces, signifiers, places, shapes, people, and inter-texts.

- 10 And, indeed, this quality is a stable sensual feature that brings together different feminine characters, whatever their ethnic differences. So are Trudy's "plump brown legs," ("Fathers and Sons," 375) or the young French woman's skin in "The Sea Change," who was "a smooth golden brown" (302). Maria, Robert Jordan's Spanish lover in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, has "handsome brown hands," and her "teeth were white in her brown face and her skin and her eyes were the same golden tawny brown" (23).
- 11 Littleless is also the name of one of Thomas Hudson's cats in *Islands in the Stream*, a work written in the 1950s and published posthumously.

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