To Tanya,
my favorite coauthor and critic,
who has read it all already anyway

Contents

Preface

Among the articles collected under this cover, the earliest was written in 1996 and the latest, a couple of months ago, in 2016. Consistency is not what one would expect from such a long stretch. I did not select articles according to a certain plan—just ones available in English and ones I was not exceedingly ashamed of, from today's perspective. Many of these texts were triggered by the desire to react to the most recent cultural irritants, and although English tends to quench most flammable emotions, these articles can hardly pretend to offer an objective history of the given (and worse, contemporary) period in Russian culture.

Nevertheless, I was surprised to detect at least two themes that seem to thread through this motley assemblage. One of them is the cultural crisis that we, for lack of a better word, call postmodernism. This is why I included in this collection an article about *Lolita*—a seminal novel that, in my opinion, marked the crisis of the transcendental cultural paradigm. Next to it I placed two articles discussing the culture of the Soviet scientific intelligentsia of the 1960s, which, as I try to argue, signified the crisis of the posttotalitarian Enlightenment project. Articles about Vladimir Sorokin and Pussy Riot, as well as about the "misuses" of postmodernism in post-Soviet popular culture, naturally belong to the same analytic thread. Nowadays, Fredric Jameson, the foremost theorist of postmodernism, says that "it would have been much clearer had I distinguished *postmodernity* as a historical period from *postmodernism* as a style" (Jameson 2016, 144; emphasis in the original). I also accept this distinction. Postmodern crises do not necessarily require postmodernist poetics for their manifestation—for example, all the films that I address here can hardly qualify as postmodernist by their aesthetics; yet they are undoubtedly postmodern, as they all display discursive discordances resulting

from multiple breakdowns of cultural communication and the collapse of stable binaries. These are the characteristics of postmodernity, but they are also central to postmodernist aesthetics (which also necessarily includes deconstruction of binaries).

Any attempt to reflect on recent cultural phenomena cannot help relating—directly or not—to the political context surrounding the works under analysis. The articles in this collection are not about politics (obviously not my field), and yet inevitably they are. I didn't plan it this way, but the twenty years between 1996 and 2016 include at least three distinct periods in contemporary Russia's history—the anarchic 1990s, the "stabilized" 2000s, and the repressive 2010s. Recently, I can't help writing about the cultural reasons behind the failure of the perestroika aspirations for a new, liberal Russia and the recent turn toward a new yet old (or vice versa) nationalist, imperialist, conservative, and isolationist Russia. There is also the question of the liberal intelligentsia's responsibility for today's state of affairs. Another painful question concerns the relationship between postmodern crises and today's crisis of Russian society, with its notorious 86 percent of the public supporting Putin's political course and the marginalization and repression of everything subversive, critical, and countercultural. Strangely enough, I believe that this "signified" can be detected not only in texts written after the failure of the anti-Putin protests but also prior to these events. This is certainly an aberration in perception, but I prefer to stick with it.

Such a collection also offers the wonderful chance to thank from the bottom of my heart all the friends and colleagues who tirelessly improved my ungainly English by editing, proofreading, and sometimes (re)translating my texts. My gratitude goes to Helena Goscilo, Birgit Beumers, Eliot Borenstein, Vladimir Makarov, Dirk Uffelmann, Tine Roesen, Klavdia Smola, Irene Masing-Delic, Helen Halva, Yana Hashamova, Lacey Smith, Julia Gerhard, and, of course, my oldest, strictest, and most sarcastic editor—Daniil Leiderman. Ben Peterson has done a lot of work to smooth the stylistic differences between disparate texts in this collection, for which I am very grateful to him.

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"The Poetics of ITR Discourse: In the 1960s and Today." *Ab Imperio* 1 (2013): 109–31.

"The *Progressor* between the Imperial and the Colonial." In *Postcolonial Slavic Literatures after Communism*, edited by Klavdia Smola and Dirk Uffelmann, 29–58. Postcolonial Perspectives on Eastern Europe, vol. 4. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016.

"Cycles, Continuity and Change in Contemporary Russian Culture." In *Russia's New Fin de Siècle*, edited by Birgit Beumers, 29–45. Bristol: Intellect, 2013.

"Fleshing/Flashing Discourse: Sorokin's Master-Trope." In *Vladimir Sorokin's Languages*, edited by Tine Roesen and Dirk Uffelmann, 25–47. *Slavica Bergensia*, vol. 11. Bergen: Bergen University Press, 2013.

"Pussy Riot as the Trickstar." *Apparatus* 1 (2015): http://www.apparatusjournal.net/index.php/apparatus/article/view/5.

"The Formal Is Political." *Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 60, 2 (2016): 185-204.

"Post-Soc: Transformations of Socialist Realism in the Popular Culture of the Recent Period." In "Innovation through Iteration: Russian Popular Culture Today," special forum issue, *Slavic and East European Journal* 48, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 356–77.

"War as the Family Value: Failing Fathers and Monstrous Sons in *My Stepbrother Frankenstein*." In *Cinepaternity: Fathers and Sons in Soviet and Post-Soviet Film*, edited by Helena Goscilo and

Yana Hashamova, 114–36. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

With Tatiana Mikhailova. "In Denial," review of Alexander Veledinsky's *The Geographer Drank Away the Globe*. *Kinokultura* 43 (2014): http://www.kinokultura.com/2014/43r-geograf-MLTM.shtml.

"Lost in Translation." Review of Mikhail Segal's *Short Stories*." *Kinokultura* 50 (2015): http://www.kinokultura.com/2015/50/fifty_rasskazy.shtml.

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Boulder, July 2016

Literature

The War of Discourses: *Lolita* and the Failure of a Transcendental Project

In *Lolita* (1955), perhaps for the first time in all his works, Nabokov transfers unto his hero *all* the traits of the author-narrator. Similar forms of discursive organization have appeared before in the novel *Despair* (1934) and the novella *The Eye* (1930). In these and all other previous works, however, we are presented with the narrating character's inner monologue, whereas in *Lolita* the reader faces a *text*, written by Humbert before his death in prison. Thus, the protagonist is here situated in the space-time of writing ("creative chronotope," to use Bakhtin's term), which Nabokov, by all indications, believes to be the sole realm where freedom of the self may be realized. In this respect, *Lolita* lends its voice directly to the metafictional tradition: it is a narrative of the creative process, though one that extends beyond the flatness of the page and into life—a narrative in which the hero becomes the author. At the same time, and as related in his own words, this introspective narrative details Humbert's attempt to realize his artistic vision in life itself, reminding us that the author-creator is not eclipsed by the hero-narrator or even by the hero-author. In the greater scheme of the evolution of modernism, however, this sentiment appears waning in importance: H.H. is truly the creator sui generis, and in his life he leads to the absolute extreme all that was distinctive in Nabokov's favorite characters.

One of the defining traits of Humbert's novel-spanning confession is its inner paralogy, structured on the polemical intertwining of two separate codes of aesthetic world-modeling. One of these codes extends from Nabokov's perennial topic of banality and totalitarianism (*poshlust*), though here it adopts a new form through association with mass (that is, pop) culture. The other is entirely monopolized by Humbert himself and lies at the basis of his personality, his philosophical and aesthetic self-definition; this code is identifiable by the *literary* intertexts of Humbert's confession.

A literary scholar, H.H. blueprints his artistic project through dialogue with numerous traditions of world literature, from Ovid and Catullus to Russian symbolists and Joyce.[1] If one judges by the frequency of allusions, the paramount positions in Humbert's model are held by Edgar Allan Poe ("Annabel Lee") and Prosper Mérimée (*Carmen*), followed by Shakespeare and Dante, then Blok,[2] Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Joyce. What do these writers have in common, aside from being part of the canon of "high literature"? Of most likely significance to *Lolita*, it is that they all are somehow linked to romanticism—whether as its forebears, its classics, or its modernist progeny. On the whole, we can state that the romantic tradition, as the predecessor and foundation of the modernist sensibility, formulates Humbert's consciousness and project. Moreover, we can say that its influence is something of a double-edged sword.

First, romanticism endows Humbert (as well as Nabokov's other "creative" characters) with a well-developed discourse of transcendence. The narrator's transcendental fixation is initially visible in the intensive allusions to Edgar Allan Poe, and particularly to his poem "Annabel Lee," wherein the full scope of Humbert's love is established. His passion for Lolita becomes one link in an endless chain of surrogates and analogies: Lolita finally, after repeated failures, "replaces" Humbert's lost childhood love "Annabel," who in turn is reminiscent of Poe's Annabel, who in

1 For more detail, see Proffer (1968) and Appel (1991).

2 Blok's intertexts in *Lolita* are analyzed by Senderovich and Shvarts (1999).

turn reminds Poe of his youthful dead wife, Virginia. All these recursive substitutions serve as metaphors for transcendental escape beyond the boundaries of reality, beyond time and death. Poe's love for Annabel transcends her passing; for Humbert, the mythical nymphets are so unlike merely pretty girls that they exist on an "intangible island of entranced time" (Nabokov 1977, 21).[3] It is not lust that moves the hero but in essence a desire to surpass the passage of time and to return to the heavenly garden of eternal childhood.[4] "Ah, leave me alone in my pubescent park, in my mossy garden. Let them [the nymphets] play around me forever. Never grow up" (ibid.), he proclaims at the beginning of the novel, inciting a theme that blossoms steadily throughout the text.

Before their first "rendezvous," Lolita appears in the famous "davenport scene" with Humbert, holding in her hands a "banal, Eden-red apple" (58), and while she sits in his lap, H.H. writes, "Lolita was safely solipsized. . . . What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another fanciful Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, *no life of her own*" (60, 62; emphasis mine). The imagery harks back to the motif of daydreaming, a device as characteristic to romanticism as it is to modernism, symbolizing escape into a transcendental dimension. (Nabokov himself used it before in *The Luzhin Defense*; *King, Queen, Knave*; *The Gift*; and *Invitation to a Beheading*.) Humbert achieves a transcendental reverie in the davenport scene—if not daydreaming, then a sort of in-between dream and reality—which is accompanied by the *erasure* of Lolita, the deprivation of her own will, consciousness, and even life.

At many points in *Lolita*, particularly throughout the novel's second part, such romantic dreaming seamlessly morphs into a waking nightmare. The termination of transcendental endeavors in reality produces for Humbert grim and surreal effects. It is telling

3 All further quotations from the novel refer to this edition.

4 There is an obvious parallel between this project and Nabokov's habitual idealization of his own childhood. Notably, *Lolita* was written immediately after Nabokov's Russian autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, in which this idealization reaches its highest point.

that the indications marking this transition from transcendental exercise to psychological plague arise immediately after Humbert attains his desired goal: the sexual possession of Lolita, without resorting to violence or subterfuge but rather at the girl's own initiative. Humbert's state of mind is far from satiation, despite his success: "Why then this horror that I cannot shake off?" (135), "an ashen sense of awfulness" (137), "a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames" (166). This arc culminates in Quilty's murder, which Humbert carefully adorns in the trappings of the romantic tradition: the hero, all in black, comes to kill his twin and reads the verdict in white verse—the scene is practically a quotation from Poe's "William Wilson" or Lermontov's *The Masquerade*. Yet Humbert's authorial fancy is insufficient: throughout the murder scene, the tone of a nightmare ("a daymare") overshadows any feeling of romantic grandeur.

The second feature of romanticism to be actualized in Humbert's narrative is one linked with the romantic discourse of chaos—with the romantic abyss. This aspect emerges in the forbidden and transgressive nature of Humbert's desire. An intertextual parallel is formed by the appearance of Mérimée's "Carmen" as a trivialized but still distinctively romantic theme of criminal desire—or, rather, desire that provokes crime. (Another important parallel in this context is Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, though the role of that intertext is much more complex.) Humbert's confession continues to incite argument over the morality or immorality of the novel to this day, resurrecting the romantic-chaotic thread of moral ambivalence. From the perspective of morality and law, the protagonist's infatuation with an underage girl is repulsive and criminal, but Nabokov, having given Humbert the power of his own oratory and having fixed his composition in the context of the romantic tradition, not only makes this passion aesthetically appealing but compels the reader to sympathize with the criminal hero, and ever to wish him luck in his efforts to seduce a twelve-year-old child. (This dynamic persists at least until the first chapters of the book's second half.)

More broadly, though still molding to the notion of the romantic abyss, *Lolita* presents us with a story of destructive and

self-destructive love, in which love *inevitably* predicates death. Given that we are told in the very first pages that he has already died in prison, Humbert's fate comes as no surprise. The device of the confession at death's door, although it is not known what crime brought him there, is deeply rooted in romanticism. With this criminal motif intertwines that of madness—not only in terms of Humbert's frequent visits to the mental hospital before his introduction to Lolita but also in his characterization as a romantic lunatic, or a "demented diarist," in the words of John Ray. Madness is perhaps the most typical manifestation of the abyss in romantic and modernist culture; tellingly, the motif persists throughout the text of *Lolita*.

In the davenport scene, Humbert sees himself "suspended on the brink of that voluptuous abyss" (60), associating this abyss with escape into the transcendental dimension. A comparable sensation, that of "the teasing delirious feeling of teetering on the very brink of unearthly order and splendor" (230), accompanies Lolita playing tennis, a scene that Nabokov categorized with several other episodes as the book's nervous system ("the nerves of the novel," 316). In direct relation to this description of the "brink," the novel invokes an ironic paraphrase of two classical quotations (Poe plus Dostoevsky): "Winged gentlemen! No hereafter is acceptable if it does not produce her as she was then, in that Colorado resort, between Snow and Elphinstone" (230). The abyss and its promised transcendence, then, are linked in this case with admiration of Lolita's beauty. However, the abyss opens again before Humbert when Lolita flees from him with Quilty: amid the ringing of church bells in Elphinstone, he comprehends how he has wronged her and finds himself on the edge of the "friendly abyss" (307; another of the book's "nerves"). His chase after Lolita formerly transported him to the verge of this abyss, causing at once unearthly pleasure; now, the bliss has vanished, and all that remains is to fall madly into the yawning chasm.

One can find virtually innumerable manifestations of the romantic abyss in Humbert's autobiography. His curse (an appetite for nymphets), his self-destruction, and the ruin Humbert brings to his beloved—Annabel, Charlotte, Lolita (only Valechka manages to

evade him; is that why he has such vehemence for her?)—all of these signify the void opening before H.H. and finally consuming him. Given the context of romantic discourse through which Humbert's literary sensibilities lead him to intersect his own story, this abyss is in essence the binary opposite of transcendence, and the toll for it.

If the presence of romantic motifs is so prominent here, why is it that in the famous afterword "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" (1958) Nabokov responds with no little umbrage to a comment from critic John Hollander declaring *Lolita* a "record of a love affair with the romantic novel"? Perhaps Nabokov's reply is meant to remind us that the romantic code is but one aspect of the discursive spectrum of *Lolita*, and to reduce the whole novel to these terms alone is, in principle, a faulty approach.

In accordance with the logic of Nabokov's style, Humbert's "literary" code is not contrary to that of "life" but rather to the "cultural" code—to an entire bouquet of like codes. These codes are crude and pseudoromantic and belong to a sphere of popular or mass culture—or, in Nabokov's terms, the sphere (or rather the discourse) of *poshlust*. Humbert presents in the most excruciating detail a whole host of pop-culture gibberish, from the *Youth* and *Young Homemaker* magazines to the fictional *Campfire Girl* (whose author bears the familiar name "Shirley Holmes"). He invents a pop song about "little Carmen," recreates scenes from a Western, and burrows into the tourist subculture, complete with its fake fetishes and seductive brochures. In describing family life with Charlotte, he does not fail to admit that "the two sets were congeneric since both were affected by the same stuff (soap operas, psychoanalysis and cheap novelettes) upon which I drew for my characters and she for the mode of expression" (80). Pop literature's sentimental clichés clearly resound in Charlotte's letter to Humbert, and even when H.H. himself, especially in the first half of his narrative, proclaims on occasion, "All New England for a lady-writer's pen" (49). In the course of banal codes, an honored place is afforded to Freudianism (which Nabokov mocked with succinctness and consistency). Humbert's resentment of Freudianism is quite understandable, as psychoanalysis mocks and overturns the romantic worldview: if Humbert negates the "lower" with high poetry, then psychoanalysis

contrarily divines a sexual complex behind all poetry, thus denying any transcendental values.

Lolita, too, is a product of this culture. The many pedagogical institutions to which she is subjected all manufacture the banal, from Charlotte's by-the-book child-rearing efforts, to "Camp Q" with its cabins named after Disney creatures and sex games under the guise of water sports, to the "good old Beardsley School," whose director presents an entire curriculum of mass-cultural education, following the thesis that "we live not only in a world of thoughts, but also in a world of things. Words without experience are meaningless. What on earth can Dorothy Hummerson care for Greece and the Orient with their harems and slaves?" (178). Later, Humbert explicitly defines his beloved as an exemplary demographic and consumer of pop culture: "She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster" (148).

A particularly important position in the book's pop culture discourse is held by all things associated with Hollywood, as Alfred Appel discusses in *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* (1974). Films, real and imagined, watched by the heroes of the novel (not excluding Humbert) occupy many of the novel's pages. Charlotte, like her daughter, carefully imitates film stars, even on the surface resembling a "weak solution of Marlene Dietrich" (37), and she fashions her relationship and even dialogue with Humbert after the patterns of movie love. Humbert dispenses astronomical degrees of sarcasm in his exposure of the inconsistencies, or even the blatant idiocy, of Hollywood characters and plots, in which "real singers and dancers had unreal stage careers in an essentially grief-proof sphere of existence wherefrom death and truth were banned" (170). It is little wonder that Clare Quilty, the popular playwright, "the American Maeterlinck," who has authored fifty-two Hollywood scripts, whose cigarette-commercial portrait seems to hang on every surface (including the wall in Lolita's bedroom), who stands at the epicenter of the world of banality, is the one to steal Lolita from Humbert.

The unlikelihood of the events on the silver screen (as well as those described in tourist booklets, magazines for girls and women, etc.) is clearly juxtaposed to analogous situations within the lives

of the novel's characters (the collision of the rebellious daughter seeking her freedom in show business and the doting father, crime and punishment, a battle with an adversary away from civilization). In most cases, the lives of the heroes carefully emulate expectations cultivated by Hollywood. However, nothing turns out quite as sleek and pretty for them as it does in the movies, and the novel's characters suffer far more than their models do. To some degree, the interplay between the ideals promoted by mass culture and the events of the novel reveal the paradox later explored by Jean Baudrillard in his Disneyland example: "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real. [. . .] It is no longer a question of false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle" (Baudrillard 1994, 13–14).

The delusive indistinguishability of life and film is exemplified not only by Charlotte and Lolita but also by many passing characters and even by Humbert himself. (Quilty is excepted, as he understands the price of these illusions.) The Hollywood "dream factory" is the first significant enterprise of the "hyperreality of the simulacrum," which is why the earliest of its "products" is not the imaginary but rather the real. Of course, even the romantic discourse to which Humbert belongs and from which he derives his facetious attitude toward Hollywood, is also a "dream factory" in a sense. It is apparently not the dreams themselves that aggravate Humbert, but their careful insulation of the consumer from grief and pain, abysses and tragedies. In absence of this threshold, the two-dimensional flatness of inevitable happiness precludes the need for transcendence. For instance, in "Annabel Lee," an obvious precursor to Humbert's transcendentalism, love acquires its full transcendental meaning only after the beloved's death. Likewise, only the death of his "Annabel" permits Humbert to glimpse the abyssal dimension of his passion. Later, the death of Lolita, obfuscated in John Ray's prologue, imparts the highest romantic intensity in Humbert's self-judgment and final profession of love for Lolita. All such feeling is impossible in the void of the flat simulacra of life and love shaped by Hollywood. In this sense, Humbert shares Nabokov's point of view: he, like his creator, rejects *poshlust*, here represented by the

discourse of pop culture as traitorous in its appeal, a beguiling, disorienting *simulacrum of transcendence*.

In this lies the greatest problem of *Lolita*: by handing the reins of authorship to Humbert, Nabokov does not allow us to accept one aspect of Humbert and reject another. We cannot agree with him on, for example, his disdain for mass culture and his faith in the transcendental qualities of love, and simultaneously reject, say, the practical realization of his philosophical-aesthetic program.

Despite the contrasting nature of the romantic-modernist discourse and the discourse of pop culture, the intertwining of *Lolita*'s motives and images demolishes the implied dichotomy of poetry and *poshlust*. To be more precise, while Humbert strives to enforce just such a dichotomy, the subtleties of the text repeatedly demonstrate the futility of such an undertaking. The artistic optic of *Lolita* is multidimensional, and nearly every image and every plot device illuminates the symbol system of high culture and the context of mass culture as its doppelgänger.

These codes interweave most noticeably in relation to Lolita herself. It is essentially this duality, according to Humbert, that yields the greatest mystery of the nymphets: "What drives me insane is the twofold nature of this nymphet—of every nymphet, perhaps; this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures [. . .] and then again all this mixed up with the exquisite stainless tenderness seeping through the musk and the mud, through the dirt and the death" (44). As we can see, vulgarity and *poshlust*, directly traced to their source, pop culture ("the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures"), intersect here with transcendental motifs of unearthly innocence, eternal childhood ("tender dreamy childishness," "exquisite stainless tenderness"), and the abyss ("the musk and the mud, through the dirt and the death").

This is exactly why Lolita becomes the subject of dispute in an invisible battle between two antipodes: Humbert and Quilty, the poet and *poshlust* incarnate. H.H. and Lolita's first kiss, imagined as an elevated moment in Humbert's code, turns out to be a "bit of backfisch foolery in imitation of some simulacrum of fake romance"

(113). Even the longed-for copulation transpires on Lolita's—that is, teenagers', which means pop-cultural—not Humbert's, terms. When Lolita, "at a kind of slow-motion walk" (120) or as if in a dream (passage into the transcendental dimension), attends to the gifts brought to her by Humbert, the romantic discourse subtly morphs into stereotypical falsity: "She crept into my waiting arms, radiant, relaxed, caressing me with her tender, mysterious, impure, indifferent, twilight eyes—for all the world, *like the cheapest of cheap cuties.* For that is what nymphets imitate—while we moan and die" (120; emphasis mine). A romantic dream becomes a selection of pop culture stereotypes, a Hollywood simulacrum. This is precisely why Humbert is unable to take advantage of Lolita's dream: his traditional romantic chronotope does not possess, as is discovered in the course of the plot, the expected autonomy over banal, pop-culture-saturated reality.

For the very same reason, Humbert fails miserably in the various operations of his transcendental project, be they to resurrect Annabel in Lolita by copulating on the shore of the sea, or peacefully to observe nymphets playing in the school yard opposite the house at Beardsley ("On the very first day of school, workmen arrived and put up a fence some way down the gap. . . . As soon as they had erected a sufficient amount of material to spoil everything, those absurd builders suspended their work and never appeared again"; 179). It is then no surprise that the poetically charged roster of Lolita's class transforms in her own retelling into a rogue's gallery of "low" pleasures; thus the "Shakespearean" Miranda twins "had shared the same bed for years," and Kenneth Knight (chivalry indeed!) "used to exhibit himself wherever and whenever he had a chance" (137).

In a similar fashion, the Enchanted Hunters Hotel—its name romantic as well as evocative of Humbert's pursuit of the nymphet—appears initially in Charlotte's memory as a symbol of bourgeois comfort, then becomes actualized as a destination, where H.H. spends his first night with Lolita. It is significant that in this hotel Humbert unknowingly crosses paths for the first time with Quilty, who has come there to compose his play "The Enchanted Hunters." Lolita will later be cast in a school production of this very drama