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A Tempest in a Test Tube: Reading Lolita as Metafiction

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A TEMPEST IN A TEST TUBE
READING *LOLITA* AS METAFICTION

by

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B.A., St. John's College, 2012

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A Tempest in a Test Tube: Reading *Lolita* as Metafiction
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Burgie, Jillian (M.A., Comparative Literature)

A Tempest in a Test Tube: Reading *Lolita* as Metafiction

Thesis directed by Dr. Mark Leiderman

This thesis traces the functions and effects of metafictional devices in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. I argue that metafictional devices serve as the most significant form of moral evaluation of a novel that has frequently been accused of immorality. The devices I focus on are parody, mise en abyme, metalepsis, and appeals to the creative chronotope. Their common function is to lay bare the conventions and processes of reading, writing, and world-construction. As a result, the text becomes self-critical and performative: it reveals its own processes and involves the audience as co-creator.

What is co-created, however, is a series of increasingly heinous crimes that underline *Lolita*'s suffering. Moreover, the processes of metafiction compromise the discourse of morality itself, so that any moral redemption of the novel's protagonist Humbert Humbert proves impossible – he has no language in which to redeem himself. I argue that the metafictional performance of writing in *Lolita* leaves a moral gap in the text that can only be filled *by the reader*. Morality in *Lolita* ceases being a code of prescribed norms but appears as a Levinasian process of reading – reading as a challenging, dialogic encounter with an Other that, ultimately, discovers the limits of transgression.

Lolita thus critiques the entire project of modernist life-construction and moral discourse itself. And yet, by offering a new vision of morality as a process of reading, Nabokov's novel serves as a poignant critique of violence as “incuriosity.” Morality, though malleable, is not infinitely flexible: the one limit to the pursuit of beauty is the suffering of the Other.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents and friends, whose support has helped me to become better, braver, and more capable of pursuing my envisioned life.

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INTRODUCTION

Humbert Humbert's commentator, "John Ray, Jr." is not to be believed about much concerning Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel *Lolita*, but he does have an important insight when he claims the book presents "a tempest in a test tube" (5)¹ – that is, a kind of experiment. This insight might be read as Vladimir Nabokov dropping a hint about how to read his book into John Ray's discourse; indeed, the poetic nature of this line is in striking contrast to John Ray's academic tone adopted in the rest of the Foreword, suggesting, perhaps, that Nabokov is intruding here.² Regardless of whether it is spoken by Nabokov or his character, John Ray, the notion of experiment is a compelling frame from which to read *Lolita*. Anna Brodsky has taken this hint and also reads Humbert Humbert as a "creative experiment" (52). The experiment, according to Brodsky, concerns the possibility of art in a world traumatized by the Holocaust with its pervasive yet banal sense of evil.³ Brodsky points to Hannah Arendt's conception of the post-Holocaust form of evil as a ubiquitous, normal evil. For example, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt claims, "the trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal" (253). Evil, in the post-Holocaust world, becomes very difficult to discern and dangerously common. It is this notion of evil that, Brodsky claims, motivates Nabokov's later artistic work, including *Lolita*. "The really shocking brutality of the war had seeped deep

¹ Hereafter, for all citations of *Lolita* I am using Nabokov and Appel, 2000.

² Appel indicates a number of such places where Nabokov seems to be "interfering" with his character's texts. See the annotations to the Foreword for various instances where a "gap in the texture of Ray's rhetoric reveals the voice of his maker" (Appel 1970, 324).

³ See Brodsky 56-59; in this respect see also Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and "The Threat of Conformism."

down into Nabokov. On one moving occasion, he seemed to admit that it bewildered even his ability to encompass or transcend it in his artistic genius” (51). Brodsky thus suggests that the main dilemma behind *Lolita* is precisely the problem of evil in the post-Holocaust world.

The evil of the Holocaust was pervasive for Nabokov. Where once he conceived the artist as possessing a unique capacity for self- and world- creation, now even art took on a guilty countenance (Brodsky 50). The artist who once retreated into his own creative being now seemed insensitive and inattentive. This inattention, according to Richard Rorty, was precisely what Nabokov, throughout his life, characterized as “cruelty,” explaining:

Nabokov’s greatest creations are obsessives – Kinbote, Humbert Humbert, and Van Veen – who, although they write as well as their creator at his best, are people whom Nabokov himself loathes. . . . Both Kinbote and Humbert are exquisitely sensitive to everything which affects or provides expression for their own obsession, and entirely incurious about anything that affects anyone else. These characters dramatize, as it has never before been dramatized, the particular form of cruelty about which Nabokov worried most – incuriosity (158).

Rorty suggests that the problem of evil as it appears in Nabokov’s works is not a question of overt, absolute, theological evil, but of a subtler, more mundane form of evil: indifference. These characters, according to Rorty, especially thematize this mundane evil because they are *not* incapable – they have extraordinary capacities for noticing, and simply do not apply it to other people. As Rorty claims, “Nabokov wrote about cruelty from the inside, helping us see the way in which the private pursuit of aesthetic bliss produces cruelty” (146).

On a larger scale, this inattentiveness is exactly the phenomena that Zygmunt Bauman identifies as the source of Nazi terror. In pursuit of the modernist ideals of “artificial, rationally designed order,” Bauman argues, modern subjects became dissociated from their moral sensibility precisely because they did not pay attention to the effects of their actions – did not *need* to pay attention (269-72). Modernity split actions, actors, and victims into “mediated

actions” “role-performers” and “facets, features, statistically represented traits” (270-72). This radical division of labor and laborers allows – and even encourages – people not to notice the full moral implications of their actions, so that, “[m]oral impulses and constraints have not been so much extinguished, as neutralized and made irrelevant” (271). Bauman concludes, “Modernity did not make people more cruel; it only invented a way in which cruel things could be done by non-cruel people” (272).

This mass-scale incuriosity, like the war itself, does not feature explicitly in *Lolita*, but the novel can be read as a condemnation of this “little” cruelty of incuriosity. Brodsky examines the numerous instances of little oversights or consumeristic banality in the novel, seeing these ultimately as Nabokov’s condemnation of American *incuriosity*. “...the barbarism of the war subtly informs *Lolita* is in the depiction of America. Evil is not something that one can confidently consign ‘over there,’ but a ubiquitous human possibility. The Holocaust cast a long, long shadow before it: America lay in that shadow” (56-7). That shadow, according to Brodsky, informs the entire staging and development of *Lolita*. The book is, essentially, a critical look at the heritage of the Holocaust, this particular insidious, small-scale type of cruelty as reckless indifference.

The gist of Humbert’s crime [is] not having ‘forbidden sex,’ but destroying another life. Humbert’s destruction of childhood links him to what Nabokov picked out as the most haunting and terrifying detail of Nazi terror – the destruction of innocent children...Humbert’s destruction of Dolores Haze’s childhood bears the trace of Nazi terror (Brodsky 53).

Nazi terror, as Bauman suggests, is also connected with the modernist project of seeking beauty at all costs – what he calls the “gardening posture” of modernism. “[The destruction of the Jews] was a *creative* destruction, much as the destruction of weeds is a creative act in pursuit of a designed garden beauty...[A]t stake was an aesthetically satisfying, transparent,

homogenous universe” (272). The modernist project of searching for beauty at all costs ended, according to Arendt, Brodsky, and, it seems, Nabokov, in these little cruelties and banality. In effect, then, in *Lolita* Nabokov posed the question: Can “good” coincide with “beautiful” after the Holocaust? Can the artist be autonomous and seek beauty?

Faced with the uselessness or even impossibility of art, Nabokov conducted an experiment: “By making his artist a predatory and unconscionable monster...Nabokov was questioning the formerly unquestionable “goodness” of art; was anything ‘good’ possible at all?” (Brodsky 53). By allying in Humbert Humbert the extraordinary attention of an artist with the solipsistic blindness of a pervert, Nabokov effectively placed art and evil into a Petrie dish. How will they relate? Which will triumph?

Thus, *Lolita* can be read not simply as a fictional “thought-experiment”⁴ but a more pervasive experiment - in Brian McHale’s terms, postmodern: “Postmodernist fiction experiments with individuals, and also with models...but beyond that it experiments as well with the very *process of world-modeling*” (2012, 146). While the debate whether Nabokov belongs to modernism or postmodernism is largely irrelevant to the current study, McHale’s notion of experimental novels as those that model *processes of world-building* already invokes a metafictional reading. These novels present not just a world but the processes of reading and writing that constitute it. Because *Lolita* is an experiment of world-models, it is necessary to take a specifically metafictional approach to its interpretation. Moreover, since neither the war nor the Nazis figure explicitly in the novel, any critique of modernist world-building, incuriosity, or artistic escapism must then be located on a level above the diegetic narrative.

⁴ Cf. McHale: “All fictions experiment with worlds, of course, in the sense that they conduct *thought-experiments*. They ask ‘*What if?*’” (2012, 145). This is not the sense in which I invoke *Lolita* as experimental novel.

Lolita puts all of these attitudes into a Petrie dish and tests the limits of both. Do any limits exist for the pursuit of beauty and freedom? Can art absent itself from this great cruelty? Is art innocent or is it inevitably mixed with the evil and cruelty that seem so pervasive in the post-Holocaust world? These are the questions *Lolita* seeks to answer.

The approach taken in this thesis is to read *Lolita* as an experimental novel precisely because of its metafictional qualities, in order to pay equal attention to and unite the aesthetic/formal genius of Nabokov and the very important moral stance of the novel. That is, *Lolita* posits a vision of morality in the post-war world as a process of metafiction – a certain attentive practice of reading and co-creating the text and the world.

Interestingly, what will be discovered in the course of the study is that Humbert is, in fact, a *failed* experiment, because of his cruelty, the inattentiveness and insensitivity that on a broader scale embodies the “moral adiaphorization” Bauman identifies in the modernist mentalities that led directly to the Holocaust (270-271). Humbert’s failure serves as a critique of the modern totalitarian regimes as well as the modernist quest for beauty in rationality. In that way, reading *Lolita* as metafiction is precisely what will locate *Lolita*’s experiment historically and show the full force of Nabokov’s inventive and yet decidedly humanist vision of art after the Holocaust.

CHAPTER I

THEORY OF METAFICTION

To begin, it is necessary to settle what is meant by “metafiction,” and to identify the key metafictional strategies deployed in *Lolita*. The term “metafiction,” to quote Linda Hutcheon, denotes “fiction about fiction” (1984 1). This fiction-about-fiction is characterized by its tendency to thematize itself as subject matter or to draw attention to itself as fiction. It does this by employing various techniques of self-consciousness and reflexivity. “Self-consciousness” describes fiction that is aware of the fact that it is fiction and, simultaneously, makes the reader aware of this fact. To this category belong such metafictional strategies as call attention to what Patricia Waugh calls the text’s “status as artefact” (2). “Reflexivity,” on the other hand, is the quality of self-exploration in fiction, a tendency in a text to hold a mirror up to itself and so to reflect its processes as fiction. To this category belong any metafictional devices that invoke mirroring, mise en abymes, or any kind of reflection within the text. Reflexivity, by presenting a microcosm or mirror image of writing, offers a model of the writing process in miniature. As such, it explores the processes and effects of fiction, but may or may not recognize itself as fiction and thereby question the nature of fiction as well. Linda Hutcheon suggests as much as well when she offers the distinction between “overt” and “covert” narcissism in fiction (1984, 7). In her formulation, narcissism involves both self-awareness and reflexivity, essentially a mirroring device for fiction to think about itself. The overt/covert distinction, in other terms, is a distinction of self-consciousness. As Hutcheon says “a [covert] text is self-reflective but not necessarily self-conscious” (1984, 7). That is, self-consciousness and reflexivity are related but distinct concepts.

The methods used to establish this self-consciousness and reflexivity all serve to shift the fictional work's reference from the real world to itself as book or to the writing process in general. Theorists identify a number of methods used in fiction to achieve self-consciousness and reflexivity, among them: anti-mimetic or counter-realistic devices (Berry), structural incoherence (Ommundsen), exaggeration of tensions between reality and fictionality (Berry, Waugh), simultaneous or related construction and destruction of illusion (Waugh), parody (Waugh, Hutcheon), and presence of play (Waugh). Yet not all devices are employed in all metafictional novels; metafiction varies widely in their choice or use of possible devices. The metafictional strategies most often discussed in criticism of *Lolita* include parody (Appel, Frosch), *mise en abyme* (Gill, Schweighauser), and a confusion of diegetic levels that spans *trompe-l'oeil*, *metalepsis*, and what Bakhtin calls "the creative chronotope" (Bakhtin 254; Gill, Alexandrov, Naiman). A theoretical definition of each is necessary before applying these concepts to *Lolita*.

PARODY

Parody is a strategy of self-consciousness in fiction. It is defined by Linda Hutcheon as "ironic inversion" or "repetition with critical distance" (1985 6). Yuri Tynjanov describes it as a "double-level" text. "[B]ehind the apparent structure of a work, its first level, lies a second level, that of the work which it stylizes or parodies" (Tynjanov 104). That is, parody is a kind of superimposition of texts – behind the text at hovers another that is just visible, as it were, *through* the main text, as through a veil. The attitude toward the parodied (second-level) text, to follow Hutcheon, is mostly one of criticism or irony.

Irony, according to Hutcheon, is the “main rhetorical mechanism” for parody. “Irony participates in parodic discourse as a strategy...which allows the decoder to interpret and evaluate” (1985 31). That is, it is only through the ironic treatment of earlier texts that this “second-level” superimposed text is apprehended and, thereby criticized. Tynjanov enumerates several ways a text may “mechanize” elements from an earlier one: “The mechanization of a verbal device can be produced by various means: by repeating it without having it coincide with the compositional plan; by rearranging its parts ... by dislocating the meaning by punning ... finally by isolating it from similar devices and unifying it with contradictory devices” (115). In short, parody operates by a de-contextualization or fragmentation of earlier literary styles and forms.

Parody decontextualizes or fragments styles in order to critique or ridicule the original style and the ways it has become ossified and clichéd. That is, parody directs critical laughter at this “mechanization.” Such parodic laughter, to follow Bakhtin, serves “to strip, as it were, the object of the false verbal and ideological husk that encloses it” (237). That is, by ridiculing these worn-out literary conventions, metafiction reinvigorates the forms and themes that have become dull or useless, offering a new look at old figures. It is in this sense that we might call parody a deconstructive device, in the sense Jacques Derrida proposes in *Of Grammatology*.

It is necessary to surround the critical concepts with a careful and thorough discourse - to mark the conditions, the medium and the limits of their effectiveness and to designate rigorously their intimate relationship to the machine whose deconstruction they permit; and, in the same process, designate the crevice through which the yet unnameable glimmer beyond the closure can be glimpsed (14).

Deconstruction, according to Derrida, is a project of careful interrogation; the purpose is to locate “the crevice” which opens into new possibilities and insights. In a sense, deconstruction re-opens a discourse that seems closed, in order to strip away the naturalization and offer new

insight. Parody, by rearranging and ridiculing supposedly “closed” literary forms, operates in precisely the same way.⁵

This process signals a self-consciousness in the work. “Imitating art more than life, parody self-consciously and self-critically recognizes its own nature” (Hutcheon 1985, 27). Parody can only engage in critical laughter with tradition if it recognizes its own status as part of that tradition, that is, if it *knows it is itself literature*. Thus, parody is the self-conscious device whereby literary works are dialogized, decontextualized and fragmented, in order to instigate a critical and deconstructive laughter.

MISE EN ABYME

Mise en abymes establish a dimension of reflexivity in the text. Lucien Dällenbach and Brian McHale both identify this device as an embedded similarity in the text, or as Dällenbach defines it, “any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it” (8). This embedded quality is the main criteria for mise en abyme; the repeated/similar elements must “[occupy] a narrative level inferior to that of the primary, diegetic narrative world” (McHale 1987, 124). The mise en abyme, then, is the name of the similarity *inside* the main narrative – “nested” in McHale’s terms (1987, 124). Moreover, this nested similarity cannot repeat just any element of the primary text, the mise en abyme must resemble “something” that “constitute[s] some salient and continuous aspect of the primary world, salient and continuous enough that we are willing to say the nested representation *reproduces* or

⁵ For a fuller discussion of deconstruction see, for example Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, especially Chapter 1, “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing” (3-26).

duplicates the primary representation as a whole” (1987, 124). The duplication can be either a simple doubling or a distortion of the primary text (1987, 127). The *mise en abyme*, since it repeats the most salient features of the primary text, can then be understood as a reflexive device; it repeats some important aspect of the text in order to draw attention to and interrogate this significant element.

Dällenbach enumerates a number of locations for the *mise en abyme*,⁶ but the two that appear in *Lolita* are the “*mise en abyme* of the utterance,” or the embedding of a “miniature model” of the text within the text (what McHale calls “nested or embedded representation”) and the “*mise en abyme* of enunciation,” or the presentation within the narrative of the act of writing or reading, either by introducing a character representing the reader/writer or by placing a “mirror image” of the processes of writing or reading in the text. (McHale 1987, 124; Dällenbach 55-6, 75).

The effects of the *mise en abyme* of utterance, or the miniature model (“nested reproduction”) are generally effects of destabilization. “*Mise en abyme* is another form of short-circuit, another disruption of the logic of narrative hierarchy” (McHale 1987, 125). These mirror images of the text, these nested narratives, have the rather vertiginous effect of making irrelevant the traditional narrative discourse of mimesis. With such mirror-images, it becomes clear that the text is not representing the world but is simply reproducing itself, perhaps endlessly. There no longer *is* a referent for a text *en abyme*, which, since it resembles the primary text, naturally questions the existence of the referent of the primary text as well. It is in this sense that one might read, with McHale, these devices as “strategies of self-erasure” (1987, 112). They problematize their internal and external relations to “reality.” Moreover, McHale suggests, this

⁶ For a fuller discussion of the types of *mise en abyme* see Dällenbach’s chapters entitled “Fiction and its doubles,” “Narration revealed,” and “The spectacle of the text and the code” in *The Mirror in the Text*.

destabilization of fiction “[has] the effect of...multiplying [fiction’s] worlds, and laying bare the process of world-construction” (1987, 112). By presenting texts with no referent to reality, the *mise en abyme* device invites an examination of the processes of these nested fictions which short-circuit the traditional fictional logic. Thus, these miniature model *mise en abymes*, by reproducing the primary text either simply or in distortion, serve to destabilize fiction’s relation to reality and to reveal the processes by which fiction creates its illusion.

On the other hand, the effect of any of the *mise en abymes* of enunciation, or the reproduction of the reading/writing process, is “to make the invisible visible” (Dällenbach 75). What is “invisible” in traditional realistic-mimetic literature is precisely the presence of the reader and the author. It is the specifically literary version of the “Las Meninas” problem posed by Foucault in *The Order of Things*.

There, in the midst of this dispersion which it is simultaneously grouping together and spreading out before us, indicated compellingly from every side, is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation – of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance (1970 16).

In Foucault’s interpretation of this painting, the main “invisibilities” in traditional painting are the painter and the viewer. Velasquez’s work, however, according to Foucault, foregrounds this “essential void” through its use of lines of gaze and mirrors. The result of such mirroring is “an oscillation between the interior and the exterior” of the painting, that is, of a kind of eternally incomplete dialogic motion between the viewers and the painting (1970, 11). *Mise en abyme* in literature functions exactly the same way: the mirroring destroys the illusion of the self-contained fictional world and draws attention to the two figures that do not traditionally appear in the work: in the case of literature, the author and reader. By presenting these two figures in the mirror of the text, the *mise en abyme* device also invites an interrogation of the role of reader/writer in the construction of these fictional worlds, these little nested boxes with an

aporetic relationship to the real world. As such, this device makes a text reflexively interrogate its own processes as fiction.

TROMPE-L'OEIL, METALEPSIS, AND THE CREATIVE CHRONOTOPE

Trompe-l'oeil is a term originally used in visual arts, denoting a painting that tricks the eye into thinking, even if only for a moment, that it is not in fact painting.

The spectator does not have to take the first step of accepting the work as a *representation*. He is surprised and deceived at the first sight of it. His eyes tell him that what he sees here is an integral part of his familiar visual world, and his reaction is not to accept what he knows is only an illusion, but to test its reality by reaching out and touching it (Milman 7).

In trompe-l'oeil paintings, realism is taken to its extreme and, as it were, subverted. Examples of trompe-l'oeil include 15th and 16th century paintings of portraits or wedding scenes⁷ which include life-like, life-sized flies that viewers attempt to shoo away (Milman 12-13), frescoes that create the illusion of continued space (Milman 14), painting broken glass on portraits (64), paintings of sculptures and paintings of paintings (54-61). One very famous example is René Magritte's 1934 painting, "The Human Condition I," which depicts a landscape painting on an easel in front of an open window, through which one sees precisely the landscape painted on the canvas. The sky of the painting blends indistinguishably into the sky of the "real" world through the window, which is also, itself, painted (Milman 60-61). In essence, trompe-l'oeil invites a confusion as to the levels of reality – which image is painted, and which is real?

⁷ Paintings, such as "Madonna and Child" by Carlo Crivelli (1430-1493) and "Portrait of the Artist and his Wife" (1480) by the Master of Frankfurt (late 15th-early 16th century) (Milman 12-13).

In literature, *trompe-l'oeil* denotes a “confusion of narrative levels.” Narrative levels, in the sense Gérard Genette suggested in his 1980 narratological study, *Narrative Discourse*, are not the same as *mise en abymes* because they assume no similarity or embedding. Genette offers a system of analyzing narrative “levels” in a text, identifying, from highest to lowest, the “extradiegetic,” “diegetic” (narrative proper), and “metadiegetic” or “hypodiegetic level” (Genette, 26-51).⁸ In literary *trompe-l'oeil*, it becomes unclear which level is which. As McHale explains, literary *trompe-l'oeil* is one of the postmodernist devices that function by “deliberately misleading the reader into regarding an embedded, secondary world as the primary, diegetic world” (1987, 115). That is, in literary *trompe-l'oeil*, the reader mistakenly takes the presented text as the primary diegesis, only to discover, eventually, that this level is, in fact, a hypodiegetic, embedded text, what McHale calls “a world within their world” (1987, 123). In other words, *trompe-l'oeil* is one of the postmodernist devices “designed to encourage [the reader] to mistake nested representations for ‘realities’ (1987, 117).

A related corollary of this confusion of levels is the actual interpenetration of levels. As narratologist Didier Coste explains, these narrative levels prove not to be self-contained, closed levels having no interaction; instead, these levels have boundaries that are porous, and authors, narrators, and characters can all slip into diegetic levels in which they do not belong (295). As Coste explains, “by pushing the narrative act as a means of transition between levels yet further, as when the author or the reader enters the domain of the characters, or vice versa, the boundaries between levels are violated, resulting in → *metalepsis*” (296). The *metalepsis*, in the definition offered by Gerald Prince in *Dictionary of Narratology* is, “the intrusion into one

⁸ For a fuller discussion see the Introduction and Chapter 1 of *Narrative Discourse*, “Order” (25-85). In “Order,” see specifically Genette’s discussion of *analepses*, *prolepses*, and the *heterodiegetic*, *homodiegetic*, and *intradiegetic* narrator.

diegesis of a being from another diegesis [or] mingling of two distinct diegetic levels” (50). Essentially, metalepsis is a transgression of narrative levels. McHale describes metalepsis as the movement of characters between levels, saying, “Some [postmodernist characters] step across to a different ontological level – not, indeed, ‘up’ to the level of their real-world authors...but ‘down’ to a hypodiegetic level, a world within their world” (1987, 123). Characters, then, can move freely across narrative boundaries; yet the author, too can appear within the text, can break his own boundaries as well (1987, 197). The effect of these metalepses, according to McHale is “disquieting” (1987, 125). It is disquieting because, by breaking the traditional narrative frames of literature, metalepsis “relativizes reality” (1987, 197). McHale explains that, “for the metafictional gesture of sacrificing an illusory reality to a higher, ‘realer’ reality, that of the author, sets a precedent: why should this gesture not be *repeatable*?” (1987, 197). Reality itself, then, becomes just another level of the fiction, a level that, as shown in metalepsis, is disquietingly porous.

An even more radical transgression of the narrative boundaries consists in an appeal to the “superior reality” of the writing process, as McHale explains:

In an effort to stabilize this dizzying upward spiral of fictions, metafiction, meta-metafiction, and so on to infinite regress, various postmodernist writers have tried introducing into their texts what appears to be the one irreducibly real reality in their performance as writers – namely, the act of writing itself (1987, 198).

This appeal to the act of writing itself, while it also serves to destabilize the sense of reality, according to McHale (1987, 198), does present an interesting radicalization of *trompe-l’oeil* and metalepsis. *Trompe-l’oeil* and metalepsis are, ultimately, tricks played upon the reader, optical illusions of reading. This appeal to the act of writing, however, offers something much more substantial – indeed, as Mikhail Bakhtin argues, something crucial to the existence and significance of literature itself.

A text, according to Bakhtin, must instigate a dialogue between reader and author, a notion somewhat similar to Foucault's "oscillation of inside and outside" in Velasquez' painting. The difficulty with this "oscillation" or dialogue, however, is that it can never be presented in art, nor will the creator or receiver ever be present *in* the work. How, then, can they interact and generate the meaning of the work? Bakhtin offers a solution by positing "the creative chronotope," a particular intersection of space and time wherein the reader and author come together and create meaning.

In the completely real-life time-space where the work resonates, where we find the inscription or the book, we find as well a real person – one who originates spoken speech as well as the inscription and the book – real people who are hearing and reading the text. Of course these real people, the authors and the listeners or readers, may be (and often are) located in differing time-spaces, sometimes separated from each other by centuries and by great spatial distances, but nevertheless they are all located in *a real, unitary, and as yet incomplete historical world set off by a sharp and categorical boundary from the represented world in the text*. Therefore we may call this world the world that *creates* the text (Bakhtin 253, first italics mine).

For Bakhtin, what exists first is the mere matter of the text – the ink and the pages or the stone tablet. This is not yet a true text: "[T]he text is always imprisoned in dead material" (253).

Where the words or stone become *text* is precisely in this zone of "resonance," of a kind of "spilling over" of both the "real" world and the represented world of the text. In this zone, real people engage in a dialogue that crosses the spatial and temporal boundary between them. It is an eternal "now," always in the time of reading, and incomplete. Yet this eternal "now" facilitates the dialogue and creates the text as a meaningful cultural artifact:

The work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers (Bakhtin 254).

Thus, the existence of the creative chronotope, for Bakhtin, is a kind of condition for the possibility of literature itself. This is how literature can have any meaning at all, the way in which it escapes being “external material,” a mere “dead thing,” and “enter into the realm of culture and...into the realm of literature” (Bakhtin 252-3). This is the only way literature can be “alive.” Even more radically, Bakhtin suggests that this is the only way a text is truly created, hence, the *creative* chronotope.

In metafiction, a text sometimes actually appeals to this zone of contact between reader and author. This device differs from the *mise en abyme* in that these figures are not *presented* in the text at all; in an appeal to the creative chronotope, the text gestures to the necessity or need for this contact, but will not place stand-ins or miniatures of reader or author within the text. The most common method of appeal is to address the reader directly, but a second, subtler one, is for the narrator to call attention to his status as author and discuss, extradiegetically, his present moment of writing. By appealing to that zone of contact, metafictional texts reveal their self-consciousness (they know they are a text) and their reflexivity (they self-consciously and purposefully actualize the writing/reading process). In short, these appeals to the creative chronotope instigate the dialogue that makes texts come alive.

All in all, the appeal to the creative chronotope, while also instigating the dialogicality that creates the text, also serves as a radical transgression of narrative boundaries, a more extreme *metalepsis* that extends beyond the text into this “zone of contact” between author and reader. All of these narrative transgression devices together – *trompe-l’oeil*, *metalepsis*, and appeal to the creative chronotope – serve to lay bare the assumptions and traditions of literature. No longer is literature a self-contained world, no longer is the text a dead entity which one reads without becoming, somehow, involved; through these devices of metafiction, fiction becomes

conscious of itself as fiction and self-reflexively interrogates its own processes and assumptions, including those that keep the reader outside the text and the narrative levels firmly fixed. Thus, these metafictional devices serve to problematize the processes of reading and writing themselves.

SEMANTICS OF METAFICTION:

LIFE-CONSTRUCTION AND PERFORMATIVITY

Thus these devices of metafiction operate by problematizing and laying bare literary conventions. They serve to strip away the automatic recognition of the forms of fiction and destabilize them, inviting the reader to *see* fiction in a new light. In that sense, one might say that metafiction operates according to Viktor Shklovsky's notion of *ostranenie*, or estrangement – the artistic process of making “perception long and ‘laborious,’” to force the viewer to see “through the organ of sight instead of recognition” (6). This process of perception reinvigorates the world and saves the mind from “automatization” - a particularly dangerous form of complacency that “eats away at things” and makes it “as if this life had never been” (Shklovsky 5). Metafiction, then, is chiefly involved in destabilizing, making strange, playing tricks – all with an eye to destroying that automatization of the reader and involving him actively in the process of reading.

In addition to destabilizing the conventions of fiction; however, metafiction also presents the processes of world-construction. As Waugh suggests,

Metafictional deconstruction has not only provided novelists and their readers with a better understanding of the fundamental structures of narrative; it has also offered extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience

of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems (9).⁹

By offering microcosms of the real world – miniatures that reveal and even glorify their own constructedness – metafiction suggests the constructedness of the ‘real’ world as well.

Essentially, metafiction suggests that reality is also a “text” that one can learn to “read.” In other words, as Tzvetan Todorov explains, “‘fiction’ is not constructed any differently from ‘reality’” (2005, 161). Metafiction, then, through estrangement, serves to destabilize the boundary between fiction and reality.

Once the distinction between the real and the fictional becomes fluid, however, reality becomes just as flexible and capable of artistic manipulation as fiction. This was, in fact, the basic assumption of an entire aspect of modernism called, in the Russian avant-garde tradition, *zhiznestroenie* (жизнестроение) or life-construction. Russian modernism conceived its project as a creation of life *as* art. The “basic spirit” of the Russian avant-garde, according to Boris Groys, can be defined “in terms of the demand that art move from representing to transforming the world” (14). The Russian avant-garde sought not to display reality, but to create it. Artists essentially played the role of God. To do so, art had to break out of the world of pure aesthetics and autonomy and actually reorganize the world. "Первостепенную важность в жизнестроении имеет ориентация литературы на будущее и вообще её действенная, преобразующая функция" (In life-construction the orientation of literature toward the future and its actual, transforming function was given first importance¹⁰) (Günther 42). The modernist aesthetic project was precisely a transformative one, one that recognized the malleability of

⁹ Cf. Ommundsen: for example, that “reflexive texts can thus be seen to function as microcosms, pointing to larger structures in the human world” (12).

¹⁰ Translation is mine

“reality.” If reality was unstable, they believed art could reshape it, and this knowledge of reality’s malleability became the condition for art’s transformative possibility.

The avant-garde artist, then, is precisely the one with a “metafictional” outlook; as Groys puts it, "All that distinguishes the artist-ruler from the crowd of ordinary mortals is the knowledge that the world is elastic and that therefore everything that to the average person seems stable and immutable is in reality relative and subject to change" (Groys 4). Metafictional self-consciousness and awareness of the fungibility of both fiction and reality, in a sense, inherits this project of life-construction from modernism.

In metafiction, however, the malleability of reality is taken one step further, precisely because metafiction is self-conscious and, as such, seeks to involve its viewers in the process of world-construction as well. The modernists did not always look at *themselves* in the process of life-construction; the artist was simply the man with the powerful, transformative artistic vision, but he did not require an audience either to notice his transformations or be involved in their production. Hans-Thies Lehmann identifies this addition of self-consciousness as the shift from modernism to contemporaneity in his account of theater, though this shift can be applied to fiction as well.

In the eyes of modernists, the degree of the ‘real’ had not been sufficient in the old theatre of dreamlike illusion, and thus strategies of disillusionment had emerged. Yet, this argument of a lack of realness could structurally return and be turned against the modern theatre itself. While the audience may have received it more consciously, this theatre did not focus on the real of the theatre situation itself, i.e. on the process between stage and audience (Lehmann 136).

According to Lehmann, the modernists did not push the concept of the malleability of reality far enough, precisely because they did not include the element of self-consciousness and reflexivity. Contemporary theater (what he calls post-dramatic theater or the performative) shifts its emphasis from the construction of illusion to its mutual creation and reception. Metafiction

bears the same relationship to the project of life-construction; in metafiction, the plasticity of reality is not just assumed but thematized and made explicit, shifting its emphasis from mimesis and transformation to dialogue and reception. This shift of emphasis from product to reception reformulates theater as “an act/moment of communication” (Lehmann 137). No longer is theater an autonomous artistic entity, consumed by somewhat passive recipients. The audience is now involved in the very creation of the work *as art*. This, essentially, establishes the audience not as consumer of art but as *co-creator*. This involvement of the audience as co-creator is precisely what Lehmann identifies and the defining characteristic of postdramatic theater or performative art, saying, “this [process between stage and audience] becomes the core of the performance concept” (136).

To translate Lehmann’s ideas into literature, one may say that in metafiction, all texts become performative, in precisely this sense of a self-conscious shift of emphasis from product to reception. “A familiar effect of reflexivity, acknowledged in some metafiction by direct authorial address is the establishment of reading and writing as collaboration” (Berry 139). Moreover, Lehmann claims that this sense of performance is immediate, entirely in the present. “Postdramatic theatre is a *theatre of the present*. Reformulating presence as present...means, above all, to conceive of it as a process, as a verb” (143). Text, too, has become a process, in Bakhtin’s creative chronotope, an eternal present in which the dialogue surrounding a text unfolds. Metafiction, then, is a kind of ‘performative writing,’ writing which stages itself and involves the audience in an ever-unfolding process of collaboration and co-creation.

Performative writing, however, does much more than stage itself and involve the audience. According to Della Pollock, it also contains its own inherent critique. “In the ironic

turns of its own self-consciousness, metonymic (performative)¹¹ writing thus tends also to displace itself, to unwrite itself at the very moment of composition, opening language to what it is not and can never be. Writing performed *in extremis* becomes unwriting. It un/does itself” (83). In other words, by laying bare devices and self-consciously critiquing itself, performative writing undoes itself in the same moment it creates itself – it flaunts its own impossibility. Metafiction is engaged in precisely this process of un-writing, as it constantly stages its own critique and problematizes its own nature and processes. It draws attention to itself as process and, simultaneously, problematizes the functioning of that process. Moreover, as Pollock suggests, performative writing is more concerned with creating/doing than with mimetic representation. In her words, “[w]riting as *doing* displaces writing as meaning” (Pollock 75). What performative writing *does*, according to Pollock, is to disrupt and deconstruct social or political norms: “Performative writing is an important, dangerous, and difficult intervention into routine representations of social/performative life” (75). In short, performative art is *ostranenie* in the realm of the real.

However, if metafiction is truly performative, requiring the reader as co-creator, then the author can no longer be an autonomous creator. Instead, he must, as Ommundsen suggests, “respect the rights of the other players in the fictional game: characters and readers” (68). It is in that sense that “authors can no longer be omniscient” (Ommundsen 68) – the author no longer has a monopoly on the reception of his text, or, indeed, on the *creation*, of his text. Moreover, to be performative the text but also contain its own critique, which means that the author is always simultaneously writing and “un-writing” his text. One might say the author is always only ever

¹¹ “Metonymic” describes an aspect of performative writing, along with “evocative,” “subjective,” “nervous,” “citational,” and “consequential.” See Pollock (80-96).

playing in metafiction.¹² In essence, the author of metafiction is a performer, a mask – essentially, a *trickster*. In this sense his function is that of Bakhtin’s rogue, clown or fool: “They [the Rogue, the Clown, and the Fool] are life’s maskers; their being coincides with their role, and outside this role they simply do not exist” (159). There is no autonomous, all-powerful author in performative metafiction. He is merely a player in the game, a masker, a clown or fool.

Significantly, such characters stand outside the political and social relations of the real, which provides a unique advantage: “the right to be ‘other’ in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available” (Bakhtin 159).

That is, the Fool by nature occupies an outside and therefore critical position. He lives in *ostranenie*: everything for him is strange. He introduces an irrational, even chaotic character. In this sense he is also the trickster as characterized by Karl Kerényi:

Disorder belongs to the totality of life, and the spirit of this disorder is the trickster. His function in an archaic society, or rather the function of his mythology, of the tales told about him, is to add disorder to order and so make a whole, to render possible, within the fixed bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted (185).

The trickster, or the fool, estranges everything, destabilizes everything. In Lehmann’s terms, he might be called a *performer* in the postdramatic sense, in that he is involved in theater “which does not create orders of power but introduces chaos and novelty into the ordered, ordering perception” (179). This introduction of chaos might also be read as a deconstruction, a laying bare of convention and directing liberating parodic toward the ossified elements of society itself.

This destabilizing power of the trickster, however, is fundamentally transgressive. Again, to apply Lehmann to literature, the process of involving the audience and laying bare

¹² Cf. Warren Motte’s investigation of play as “the essential dimension of both writing and reading” (4). For fuller discussion of play, the creation of aesthetic artifact through play, and the disruptive potential of play, see Motte’s introduction in *Playtexts*.

conventions is an “aesthetic behaviour [that] is unthinkable without the infringement of prescriptions, without *transgression*” (Lehmann 178, original emphasis). It is precisely in its similar capacity for destabilization that metafiction, too, can be called “transgressive.”

Metafiction, whether by parody, laying bare the device, destroying mimetic illusion or calling attention to traditional “blind spots” and assumptions, is constantly overstepping the bounds traditionally conceived for fiction, constantly raising questions and pointing out problems.

“Metafiction very deliberately undermines a system, unlike, say, aleatory or Dadaist art which attempts to embrace randomness or ‘illinx’” (Waugh 43). Metafiction is always testing boundaries and limits. In metafiction, even play is subversive.

Metafiction, then, operates according to a radical code of *ostranenie*, constantly estranging and destabilizing literary forms and conventions, which leads to the destabilization of the real and the fictional, and along with them, the roles of the reader and author. What results is a vision of metafiction as performance, in which the reader and author have equal and reciprocal involvement. And in the playing-out of this performance, metafiction constantly, through transgression of convention and expectation, experiments with the limits of the real world, of fictional worlds, of fiction itself, and – most importantly – of the reader.

HISTORICAL POSITIONING OF METAFICTION

Metafiction’s capacity for radical destabilization has struck some artists and critics as a potentially destructive force. Hutcheon suggests that self-consciousness, if taken too far, can become self-obsession, which is dangerous: “Narcissus is indeed self-obsessed to the point of

self-destruction” (1984, 8). Hutcheon here points to the potentially cannibalistic impulse of reflexivity – to critique until nothing is left is not liberating or interesting, but death. The danger of self-obsession lies in the fact that the novel gets “stuck in its own head,” it circles around obsessively, and, according to some critics, signals the death of the novel. John Barth, in his essay “The Literature of Replenishment,” points to the interpretation of his earlier essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” as a vision of precisely this dangerous trend in postmodern fiction of the 60s and 70s. “[A] great many people...mistook me to mean that literature, at least fiction, is *kaput*; that it has all been done already; that there is nothing left for contemporary writers but to parody and travesty our great predecessors in our exhausted medium – exactly what some critics deplore as postmodernism” (176). However, as Barth emphasizes in his later essay, “That is not what I meant at all” (176).

Indeed, the apocalyptic prediction about the death of literature in the 60s and 70s proved entirely unfounded. Instead, as Waugh argues, “the novel itself is positively flourishing” (9). She claims that literature has in fact survived precisely because of metafiction’s capacity to reinvigorate old forms.

The paranoia that permeates the metafictional writing of the sixties and seventies is therefore slowly giving way to celebration, to the discovery of new forms of the fantastic, fabulatory extravaganzas, magic realism (Salman Rushdie, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Clive Sinclair, Graham Swift, D.M. Thomas, John Irving). Novelists and critics alike have come to realize that a moment of crisis can also be seen as a moment of recognition (9).

This apocalyptic panic, then, has proven to be far less fatal than the 60s imagined. The proliferation of metafictional texts since the sixties supports Waugh’s claim. She mentions here only a handful of authors; many more names could be added to the list. Therefore, fiction has emphatically *not* exhausted itself, but rather has been injected with new life through metafiction. Most tellingly, Barth points to two authors in his “The Literature of Replenishment” as evidence

that fiction is not exhausted: Jorge Luis Borges and Vladimir Nabokov – the two masters of metafiction.

The question remains, though, whether this panic reflected a unique historical position. Was literature truly in danger in the 60s, a danger it had never encountered before and, therefore, has safely passed? Most theorists of metafiction would say, no, it was not. In fact, many theorists trace metafiction back to *Don Quixote* (1604), *Tom Jones* (1749), and *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759), and (Waugh 23-4; Hutcheon 1-10). Some will even cite Homer as a metafictional writer (Neumann 207). Metafiction has been more prolific in the 20th century, with writers like Joyce, Gide, Roussel, Beckett, Barth, Fowles, Sollers, Pynchon, Borges, and, of course, Nabokov. All this leads most critics to conclude that, “metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels” (Waugh 5, original emphasis).

Metafiction as a tendency in all novels, however, does not take account of any historical context of metafictional texts. Metafiction is not simply a potential in all novels that may not be actualized; nor is it, in Ommundsen’s formulation, “the product of a certain practice of *reading*,” in which case “all texts can be read as metafiction” (29). Metafiction is, more precisely, a historically-influenced tendency in fiction.

Following Foucault’s account of history as the development – sometimes by discontinuous leaps – of knowledge, it may be said that metafictional tendencies become more prevalent in times of changing *epistemes*, that is, times wherein existence and knowledge, the established concepts of reality, are called into question. Foucault locates a few such extreme shifts in the conception of knowledge and reality, such as the beginning of the seventeenth century and again the end of the eighteenth (1970, 217). The most radical epistemological shift occurred precisely because man took on a particularly introspective, self-reflexive aspect: man

became “the object of science” (1970, 345). However, this self-consciousness also instigated “a general redistribution of the *episteme*” (1970, 345). Conceptions of knowledge, man’s being, and the nature of the world shifted:

But since the general theory of representation was disappearing at the same time, and the necessity of interrogating man’s being as the foundation of all positivities was imposing itself in its place, an imbalance could not fail to occur: man became that upon the basis of which all knowledge could be constituted as immediate and non-problematized evidence; he became, *a fortiori*, that which justified the calling into question of all knowledge of man” (1970 345).

The shift of the *episteme*, according to Foucault, resulted in a questioning of knowledge itself. In other words, the entire concept of reality and scientific knowledge became destabilized. It is precisely in such times of destabilization of reality and knowledge that metafiction becomes more prevalent. Metafiction shows itself specifically in times of these, one might say, crises of reality.

When existence and established concepts of the real are radically and suddenly changed, when old forms lose meaning, when social upheavals underline the constructedness of the real world, then metafictional tendencies in literature come to the fore. For instance, metafiction includes works by authors such as Ludvic Tieck and E.T.A. Hoffman, writing in the crisis of reality after the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars; works such as Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1921), Andre Gide’s *The Counterfeiters* (1925), Konstantin Vaginov’s *Goatsong* (1920s), Osip Mandelshtam’s *Egyptian Stamp* (1928), Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea* (1938), Samuel Beckett’s *Murphy* (1938) Vladimir Nabokov’s early works *Despair* (1934) and *Invitation to a Beheading* (1936) shortly after World War I; and works by Alain Robbe-Grillet, John Fowles, B. S. Johnson, Robert Coover, William Gass, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, William Burroughs, Vladimir Nabokov and Jorge Luis Borges in the decades after World War II.¹³ Speaking

¹³ See Waugh (21-27, 43-53), Hutcheon (18-27, 60-63), and Nicol (22-23, 50-112).

generally, metafiction is a historical form arising at times when reality is shown to be instable, highly malleable, and constructed.

Lolita, published in 1955, relatively soon after Nabokov's flight from Europe after the rise of the Nazis, is written precisely in such a historical and epistemological crisis. Thus, the theme of the literary experiment returns. *Lolita*, one might say, is Nabokov's attempt to test the limits of the fungibility of reality and knowledge, in a world suddenly shown to be constructed and, moreover, very dangerous, if not outright evil. In the analysis to follow, *Lolita*'s metafictional processes will be examined, in order to trace out Nabokov's investigation of art's potential for goodness and, at the same time, *the reader's* potential for goodness. It is fitting that Nabokov should undertake this experiment through metafiction; in such a time of Foucauldian epistemological crisis, metafiction is the only literary strategy that can take the full measure of the processes of construction and destabilization and reveal both their power and their faults.

LOLITA AS METAFICTION: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Critical scholarship on *Lolita* seems to fall more or less into two categories: either critics read the novel as a humanistic tale that ultimately presents the “moral apotheosis” of Humbert Humbert (Alexandrov, Appel, Benson, Boyd, Connolly, Dolinin, de la Durantaye, Rampton, Tamir-Ghez), or they read the novel as simply a linguistic puzzle, a kind of literary game “with no moral in tow” (Frosch, Naiman,¹⁴ in some senses Vladimir Nabokov himself; quote *Lolita* 314). However, the moral-redemption reading rarely takes adequate account of the formal and stylistic complexity of Nabokov’s work, and almost never places it in its historical context. The linguistic-puzzle reading, on the other hand, does not allow the problem of evil to resonate enough; *Lolita* does, in fact, have a moral content that must be taken into account. In a metafictional approach to *Lolita*, the moral significance of the work is revealed as the result of its literary complexity, a reading that takes both Nabokov’s artistic genius and humane vision into account.

Despite the fact that Vladimir Nabokov is widely acclaimed as one of the masters of metafiction, there has been little criticism treating *Lolita* specifically as a metafictional text. Most specifically metafictional criticism of Nabokov’s work draws on *Pale Fire* (1962; Haegert, Chupin) or *Ada* (1969; Christensen). Yet, Nabokov’s early novels, such as *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935) and *Despair* (1936) are also considered metafictional texts. Both directly thematize writing and the powers (both positive and negative) of narrative art. In *Invitation*, Cincinnatus saves himself, essentially, by realizing that his ‘reality’ is fiction, that he is a character, and as a result of these discoveries, by stepping out into the realm of the author, into

¹⁴ Especially in *Nabokov, Perversely* (2010).

the world where "stood beings akin to him" (223). *Despair*, more explicitly, is a story of a man writing the perfect murder – in real life. Christopher Weinberger reads *Despair* as the story of the creation of a story: “Hermann makes it clear that his artistic sensibility and powers of expression are the *cause* of the plot he relates through them” (288). Nabokov’s early novels, then, may be considered preliminary exercises in metafiction, and in that way serve as a prelude to a metafictional project first fully realized not in *Pale Fire* but in *Lolita*.

A few critics have investigated specific metafictional aspects of *Lolita*, with compelling results. These critics examine the use of parody, mise en abyme, confusion of narrative levels, and deconstructive potential identified in Chapter 1 as specifically metafictional devices.

For example, Alfred Appel focuses Nabokov’s use of parody in *Lolita*. Appel suggests that in *Lolita* Nabokov parodies all styles, most specifically the confessional, in order to challenge the reader’s own moral stance and by the end “has demonstrated that the certainty of our moral feelings is far more tenuous than we ever care to admit” (1987, 36). Appel ultimately concludes, however, that Nabokov’s use of parody is ultimately a playful and positive, even optimistic stylistic device that reveals “Vladimir Nabokov's profoundly humane comic vision,” which “overrides the circumscribing sadness, absurdity, and terror of everyday life” (1987, 51). Appel’s insight to examine the effects of parody on the experience of the reader is especially shrewd; he seems, however, to accept Nabokov’s fictional world as a more or less autonomous game-world that serves, in some ways, more as a retreat from reality than a critique of it. To read *Lolita* more strictly as metafiction, the distinction between reality and fiction must be dissolved and fiction must serve to elucidate – not override – the circumscribing real world. We will argue that Nabokov’s parodies are much more pointed and reveal not an optimism but an aesthetic crisis and desperate experiment of art’s relevance to the real world.

The mise en abyme device has also attracted the attention of a number of critics, either with reference to ethical concerns or to more or less purely formal ones. Philipp Schweighauser, in an ethical reading, suggests that, “Nabokov’s use of the play-within-a-play tradition frequently indicates a convergence of metafictional devices and what one might call the novel’s ethical concerns” (101). The double-sided use of literary codes, Schweighauser argues, “ensure[s] the reader is not seduced by Humbert’s attempts to use the same tradition in order to protest his innocence and harmlessness” (107). In that way, he sees the mise en abyme as a way to shed ethical light on Humbert’s duplicitous discourse, as it were, from the wings, to use a theatrical metaphor.

A more strictly artistic interpretation of *Lolita*’s mise en abymes is offered by Anne-Marie Gill, who identifies a number of miniature models of the novel wherein Humbert is cast as an “unreliable interpreter of his own reality” and the author as a more or less all-powerful enchanter (21). However, Gill concludes that by combining the world-visions of the reader and the implied author upon rereading, we can discover a single vision of the text and of human nature (25). “In that ideal, controlled vision in . . . *Lolita*, there is no confusion of fiction with reality, no imposition of limited, unambiguous imaginary construct for the profound, essentially irreducible reality which exists independent of individual frames of reference” (24). These two approaches to the mise en abyme in *Lolita* are compelling – especially Schweighauser’s suggestion that metafictional devices might “betray” Humbert and Gill’s observation of the way the mise en abyme stages the interplay of authors in *Lolita*. Both approaches share a similar limitation, however, in that neither takes account of the “self-erasure” of mise en abymes; neither points to a destabilization of fiction or reality due to these mise en abymes. In addition, it is highly unlikely that reading the mise en abymes as clues to the narrative level relations in *Lolita*

will yield a single, unified vision wherein fiction and reality are distinct. Nabokov's narrative levels may prove too porous, and the conclusions he reaches in the laboratory of the text too pertinent to the 'real' world, for Gill's distinction between them to remain.

As to the confusion of narrative levels, Gill's analysis offers some insights, but Eric Naiman and Vladimir Alexandrov investigate more specific metalepses in the text. A critical treatment of the appeal to creative chronotope itself seems to be lacking, but Naiman and Alexandrov together come close. Naiman locates a transgression of narrative boundaries between the author and his characters. In his article "What if Nabokov had written 'Dvoinik'?" Naiman reads Dostoevsky's early short story as metafiction, precisely by identifying a number of Nabokov's metaliterary characteristics and applying them to "Dvoinik." His argument rests on Nabokov's tendency to either present or suggest the presence of the author in the text, either by using various "ominous or comical agents" (Quilty, Beale, Darkbloom) or the force of chance itself (McFate) (2005, 578-82). He identifies the reaction of characters to this presence of the author as an "anxiety" or sense of being "stalked" by the author. Their attempts to thwart this stalker ultimately end up as "hero's hopeless attempt to escape from the text that contains him" (2005, 583).

In a similar vein, though he would by no means call it metafiction himself, Vladimir Alexandrov offers a reading of *Lolita* that pays particular attention to the experience of the reader in the book. He notes Nabokov's use of "epiphanies" in his novels, and links this device to Nabokov's "belief in the Otherworld (potustoronnost') (569). These epiphanies, according to Alexandrov, are characterized by "a sudden fusion of varied sensory data and memories, a feeling of timelessness, and intuitions of immortality" (569). More telling, however, Alexandrov also indicates a parallel "epiphany" in the experience of decoding Nabokov's puzzles during re-

reading: “[the reader] is thus lifted out of the localized, linear, and temporally bound reading process in a manner resembling how character’s epiphanies remove them from the quotidian flow of events within the world of the text (Alexandrov 569-70). This is a compelling and subtle parallel which attests that Nabokov directly thematizes the reading process in his work; where Alexandrov departs from a metafictional analysis is his staunch claim that, “a necessary caveat regarding the transferability of interpretive strategies from life to art is that Nabokov clearly was not advocating a confusion of life with art” (Alexandrov 570). This claim is untenable if the presentation of the reading process is to be read, as it undoubtedly must, as a metafictional technique. By definition, metafiction *does* advocate a confusion of life with art, or more precisely, an ultimate lack of distinction between them.

Two critics identify the deconstructive potential of *Lolita*, but do not derive this potential from the novel’s metafictional aspects. Lance Olsen suggests that “what one finds, then, at the heart of *Lolita* is a struggle for power between two competing modes of discourse” (124). These two modes are traditional mimetic-realism and fantasy, here understood as a blend between mimesis and Todorov’s concept of the fantastic).¹⁵ Olsen suggests that fantasy, in the work of Nabokov among others, is analogous to the philosophical project of deconstruction (119). Understanding fantasy as a hesitation between the real and the illusional, we might indeed see the fantastic as related to metafiction. However, the importance of *Lolita* as deconstruction is the observation that will be most relevant for this study.

¹⁵ Todorov claims that the fantastic consists in that hesitation between the real and the imaginary; in a fantastic tale, the reader and/or characters are unable to assure themselves either of the reality or illusoriness of some experience. As Todorov explains, “Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings – with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently. *The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty*. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous (1973, 25, my emphasis).

Similarly, Christopher Weinberger offers a view of *Lolita* as a destabilizing, deconstructionist novel, employing various strategies to examine ethical concerns. He claims, “Nabokov thus insists that we revise our interpretive practices” but also that he “vex[es] our efforts to resolve his novels’ perplexities into objects of understanding or simple ethical imperatives” (281). That is, Weinberger reads *Lolita* as intentionally thwarting any attempts at systematization or singular total readings – it is constantly eluding readers and challenging them to change their techniques of reading. This, too, will be an important outcome of metafiction for this study of *Lolita*.

Brian Boyd and Julian Connolly, though they do not offer metafictional analyses per se, read an overall moral project in somewhat “meta” terms. That is, as Connolly suggests, the book has an ultimately moral content, but is seeking most of all to educate readers: “Ultimately, I think, Nabokov’s aspiration for readers of *Lolita* was the same as in all of his novels: to have them become sharper, more observant, and more sensitive readers – of literary texts, of words and worlds alike” (50). The moral content of the novel, while important, is given secondary importance beside this message about reading. Boyd, similarly, by reading Humbert’s moral epiphany as a rhetorical device and not a sincere discovery of guilt, concludes that Nabokov may all the same offer a compelling moral insight. No matter what Humbert claims or how persuasively, Boyd suggests, “Nabokov assesses things differently, and although he gives Humbert complete control over his pen, he finds a way to inscribe his own judgment within what Humbert writes” (Boyd 254).¹⁶ Although Boyd and Connolly do not treat of specifically metafictional devices in *Lolita*, they do gesture to the presence and intention of the author and, interestingly, locate whatever moral significance is to be found in the novel at the meta-level of

¹⁶ Connolly agrees, see 29.

this author and his readers, *not* in Humbert's level or even in Humbert's discourse. It is a compelling "meta-ethical" reading of *Lolita*, if the term may be suggested. In this way, *Lolita* may be read as both having, and not having "a moral in tow."

In conclusion, the critical writing on *Lolita* as metafiction, despite being a minority voice of *Lolita* criticism, offers a number of valuable and compelling insights into the metafictional workings and significance of the novel. This study seeks to continue the aforementioned lines of inquiry, taking into account the specifically metafictional devices at work as well as the resulting challenge to the distinction between fiction and reality. Ultimately, inspired by Schweighauser's suggestion that, "both aspects [metafictional and ethical] not only co-exist but also mutually reinforce each other" (110), we seek to read, following Boyd, a way to marry the ethical and metafictional in a way that allows the virtues – and paradoxes – of both to be felt, and permits the ethical significance of reading to be displaced into the larger social and historical world of the reader.

CHAPTER II
READING *LOLITA* AS METAFICTION

PARODY IN *LOLITA*

To return briefly to the theory of parody, recall that parody has been defined as the "ironic inversion" of well-known or previous authors' themes and styles (Hutcheon). It functions moreover by Tynjanov's process of "doubling," or of making visible a text "behind" the text (104-117). This "making visible" of a "second-level text" behind the text is produced through the use and subversion of the styles of earlier writers (Hutcheon) or by the dislocation of the elements and purposes of a previous style into a new and often comical arrangement (Tynjanov). Bakhtin has a similar formulation, in which "[t]he speech of another is introduced into the author's discourse (the story) in *concealed form*, that is, without any of the *formal* markers usually accompanying such speech" (303). Parody, in any of these accounts, is the subtle use and transformation of previous literary styles or discourses in order to inject new life into old forms. In *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert makes visible not just texts or writers "behind" his work but entire aesthetic traditions.

The first aesthetic tradition parodied in Humbert's narrative is the confessional discourse, rooted in Augustine and Rousseau. Confession, as discussed by Jean Starobinski, Jeremy Tambling and Peter Brooks, assumes a unified, self-conscious and self-interrogating subject revealing itself in an act that presumes absolute transparency and sincerity. Starobinski locates in Rousseau's discourse a faith in man's original quality of transparency, that "in the past, before the veil fell between the world and ourselves, there were 'gods who read in our hearts,' and nothing denatured the transparency and clarity of our souls. We lived at one with the truth" (11).

Rousseau attempts to make himself transparent to readers in order to attain that level of primordial truth in our fallen world and, thereby, to connect with others. Starobinski describes this hope as follows:

Though focused on inner problems, sincerity is indirectly concerned with the outside world: it is worth the trouble to describe ourselves sincerely, because in the society with which we have broken relations there may *already* be individuals capable of understanding us. Sincerity begins the task of social restoration, not by means of political action but through human understanding (64).

To do so, however, requires not only the author's transparent, and therefore sincere, self-revelation, but also the certain kind of unified, authentic subject capable of sharing. This subject is, firstly, a "private individual, measured by deep interiority and feelings, and by a personal history" (Tambling 2). But the subject is also, secondly, unified and stable. "Beneath the mask that others, outside himself, have imposed on him, Jean-Jacques remains Jean-Jacques...time has altered nothing essential, but only the surface of things" (Starobinski 17). This sincere revelation of such a deeply interior and yet stable subject "offers a privileged insight, a knowledge of that which is normally hidden from us," which grants the "supreme and vertiginous power" that comes with knowing secrets (Brooks 88-89). Confession, then, as it is depicted in these studies, offers a glimpse into the deep recesses of another person's interior life, in an act that assumes utmost sincerity and truthfulness.

And yet, all these theorists locate deep paradoxes surrounding the human desire for transparency. Not only are the motives of confession highly suspect, as Brooks points out (6), more importantly, confession itself is never adequate - sincerity and transparency are, finally, impossible. "[Rousseau's] autobiographical work is doomed to fail in two ways. For it is impossible to tell all, so that justification can never be complete. And the silence of perfect happiness is destroyed forever. Language fills a middle ground between the primordial

innocence and the verdict of final judgment” (Starobinski 192). Tambling puts this discovery in Derridean terms, saying, "this fiction of transparency can only be sustained through the employment of supplementary techniques, of which fictional embellishments are one" (107). In the final analysis, then, confession operates according to a number of assumptions, transparency and a unified self being foremost among them; and yet, at its core lies a paradox: language can never be sincere – what, then, is to alert us to a “true” confession?

In *Lolita*, Humbert both employs and subverts the assumptions of confessional discourse, and in the process reveals the full measure of the confessional paradox. To begin, his narrative is offered as a confession, which mobilizes the fundamental assumptions of unity, sincerity, and transparency. The narrative is staged as a confession in the Foreword by John Ray, Jr, who reports. “*Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male,*’ such were the two titles under which the writer of the present note received the strange pages it perambulates” (3). By introducing the novel this way, he simultaneously asserts the literalness of the narrative (it is a book that he edited) and the sincerity of it. He himself, ostensibly, takes the confession as a true disclosure, and is eager to convince readers that he has not tampered with it and that it, therefore, retains its sincere quality and truth content: “Save for the correction of obvious solecisms and a careful suppression of a few tenacious details ... this remarkable memoir is presented intact” (3). Such a presentation, as Appel points out, invokes the assumptions of confession as absolutely truthful and sincere; John Ray Jr.’s Foreword creates “the illusion that Humbert’s manuscript is a first draft, unaltered, written in great haste but with passion, and the hapless literal-minded reader may embrace it as the most ‘sincere’ form of self-portraiture possible (Appel 1987, 35). Despite John Ray’s handling of the ostensible manuscript, then, we are to believe that Humbert’s own sincere truth speaks from these ‘strange pages.’

As soon as Humbert's own voice takes over the narrative, however, the confessional discourse is subverted. In the first chapter, he addresses the "ladies and gentlemen of the jury" (9). The supposedly transparent self-revelation of confession suddenly modulates into the language of legal advocacy. As Nomi Tamir-Ghez points out, "[t]ypically, Humbert's discourse (with the exception of the last chapters) is a mixture of *self-accusation and self-justification*. . . . He is evidently trying the best he can to explain himself to his judges and to prove that he is not really guilty of any crime" (27, my emphasis). She further argues that Humbert maintains this double discourse throughout the novel, a double discourse that both invokes and subverts confession.

Humbert's self-accusation is in line with the confessional tradition, especially since it also mobilizes the notion of confession in a more Christian context. As Foucault explains in *Technologies of the Self*, the Christian duty to confess involved, at its root, a radical self-scrutiny and self-accusation:

[In Christianity], each person has the duty to know who he is, that is, to try to know what is happening inside him, to acknowledge faults, to recognize temptations, to locate desires, and everyone is obliged to disclose these things either to God or to others in the community and hence to bear public or private witness against oneself (1988, 40).

Self-accusation, then, is linked with confessional discourse in an overtly Christian sense. Humbert Humbert, however, does not mobilize this aspect of confession. To return to Tamir-Ghez, Humbert is also engaged in the second discourse of continual *self-justification*. It is to this end that he uses the language of advocacy and emphatically does *not* mobilize the assumptions – Christian or otherwise – of confessional discourse. Essentially, in his double discourse, Humbert embodies the "paradox" identified by theorists. He constantly reveals himself as in a "true" confession, but simultaneously uses language that subverts the sincerity of the discourse.

Quite tellingly, a good portion of the confession concerning the time before marrying Charlotte is presented in diary format, a very intimate and very transparent narrative form. Despite admitting that the diary is written “in [his] smallest, most satanic, hand” (40), Humbert proceeds in the diary section to reveal his moments of agony and denial. He analyzes a number of incidents wherein Lolita tempted him horribly: the constantly-thwarted trip to Hourglass Lake, his “cesspool of rotting monsters” (44), the precise nature of nymphets (“twofold . . . [the mixture] of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity (44)). Overall, however, the diary asserts his good behavior, as he summarizes: “it will be seen from [these entries] that for all the devil’s inventiveness, the scheme remained daily the same. First he [the devil] would tempt me – and then thwart me” (55). That is, we see Humbert utilizing the diary format to downplay his moral transgressions, as if this confession did in fact absolve him in some quasi-religious sense. However, this diary is itself a simulation of a diary – as Humbert alerts us up-front, the original has been long destroyed: “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” (40). This diary, itself, then, represents not a moment of sincerity in Humbert but a convenient, re-constructed and fictionalized piece of evidence. Confession, it seems, is not a way of “bearing witness against oneself,” as Foucault suggests, but of “self-justification,” of manipulating the narrative. Manipulating the narrative, however, also implies manipulating the reader, as Boyd suggests, saying Humbert only accuses himself “in order to disarm us with this display of moral scrupulousness” (230).¹⁷

¹⁷ Connolly offers a similar insight, stating that Humbert is constantly trying to anticipate, forestall, and shape his readers’ judgments and evaluations” (30).

As the novel develops, Humbert continues using confession to manipulate the reader's assessment of him, and confession becomes increasingly a means of deception, not of transparency. Consider, for instance, Humbert's manipulation of Charlotte after their marriage.

Never in my life had I confessed so much or received so many confessions. The sincerity and artlessness with which she discussed what she called her 'love-life,' from first necking to connubial catch-as-catch-can, were, ethically, in striking contrast with my glib compositions, but technically 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 her mode of expression (80).

Humbert here admits that his confessions are exactly the opposite of true or sincere – they are “compositions,” inspired by “soap operas and cheap novelettes.” He even notes that his confessions are *ethically* quite different from Charlotte's, which are, in fact, “sincere and artless.” Ultimately, then, Humbert's use of the confessional mode is a parody of confession. It subverts the traditional discourse of confession, overturning its basic assumptions, and takes it out of the context of “bearing witness” or “self-accusation” in order to use it as another rhetorical device in the hands of a brilliant manipulator.

The second discourse Humbert parodies in his narrative is the Romantic discourse. In this analysis “Romanticism” is understood in the sense given by Mario Praz, Aidan Day, and Rüdiger Safranski. In their conceptions, Romanticism is a historical aesthetic movement characterized chiefly by the emphasis on the grotesquery of the “real” world (Praz), a delight in chaos or overcoming boundaries of the real (Praz, Safranski), the existence of a higher realm of transcendence (Day, Praz, Safranski),¹⁸ the transformative power of the individual imagination to shape the world and/or achieve the transcendent goal (Day, Praz, Safranski), and the delight in the immaterial or inexpressible (Praz). To capture this inexpressible, Romantic art tends to shift

¹⁸ The term varies (transcendence, the sublime, the infinite, with or without capital letters). Overall, I read all these terms as denoting, in general, a higher existence or what Day calls a “spiritual reality” (3).

its emphasis away from imitation/mimesis to expression, “a suggestive expression which evokes more than it states” (Praz 15). In this highly individual search for the sublime, Romanticism functions chiefly by a radical aestheticization, a treatment of an ordinarily mundane or grotesque object as if it were beautiful: “By endowing the commonplace with a higher meaning, the ordinary with a mysterious respect, the known with the dignity of the unknown, the finite with the appearance of the infinite, I am making it Romantic” (Stoljar, quoted in Safranski 30). This aestheticization takes as its object usually the grotesque or terrible, the painful or - of special delight - the morbid (which shades into sadism and vampirism, see Praz). Also often used are tropes of the “noble bandit,” the “fatal woman,” exoticism, decadence, melancholy, and the wildness of nature (Praz). In short, Romanticism maintains a clear divide between the grotesque, ordinary, and ugly world of reality and the aesthetic, beautiful world of Art created by their own genius and, in order to transcend this divide, Romantic artists aestheticize the grotesque, morbid, criminal, or melancholy by means of art and poetry. In this sense, Romanticism has similarities with the project of modernist life-construction, in that both seek to transform reality through art. Romanticism, however, has a greater emphasis on transcendence and aestheticization.

Humbert Humbert, again, both uses and subverts this Romantic artistic code. In the first place, he places himself in the Romantic tradition by appealing to Romantic literature as a life-model. He frames the entire *Lolita* narrative as a continuation of his flirtation with “Annabel Leigh,” an obvious reference to Edgar Allen Poe’s famous poem (see Appel’s annotation (328-32)). This attitude takes as its starting point the Romantic tendency to “live one’s life as literature” that was prominent in the Romantic era (Safranski 27-31). Humbert tried to reincarnate Poe’s Annabel in Annabel, the same way he tried to reincarnate his own Annabel in *Lolita*. But Humbert also invokes a number of other prominent Romantic writers, especially

Shakespeare¹⁹, as in the Class List in Chapter 11 (50-51),²⁰ and, repeatedly throughout the novel, Prosper Merimée's *Carmen*, itself a prime example of the Romantic "fatal woman" trope.²¹ Humbert both likens Lolita to Carmen and uses Merimée's character as the source of a number of silly songs and rhymes he constructs to distract Lolita from his real purpose of transcendence through art.

Moreover, Humbert casts himself as a Romantic character type: the noble bandit, or some similar mix of criminality and nobility or beauty. He describes himself as one of many "gifted" ("bewitched") travelers in this plane of being who have access to the Other one, appealing to membership in a class of "we who are in the know, we lone voyagers, we nympholepts" (16-7). He describes pedophiles as a privileged artistic class, and, moreover, casts this pedophilia as a fundamentally artistic impulse and a misunderstood gift of vision that puts him in touch with something transcendent. As Connolly suggests, "[Humbert] presents himself as a misunderstood Romantic seeker, not a common pedophile" (41). To recognize these mysterious "ineffable signs" of the nymphets and their Otherworld, Humbert assures us, "you have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine"²² (17). That is, he is explicitly linking the Romantic quest for mystery and transcendence with the more clinical discourse of

¹⁹ "Romantic writers of all persuasions...continually use Shakespeare as a powerful medium through which to claim authority for their particular interests" (Ortiz 3). Though not always considered Romantic, Shakespeare was claimed by the English Romantics as their predecessor and forebear. See Bate, Ortiz, and Sabor & Yachnin.

²⁰ See Gavriel Shapiro's article, in which he traces the literary allusions in the Class List.

²¹ Especially since for love of the gypsy girl, Carmen, Don José goes into an irremediable life of crime. See *Carmen*.

²² See Leland de la Durantaye's argument for "the spine" in Nabokov's vision being the aesthetic organ, the place where "inspiration" and "aesthetic bliss" are felt (*Style is Matter*)

pedophilia, by claiming that this mysterious knowledge comes not simply from creative genius (artist/madman, flame in spine) but also from a kind of sexual aberration (a bubble of hot poison in your loins). In that sense, Humbert's use of Romanticism is already a parody, in that he has taken it out of its original spiritual context and made more physical.

Even more radically, however, Humbert parodies Romanticism by using it to explain his own desires and processes. He frames his entire project not merely as reincarnation of a literary character but as a Romantic quest for mystery and transcendence. The immortal, transcendent other realm appears, in *Lolita* as “that intangible island of entranced time where Lolita plays with her likes” (17). Transcendence is a place outside of time, where nymphets do not grow up, where Humbert can gaze upon them (and, we assume, more) with perfect impunity. For Humbert, this is a vision of Paradise, a perfect world of eternal happiness outside time. “Ah, leave me alone in my pubescent park, in my mossy garden. Let them play around me forever. Never grow up” (21). Humbert's project, then, is a decidedly Romantic one: he seeks to escape the confines of this oppressive, melancholy world and reclaim a kind of personal Eden.

The means to this transcendence, in keeping with Romantic notions, are exclusively artistic. For Humbert, they are moreover purely linguistic and poetic; it is language that is the vehicle for his artistic transcendence. For instance, in a class list found in the Haze home, Humbert sees Lolita's name, right between “Hamilton, Mary Rose” and “Honeck, Rosaline” (52). He exclaims, “A poem, a poem, forsooth! So strange and sweet was it to discover this ‘Haze, Dolores’ (she!) in its special bower of names, with its bodyguard of roses – a fairy princess between her two maids of honor” (52). Humbert is excited here not by Lolita's body or even her presence but by her mere name, and constructs a fairytale scene for her merely from the words on the page. This is an exaggeration of the mostly linguistic process earlier linked

Annabel: “I see Annabel in such general terms as: ‘honey-colored skin,’ ‘thin arms,’ ‘brown bobbed hair,’ ‘long lashes,’ ‘big bright mouth’” (11). Annabel was always mostly a poetic construct for Humbert (as suggested in Appel’s annotation, “Annabel . . . has no reality other than literary” (334)). In the class list scene, we see him beginning to subsume Lolita into linguistic signs as well. Moreover, as Gavriel Shapiro points out, Lolita’s position among these names – another literary character in a list of allusions – highlights the poignant fact that Humbert essentially does not see her as a ‘real’ girl, as anything more than language and his own romantic concepts of her. As Shapiro phrases it, “[Lolita’s classmates] and their rather conventional lives of American youngsters shed contrasting light on the title heroine and her tragic fate” (331).

In this sense the class list embodies a parody of the romantic notion of making art into life, no less than Humbert’s entire transcendental project. He has taken transcendence out of its spiritual context and allied it with physical, sexual desire, but also inverts the power of poetry in Romanticism. He shows not the imaginative power of language to constitute a different reality but the power of language to *destroy* reality. Lolita, far from becoming some kind of modern-day Galatea to Humbert’s Pygmalion, becomes a shadow of a person, an allusion, or, perhaps, as Humbert suggests later, “the small ghost of somebody I had just killed” (140). It is a radical aestheticization of language itself, to the extent that the real girl becomes immaterial. Perhaps this, in part, contributes the poignant irony of the famous line, “Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!” (32).

Humbert’s transcendental project, despite these inversions of Romantic notions, does maintain the emphasis on the transformative potential of the imagination, though again he subverts it into something entirely different. The supreme power of the imagination comes to the

fore in the davenport scene, in which Humbert steals his first pleasure from an unwitting Lolita. The description of this highly physical scene is filled with transcendent terms. Humbert uses “magic friction” to erase the physical boundaries between his body and Lolita “in an illusional, if not factual sense” (59). The magic and erasure of boundaries is all entirely in his mind, and, in keeping with Romantic notions, he does in fact achieve some kind of transcendence of his spatio-temporal reality. “I entered a place of being where nothing mattered, save the infusion of joy brewed within my body... I was above the tribulations of ridicule, beyond the possibilities of retribution” (60). Here, then, Humbert succeeds in his transcendental project; he has moved outside of time and into some kind of other world.

The means of this transcendence is again linked with verbal art. Humbert composes a song about Carmen – itself a metafictional moment as it is a piece of writing embedded in a text.

Having, in the course of my patter, hit upon something nicely mechanical, I recited, garbling them slightly, the words of a foolish song that was then popular – o my Carmen, my little Carmen, something, something, those something nights, and the stars, and the cars, and the bars, and the barmen; I kept repeating this automatic stuff and holding her under its special spell (spell because of the garbling) (59).

The use of the song is an important element because it keeps Lolita distracted, but it also appeals to Romantic notions of the magic power of art, calling it a “spell,” precisely because it is, in a sense, transcending language (“garbling”). In another sense, this song is a parody of Merimée’s character Carmen, who traditionally suggests a woman of an unrestrained passion. Humbert, however, applies this idea not to an unrestrained woman but to a twelve-year-old girl. Here, again, is another instance of parody, for *Carmen* has moved out of the realm of “fatal woman” in the passionate Romantic sense and has migrated into popular culture as simply a garbled love song. This parody of Romantic works functions by placing transcendent Romantic “fatal women” within the same discourse as pop culture. These two discourses seem to conflict, but, as

Mark Lipovetsky concludes in his article *The War of Discourses*, these two discourses become, through the development of *Lolita*, indistinguishable: “*Lolita* is not about the beneficial synthesis of the two [romantic/modernist code and mass culture code], but rather about the tragic union and indistinguishability of transcendence and simulation” (61).

Moreover, Humbert’s “success” is ironically cast as the ultimate solipsism and not, as Romantics might envision it, a communion with some mysterious, possibly spiritual, higher realm. Humbert’s transcendence is absolutely physical and his creation of “another reality” by transcendence becomes ominous.

I felt proud of myself. I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor... What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful *Lolita* – perhaps, more real than *Lolita*; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness – indeed, no life of her own (62).

Ominously, he is proud that he has managed to strip *Lolita* of her reality, managed to recreate her in his mind, where he can do whatever he likes without remorse or retribution. In this way, the davenport scene, in its parody of Romanticism, reveals the means of transcendence – the transformation of life *into* art. By denying a substantial real world wherein *Lolita* may have a life of her own and his actions have a moral consequence, Humbert in effect interprets all of the world as a text (in keeping with modernist/Romantic notions) but, moreover, displays his conceptual power over this artistic world. His is the only word that matters, his the only desires with any value. In that sense, for him this artistic construction *Lolita* is *more real* than the real *Lolita*. Ultimately, as Julian Connolly suggests, “Humbert is guilty of extreme narcissism and solipsism: he evaluates everything and everyone only as they fit his own needs, dreams, and desires” (Connolly 39). Essentially, Humbert places art onto reality, absorbs reality *into art* and

in the process reveals both the highly malleable nature of art and reality as well as his own assumption that he has ultimate control over both through his Romantic artistic genius.

In summary, then, Humbert uses parody to invert established discourses of confession and Romanticism and, through this inversion, manipulates his narrative, recasting it as a mitigation of his guilt and a chronicle of his artistic project. The effect of these parodies, however, is to radically destabilize the possibility of sincerity as well as to problematize the aesthetic project of bringing art into life.

MISE EN ABYME IN *LOLITA*

The mise en abyme, as earlier discussed, is any instance of a repetition or mirroring within a text. It serves as a strategy of destabilization, or, as Brian McHale puts it, a “strategy of self-erasure,” meaning that there is no referent or privileged narrative “world” in a mise en abyme (112-124). These structures, as microcosms, serve to lay bare the process of fictional construction. Moreover, as Dällenbach suggests, the mise en abyme offers a mirror wherein is reflected the reader and the author. Two mise en abymes in *Lolita* present microcosms of the novel by representing “salient features” of the text and its development. In this way, the mise en abymes reveal the process of world-construction, but also introduce the question of reading.

The first example of mise en abyme is the brief section “Who’s Who in the Limelight” in Chapter 8 of Part 1 (31-2). Humbert introduces this mise en abyme by announcing, “I was treated last night to one of those dazzling coincidences that logician loathe and poets love” (31). Such coincidences, as Naiman suggests, is a thinly-veiled intrusion of the author into the text: “In

Nabokov's metafictional world, there is no contingency, and the very words 'chance, by accident, incidentally' nearly always refer the reader to the author's all-powerful and all-conscious presence behind the text" (2005, 578).²³ In this instance, the author makes himself known only in masks. Humbert reads an entry about "Quilty, Clare" whose works listed include: "Author of *The Little Nymph*, *The Lady Who Loved Lightning* (in collaboration with Vivian Darkbloom), *Dark Age*, *The Strange Mushroom*, *Fatherly Love*, and others" (31). Vivian Darkbloom, a well-known anagram of Vladimir Nabokov, serves as the author's mask in this section. The titles of the plays ironically suggest the very plot of *Lolita* itself, suggesting Humbert (*Dark Age*, *Fatherly Love*), *Lolita* (*The Little Nymph*) and Quilty (portrayed here as the author of them all). Very tellingly, this entry announces that "*The Little Nymph* (1940) traveled 14,000 miles and played 280 performances on the road during the winter before ending in New York" (31). This refers, of course, to Quilty's play, but additionally, as in a mirror, describes *Lolita*'s own trips around the country and, in "ending," her death.

Quilty, however, is not the only author listed in this section. The next entry in the "Who's Who," "Quine, Dolores," though not *Lolita*, Humbert reads with a flash of recognition as though it were; moreover, the overview of this actress captures *Lolita*'s story quite well: "Made New York debut in 1904 in *Never Talk to Strangers*. Has disappeared since in [a list of some thirty plays follows]" (32). The list of works in which this Dolores actress "disappears" underlines *Lolita*'s erasure by Humbert's solipsistic parody of Romanticism. Seeing the "disappears," Humbert notes in a parenthetical: "I notice the slip of my pen in the preceding paragraph, but please do not correct it, Clarence" (32). This suggests, again, in the mirror, that he knows that *Lolita* has been erased and become merely an artistic entity, a mask or a purely fictional persona

²³ See also Appel 1970, (345 & 425.) i.e. "Nabokov appears everywhere in the texture but never in the text" (1970, 425).

– has “disappeared” in art. Thus, in this encyclopedia we have represented Humbert, Clare Quilty, Lolita, and Nabokov, as well as their complex and convoluted relationship. The “Who’s Who in the Limelight” presents a microcosm of both the plot and the themes of the novel – the themes of erasure and, most importantly, of authorship. Who *is* the author of *Lolita* the confessions? Is it Humbert, who does not appear as an author in this miniature model, or is it Quilty, who is listed as the author of a number of tales suspiciously akin to the story of *Lolita*?

The second *mise en abyme*, the text-within-a-text entitled “The Enchanted Hunters,” develops this question of authority. The play’s title refers to the name of the hotel where Humbert first possessed Lolita, a fulcrum of the novel’s narrative, to be sure. Yet, in the same way the Enchanted Hunters hotel serves as a turning point for the plot, the Enchanted Hunters play serves as a catalyst for the development of the novel’s themes and metafictional elements. The play offers a mirror, as it were, in two directions; it reflects the events and relationships of the novel up to this point and, in addition, suggests developments of certain themes that will play out in the remainder of the novel.

The Enchanted Hunters theme begins long before the play, when Charlotte suggests to Humbert that they make a romantic getaway to this hotel, where “the food is a dream. And nobody bothers anybody” (93). Humbert’s mind attaches to this notion and it is the first place he takes little orphaned Lo after he collects her from Camp Q. Searching for it is a maze, somewhat like wandering through an enchanted forest, hunting a hotel, and indeed the hotel seems for a while not to exist: “the passers-by I applied to for directions were either strangers themselves or asked with a frown ‘Enchanted what?’ as if I were a madman” (116). Most importantly, at this hotel, Humbert comes face to face with Clare Quilty, the man who will challenge him as an artist and as Lolita’s lover, the man who hunts him and whom he spends three years hunting. In both

these moments of Enchanted Hunters theme, Humbert's monopoly on artistic life-creation discourse is challenged. Charlotte is asserting her own will and desires, writing a romance narrative for herself and Humbert. Humbert is again not in control, has not mastered the world, when he is lost looking for the hotel like "a madman." And, finally, Clare Quilty is literally another author, with whom Humbert comes face to face on that critical night, that night of which he envisioned himself the sole author, the sole master, of the world. In essence, then, this Enchanted Hunters theme has already set the stage for a challenge to Humbert's authorial power.

In Chapter 13 of Part 2, Lolita participates in the preparation of a play entitled "The Enchanted Hunters," written by Clare Quilty, and it is this instance of the "Enchanted Hunters" theme that constitutes the *mise en abyme* proper. Humbert pieces together this "playlet" from scraps of script left by Lolita around their home. From them he summarizes the plot:

Dolores Haze was assigned the part of a farmer's daughter who imagines herself to be a woodland witch, or Diana, or something, and who, having got hold of a book on hypnotism, plunges a number of lost hunters into various entertaining trances before falling in her turn under the spell of a vagabond poet (Mona Dahl) (200).

In one sense, this is a rather straightforward reflection of what's happened previously in the novel; it is exactly what Humbert claims happened at the Enchanted Hunters hotel. There he drugs Lolita (plunges her into a trance) intending to derive "various entertainments" from her, but, contrary to his schemes, claims that "it was she who seduced me" (132). The Hunter, ostensibly, became the hunted; the enchanter fell under the spell of his prey. In this reading, the role of Diana represents Humbert, and the Poet is Lolita herself.

On another level, however, this recap of the play also reflects Humbert's treatment of Lolita throughout the novel and not just at the hotel. Lolita, being a nymphet, goes about enchanting the "lone travelers" like Humbert, completely "unconscious herself of her fantastic power" (17) until Humbert Humbert comes along, the Poet, enchanting with his artistic prose

(for example, the song he garbles on the davenport about Carmen, which keeps Lolita from noticing his “transcendent” actions). In that sense, this playlet casts Lolita in exactly the role of seductress/enchanter in which Humbert has been describing her throughout the novel, as Schweighauser notes. “Lolita temporarily becomes what Humbert’s discourse is trying to turn her into: a fictional character in someone else’s – this time it is Quilty’s – game. Lolita voluntarily enters the sphere of art” (101). On this level, the role of Diana falls to Lolita and Humbert is the Poet. Already, then, the ambiguity around the *mise en abyme* reflects the ambiguity of authorial control in the novel so far: is Humbert really the all-controlling Romantic artist he thinks he is?

However, a mere page later, Humbert offers a slightly different summary of the play, which motivates the thematic and narrative shift of the novel. “A seventh Hunter (in a *green* cap, the fool) was a Young Poet, and he insisted, much to Diana’s annoyance, that she and the entertainment provided (dancing nymphs, and elves, and monsters) were his, the Poet’s, invention” (201). Here Diana does not “fall under the spell” of the Poet but is shown to be his character. This reformulation adds another layer to the nested narratives: the enchanter and the enchanted are both themselves a part of someone else’s narrative. Following this shift, we might re-analyse the casting of the play; now, it seems, Diana symbolizes Humbert, the nympholept who thought he was writing enchanting confessions, and the Poet is Clare Quilty, the man who seems to know Humbert’s story already and is linked with “Aubrey McFate.” In such a way Quilty suggests that he is, in fact, Humbert’s author, that *he* is writing Humbert’s story. This interpretation shifts Humbert’s powers from an artistically gifted narrator-enchanter to a mere character – a shift which he loathes.

The interpretive shift in the Enchanted Hunters play, however, reflects moments of loss of authority earlier in the text and anticipates Humbert's later transformation into a mere character. For example, the theme of Humbert becoming a character has been suggested in the account of Valeria, "the comedy wife," who proves capable of "brazenly preparing to dispose in her own way of [Humbert's] comfort and fate" (28). Humbert is consistently upset when Valeria or, later, Charlotte turn out to be agents authoring their own lives and not "the stock character [they] were supposed to impersonate" (27). The "Waterproof" scene, indicated by Nabokov as one of the "nerves of the novel" (316), also reveals Humbert as a character in someone else's artistic creation (this time it is Jean Farlow's landscape painting). Quilty's play, then, is not the first time it has been suggested that Humbert is a character.

After the Enchanted Hunters play *mise en abyme*, however, this theme of becoming a character becomes the dominant one. Humbert increasingly loses control of his narrative, running through Lolita's escape (with the help, tellingly, of Clare Quilty), her eventual rediscovery (now residing not with Clare Quilty but, equally tellingly, on Hunter Road in Elphinstone) (261), and, finally culminating in the murder of Clare Quilty, wherein Humbert seemingly admits his powerlessness over his story. Wandering through Quilty's mansion is "a nightmare of wonder" (304). Humbert invokes a surreality, describing a complete farce in dream-time. This exaggerated sense of the surreal has led some critics, beginning with Alexander Dolinin, to suggest that these final scenes only happened in the deranged mind of incarcerated Humbert Humbert. Pointing out the chronology troubles in the second part of the book, Dolinin concludes "while imagining his fight with Quilty, [Humbert] suddenly realizes that he and his enemy are twin puppets, manipulated by the invisible puppet-master, whose design is still inscrutable to him: I rolled over him, We rolled over me They rolled over him. We rolled over

us” (38, quoting *Lolita* 299). Ultimately, Humbert admits, “this, I said to myself, was the end of the ingenious play staged for me by Quilty” (305), suggesting that even though he has, apparently, killed his author, he understands that he is still not free.

And, indeed, in the murder of Quilty there is yet one more, smaller *mise en abyme*, embedded in the narrative: a poem-within-the-novel, in which we see Humbert seemingly accept his role as character and push all of his moral culpability onto Clare Quilty:

Because you took advantage of a sinner...
 ...when I stood Adam-naked
 before a federal law and all its stinging stars
 ...Because you took advantage of a sin
 when I was helpless mouthing moist and tender
 hoping for the best
 dreaming of marriage in a mountain state
 aye of a litter of *Lolitas*...
 Because you took advantage of my inner
 essential innocence
 because you cheated me...[skipping ahead]
 because you stole her
 from her wax-browed and dignified protector
 spitting into his heavy-lidded eye
 ripping his flavid toga and at dawn
 leaving the hog to roll upon his new discomfort
 the awfulness of love and violets
 remorse despair while you
 took a dull doll to pieces
 and threw its head away
 because of all you did
 because of all I did not
 you have to die” (299-300).

This embedded text suggests the culmination of the shift from enchanter to character begun in the *Enchanted Hunters* play. Here, Humbert recognizes and even embraces his status as character – because it allows him to shift his moral shortcomings onto Quilty. Here, *Quilty* is the criminal, the one who took advantage of Humbert and *Lolita*, who “took a dull doll to pieces” (i.e. destroyed Doll-y Haze). Humbert, by contrast, maintains his “inner, essential innocence,” and

Quilty, as the criminal, must pay with his life. The shift of moral burden is complete in the final line: “Because of all you did, because of all I did not, you have to die.”

Therefore, the Enchanted Hunters *mise en abyme*, developing themes introduced in the earlier “Who’s Who?” *mise en abyme*, offers a microcosm of the theme of loss of authority that constitutes the development of the novel. In that sense, the *mise en abyme* presents not only the ultimate indistinguishability of art and reality, but also the interpenetration of these two worlds. The *mise en abyme*, by presenting the thematic shift in the novel, might be said to formulate the driving force of the narrative – in a sense, Humbert became a character in the later development of the novel *because* Quilty presented him this way in the play. This rather vertiginous interplay of art and reality reveals the process of world construction, namely, that the world is constructed *in the same manner as fiction*.

And yet, the *mise en abyme* device also serves to present the process of reading. On one level, as Gill suggests, the *mise en abyme* play reaches outside its text and even, perhaps, outside the text of *Lolita* and involves real flesh-and-blood readers as well: “‘The Enchanted Hunters’ refers to the fairy-tale powers which the nymph holds over Humbert, the narration holds over the reader, and which Nabokov holds over Humbert, and through Humbert’s narration, over the reader” (22). Perhaps so, but moreover and perhaps more importantly, this *mise en abyme* presents a model of the process of *misreading*. With the Enchanted Hunters play, Humbert reveals just how bad a reader he is. At first he off-handedly admits, “I did not bother to read the complete text of *The Enchanted Hunters*” (200). Nevertheless, he proceeds to pass aesthetic judgment on the piece. Moreover, however, he misinterprets the entire point of the play, claiming, “a last-minute kiss was to enforce the play’s profound message, namely, that mirage and reality merge in love” (201). If this play is read as a mirror of Humbert’s own story,

regardless of who authored it, Humbert here displays a remarkable inability to recognize himself in the mirror. Perhaps it is his Romantic notions clouding his interpretive faculties; more likely, it is his extreme solipsistic impulses. Either way, he is correct in the sense that the play presents the merging of mirage and reality; in no way, however, does it present love as the force of unification. In that sense, Humbert's misreading offers yet another parody of his Romantic posturing. He wishes mirage and reality would merge in love; yet what *Lolita* presents is that the effect of the merging of mirage and reality is not love but the utter destruction of an innocent.

Humbert's bad reading processes, like other themes presented in the *mise en abyme*, constitute a recurring feature of his interaction with the world. He consistently fails to notice the presence of multiple authors or agents in the world. For example, he absolutely does anticipate the possibility of Quilty's pursuit and Lolita's escape: "Queer! I who was jealous of every male we met – queer, how I misinterpreted the designations of doom" (217). Towards the end of the novel, Humbert does show a moment of recognition, in realizing how badly he read the signs of Lolita's inner life: "I recall that on this and similar occasions, it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita's states of mind while comforting my own base self" (287). By the time he realizes this, though, it is too late. Humbert, then, is presented as the model of a terrible reader.

Interestingly enough, it is Lolita herself who proves the most insightful reader in the Enchanted Hunters play scene. After a number of rehearsals (during which she presumably gets to know Quilty and the story of the play's creation), Lolita figures it all out. She solves the puzzle that Humbert does not solve for another three years:

'Can you remember,' she said, 'what was the name of that hotel, *you* know... Oh, you know [noisy exhalation of breath] – the hotel where you raped me. Okay, skip it. I mean, was it [almost a whisper] The Enchanted Hunters? Oh, it was? [musingly] Was it?' – and with a yelp of amorous vernal laughter she slapped the glossy bole and tore uphill, to the end of the street, and then rode back, feet at rest

on stopped pedals, posture relaxed, one hand dreaming in her print-flowered lap (202).

Lolita, after solving the puzzle, laughs and dreams. It might be read as a moment of interiority for her, one that Humbert, again, fails to recognize. In that sense, the text might suggest that Lolita herself is an author as well – or at least, a person with some kind of inner life and agency, despite all these self-confident authors making her play roles. Later, Humbert will notice how little of her he really saw, saying “quite possibly . . . there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate – dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me” (284). Yet, at the point of the story in which “The Enchanted Hunters” takes place, Humbert only misreads the play, Lolita, Quilty, and the world itself. He consistently fails to recognize when people or events escape his control, the message of the playlet, and the significance of various “coincidences” in his own story – coincidences that might suggest the presence of multiple authors in his story/world. Thus, the *mise en abymes* have presented not only a miniature model of the processes of construction in the novel, but have also presented miniature models of the *misreading* process.

THE CREATIVE CHRONOTOPE AND PERFORMATIVITY IN *LOLITA*

The *mise en abymes* in *Lolita* foreground the presence – and, above all, the interpenetration – of narrative levels. It is hardly possible to trace out the different levels and metalepses because the boundaries among fictional levels are shifting too much and too often. In one level, Humbert writes a confession; in another, Quilty writes a play about the events Humbert is confessing. Which of these levels is prior? In one sense this is a literary trompe-

l'oeil, in that the reader is “mislead...into regarding an embedded, secondary world as the primary, diegetic one” (McHale 1987, 115). However, this is not just a literary “optical illusion” that in the next moment is recognized as illusion. It is an unresolvable confusion of narrative level hierarchy. This is an instance of what McHale calls “Strange Loops” (1987, 119-121). Metalepsis becomes difficult to parse in this instance, because there might be no “primary” narrative, but rather a sort of spiraling, looping narrative structure in which every “nesting box” both contains and is contained by the others.

And yet, the most radical metalepsis – the rupture of the entire fictional world by the appeal to the creative chronotope – is present and identifiable in *Lolita*. Recall that the creative chronotope is that unique intersection of space and time where the author engages in dialogue with the reader. This dialogue both makes the text come alive *as literature* and lays bare the processes of writing – namely, the presence of an author “behind” the text, and the necessity of opening the dialogue in the creative chronotope.

The appeal to the creative chronotope appears in two ways in *Lolita*. First, it occurs as the apex of the “Humbert-the-author becomes a character” theme, as introduced in the *mise en abymes*. As mentioned previously, Humbert is faced numerous times with evidence that he is not the master-writer of his life. At Hourglass Lake, for instance, Charlotte breaks the news that she intends to send Lolita away, to Humbert’s obvious distress. “I had always thought that wringing one’s hands was a fictional gesture” (83). Interestingly enough, he mentions this as if it is merely part of his style or, even, ironic. Yet this is, presumably, the very gesture he is at that moment making – does this mean he too is a fiction? After Humbert dissuades himself from drowning Charlotte, the painter neighbor Jean emerges from where she had been painting a landscape. “I almost put both of you into my lake,” [Jean] said. “I even noticed something you overlooked.

You [addressing Humbert] had your wrist watch on in, yes, sir, you had” (89). Not only does Jean underline the fact that Humbert is merely an object in someone else’s work of art, she also intimates that she saw *more* of the scene than Humbert (the author, he assumed) saw. Humbert is absolutely not the most powerful creator or, even, character in his life – a source of increasing anxiety for him as an author.

This anxiety reaches its peak just after Charlotte’s “coincidental” death (though, following Naiman and Appel, we remain skeptical of coincidence). Humbert has been contemplating killing Charlotte for a number of pages at this point; yet, by some deus-ex-machina intervention of Fate, Charlotte is killed without Humbert having to lift a finger. Where this might seem to be a source of relief for Humbert, it is instead a terrifying experience, because it signals his loss of control over his narrative. Here, Humbert is not being turned into a character by another character, but is the character to some higher force, some author-god above him. “Fat fate’s formal handshake (as reproduced by Beale before leaving the room) brought me out of my torpor; and I wept” (103). Humbert equates Beale, the fatal driver, with the force of Fate.

Coming face to face, as it were, with the embodiment of this higher authoring force, Humbert panics. “Instead of basking in the beams of smiling Chance, I was obsessed by all sorts of purely ethical doubts and fears” (105). On one hand, this, again, is a parody of moral turmoil, as Humbert is emphatically *not* some Raskolnikov tormenting himself over ethical questions.²⁴ On the other hand, and more importantly, his panic is revealed to concern not ethics but

²⁴ Indeed, Nabokov detested Dostoevsky’s “epiphanies” and “soul-searching” as sentimental nonsense. See *Strong Opinions*, for example: “if you are alluding to Dostoevski’s worst novels, then, indeed, I dislike intensely *The Karamazov Brothers* and the ghastly *Crime and Punishment* rigmarole. No, I do not object to soul-searching and self-revelation, but in those books the soul, and the sins, and the sentimentality, and the journalese, hardly warrant the tedious and muddled search” (148).

authority. “Granted it was the long hairy arm of Coincidence that had reached out to remove an innocent woman, might Coincidence not ignore in a heathen moment what its twin lamb had done and hand Lo a premature note of commiseration? (105). He fears that Fate may just as easily “warn” Lolita and snatch her away from him – not that there is any legal or moral obscurity to what he’s doing and that he must make some decision in the depths of his soul.

For the assuagement of these “purely ethical fears,” Humbert calls the camp, only to discover that Lolita has gone on a hike and will not return til late (a scenario Humbert had already invented to excuse himself from bringing Lolita back to Ramsdale) (106). After this call, “some freak mechanical flaw” causes the pay phone to return all of his coins. In one sense, Fate thus continues to tease Humbert with “coincidences,” but Humbert consistently finds a way to reframe these coincidences as elements of his own artistic master plan: “One wonders if this sudden discharge, this spasmodic refund, was not correlated somehow, in the mind of McFate, with my having invented that little expedition before ever learning of it as I did now” (107). Humbert is suggesting that these “coincidences” are themselves linked with his own artistic creations – he is appealing precisely to the discourse of metafiction to defend himself from these doubts of his authority. But he cannot sustain this metafictional rewriting of coincidence.

In the enigmatic Chapter 26, Humbert withdraws entirely from the diegetic battle with his Fate/Author and, through what McHale might call a radical and extremely disquieting metalepsis, breaks outside of his narrative altogether. He appeals exactly to the creative chronotope, the time of writing that reaches across time and space to engage the reader.

This daily headache in the opaque air of this tombal jail is disturbing, but I must persevere. Have written more than a hundred pages and not got anywhere yet. My calendar is getting confused. That must have been around August 15, 1947. Don’t think I can go on. Heart, head – everything. Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita. Repeat till the page is full, printer (109).

Pursued by intimations of a higher author, Humbert's only recourse is to point out his own hand on the pen, to appeal to his own time of writing his own memoirs. Yet along with this appeal to the time and act of writing, Humbert also addresses the editor (and, by proxy, the reader) to engage in direct dialogue with them, as it were, *beyond* the text, to assert his authority by showing himself at the writing desk and engaged in the dialogue of the creative chronotope.

What this appeal to the creative chronotope reveals, ultimately, is a complication of the notion of authorship itself. Humbert is indeed the author, as he proves with the creative chronotope. But Vladimir Nabokov's presence in the mask of McFate is also undeniable. What do we do with this enigma? One might expect there to commence a battle of wills between author and character for control of the text, but Humbert seems increasingly to resign to his status as character as the novel develops. When he does collect Lolita, he ironically states, "This was the beginning of the ineffable life which, ably assisted by fate, I had finally willed into being" (113).

The resignation to Fate's power culminates, like the parodic themes, in the Quilty murder scene, which might at first seem like Humbert killing his author and establishing his freedom. Immediately after the attainment of his vengeful goal, however, Humbert seems to recognize that Quilty was just a mask for Nabokov. "This, I said to myself, was the end of the ingenious play staged for me by Quilty" (305). Boyd interprets this final lament as evidence for Quilty's ultimate power: "Even in murdering Quilty, Humbert cannot wrest control from him. Even as he dies, Quilty scripts the show" (Boyd 248). In contrast, we propose that Quilty has, indeed, been killed and negated, but there remains, out of Humbert's reach, yet another author, who still pulls the strings, who still stages such "ingenious plays" for Humbert. In true trickster fashion, Nabokov shows that there will always be another author behind the ones presented to Humbert.

In the creative chronotope, then, Humbert finally realizes the presence of the higher author(s), that he is a character in a story and *not* an autonomous creator. In this panic, his only refuge is to appeal to the chronotope, suggesting that he *cannot* assert authority over his text from within the text. This scene ultimately reveals Humbert's lack of authority and shows his powerlessness. Thus, the creative chronotope supports the shift from enchanter to character signaled in the *mise en abyme*, but moreover constitutes the moment of highest self-consciousness – and therefore metafictionality – in the text. Here, Humbert knows he is in a great game of authors, characters, and readers, and breaks the fourth wall to lay bare this puzzle.

The second way the creative chronotope functions in *Lolita* is by the appeals to the reader. Humbert appeals to the reader a number of times throughout the novel, sometimes, as mentioned, as jurors. Yet he also appeals to the reader in moments of crime, with the effect, as a self-conscious attempt to involve the audience in his actions, of unlocking the specifically *performative* aspects of the novel. The reader is made a co-author, in Lehmann and Pollock's formulation, and Humbert's narrative becomes a literal *performance* of writing.

Lolita has a number of moments in which theatrical elements come to the fore. For example, before describing the davenport scene, Humbert invites the readers into the scene as if into a theatrical production: "I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay" (57). He continues to describe the scene in specifically theatrical terms, as if he were literally staging a play. "Main character: Humbert the Hummer. Time: Sunday morning in June. Place: sunlit living room. Props: old, candy-striped davenport, magazines, phonograph, Mexican knickknacks" (57). Quilty's murder, as has been discussed, is also a highly theatrical moment in *Lolita*, one that might even be characterized, with its "fogs," "hazes" and "losses of touch with reality", as theater of the absurd.

Far beyond these stagings of significant moments in the text, however, Humbert makes a few much more radical theatrical gestures, including his repeated appeals to the reader as co-creator. One instance of this is Humbert's grotesque performance of fatherhood. Addressing Lolita, he says, "in former times, when I was still your dream male [the reader will notice what pains I took to speak Lo's tongue]...But now I'm just your *old man*, a dream dad protecting his dream daughter" (149). Humbert is, indeed, an impostor father, and he wants the reader to be aware of this fact, seeing in it not a reprehensible ruse but a caring man doing his best with a troublesome teen.

Thumbing through that battered tour book, I dimly evoke that Magnolia Garden in a southern state which cost me four bucks and which, according to the ad in the book, you must visit for three reasons: because John Galsworthy (a stone-dead writer of sorts) acclaimed it as the world's fairest garden; because in 1900 Baedeker's Guide had marked it with a star; and finally, because, ...O Reader, My Reader, guess!...because children (and by Jingo was not my Lolita a child!) will 'walk starry-eyed and reverently through this foretaste of Heaven, drinking in beauty that can influence a life' (154-5).

Here Humbert appeals to the reader in order to point out that what he is doing is giving Lolita a "foretaste of Heaven." She is a child and he is trying to influence her life for the better. However, he considers this gift mostly in terms of money spent (\$4). This gift to child Lolita is not a gift but a bribe, and the reader sees this and is invited to hazard a guess as to what the gift might be. However, the address is reminiscent of Walt Whitman's 1891 poem, "O Captain! My Captain!," a poem ostensibly bemoaning the assassination of Lincoln. Not only, then, is Humbert parodying another great Romantic writer, but he is invoking a poem of death to appeal to the reader.²⁵

Humbert has stooped to bribing Lolita for her favors, a bribery he acknowledges as fatal, and

²⁵ Note especially the lines: "My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,/My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,/The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,/From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won" (Whitman). This piece invokes death, but also, somewhat ominously, the attainment of a goal.

which, by extension, the reader acknowledges as fatal. Thus Humbert again inculcates the audience in his dangerous games.

Moreover, in the Enchanted Hunters hotel scene, Humbert begs the reader, who until now has more or less followed along in his “confession” with a relatively clear conscience, to withhold judgment and see him not as a monster but as a gentle creature: “Please, reader...Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me, try to discern the doe in me, trembling in the forest of my own iniquity” (129). Humbert appeals to a sense of curiosity in the readers. We see here an example of what Boyd, Connolly, and Tamir-Ghez have already identified as Humbert’s attempts to garner support and sympathy from readers. However, we must not forget that Humbert is asking us to see the gentle doe in a man who is about to drug and rape a twelve-year-old. In asking for the withholding of judgment, Humbert is tacitly asking readers to overlook his crimes but also invites the reader to become involved in events, to have some stake in what’s happening, based on curiosity or empathy or some mix of the two. What’s important is that the reader becomes, through these addresses, a kind of fan of Humbert; the reader starts wanting him to succeed. In the appeals to the reader, then, Humbert makes them not a confidant or confessor but an *accomplice*.

Eventually, readers are involved in the enslavement of Lolita: “Oh, do not scowl at me, reader, I do not intend to convey the impression that I did not manage to be happy. Reader must understand that in the possession and thralldom of a nymphet the enchanted traveler stands, as it were, *beyond happiness*” (166). Humbert again invokes his transcendental achievements, but he does so in chilling terms of “possession” and “thralldom.” He cannot claim ignorance to Lolita’s feeling – he knows she is a slave, but what matters, and what he assumes the reader wants to

know most of all, is that *he* is happy. He continues to buy her favors and keep her in thrall, but later begins to steal his payment back.

O Reader! Laugh not, as you imagine me, on the very rack of joy noisily emitting dimes and quarters, and great big silver dollars like some sonorous, jingly and wholly demented machine vomiting riches; and in the margin of that leaping epilepsy she would firmly clutch a handful of coins in her little fist, which, anyway, I used to pry open afterwards unless she gave me the slip, scrambling away to hide her loot (184).

This appeal to the reader describes a pleasurable moment but in terms of illness; Humbert's passion is related to "vomiting" and likened to "epilepsy." He also attempts here to reverse the situation, in some form. Instead of simply paying Lolita and letting it remain prostitution, he forcibly takes back the money, as if by not paying her it is not prostitution. This is, of course, a fallacy, as the transgression lies in the act and not in the payment, but it is one meager way Humbert tries to reassert control of the situation and undo the transgression.

Finally, thinking of returning to the Enchanted Hunters hotel after losing Lolita but knowing he is unable, Humbert seeks out a picture of him taken on that fateful day, hoping "to find preserved the portrait of the artist as a younger brute" (262). However, he knows this photograph would be cold comfort for the loss of Lolita, and explains its inadequacy to us:

Reader! *Bruder!* What a foolish Hamburg that Hamburg was! Since his supersensitive system was loath to face the actual scene, he thought he could at least enjoy a secret part of it - which reminds one of the tenth or twentieth soldier in the raping queue who throws the girl's black shawl over her white face so as not to see those impossible eyes while taking his military pleasure in the sad, sacked village (262).

This passage shares some elements with the previous passage of prostitution and theft, in that Humbert describes it as a mix of pleasure and sickness. He is trying to "enjoy a secret part" of his memory of the hotel, itself a painful memory. Also, he takes "military pleasure" – an odd description, as it allies war and pleasure. Moreover, we see a similar attempt at reversal or

alleviation of his faults. The soldier in this passage throws the girl's shawl over her face, as if not seeing her face mitigates the situation, as if not seeing could excuse one from moral reprobation. However, this appeal to the reader is even more chilling, because the opening lines ally it strongly with Germany. Humbert calls the reader "Bruder," the German word for brother, and calls himself "Hamburg" twice – a rather German-sounding transformation of Humbert Humbert.

However, as Anna Brodsky points out, "Nabokov forever after [the experience of Nazi Germany] felt a cordial hatred for Germany" (50). In Nabokov's universe, "German" was more or less equivalent with "evil,"²⁶ as reflected in his adamant decision not to return to Germany, saying, "As long as I am still alive, there may be brutes still alive who have murdered and tortured the helpless and the innocent" (Nabokov, quoted in Brodsky 50). This appeal to the reader in German terms, then, subtly highlights the evil of the act. This implies that these raping soldiers are not just any soldiers, but specifically Nazi soldiers.

What's more, this is Humbert's own description of the meager pleasures afforded by art and memory after *Lolita* is gone – in a sense, this passage describes his entire conception of the writing process: a sick pleasure, one with criminal elements he prefers to overlook. This makes this passage simultaneously one of the most powerful metafictional moments in the novel, and, moreover, presents the final step in the transformation of the reader from juror to accomplice. Readers are now brothers in crime with Humbert Humbert, and, shockingly, what they are now involved in is gang-rape and Nazi terror.

²⁶ Cf. Nabokov's attitude toward Germany as presented in a lengthy quote in Boyd's biography. In brief, it is an unforgiving condemnation. e.g. "It is useless looking at a hyena and hoping that one day domestication or a benevolent gene will turn the creature into a soft purring tortoiseshell cat... Let us chloroform it – and forget" (Nabokov, quoted in Boyd 90).

What is created, then, in this collaboration of the reader and Humbert in the performance of his narrative? Nothing less than a chain of increasingly heinous crimes, bookended by rapes and constantly evoking death. The reader can no longer serve as the jury. The reader can no longer judge Humbert, because as accomplices the readers share in Humbert's guilt. Ultimately, what Humbert has demonstrated through his performance of writing is precisely the fungibility not only of reality and fiction, but of morality itself. Humbert has managed to disarm the reader and to show that "the certainty of our moral feelings is far more tenuous than we ever care to admit" (Appel 1987, 36). Humbert, then, has shown the impossibility of morality itself.

And yet, in order for this writing to be performative, it must also, as Pollock suggests, "unwrite" itself. It must contain its own critique. This critique of moral fungibility is most clearly revealed in the "moral apotheosis." Interestingly, the final appeal to the reader occurs precisely at this moment, wherein Humbert exclaims, "Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that...and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord" (308). It *is* a poignant moment, one that many critics read as redemptive, despite Humbert's egregious previous crimes.

²⁷ However, most critics point to an earlier passage as the moment of Humbert's true "revelation," and which constitutes his moral redemption:

Alas, I was unable to transcend the simple human fact that whatever spiritual solace I might find, whatever lithophanic eternities might be provided for me, nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted upon her. Unless it can be proven to me – to me as I am now, today, with my heart and my beard, and my putrefaction – that in the infinite run it does not matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac, unless this can be proven (and if it can, then life is a joke), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art (283).

²⁷ See Alexandrov, Benson, de la Durantaye, Rampton, Tamir-Ghez

Here, as critics point out, is the true moment of redemption, because Humbert realizes the depths of suffering he has inflicted on Lolita and the extent of his own crimes and, furthermore, he knows that he cannot ever atone.

However, the presentation of Humbert's "moral epiphany" is immensely problematic. Firstly, it marks a failure of his Romantic/modernist project of bringing art into life. Here, Humbert retreats back into art, back into his Romantic dreams, where reality cannot intrude, where he can "treat his misery" without actually engaging with the "real" world, where his "real" crimes against the "real" girl-child cry out for justice. In that sense, this scene is not a moral awakening but an acknowledgement of the failure of his attempts to control reality through artistic means. Moreover, it is only *after* the narration of this revelation that he goes to kill Clare Quilty. Why kill Lolita's lover if he has reached some deep moral insight about his own iniquity? Indeed, as previously discussed, in his murder of Quilty he *offsets* his moral iniquity onto Quilty, as though Quilty, as the author, were responsible for it all and not Humbert.

More problematic still is Appel's suggestion that "these passages represent a series of traps in which Nabokov again parodies the reader's expectations by having Humbert say what the reader wants to hear" (1987, 38). Humbert presents this moral epiphany so that readers continue to withhold judgment. The reader desperately wants Humbert to realize his crimes – expects it, in fact. And so, according to Appel, Humbert, who knows literary discourse and expectations so well, gives readers what they want. Indeed, if readers are inculcated in Humbert's crimes, they want a redemption in order to see *themselves* redeemed. In essence, then, Humbert's redemption is, again, a performance. On one hand, the fact that Humbert is compelled to present this moment demonstrates the *need* for redemption in the reader. On the other, it makes the redemption itself suspect. The redemption is couched, again, in the confessional

mode, as Humbert ostensibly lays bare his soul in the only moment of true sincerity in the novel. The difficulty is that this entire discourse has been compromised –through Humbert’s own subversion of it! The only interpretation for Humbert’s confession here is as yet another manipulation of the narrative. In that sense, this “moral epiphany” also demonstrates the *impossibility* of redemption for Humbert Humbert. He *has no language* in which to present or explain his moral redemption.

The performance of writing, then, does contain its own critique in the breakdown of Humbert’s entire confessional and Romantic project. Language itself fails him – it has become so fragmented and decontextualized by parody, so “unwritten” by performance, that it proves to be utterly empty, here at the most important moment for his – and his readers’ – moral potential. Humbert’s failed apotheosis suggests that morality does not exist outside language. The performance of writing, then, leaves an enormous gap in the text, one that cannot be filled from within the narrative because there exists no language in the narrative to discuss it. Thus, *Lolita* is not finalized in its own terms; it lacks the language to make a statement about itself.

And yet, this enormous gap does not signal the end of the novel and the death of morality. Rather, it offsets the moral onus *onto the reader*. Where Humbert is unable to redeem himself, where Humbert cannot see or read or even say the full extent of his crimes, we can. We must. But how?

The great discomfort felt by most readers of *Lolita* is a clue. Indeed, the existence of the critical debate about Humbert’s moral redemption may also be seen as a clue, as a sign that readers are *not* content with Humbert’s demonstration of the malleability of morality. Readers remain horrified at his crimes. In a sense, readers have *already seen* what Humbert does not: the limit of his transgressions. Readers already know how much Lolita has suffered, even though

Humbert does not. Readers saw it as early as Humbert mentioned Lolita's " . . . sobs in the night – every night, every night – the moment [he] feigned sleep" (176). With the extraordinarily poignant repetition, this phrase ought to alert Humbert to Lolita's inner life. Yet it does not. But it does alert *readers* to it. Morality, then, has indeed been shown to be malleable through *Lolita*, but it is not infinitely malleable; there exists, as shown in the reader's reactions, a limit to the fungibility of morality. That limit is the suffering of the other. No aesthetic project is valid once it crosses this boundary – art, in this sense, has a responsibility to *pay attention*.

In a way, this is reminiscent of Emmanuel Levinas' "first philosophy," in that Levinas's ethics do not prescribe, they are not founded on logic or on metaphysics, but on the fundamental *experience* of human beings in the encounter with the Other (Bergo, Perpich 77). In the encounter with the other, whatever freedom a person may have is challenged and replaced by a responsibility toward that other. What is established in this encounter is what Levinas calls "finite freedom:" "This finite freedom is not primary, is not initial; but it lies in an infinite responsibility where the other is not other because he strokes up against and limits my freedom, but where he can accuse me to the point of persecution, because the other, absolutely other, is another one" (1981, 124). Levinas here suggests the responsibility toward the other not as a limitation of freedom but as an infinite, primordial recognition of the other *as* other and, as such, as a kind of interlocutor in an ethical situation. To put this into the terms of this study, we may say that art is not limited by the suffering of the other, as though it had a right that has been taken away; rather, art has a much more fundamental duty to preserve the ethical sense, not in a moralistic way but in a dialogic way. Humbert's aesthetic project, his artistic genius, his devoted pursuit of beauty – none of these outweigh for readers the "simple human fact" that Lolita has been destroyed, that Humbert has failed in his responsibilities toward her. Humbert is not "bad"

or “evil” according to some moral precepts or code – he is guilty of *not paying attention*, of not seeing the other as other, of not acknowledging his duties. In that sense, *Lolita* is a test of the moral sense - a test which Humbert, by all accounts, fails, but which it falls to the reader to pass.

In the final analysis, then, Humbert’s disturbing performance of writing offers a vision of morality as a process of metafiction. Morality, as suggested, has no language in which to exist in the narrative; it does, however, exist as a process of empathetic and attentive reading - something that Humbert, it seems, cannot do. This moral process of reading begins with the challenge to the reader, and proceeds not according to a moral code, but according to a dialogic (non-didactic) encounter with the text that problematizes, probes, challenges, and in this testing of the reader discovers the limits of transgression *precisely through the processes of metafiction*: through the laying bare of the fictional devices, by the co-creation of the text by the reader, and by the deconstructive, disquieting performance of the writing itself.

CONCLUSION

Nabokov's *Lolita* is a very powerful critical tool. It critiques the entire project of modernist life-construction and modernist-Romantic attempts to create reality as art by showing, in Humbert's artistic failures, the inherent impossibility of the entire enterprise. Humbert's attempts at modernist world-building and writing life as art have utterly failed – he does not transcend into a reclaimed Eden, or create a Lolita that is “more real” than the girl, or establish artistic control over reality. In the moral apotheosis, Humbert demonstrates this failure by retreating back into art, as into a safe haven, into a hermetic author-world where the “real” world of Lolita's suffering cannot penetrate. Metafiction reveals the construction of this kind of world, showing it to be a process founded on manipulation, death, and inattentiveness.

Lolita also critiques moral discourse itself, performing the deconstruction of the traditional view of morality by disarming the moral sense and demonstrating just how far it can be manipulated. By demonstrating his great artistic skills at manipulating both text and (via text) world, Humbert compromises the confessional discourse, and along with it the notions of unified self and sincerity. Moreover, Humbert has demonstrated the malleability of morality in the reader himself. The failure of Humbert to redeem himself shows that morality, in fact, does not exist outside language, and since Humbert has compromised all discourses through his metafictional deconstruction, he is left without a way to atone for – or even fully realize – his crimes.

And yet, by opening the space for a new vision of morality as a process of reading, *Lolita* serves as the poignant critique of cruelty or “incuriosity” (Rorty 158). For, by opening up this moral gap in the novel through the presentation of Humbert's failures, Nabokov requires readers to question their own complicity in reading. In this self-critique, readers discover their own

ethical sense as well as Humbert's main moral flaw: indifference. Humbert fails because he does not notice the suffering of other people; art, too, fails when it becomes indifferent. *Lolita* thus presents readers with an inescapable and uncomfortable self-scrutiny and dialogue with the book. It is this dialogue which activates the moral potential of the novel.

To put this in Levinasian terms, in *Lolita* the text *is* the face that challenges our ethical sense. The book, by opening this uncomfortable dialogue with the reader through metafictional devices, triggers an ethical uncertainty in the reader that invokes the one moral imperative remaining in the post-Holocaust world: the imperative to *pay attention*. Regardless of the fact that *Lolita* leaves no language in which to discuss morality, the fact that the text confronts readers so powerfully requires them to take an ethical responsibility for their reading. "Thus I cannot evade by silence the discourse which the epiphany that occurs as a face opens" (Levinas 1969, 201). That is, the failure of Humbert's discourse does not excuse his readers from a moral responsibility – *Lolita* itself activates a responsibility toward the text, precisely through the functions of metafiction. The new, metafictional, model of morality as reading offers a way for Nabokov to open up the moral dimension of the novel without moralizing, becoming didactic, or employing any previously given moral discourse – discourses that have all been compromised in processes of modernism.

Let us, then, take stock of the "creative experiment" posited at the beginning of the paper. Humbert has failed, but through his failure Nabokov demonstrates the limit of moral transgression, without moralizing or writing didactic fiction. He has found exactly the point at which art becomes evil in the post-Holocaust world, and in discovering that demarcation line has also found the limit of the aesthetic pursuit of beauty. These limits he discovered through the performance of the entire book, through the process of inculcating the reader as co-author of

Humbert's crimes, and through the process of deconstruction so many codes of literary discourses. This is why metafiction was the most useful format for the experiment. Evil itself is not represented in the novel, the same way the war was not. But through the reader's interaction with the text we discover the proper limitations and failures of both. So Nabokov has, in fact, fixed "the portion of hell and the portion of heaven" (135). Art is not innocent, but Nabokov has shown how art may still be "good" in the post-Holocaust world. It must pay attention to the banal, everyday evils, and find a way to make the reader pay attention. In other words, art is, indeed, irreparably mixed with evil, as is all things in the post-Holocaust world, but art has the possibility of becoming aware of this, of critiquing it, and of making readers aware of it too. That making aware of readers constitutes the ultimate moral project of art. Art must engage the reader in profound and uncomfortable new ways and must involve the reader in its failures and fallacies. This is the only way to avoid cruelty.

Morality is, indeed, malleable and constructed like all things in our world, but it is not infinitely flexible: the one limit, which we cannot transgress, is the suffering of the Other. And so, ultimately, we read Vladimir Nabokov as experimenting with art and goodness in this novel. What he discovers is goodness not as an inherent quality, nor as a quality necessarily allied with beauty, but as the result of a certain process of reading. Nabokov offers us this one Archimedean point from which to approach the world, this time not as accomplices but as attentive, empathetic, *morally responsible* readers.

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