

The Art of Transgression: Reading *Lolita* Through Bataille
By Christina Donahue

Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literatures
March 18, 2011

Committee Members

Thesis Advisor: Mark Leiderman
Mary Klages
Tatiana Mikhailova
Laura Osterman
Rima Salys

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the relationship between Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Georges Bataille's *Eroticism, Death, and Sensuality*, two significant texts published in the 1950's. In a comparative analysis, I argue that the texts share a common interest in taboo and erotic transgression, but that the authors present disparate interpretations of these actions. Bataille concludes that erotic transgression liberates the individual from social and/or ideological hegemony. Nabokov critiques this idea through his deconstruction of *Lolita*'s narrator, Humbert Humbert, and his erotic transgression. Nabokov portrays erotic transgression as a form of destructive self-indulgence that renders individuals liable to violate others. Nabokov highlights the violent potential of transgression when the subject in pursuit of freedom is incapable of recognizing the value of other lives apart from his own. Despite their disparate conceptions of eroticism and individual freedom, Nabokov and Bataille envision reality to be heterogeneous and share a common opposition to global ideas. In the context of the 20th century, this stance represents an intellectual reaction to the pathos of global ideas that served as a basis for the rise of totalitarian regimes and their humanitarian atrocities during the 1930s-40s.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4-8
Chapter One: Bataille's <i>Eroticism, Death, and Sensuality</i>	9-20
Bataille's Theoretical Objective	9-12
Continuity and Discontinuity	12-13
Excess, Taboo, and Transgression	13-18
Moral Implications of Erotic Transgression	18-20
Chapter Two: Reading <i>Lolita</i> Through Bataille	21-44
Taboo and Erotic Transgression from Humbert's Perspective	21-27
Nabokov's Deconstruction of Humbert's Transgression	27-39
The Violence of Erotic Transgression	40-44
Chapter Three: Critique of Global Ideas	45-54
Historical Context	45-47
Modernity and Totalitarianism	48-49
Nabokov and Bataille: A Response to Global Crisis	50-54
Conclusion	55-58
Bibliography	59-62

Introduction

In the introduction to *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, the editor Vladimir E. Alexandrov states that the book was conceived to be an encyclopedia about the life and works of Vladimir Nabokov (xiii). Despite Nabokov's refusal to admit that any preceding literary figure influenced his writing, this extensive anthology includes over twenty essays written by scholars that have found meaningful relationships, both antagonistic and sympathetic, between his work and the works of other authors and philosophers. Jenefer Shute analyzes the paradoxical tension that arises between Nabokov's blunt derision of Freud and the parody of psychoanalytic tropes in his novel. She argues that Nabokov's notion of "pure textuality" has not "banished Freud" or immunized his text from theories about its underlying meaning (419). Instead, Nabokov is consistently in dialogue with it (ibid.). In his essay on Nabokov and James Joyce, Julian Moynahan looks to Nabokov's lecture notes on *Ulysses* to highlight his veneration of the text and his conviction that "this book is a new world invented by Joyce" (qtd. 443). He concludes his essay with the claim that Nabokov's "view that a great book is a world by itself" strongly influenced his theory of literary criticism and that it marks a link between himself and Joyce (ibid.). The works of Poe are specifically relevant to *Lolita*; the novel contains references to Poe's erotic attraction to young girls and appropriates his poem "Annabel Lee." Dale E. Peterson writes that Nabokov's parody of the literary principles associated with Poe is a way he can distinguish himself from his predecessor while simultaneously employing aspects of the poet's legacy (465-448). In this extensive

collection of comparative essays, Freud, Joyce, and Poe are accompanied by other names such as Proust, Kafka, Shakespeare, Gogol, and Dostoevsky, but one person who is missing from this list is the French writer and philosopher, Georges Bataille (1897-1962).

Georges Bataille is one of Nabokov's contemporaries, and his unconventional contributions to critical discourse are generally regarded as an intellectual anomaly within the context of this period in history. He worked as a librarian in Paris, authored novels and essays, and was the editor of *Critique*, a prominent scholarly journal. Unlike his intellectual counterparts living in Europe during the first half of the 20th century, Bataille and his work are associated with mysticism, an unusual field considering the trend favoring rationalism during the first decades of the century (Connor 20). Mystics, in a broad sense, are interested in the nature of divine experience and knowledge. Bataille was concerned with human experiences that transcend rational understanding and he wrote about topics such as the impossible, unknown, sacred, rapture, inner experience, death, eroticism, and excess. His works frequently sparked public controversy. His erotic novels contained incendiary pornographic content. The ideas he articulates in *The Inner Experience* were the target of harsh criticism by Jean-Paul Sartre, who claimed that they were morally questionable for their rejection of reason (ibid. 34). Although he engaged in critical discourse throughout his life, and intellectuals, such as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan and Kristeva, believe he made critical contributions to the development of postmodern thought, Bataille and his outrageous statements have been generally overlooked in the study of intellectual history (Winnubst 2). Connor points to Bataille's mysticism as an explanation of his exclusion. Scholars have wavered over how to categorize a figure who

resisted identifying himself as a philosopher and whose works oppose traditional philosophical thought (Connor 15).

Although Bataille was an outlier in the context of the political, social, and intellectual atmosphere in Europe, he finds a counterpart in Vladimir Nabokov, a Russian-American author and professor (1899-1977). Born in St. Petersburg, Nabokov grew up in a family with a long history of scholarly and civic engagement (Appel xviii). In 1919 the family went into exile in Western Europe, where Nabokov studied and worked as a writer, émigré newspaper editor, and translator. In 1940 he and his wife moved to America. Upon the 1958 American publication of *Lolita*, a national bestseller, Nabokov garnered increasing recognition as one of the era's seminal writers (Vickers 51). He became an outspoken public figure who openly criticized moralistic literature and was particularly hostile towards the works of Freud and Dostoevsky (Davydov 630). Alfred Appel notes that in addition to his unwillingness to conform or identify himself with a pre-existing school of literary criticism, Nabokov's unconventional and innovative approach to the novel puzzled scholars who sought to interpret it from a formalist perspective (xix). It created a dissonance between criticism and literature that ultimately resulted "in a radical shift in opinions about the novel and the novelist's ethical responsibilities" (ibid. xx). Nabokov's nonconformity to mainstream literary trends marks one of the several similarities between him and Bataille, a writer with whom he is rarely associated.

Even though there is no evidence that these writers engaged in dialogue with each other, I would like to argue that both Nabokov and Bataille expressed a similar interest in incendiary topics that deviated from literary and intellectual trends. In his controversial

book *Eroticism, Death, and Sensuality* (1957), Bataille writes about the sacred experience that he attributes to the interplay between taboo, transgression, and eroticism. He explores this mystical phenomenon as a limitation of systematic, rational thought and presents transgression as a means to preserve individual sovereignty and undermine social/ideological hegemony. Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955, first published in the U.S. in 1958), a novel about Humbert Humbert's seduction and rape of his stepdaughter, resonates with the dominant themes in Bataille's text. Although concerned with similar subject matter, their respective interpretations of erotic transgression mark a divergence between these two authors. Unlike Bataille who supports individual transgression in the context of an "I" vs. "the world" dichotomy, Nabokov considers the multitude and diversity of people striving for the same personal freedoms and the power relations between them. To him, the struggle for freedom is a function of the relationship between the individual and a social superstructure and relationships between a "self" and the "other self." In his deconstruction of Bataille's theory, Nabokov demonstrates how the individual freedom of erotic transgression has destructive consequences when it deprives the "other" of his/her freedom for the sake of one's own erotic pleasure

His critique is twofold. Humbert, the narrator who resonates with Bataille's theory that erotic transgression leads to transcendent sovereignty, is the primary target of Nabokov's deconstruction. Through the portrayal of the insincerity of Humbert's aesthetic veneration of Lolita, the doppelganger motif, and the ironic misplacement of the transcendent moment Humbert seeks, Nabokov demonstrates how erotic transgression transforms into a self-satisfying project that fails to result in "Bataillean" sacred transcendence and leads to the ruination of human lives. In addition to his deconstruction

of the narrator's transgression, Nabokov draws attention to the "other", a subject given limited consideration in Bataille's text. Humbert is an example of how the subject who cannot recognize the value of the lives of others as equal to his own evolves into a tyrant who recreates a system of oppression. This outcome is evident in Humbert's violence towards and objectification of Lolita.

In spite of their opposing interpretations of erotic transgression, both Bataille's and Nabokov's texts are united by their opposition to global ideas; a fundamental tenet of modernity based on the belief that the entirety of human experience can be reduced to a single conceptual framework. In the context of the 20th century, their standpoint represents an intellectual response to the pathos of global ideas that fueled the catastrophic events surrounding the totalitarian regimes and associated historical catastrophes of the 1930s-40s.

Chapter One

Bataille's *Eroticism, Death, and Sensuality*

The purpose of this first chapter is to provide a summary and analysis of the main principles of Bataille's *Eroticism, Death, and Sensuality*. The author primarily argues that transgression subverts philosophical hegemony and preserves individual sovereignty. I then analyze the ideas he draws upon in order to arrive at this conclusion and pay specific attention to his understanding of eroticism, taboo, transgression, heterogeneity, excess, and limits. References to Bataille's "The Notion of Expenditure" and Foucault's "A Preface to Transgression," two texts that closely engage with the primary themes addressed in this chapter, will supplement my analysis. After an explanation of how these ideas together contribute to Bataille's unique vision of knowledge and individual freedom, this chapter will end with a discussion of opposing interpretations of the ethics of Bataille's erotic transgression.

Bataille's Theoretical Objective

A search for the categories that would undermine the supremacy of systematic philosophical knowledge is the primary objective of *Eroticism, Death, and Sensuality*. Bataille's engagement with mysticism marks his initial step towards this goal, and in this book he focuses on eroticism, a mystical experience he believes exceeds rational thought. Bataille analyzes his notions about eroticism in comparison to formal philosophy, but he does not synthesize both opposing modes of knowledge. Bataille retains the opposition

between philosophy and eroticism in order to illuminate the limitations of human reason. In the final pages of *Eroticism, Death, and Sensuality*, he writes, “But philosophy in so far as it is a specialized undertaking is work. That is to say that it excludes without even deigning to notice them the moments of intense emotion I referred to earlier... It is not the sum of possibles, the sum of possible experiences, but only the sum of certain well-defined experiences aimed at knowledge” (Bataille, *Eroticism* 258). By highlighting aspects of the human condition that exist beyond the purview of philosophy, Bataille aims to show how it fails to be the all-encompassing source of truth that it purports to be. It is not free from the exclusionary practices and limitations that it tries to shed in its attempt to create a totalized body of knowledge and truth. This stance opposes modernity’s belief that human reason can deduce a definitive, universal truth about the self and the reality s/he inhabits. In an analysis of Bataille’s works, Peter Tracy Conner writes, “it was precisely Bataille’s intention to bring down such ruin on philosophy he saw as an apparatus of oppression. Knowledge... is only one possible mode of experience” (133). Bataille’s theory is antithetical to totalized ideology and conducive to the preservation of individual sovereignty. It conceives of the individual potential to incite liberation and revolution. By perceiving the elements of his existence that contradict and subvert the homogeneity of a singular, systematic body of thought, the individual can rise up against this type of repressive system. Connor writes, “The mystic...is thus revolutionary because [he is] outside the system; the mystic is an outlaw refusing the rule” (134).

Through his analysis of eroticism, Bataille demonstrates that the heterogeneous quality of nature and humanity places a limitation on human reason. He discusses

eroticism, an experience that transcends the bounds of rational thought and discourse, in terms of taboo and transgression. These two forces structure erotic behavior, and they simultaneously complement and oppose each other. This paradox negates man's ability to engage in transgression without reinforcing taboo or to abide by taboo without laying the foundation for transgression. By rendering man unable entirely to satisfy one force or the other, Bataille claims that eroticism is a testament to the heterogeneous nature of human existence. It is indicative that there exists something beyond him and that his understanding of it is insufficient.

Bataille applies the logic of heterogeneity and limitations to philosophy to demonstrate how it is *not* the source of universal truth and knowledge. By drawing attention to experiences and phenomena that are unexplainable in terms of human rational thought, Bataille presents an aspect of life that philosophy cannot account for. He points to the exclusion of eroticism as a sign of its limitation, but this restriction is nevertheless necessary. He writes, "philosophy finds itself in an impasse; without discipline it could accomplish nothing and yet in that it cannot embrace the extremes of its subject, the extremes of the possible as I have called them, the outermost reaches of human life, it is doomed to failure" (Bataille, Eroticism 259). He argues that philosophy's omission of what it is unable to explain is necessary to its existence, but this essential exclusion limits the scope of its authority as a source of knowledge. To him, its inability to encompass the entirety of human existence delegitimizes the claim that it is a source of universal truth. This logic has a revolutionary power to combat systems of oppression because it negates the possibility that a singular ideology is sufficiently powerful to have absolute control over its subjects. Since there always exists something beyond a given framework, any

individual who recognizes the heterogeneity of his existence can undermine the repressive systems that operate under the assumption that nature is homogeneous and subject to its rule.

Continuity and Discontinuity

Bataille's theory about the conditions of man's existence is the basis of his explanation of eroticism, taboo, and transgression. He asserts that man's existence is characterized by two opposing states, continuity and discontinuity. The term continuity refers to an abstract form of existence before man's birth and after his death. It is a time when he is "link[ed] with everything that is" and not isolated by his own individuality (ibid.15). In the state of individuation, he is a discontinuous being; a singular entity isolated from all other independent beings. In his description of this condition, Bataille writes, "This gulf exists, for instance between you, listening to me, and me speaking to you. We are attempting to communicate, but no communication between us can abolish our fundamental difference" (12). According to the author, this alienation is a source of pain and suffering that generates man's desire to be at one with the world in a state of continuity. However, the transition from one state to another is inherently violent because it requires the annihilation of the discontinuous subject. This unimaginable self-destruction poses a limitation upon man's yearning to return to a state of continuity. Bataille notes, "What we desire is to bring into this world founded upon discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain" (19). Eroticism is a solution that enables man to experience the ecstasy of continuity without the complete destruction of his discontinuous self. Although violent, eroticism, unlike death, requires only a "partial

dissolution of the self” but it still successfully “[destroys] the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives” (ibid. 17). By eroding the boundaries that separate two people and allowing them to temporarily fuse into one, eroticism simulates the blissful unity of continuity that the discontinuous man is constantly in search of.

Excess, Taboo, and Transgression

Although it offers a way to alleviate individual longing, eroticism (like all urges that breach the limits of discontinuity), is, according to Bataille, one of the manifestations of man’s excess, a violent force that threatens the foundation that supports human life within the discontinuous realm. During the earliest years of civilization, man developed tools and depended upon his mental faculties in order to survive. Bataille refers to this capacity as the ability to work, and it is the foundation upon which man sustains himself and the society he inhabits. Despite man’s necessary commitment to the world of work and rationality, this system cannot entirely contain his nature. He writes, “There is in nature and there subsists in man a movement which always exceeds the bounds, that can never be anything but partially reduced to order” (ibid. 40). Bataille identifies this inherently violent force as man’s excess.

He elaborates on this phenomenon in his essay “The Notion of Expenditure” and defines expenditure as one of two types of consumption. The first form involves minimal consumption in order to conserve resources and prolong human life and productivity (Bataille, Expenditure 169). He uses the term expenditure to refer to the second type of consumption that refers to the unproductive use of resources. War, poetry, sports, luxury

items, and eroticism are all examples he uses to describe expenditure. These activities have no greater purpose beyond themselves and they involve the (mis)use of resources that could be used productively. They engender value and meaning to loss. Bataille observes the principle of the value of loss in *potlatch* traditions of some of the earliest civilizations. *Potlatch* refers to the ritualized destruction of personal or communal wealth. The deliberate destruction of resources is meant to demonstrate man's "power to lose" (ibid. 174). By flouting the normative limits of consumption and engaging in nonproductive expenditure, man temporarily evolves into a sovereign being that is greater than the systems of useful consumption that sustain and govern his life. By exceeding the systems of knowledge, productivity, and organization, he demonstrates how they insufficiently encapsulate his being, and that he "cannot be subordinated to anything that one can account for" (ibid. 180).

Although man's excess opposes and subverts his instinct to work and sustain his individuated life, Bataille argues that excess and work are integral parts of his nature. This duality is symptomatic of the inherent heterogeneity of man and his existence. He writes, "Human life, therefore, is composed of two heterogeneous parts which never blend" (Bataille, Eroticism 193). Heterogeneity is an important concept in *Eroticism*, *Death, and Sensuality* as well as the entire corpus of his work.

As he draws attention to the excessive forces that pervade nature, Bataille is also cognizant of the threat they pose to the discontinuous subject and how they prompt the imposition of taboos meant to ward off destructive energy. The freedom of expenditure catalyzes "*states of excitation*, which are comparable to toxic states, [and] can be defined as the illogical and irresistible urge to reject material and moral goods that it would have

been possible to utilize rationally” (Bataille, Expenditure 180). Due to their link to man’s release from the social restrictions that sustain human life, the sovereignty and frenzy of expenditure represent an affront to the structures belonging to the discontinuous realm. Society responds to this threat with the imposition of taboos. Taboos impose symbolic limitations upon man’s excess by forbidding certain behaviors society deems unacceptable. Bataille argues that their primary purpose is to eliminate the expression of human excess that could destroy the discontinuous realm of work and rationality.

In spite of its primary function to forbid certain behaviors, taboo cannot extinguish or separate itself from transgression, the breach of taboo. The violation of taboo occurs in part because man embodies both an impulse to sustain his survival through work and an urge to succumb to excess. Neither part of him is capable of entirely subsuming the other. In addition to their inherent impotence against human excess, taboos are also complicit in their own subversion. The breach of taboo is “such a violation [that] will not deny or suppress the contrary emotion, but justify and arouse it” (Bataille, Eroticism 64). By attempting to repress man’s excess, the taboo awakens it and lays the foreground for transgression. According to Bataille, transgression propels man into a sacred realm of freedom that exists beyond the mortal sphere governed by taboo. It is linked to continuity and the spiritual experience that “opens the door into what lies beyond the limits usually observed” (ibid. 67).

Eroticism is one of the manifestations of man’s excess because it is not intrinsically associated with the productive functions of sexual activity and because engagement in erotic activities can detract from man’s ability to work. Consequently, eroticism has consistently been the target of taboos and repression since the earliest years

of human civilization. On the other hand, throughout history, eroticism has functioned as a form of transgression. It has the power to liberate man from the discontinuous realm regulated by the need to work and obey taboos. In an essay about Bataille's idea of erotic experience, Zeynep Direk writes, "The erotic act, whose sacred nature is manifest in the pagan world, suspends discontinuity of the world of work. It not only transgresses—acknowledges and negates—the sexual prohibitions that historically constructed borders between different sexes, genders, classes, races, cultures, and ages, but it also dissolves personalities" (96). By removing the boundaries between individuals, erotic transgression mirrors the sensation of continuous unity. Eroticism facilitates the inevitable satisfaction of the part of the individual that is not entirely content within the discontinuous realm and longs to escape the alienation of discontinuity. As the product of the coalescence between excess and the restriction of excess, eroticism is a sacred, mystical experience. Upon the dissolution of the boundaries between the worldly and mystical, the sacred and profane, fear and fascination, man enters "the world of holy things" (Bataille, Eroticism 84).

In "A Preface to Transgression", a commentary on Bataille, Michel Foucault interprets his theory of transgression as an encounter with a sacred form of freedom. He begins by establishing that transgression is not merely a method by which man rediscovers the sacred. It is instead a creative action. He writes, "In that zone which our culture affords for our gestures and speech, transgression prescribes not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated substance, but also a way of recomposing its empty form, its absence, through which it becomes all the more scintillating" (Foucault 25). The sacred lacks any inherent, positive, qualities. This obscurity, in tandem with man's immunity from normative limitations, enables the

individual to construct a unique vision of the sacred through transgression. According to Foucault, eroticism and sexuality, manifestations of transgression, engender the possibility of an entirely singular experience that affirms the death of God – i.e. the modern condition. Foucault writes, “a precise definition of eroticism, it would have to be the following: an experience of sexuality that links for its own ends, an overcoming of limits to the death of God” (27). Eroticism affirms God’s absence and man’s capability to exist without him, and yet at the same time manifests an insatiable thirst for the sacred. For Foucault, erotic transgression attests to the human capacity to undermine the abstract restrictions of taboo and demonstrates that the individual himself is his only limit.

Although they represent opposing urges that subvert each other, taboo and transgression are complementary forces. After explaining the mystical qualities of transgression, Bataille writes, “but [transgression] maintains these limits just the same. Transgression is complementary to the profane world, exceeding its limits but not destroying it” (Bataille, Eroticism 67). Transgression reinforces the power of taboo by affirming its existence and influence as a viable agent that structures the realm of discontinuity and limits man’s excess. Taboo, by serving as a barrier for man to breach, mediates transcendence beyond itself and thereby links itself to transgression. Only together can they facilitate the sacred experience. The contradiction between taboo and transgression presents a limitation upon the discontinuous subject. If he engages in transgression and violates taboo, he satisfies his excessive nature, but he paradoxically violates his discontinuous self and reinforces the symbolic power of taboo. If he never acknowledges his excessive desires and strictly abides by taboos, he denies a part of himself and bolsters the significance of transgression. Since they simultaneously

complement and subvert each other, neither synthesis nor the absolute authority of one element over the other is possible. Bataille writes, “The limit occurs when it is plainly impossible to respond satisfactorily in both directions at the same time... We are obviously faced with the impossible” (ibid. 261).

Eroticism, an experience that revolves around taboo and transgression, exposes a limitation of man’s rational faculties. It is indicative of the heterogeneous nature of humanity. It reveals the human duality that longs for self-preservation and self-destruction, and is indicative of a force that exceeds man’s rational mastery; a testament to the universal heterogeneity. Connor writes, “Bataille advanced the hypothesis that existence is irreducibly ambiguous, composed of both reason and non-reason, knowledge and non-knowledge, calculation and excess; beyond this, he tried to affirm the irresolvable tension between them” (162-163).

The Moral Implications of Erotic Transgression

However, the logic that enables an individual to rise above taboo and social norms is vulnerable to the interpretation that it can serve as a justification of egoism and immorality. Bataille openly advocates the individual’s breach of social taboos, and thus endorses his right to function above *criminal* and *moral* laws. Some critics claim that this logic exonerates the individual from moral responsibility, and that it can potentially justify a variety of atrocious actions. The ethics of eroticism have been a source of debate about the morality of Bataille’s ideas. Eroticism causes conflict because it necessitates the participation of another person to channel one individual’s erotic desire who may engage with the violence that accompanies such impulses. Bataille attempts to

compensate for the compromised position of the other individual by claiming that eroticism is a form of *spiritual* communication between two people and that it cannot occur if one person objectifies another. In a claim that Bataille's theory of eroticism contains an ethical principle, Zeynep Direk quotes an excerpt from his book *The Accursed Share* that states, "There is no doubt that the way individual love obliges us to limit ourselves not only to those possibilities that make allowance for the partner's interest, but also those that the partner herself can bear" (qtd. 112). By highlighting how Bataille qualifies his sanction of eroticism and explaining how Bataille's framework does not endorse the objectification of another individual, Direk presents a compelling explanation about how Bataille's theory of eroticism is not meant to promote the abuse of others in pursuit of self-satisfaction through transgression.

However, the ability to claim that Bataille's theory does demonstrate consideration for the "other" does not mean that this consideration is sufficient to protect him or her from the violence of another person's excessive desires. Underlying Bataille's articulation of the importance of respecting the partner's interest is the assumption that the individual is capable of comprehending the partner's thoughts and feelings. The philosopher does not offer an explanation that guarantees that this mutual understanding occurs prior to or in the process of an erotic encounter, and without the certainty that the individual can accurately know the needs and wants of his/her partner, there remains the possibility that the ecstasy of erotic transgression is not mutually enjoyable or beneficial for both people. This assumption marks one limitation of Bataille's theory and subsequently draws out its second blind spot; the individual perspective of the transgressor.

Bataille begins his argument with the premise that eroticism is grounded in the discontinuous individual's longing to achieve continuity by allowing himself or herself to fuse with another person. Consequently, the impulse he describes throughout *Eroticism, Death, and Sensuality* is solely a product of *one* individual's sensibilities and desire. Connor's assessment that "the mystic is, strictly speaking, unable to translate his or her experience into discursive terms" emphasizes the isolated perspective of the erotic transgressor and the fact that mystical experience is only understood from one viewpoint (134). This indicates that the individual's capacity to understand his/her partner is limited by one's own perspective, and if the individual is insensitive to his/her partner's needs or their articulation (either deliberately or accidentally), it is very possible that one person's marginalization is the price of another's erotic transgression.

Chapter Two

READING *LOLITA* THROUGH BATAILLE

The purpose of this second chapter is to analyze how Nabokov's *Lolita* relates to Bataille's theories of taboo and erotic transgression. It will begin with a reading of Humbert Humbert (on his own terms) in order to draw out the similarities between his erotic transgression and Bataille's conception of it. After establishing this link, I argue that Nabokov deconstructs this character and his transgression, thereby challenging the principles behind "Batailleian" transgression. The author advances his critique by demonstrating how transgression functions as an outlet for self-indulgence that fails in its transcendental objective, destroys the self, and the sacred erotic object. Nabokov also exposes how the individual in pursuit of transgression is liable to transform into a violent tyrant when he is unable to recognize the value of lives other than his own. The chapter concludes with the claim that Nabokov's critique of "Bataillian" transgression is indicative of his conception of a qualified form of individuality, one that supports individual freedoms to the extent that one person does not infringe upon the liberties of another.

Taboo and Erotic Transgression from Humbert's Perspective

Humbert Humbert, the protagonist and narrator of *Lolita*, is key to Nabokov's deconstruction of eroticism because this character and his seduction of Lolita deeply resonate with Bataille's theories of eroticism, taboo, and transgression. The initial example of this parallel is Humbert's conception of nymphets, a category of young girls that links eroticism to transcendence. Before introducing Lolita into his narrative,

Humbert explains the development of his erotic fascination with nymphet girls. He attributes this fetish to the loss of his first childhood lover Annabel. His recollection of his sexual awakening as a young boy consists of a romanticized depiction of erotic yearning foiled by death. His sexual exploits with Annabel consist of a series of “incomplete contacts” characterized by a “frenzy of mutual possession;” an urge that is never entirely consummated and ultimately rendered impossible by her untimely death (Nabokov 12). This unfulfilled longing spawns an internal pain that he can only alleviate by “reincarnating her in another” (ibid. 15).

In tandem with this longing, Humbert loses the ability to experience a sustained or meaningful attraction to a woman belonging to his age cohort. Instead, he cannot resist the lure of “nymphets,” a category of young girls that evoke his sexual arousal. Humbert perceives the nymphet to be a mystical embodiment of childhood and characterizes her as a being with transcendental and supernatural qualities. He writes, “Between the age limit of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as “nymphets” (ibid.16). According to Humbert, the erotic girl-child is a fantastical and non-human figure. The term nymphet gives such a girl a whimsical identity reminiscent of a fairy tale character, but she also has a sinister quality. The nymphet is evil and has the power to “bewitch.”

She also exists in another world outside of time. Humbert writes, “certain mysterious characteristics, the fey grace, the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm that separates the nymphet from such coevals of hers as are incomparably more

dependent on the spatial world of synchronous phenomena than that intangible island of entranced time where Lolita plays with her likes (ibid. 17). The nymphet lives in a utopia of eternal childhood. She is immune to temporal progression and is a timeless symbol of Humbert's past. She has the power to transcend the normal confines of Humbert's space-time realm and evade the loss that accompanies the passage of time. To him, she has the ability to facilitate his transcendence into the utopia she inhabits and he has lost (the motif of childhood as a paradise lost is inherent in many of Nabokov's works). By endowing them with these imaginative and mystical traits, Humbert treats nymphet girls as a whimsical embodiment of innocence and sexuality that resonates with Bataille's theory of transgression and the transcendence it facilitates. Not only is the contradictory fusion of childhood and the erotic a transgression in and of itself because it violates taboo, but Humbert's conception of nymphets also lays the foundation for his seduction of Lolita, his ultimate transgression. Functioning under the delusion that the young girls that embody his lost childhood will deliver him from the pain and dissatisfaction of reality to a realm of erotic bliss, Humbert violates the taboo that prohibits the realization of his sexual fantasies through his seduction of Lolita.

Although Humbert makes appeals to historical and cultural examples of sanctioned relationships between older men and younger girls, he is aware that society condemns his pedophilia. He writes, "I found myself maturing amid a civilization which allows a man of twenty-five to court a girl of sixteen, but not a girl of twelve (ibid.18). This passage contextualizes Humbert's erotic pursuit of nymphets as a culturally forbidden endeavor. This limitation parallels Bataille's claim that taboos inhibit man's

inherent, excessive impulses, and the events that ultimately transpire in *Lolita* support the theorist's argument that man's excess ultimately overcomes restrictions placed upon it.

Humbert's experience of transcendental ecstasy upon his violation of taboo mirrors Bataille's description of the sensation of erotic transgression. The Davenport scene portrays Humbert's initial transgression and the mystical rapture that follows. The erotic event occurs during the summer Humbert spends at the Haze household. Lolita and her nymphet allure have already caught his eye, and various schemes that would bring them together consume him. On this day, his teasing ploy to steal an apple she tosses in her hand results in Lolita sitting on his lap on the sofa. Thrilled by his physical proximity to the young girl, Humbert distracts her while he clandestinely masturbates himself to orgasm. By drawing upon the discourse of transcendentalism to describe this erotic exploit, Humbert's recollection of the moment resonates with Bataille's belief that the sacred transcendence arises from erotic transgression. He writes, "I entered a plane of being where nothing mattered, save the infusion of joy brewed within my body. What had begun as a delicious distention of my innermost roots became a glowing tingle which *now* had reached that state of absolute security, confidence and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life" (ibid. 60). This moment of rapture represents a respite from a life of sexual frustration and longing. It is an "infusion of joy" that yields feelings of "absolute security, confidence, and reliance" (ibid.). At the peak of his erotic pleasure, Humbert transcends his ordinary, conscious existence within reality. This parallels the ecstasy associated with Bataille's conception of transgression and symbolizes the mystical, euphoric objective of eroticism.

At the time, Humbert feels as if he is “above the tribulations of ridicule, beyond the possibilities of retribution” (ibid.). Like the discontinuous subject that transcends the world of work and reason, Humbert’s erotic ecstasy propels him outside of his usual position in the mortal realm. He is “above” and “beyond” the norms that govern humanity (ibid.). He perceives himself to momentarily possess the sacred freedom to operate outside of the law. This sense of liberation resonates with Bataille’s and Foucault’s concept of transgression.

Despite the overwhelming ecstasy he feels during the Davenport scene, Humbert’s sexual appetite is not satiated, and he dedicates himself to the recreation of similar moments. During their first road trip when he repeatedly has sex with Lolita, he writes, “Reader must understand that in the possession and thralldom of a nymphet, the enchanted traveler stands, as it were, *beyond happiness*. There is no other bliss on earth comparable to that of fondling a nymphet” (ibid.166). The language Humbert uses here to describe his erotic possession of Lolita resembles the transcendental discourse in the Davenport scene. Humbert identifies himself as the “enchanted traveler” who experiences joy “*beyond*” normal happiness (ibid.). The otherworldly nature of these encounters reinforces the similarities between Humbert’s account of this experience and Bataille’s argument that erotic transgression can catalyze an individual’s mystical escape from the normative world.

Humbert also claims that his erotic obsession is not a product of carnal lust. Instead it has to do with a spiritual desire to intimately possess what he perceives to be a supernatural quality. He writes, “I am not concerned with so-called ‘sex’ at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once and

for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (ibid. 134). This comment resonates with Bataille’s claim that erotic transgression does not arise from an objectifying physical attraction to another’s body, and instead requires the appreciation of and communion with the other person’s inner qualities. Humbert’s attraction to “the perilous magic of nymphets” implies that he appreciates Lolita’s uniquely intangible qualities. In his interpretation of this passage, David Andrews maintains that Humbert’s erotic transgression has an artistic objective (68). This comment highlights a link between transgression and aesthetics (another form of excess according to Bataille) that runs through the entire narrative and points to a quality that is specific to Humbert and his eroticism.

Aesthetics is an integral part of Humbert’s experience of erotic transgression and transcendence. From the outset of the novel, Humbert identifies himself as a professional scholar who studies French literature and grew up enjoying the sophisticated aspects of European culture. His language is reflective of this background. He often references French phrases and alludes to the great works of poetry, literature, and art in order to articulate himself. He claims to have an interest in and an acute sensitivity to the aesthetic, a claim epitomized by his conception of nymphets. His perception of these young girls, characterized by their mystical, non-human beauty, is reflective of his artistic sensibility. A figure worthy of such admiration is rare and distinctly different from (and superior to) “ordinary girls.” Likewise, the individual who can perceive her beauty belongs to an exclusive class. After saying that a “normal man” is insensitive to nymphet beauty, Humbert writes, “You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins... to discern at once, by ineffable

signs” (ibid. 17). An appreciation of nymphets belongs to a limited group of artistic visionaries who can recognize a form of beauty that does not conform to mainstream conventions. Those who perceive this beauty have a unique sensitivity to art that exceeds common morality. Humbert’s perception of beauty catalyzes his blissful transcendence, and leads him to seduce and rape Lolita, a pursuit he believes to have an aesthetic objective.

Nabokov’s Deconstruction of Humbert’s Transgression

An interest in aesthetics has prompted critical interpretations linking Humbert to Nabokov; a notion undermined by Nabokov’s explicit and implicit contempt for the narrator protagonist he conceives of. In his essay about *Lolita*, Richard Rorty writes, “Humbert is, as Nabokov said, ‘a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear ‘touching’” (158). In addition to this overt judgment of Humbert, Nabokov deconstructs the character’s “Batailllean” perception of transgression as sacred, aesthetic, unique, liberating, and transcendental. Through the deconstruction of Humbert’s aesthetics, employment of the doppelgänger motif, and misplacement of transcendence, Nabokov presents erotic transgression as a form of carnal self-indulgence that fails in its transcendental objective and destroys both the individual and the sacred object of eroticism.

Despite his claims to have an acute sensitivity to the unique beauty of nymphets, Humbert’s ornate and elaborate language reveals his taste for and response to “non-original,” “second-hand” beauty. When he first sees Lolita in the backyard, Humbert writes, “It was the same child—the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky

supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair. A polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest hid from my aging eyes, but not from the gaze of a young memory, the juvenile breasts I had fondled one day” (Nabokov 39). In his poetic description of Lolita’s “honey-hued shoulders” and “supple bare back,” Humbert demonstrates an attention to detail indicative of pointed and specific aesthetic appreciation for an individual. Each meticulous reference contributes to the composition of an elaborate portrait of a young girl. However, his words subtly betray the superficial and generic nature of this veneration. The rapture he feels in the presence of Lolita is triggered by the recognition that she is “the *same* child” (ibid. 39). He is attracted to Lolita because she resembles Annabel. The details that he writes about do not refer to qualities unique to Lolita, but instead these are traits that match his beloved Annabel. Lolita appears not as the source of a rare and unique form of beauty, rather she is valued by Humbert as a replica whose aesthetic value is a product of her resemblance to a specific formula that anyone with the same characteristics could satisfy. Thus, Humbert’s lust for Lolita, and the language he uses to describe it, is reflective of his enjoyment of a duplicate form that satisfies his idea of beauty.

Humbert also uses his nymphet prototype to describe Lolita, a discursive maneuver that erases her unique individuality and humanity. In his recollection of their first night at The Enchanted Hunters motel, he writes, “I had hoped the drug would work fast. It certainly did...as the adorable and accessible nymphet now started to tell me in between suppressed palate-humping yawns” (ibid. 122). Humbert draws upon his discourse of nymphets particularly in his more suggestive descriptions of his erotic exploits with Lolita; it is a rhetorical pattern that repeats itself throughout the text. After

they have sex in the motel, Humbert writes that her body was like “the body of some immortal daemon disguised as a female child,” and in describing the pleasure of such trysts he mentions “the possession and thralldom of a nymphet” (ibid. 139, 166). By referring to her as a nymphet, a term that appears to glorify Lolita, Humbert actually reduces her to a generic framework of beauty (Andrews 78). He squeezes her individuality into an abstract taxonomy. In Humbert’s eyes (and style), Lolita’s aesthetic qualities are a product of her embodiment of an abstract criteria, and are not an inherent aspect of her individuality.

Therefore, it is possible to claim that Humbert’s aesthetic interpretation of the young girl’s erotic power serves the utilitarian purpose of shielding his hedonistic fantasies from their reprehensible reality. By substituting an aesthetically pleasing image for a violent, unsavory event, this discursive strategy preserves Humbert’s fantasy by concealing the abusive reality of his pursuit. Andrews writes, “The perception of a girl as a nymphet obviates the pity that might in turn obviate the pedophile’s sexual intention...the idea that the nymphet is subhuman, even ‘demoniac’ allows the pedophile to treat her inhumanely” (77). By defining Lolita as a nymphet, a term that refers to an imagined form of beauty that has nothing to do with the girl’s true, human qualities, Humbert transforms Lolita into a non-human, mystical object. This insulates his transcendental fantasies from their abusive, hedonistic reality, a maneuver conducive to the prolongation of his exploitative actions. Andrews writes, “this behavior is in keeping with his goal of sexual rapture, a goal specifically at odds with the pity afforded by a clear perception of his victim (78). The critical interpretations of Nabokov’s novel that primarily sympathize with Humbert are indicative of the power of the narrator’s

aesthetic, rhetorical manipulations that warp the reality of his seduction and efface pity for Lolita. In an essay entitled, “The Last Lover: Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*,” Lionel Trilling identifies Humbert’s narrative as a tale of medieval “passion-love,” (9)-- a scandalous romance between people prohibited from fully and openly expressing their love for each other. Similar to the qualities of passion-love, Humbert’s relationship with Lolita is taboo and his unrequited adoration for the young girl agonizes him. Trilling characterizes Lolita as a “perpetually cruel mistress [who] even after her lover has won physical possession of her, she withholds the favour of her feeling, for she has none to give, by reason of her age, possibly by reason of her temperament” (ibid.). Trilling insightfully analyzes Nabokov’s representation of the narrator, who proves himself to be unreliable, solely on his own terms and yet at the same time falls for Humbert’s ploys that artfully obscure Lolita’s humanity and suffering. In his response to this essay, Brian Boyd remarks, “he has reacted to Humbert’s eloquence, not Nabokov’s evidence,” and claims that the novel is an example of the “power of the mind to rationalize away the harm it can cause” (232).

Humbert’s appreciation for non-original beauty and the utilitarian functions of his own stylistic craft reveal the self-reflexive and self-indulgent reality of his transgression. Both Bataille and Humbert connect mystical transcendence with the dissolution of the normative self. However, Humbert’s perception of beauty that prompts this sensation is founded upon principles that are antithetical to the dissolution of self. By admiring Lolita as a duplication of Annabel or a sample of the nymphet, Humbert fortifies the self and his needs, desires, and ideas. Humbert links his transcendental quest with the beauty of transgression, to the moments when he “enter[s] a plane where nothing matters” and has

a “teasing delirious feeling of teetering on the very brink of unearthly order and splendor,” but by connecting them to the pleasure of self-indulgence, the opposite of spiritual dissolution of self (Nabokov 60, 230) , Nabokov -- unlike Humbert --presents his character’s vision of erotic transgression as the selfish pursuit of sexual pleasure.

Nabokov reinforces the deconstructive depiction of erotic transgression as a form of carnal self-satisfaction by linking Humbert’s character to Clare Quilty. As his doppelganger, Quilty links Humbert and his transgression to the world of vulgarity and popular culture. In comparison to Humbert, who identifies with modern European tradition, Quilty represents his ideological opposite because of his association with low-grade, mass-produced media. He is a playwright whose works have resulted in minor fame. He appears in an ad for Drome cigarettes and was a guest speaker at Charlotte’s women’s club. As the novel progresses, Humbert reveals that beneath Quilty’s homely exterior exists a dark, perverse man who produces pornography for private use and has a taste for drugs and alcohol. The opposition between Humbert and Quilty inflates into antagonism after Quilty deprives the protagonist of his beloved prize, as part of Humbert’s response is to exaggerate these differences to demonize Quilty and elevate himself. His expectations of Quilty, before they meet at Pavor Manor, emphasize the vulgarity of the opponent’s character and the world he inhabits. Humbert imagines that Quilty “ would be surrounded by henchmen and whores. I could not help seeing inside of that festive ramshackle castle in terms of ‘Troubled Teens,’ a story in one of her magazines, vague ‘orgies,’ a sinister adult with penele cigar, drugs, bodyguards” (ibid. 292-293). To Humbert, Quilty is a grotesque figure that embraces the underbelly of American culture.

The polarization between the two characters peaks during the scene of Quilty's murder. Humbert brings a poem for him to read that delineates the reasons for Quilty's guilt and why Humbert must kill him. But as Humbert tries increasingly to amplify the distinction between himself and Quilty, the latter reverses the situation by refusing Humbert's allegations. He says, "I did not! ...I saved her from a beastly pervert...I'm not responsible for the rapes of others. Absurd!" (ibid. 298). By rejecting Humbert's claims and pointing to the depravity of his actions, Quilty draws attention to the commonalities between the two men that have existed from the outset of the novel. When he writes about how he has the traits that stir the "sex interests of children," Humbert says, "Moreover, I am said to resemble some crooner or actor on whom Lo has a crush" (ibid. 43).

Unknowingly, Humbert compares himself to Quilty, an association he willingly accepts when it is conducive to his erotic objective. While observing the ad for Drome cigarettes, Humbert notices a "slight" correspondence between his physical features and those belonging to Quilty, the man in the ad (ibid. 69). Like Humbert's vilification, the resemblance between himself and Quilty becomes increasingly acute as their conflict intensifies. When he grows suspicious that someone is stalking him and Lolita, Humbert questions whether "another Humbert was avidly following" and after he learns that Quilty has escaped with Lolita, taking her from the hospital disguised as her uncle, Humbert is "free to destroy [his] brother" (ibid. 217, 247). As he traces their steps across the country, Humbert notices that "the tone of his brain, had affinities with my own. He mimed and mocked me," the most salient affinity being that Quilty is an "amateur of sex lore" (ibid. 249-250). During the scene at Pavor Manor, their physical differences begin

to dissolve. Humbert claims, “[h]is condition infected me,” and in his recollection of their fight on the floor, Humbert writes “[w]e rolled over us” (ibid. 297, 299). In the aftermath of the murder, Humbert says, “I was covered with Quilty” (ibid. 306). As Humbert’s doppelgänger, Quilty represents an alternative version of Humbert’s character. Humbert’s contrived image as a refined, cultured man does not sufficiently encapsulate his identity. The consequences are twofold. His delayed acknowledgement of his resemblance to Quilty reveals how Humbert is blind to certain elements in himself, another testament to his limited sensitivity and introspection. In addition to undermining the integrity of his perception, the conflation of Humbert and Quilty shows how Humbert is linked to the world of vulgarity and vice. Their shared sexual pleasure in response to children tarnishes Humbert’s claims that his infatuation with nymphets is a result of a unique aesthetic sense. Quilty’s grotesque taste demonstrates that Humbert’s pedophilia is not entirely opposite to mass consumer culture. Quilty’s role as a pornographer of underage girls demonstrates that the violation of sexual taboo is not a sacred action that liberates the individual from the restrictions of cultural norms. Instead, it appears as part of the realm that it wants to transcend. Thus, through his doppelgänger, Humbert becomes identified with the culture of depravity and perversity that he wants to disassociate himself.

Quilty’s character also demonstrates how Humbert’s transgression fails to transform him into a sovereign individual who has transcended the realm of normative society and has absolute solipsistic reign over his reality. In his play *The Enchanted Hunters*, Quilty usurps the sacred meaning of this name and uses it to present an alternative rendition of the event that undermines Humbert’s interpretive power. The play is named after the motel where Humbert’s transgression first comes to fruition. This

“unforgettable inn” is a location with a sacred value to him, and he sporadically feels a nostalgic urge to return to this site (ibid. 200). Quilty, however, appropriates this title and the connotations it carries to trivialize and taint Humbert’s romanticized recollection of this inn and what it represents to him. In his book *Nabokov Perversely*, Eric Naiman remarks, “When the hotel is then turned by Quilty into a play, this transposition merely brings out what is latent in the hotel’s description from the very first” (37). Lolita’s character in Quilty’s play, Diana, confronts the Young Poet to “prove to the braggard that she was not some poet’s fancy, but a rustic, down-to-brown-earth lass” (Nabokov 201). The poet who perceives Diana to be his “fancy” resonates with Humbert’s character and his perception that Lolita is a nonhuman, fantastical nymphet, and Diana’s response directly undermines this impression (ibid.). By endowing the solipsized individual with a voice, Quilty’s play reinterprets facets associated with Humbert’s night at the Enchanted Hunters to produce an alternative representation of the event and to show that the solipsistic vision of the poet fails to account for the entire reality of the situation. In tandem to its exposé of the limitations of solipsism, Quilty’s play is symbolic of how the disregard of other voices does not result in their eternal silence. The school play is also the scenario when Quilty seduces Lolita, an interaction that lays the foundation for her escape from Humbert. This coincidence transforms *The Enchanted Hunters* into an ironic symbol that represents Humbert’s possession of Lolita and also her escape from him. The inn no longer has the singular sacred, significance Humbert imagines it to have. By reenacting Humbert’s transgression in a parallel context, not only does Quilty demonstrate the limitations of Humbert’s solipsistic tyranny, but he also undermines Humbert’s individual power to control and possess the object of his desire.

In addition to usurping the divine symbolism of *The Enchanted Hunters*, Quilty manipulates Humbert's identification and relation to the hunter motif in the novel and reveals how transgression fails to transform Humbert into the sovereign man he purports to be. Upon contriving a scheme to realize his erotic transgression, Humbert says of himself, "Was he not a very Enchanted Hunter as he deliberated with himself over his boxful of ammunition" (ibid. 109). Humbert repeatedly uses words such as "hunter" or "predator" to refer to himself in descriptions of his seduction of Lolita. Along with the sinister connotations of this terminology, it also implies that he perceives himself to dominate Lolita, his prey. But during the second road trip, Quilty undermines his assumed power when he begins to intrude into Humbert's fantasy. While trying to relive the bliss of his previous rendezvous with Lolita, Humbert faces "the problem of the Aztec Red Convertible," an ominous specter that follows them across the country (ibid. 216-217). The premonition that he and Lolita are subjects within the gaze of a "quiet pursuer" transforms Humbert's erotic getaway into a "grotesque journey" spent trying to evade the anonymous figure that threatens to deprive him of erotic bliss (ibid. 218,229). It triggers all-consuming fear and anxiety that Humbert describes as "the pain of a fatal disease" and "a sickness, a cancer that could not be helped" (ibid. 218-219). In this scenario, Humbert becomes prey to Quilty, the ghostly stalker who is later complicit in the realization of his worst fear.

His reaction to the threat to his erotic bliss demonstrates how Humbert is a victim of his own fantastical imagination. Although he claims to be the one who chases after his dream and controls its every aspect, he implodes at the suggestion of its disappearance. He reveals that he is not the sovereign man who actively dictates the solipsistic world he

creates. Humbert feels a resurgence of agency when he resolves to follow Quilty's path and avenge his nemesis, but Brian Boyd perceives this reaction as a product of Humbert's obliviousness to the trap he steps into. Boyd writes, "he discovers his quest for clues to be another spell cast by his prey...it seems almost as if Quilty has Humbert completely in control, as if Humbert were not more than a character in one of Quilty's plays" (247-248).

Quilty's manipulation of Humbert's destiny culminates in the narrator's murder of his double, an event that demonstrates the lack of transcendental meaning in Humbert's transgression and how his indulgent violation of taboo results in his self-destruction. Armed with an elaborate plot and the confidence that he once again is "an enchanted and very tight hunter" (Nabokov 294), Humbert enters the scene with a calculated plan to murder his rival and the intent to punish a man who violated Lolita, but Quilty again takes control over the scenario and demonstrates the meaninglessness of Humbert's glorified quest for a just punishment. In response to Humbert's threat upon his life, Quilty makes senseless digressions, suggests they share a drink, refuses his accusations, only has a vague memory of Lolita, and offers him the sexual services of another girl as retribution. This reaction obviates Humbert's desire that Quilty genuinely understand and admit to the depravity of the actions that have necessitated his murder. Humbert's language reflects this impotency. After taking a shot at Quilty, he says, "I made another awful effort, and with a ridiculously feeble and juvenile sound, it went off," and later he states, "I understood that far from killing him I was injecting spurts of energy into the poor fellow, as if the bullets had been capsules wherein a heady exilir danced" (ibid. 297, 303). Quilty's chaotic indifference to Humbert and his search for justice render the "hunter" powerless, and his vision of climactic redemption never comes to fruition.

Barbara Wyllie writes, “Quilty’s murder is thus reduced to a hollow act serving merely to conclude the charade that is Humbert Humbert’s revenge scenario” (167). Even Humbert acknowledges Quilty’s mockery. Left with the dissatisfying outcome of his murder, Humbert writes, “This, I said to myself, was the end of the ingenious play staged for me by Quilty” (Nabokov 305). Powerlessly unable to override Quilty’s absurd theatrics, Humbert exposes the underlying emptiness and impotency of his character and the values he embodies. The breakdown of communication results in awkward, chaotic violence between the two characters who reflect a lack of understanding or mutual receptivity for each other. Quilty’s refusal to affirm the seriousness of Humbert’s accusations deprives Humbert’s murder of any meaning that transcends the subject that conceives of it. Although he successfully kills Quilty, the symbolic catharsis and redemption he seeks remain absent.

The portrayal of Humbert as powerless and superficial is a greater detriment to the narrator than to Quilty, who does not conceal his self-indulgent depravity. Humbert wants to bring about transcendent justice by eliminating an evil element that plagues the world, but this intent fails to meaningfully engage others and function in an external context, an inefficacy that reinforces the notion that the meaning of Humbert’s poetic justice cannot transcend his imagination. By rendering it meaningless, Quilty exposes the shallow, self-centered nature of Humbert’s grandiose perception of his own transgression.

According to doppelgänger logic, Quilty is a manifestation of Humbert’s self, and thus his murder also symbolizes Humbert’s killing of himself. It shows how his self-aggrandizing pursuit of pleasure ends in self-destruction. As discussed earlier, over the course of the novel the opposition between Humbert and Quilty slowly dissolves, and

Nabokov reveals how they mirror each other. By the end, Humbert writes “He and I are were two large dummies, stuffed with dirty cotton and rags. It was a silent, soft, formless tussle on the part of two literati” (ibid. 299). Such references to their similarities repeat themselves throughout this scene and create a link between the characters that renders Humbert’s murder of Quilty into a symbol of self-destruction. The manner in which Humbert is caught and imprisoned for his crime is also indicative of his desire for his own ruination. Driving away from Quilty’s home, Humbert decides to “deliberately [drive] on the wrong side of the road” (ibid. 306). Weaving through oncoming traffic and running a red light, Humbert continues this illegal cruise until stopped by authorities. He writes, “[I] was, indeed, looking forward to surrender myself to many hands...surrendering myself lazily, like a patient, and deriving an eerie enjoyment from my limpness and the absolutely reliable support given me by the police and the ambulance people” (ibid. 307). In the aftermath of his erotic transgression and the murder it leads him to, Humbert seeks respite by incriminating himself. He no longer seeks sovereign freedom, and instead desires the subjugation of incarceration. This ending shows how the boundless indulgence of self-through transgression fails to result in genuine individual transcendence and ends in the destruction of the individual.

In the aftermath of the destruction of himself, Quilty, and Lolita, Humbert faces the *ultimate* failure of his transgressive utopia. In the novel’s final scene, Humbert recalls walking to an abyss overlooking a town. He hears a “vapory vibration of accumulated sounds” that he recognizes as “the melody of children at play” (ibid. 307-308). He writes, “So limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic – one could hear now and then,

as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter” (ibid. 308). Although he does not make the connection, this scene mirrors his original fantasy about nymphets and their mystical childhood realm. It is the “intangible island of entranced time where Lolita plays with her likes” (ibid. 17). But Lolita is emphatically extracted from this paradise, and this is what Humbert notices. He writes, “the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord” (ibid. 308). Thus, the final result of Humbert’s transgression, an action he believed would enable him to transcend his selfhood and enter a sacred realm, is the destruction of the sacred object he obsessively wants to possess. It ruins Lolita and her unique childhood, an embodiment of that dream.

The novel’s foreword note prefigures the magnitude of this crime through the details it provides about Lolita’s death. Its fictitious author, John Ray, Jr. mentions among other things that “Mrs. ‘Richard F. Schiller’ died in childbirth giving birth to a stillborn girl, on Christmas Day 1952, in Gray Star, a settlement in the remotest Northwest” (ibid. 4). Nabokov draws upon conspicuous Christian symbols and reverses their meaning in his description of Lolita’s death. Instead of symbolizing life and the birth of the sacred, it represents spiritual demise.

The timing of this event, only months after Humbert last sees Lolita, links it to the final scene that illuminates the deprivation of her childhood that is subsequently connected to Humbert’s self-indulgent transgression. Not only does Nabokov depict transgression as a violating force that destroys the sacred, but he also demonstrates how the pleasure it generates for one person occurs at the expense of another.

The Violence of Erotic Transgression

In *Eroticism, Death, and Sensuality*, Bataille only gives cursory consideration to the other individual involved in one person's transgression, but for Nabokov, the self's treatment of the other is of critical importance. Overwhelmed by Humbert's solipsistic tyranny, Lolita's character apart from his interpretation of her is unknown. Even Humbert admits, "I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight" (ibid. 284). The girl who died in childbirth on Christmas Day in 1952 may forever remain anonymous, but Humbert's narrative contains subtle and overt indications of the pain he inflicts upon his nymphet. In the beginning, they emerge as minor details that Humbert ignores until the end of the novel, when he directly acknowledges the violent and unjust nature of his actions and that his worst crime is the deprivation of Lolita's childhood. By depicting Humbert's violence towards Lolita, Nabokov demonstrates how the individualism of transgression recreates a system of oppression and objectification when one cannot value the lives of others as equal to one's own.

Humbert's subtle references to the abusive reality of his transgression are indicative of the presence of violence, and their brevity demonstrates his indifference to it. Humbert's use of psychological abuse, in addition to being a form of violence, is a sign that Lolita is not a consenting participant in their erotic exploits. After threatening that she would end up in a reformatory or correctional school if she reported him to the police, Humbert writes, "I succeed in terrorizing Lo, who despite a certain brash alertness of manner and spurts of wit was not as intelligent a child as her I.Q. might suggest" (ibid. 151). Although his brief reference to blackmailing Lolita lacks explicit description, the word "terrorizing" is a poignant indication of the violence underlying Humbert and

Lolita's interactions. It reflects the necessity of abuse in order to preserve his erotic bliss. Humbert's word choice suggests that he perceives the fear and turmoil his behavior inspires, but his tertiary reference reflects its subordinate relevance and his overall carelessness to the impact his actions have on others.

Humbert only briefly mentions Lolita's expression of pain at the end of their tour across America. In reference to the trip, he writes, "in retrospect, [it] was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night – every night, every night – the moment I feigned sleep" (ibid. 176). Lolita's cries punctuate the summary of the wasteful expenditure that results from their trip. It is one of the few moments when Humbert allows her voice to be heard, and it is an expression of pain that rises from a collection of desecrated material objects. Like the "dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, and old tires," Lolita is a casualty of Humbert's self-indulgence (ibid.). This passage not only provides a glimpse into her sorrow, but it also implies that her misery has existed throughout the duration of their road trip. Yet this was not sufficient to prevent Humbert from repeating the actions that caused such pain.

Boyd writes, "For two years Humbert has been lucidly aware that he was keeping Lolita a prisoner and destroying her childhood and her spirit, but he continued to hold her in his power. So long as he could extract sexual delight from her, he could remain deaf to his moral sense" (254). Humbert's more overt descriptions of violence demonstrate the extent to which he is willing to objectify and abuse the other in order to maintain possession of the source of his individual pleasure. Suspicious that she has been unfaithful, Humbert recalls, "I pushed her softness back into the room and went in after her. I ripped her shirt off. I unzipped the rest of her. I tore off her sandals. Wildly I

pursued the shadow of her infidelity” (ibid. 215). This scene reveals the violence Humbert is willing to inflict in an effort to regain the object of his fantasy that he fears is escaping his grasp. There is no evidence to conclude that every sexual interaction between them is violent, but the violence in this scene resonates with normative notions of sexual abuse. Like the other examples of Humbert’s indifference to Lolita’s well-being, he never expresses any qualms about the brutal treatment of another human being, not even someone he desires. In tandem with exposing the dark underbelly of Humbert’s aesthetic infatuation with Lolita, this scene emphasizes the extent to which the longing for self-satisfaction can eclipse one’s sense of empathy for others.

By the end of the novel, Humbert exposes the suffering he inflicted upon Lolita and how his erotic transgression lead to his worst crime, the deprivation of her childhood. He recalls a moment when he observes Avis, another Beardsley schoolgirl, with her “wonderful fat pink dad, and small chubby brother, and a brand-new baby sister, and a home, and two grinning dogs, and Lolita had nothing” (ibid. 286). Imprisoned in a home with her predatory stepfather, Lolita has been helplessly deprived of any chance at a happy childhood. Instead she spends it as Humbert’s “spoiled slave child” (ibid. 188). Along with denying her the comforts of a traditional childhood, Humbert also admits to neglecting of her emotional life. After coming across a book about a girl whose mother died and inferring that it is indicative of Lolita’s turmoil over the loss of her mother, Humbert chooses to disregard his premonition. He remarks, “I always preferred the mental hygiene of noninterference...it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita’s states of mind while comforting my own base self” (ibid. 287).

Humbert's failure to recognize or care about Lolita's emotions demonstrates his cruel and dehumanizing objectification of his stepdaughter. The utilitarian and selfish function he attributes to his deeds is indicative of how his fantasies necessitate such actions and that he is willing to succumb to this urge. Abuse such as this culminates in Humbert's worst crime, the denial of Lolita's subjectivity. "The absence of her voice" from the musical harmony of children is the price for Humbert's years of erotic satisfaction (ibid. 308) and is in sync with the general absence of her voice and her perspective in his entire narrative. Even in comparison to his murder, Humbert believes his deprivation of Lolita's childhood is his most reprehensible offense. He writes, "Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape and dismissed the rest of the charges" (ibid.). Although his remorse hints at Humbert's moral awakening, it is a weak attempt at redemption. It is too late for him to refrain from depraved self-indulgence or demonstrate the moral capacity to regulate one's behavior with consideration for others. Also, the childhood that Lolita loses is something that can never be restored.

His attempts to compensate for his crime only emphasize the impossibility of the task. Humbert's generous gift to pregnant Lolita and his murder of the man who wanted to exploit her are hopelessly insufficient attempts at redemption that cannot undo the fact that Lolita is absent from the scene of utopian childhood. Boyd argues that Humbert has limited and contingent moral insight due to the fact that he only accepts responsibility for his actions after he loses the object of his desire. He remarks that "Humbert demonstrates how easy it is to let moral awareness turn into sincere regret after the fact, but how much more difficult to curb the self before it tramples others underfoot" (254). Boyd's

interpretation supports the conclusion that Humbert's belated empathy for Lolita is fundamentally a function of a consciousness that is exclusively attuned to his experience and that his remorse does not qualify as a genuine expression of unselfish empathy.

The story of Humbert's seduction portrays how the self who follows the "Batailleian" ideology of erotic transgression may transform into a tyrant when the freedom of the other, of the object of erotic desire, is completely disregarded. The violation of taboo may promote individual liberation, but it is also conducive to non-transcendent self-indulgence. Boyd writes, "Humbert epitomizes the insatiable hunger of the human imagination, but – and this special twist *makes* the whole novel—his attractive urge to transcend the self decays at once into nothing more than its own foul parody, into the mere promotion of self" (227-228). The self-satisfaction that Boyd refers to does not result in the revolutionary freedom Bataille attributes to transgression. Instead, it fosters carnal self-indulgence, a false sense of empowerment, self-destruction, and the subjugation of the other. Nabokov's representation of transgression thus highlights a limitation of Bataille's logic of transgression. Individual freedom is not simply a function of the "I" vs. the "world" dichotomy. It is also dependent on how individuals treat each other. The individual who perceives himself to be the only person struggling to liberate oneself from society, the only one whose deserves freedom, may become liable to recreate the systems of repression and abuse that erotic transgression was meant to subvert. This does not imply that Nabokov opposes individuality. He was a vehement advocate of this principle, but his support is qualified. To him, personal freedoms are invaluable to humanity to the extent that one person's freedom does not infringe upon another's.

Critique of Global Ideas

Despite their opposing interpretations of eroticism, Bataille and Nabokov's texts share a common belief in the heterogeneous nature of reality. This premise challenges global ideas or 'grand narratives' of universal happiness, progress and homogenous societies so typical for modernity in general and its totalitarian variations in particular. Drawing upon Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish sociologist who demonstrates how the ideology behind modern western civilization lends itself to the establishment of totalitarianism and institutionalized violence, I would like to argue that Nabokov and Bataille's support of heterogeneity and their opposition to global ideas represent an intellectual reaction to European politics during the 1930s-40s that would permanently alter the course of critical/philosophical and literary development.

Historical Context

Nabokov and Bataille lived through the first half of the 20th century, a period of unprecedented political and social turmoil triggered by the rise of fascism in modern Europe. Prior to this movement, modernity and its optimistic vision of human rationality characterized intellectual discourse since the Age of Enlightenment. The chief tenets of this philosophy were the belief in the supremacy of human reason over nature and the notion that science would lead to social progress and a better life for mankind (Bressler 98). On the basis of these principles, western civilization tended to value qualities such as reason, order, discipline, productivity and improvement of the human condition (Bauman 242, 246). Beginning with WWI, political upheaval triggered unprecedented crisis that

would shatter this centuries-old optimism in humanity. The series of catastrophes that occurred between the 1920s and 1940s was largely associated with the rise of totalitarian regimes, particularly the emergence of Nazism in Germany and communism in Russia. The millions of civilians who encountered these regimes became witnesses, victims, and/or contributors to some of the most violent atrocities in the history of modern society.

The lives of Nabokov and Bataille were likewise affected by the political crises during this era. The rise of communism prompted Nabokov's father to take his family into exile in Western Europe in 1919 (Appel xxvi). Although he left for America in 1940, prior to the peak of WWII and the Holocaust, his exposure to totalitarian regimes left a lasting, bitter impression. Charles Nicol writes, "Bolsheviks robbed him of his homeland, Russian monarchists assassinated his father, and Nazi Germany killed his brother in a concentration camp" (626). Nabokov expressed poignant hatred for the political parties that were responsible for these crimes. In reference to the Soviet Union, Nabokov writes, "nothing, nothing has changed—the same soldiers going mad from the same hunger and grief of five hundred years ago, and the same oppression and the same bare-bellied children in the mud, in the dark. For their sake alone all these vile 'leaders of the people'... should be destroyed forever" (qtd. in Boyd 84). This hatred epitomizes his sentiments towards the communist dictatorship that transformed the country of his idyllic childhood memories into a repressive wasteland. It explains his strong affinity for America and the development of his personal political views. Nabokov states, "Since my youth—I was 19 when I left Russia—my political creed has remained as bleak and changeless as a grey old rock...Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art. The social and economic structure of the ideal state is of little concern to me" (qtd. in

Nicol 628). Although Nabokov describes himself as “disinterested” in political affairs, his reference to his departure from Russia as the inception of his solid “political creed” is indicative of how the crisis and revolution in Russia shaped his beliefs.

Up until the mid-1930s, Bataille was also attuned and responsive to the rise of fascism in Western Europe and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Along with his participation in left-wing political groups, he wrote several essays articulating his opposition to fascist ideology (Connor 39). In his essay “The Problem of the State,” (1933) Bataille argues that the totalitarian movements in Germany, Italy, and Russia are not examples of the type of revolution he advocates (Surya 171). Although his vision of revolution is inherently violent, he denounces these political parties for using violence to garner and sustain state power (ibid. 172). For Bataille, only violence that ceases to have a productive value is revolutionary. He also condemns their exclusion and extermination of people deemed ‘undesirable’ (ibid. 178). Surya writes, “There is no doubt about this in Bataille’s eyes: this affirmation of purity, incomparably stronger and more vital in the fascist state than in the bourgeois state, is *sadistic*” (178). Despite his oppositional stance towards fascism, Bataille’s critical interest in the violence and irrationality of fascism triggered accusations that he sympathized with these movements (ibid. 293). Ultimately, evidence of Bataille’s opposition to fascism trumped contrary claims, and in retrospect, scholars and some of his colleagues think that his intellectual interest in the rise of the Nazi movement led to political insights that anticipate the post-war critique of fascist discourse and ideology (ibid. 292-294).

Modernity and Totalitarianism

Like Nabokov and Bataille, the Polish sociologist Bauman was also a victim and witness to the emergence of both fascist and communist regimes and their atrocities. From his retrospective perspective, “the Holocaust was not an irrational outflow of the not-yet-fully-eradicated residues of pre-modern barbarity. It was a legitimate resident in the house of modernity; indeed, one who would not be at home in any other house” (246). In his book, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), Bauman argues that the ideological principles of modernity, epitomized by the belief that humanity is capable of engineering and arriving at a common vision of utopia, were conducive to the rise of fascism and systematic violence (246). By promising to systematically transform Germany into a master state, the Nazi Party appealed to traditional values of modern civilization. The regime’s leaders propagated the notion that the extermination of Jews and other “undesirable” people was a necessary condition for the realization of this objective, and they authorized an institutionalized method of carrying this out. Bauman remarks; “In this context, the camps – senseless in every other respect—had their own sinister *rationality*” (274). Although entirely immoral, the annihilation of an entire group of people was a logical step towards the creation of a Nazi utopia, and civilians who followed these dictates were considered to be contributing to the betterment of the state (ibid. 251). Even concentration camps, the systems of mass murder, were reflective of the modern ideals of efficiency, organization, and technological innovation (ibid. 274). Moreover, the camps, like the people who directly or indirectly contributed to the Nazi project, are quintessentially modern as “an invention which derives its need and

usefulness and functionality from the declared ambitions of modern society, a society that views having such ambitions as the foremost mark of its superiority” (ibid.).

Modernity and Nazi fascism share a common ideological structure that privileges the utopian goals of civilization over the human individuals expected to arrive at this vision. In addition to its dehumanizing implications, Bauman sees the totalitarian structure as morally vulnerable, capable of facilitating the salutary scientific innovations of 18th century Europe, but equally as conducive to institutionalized murder (ibid. 272). In a description of how idealism is amenable to immorality, Bauman writes, “In the case of Hitler, the design was a race-clean society. In the case of Lenin, the design was a class-clean society. In both cases, at stake was an aesthetically satisfying, transparent, homogeneous universe free from agonizing uncertainties, ambivalence, contingency” (ibid.). Although based on opposing visions of a man-made utopia, Nazism, communism, and modernity treated their idealized goals for humanity as a divine authority that engendered a system of value and meaning based on progress towards its realization. The analogous ideological structure shared by totalitarianism and modernity leads to Bauman’s conclusion that fascism, communism and their atrocities “were legitimate offspring of the modern spirit, of that urge to assist and speed up the progress of mankind toward perfection that was the most prominent hallmark of the modern age” (ibid. 273). Unlike those who see Nazism or communism and their humanitarian crimes as a historical aberration, the sociologist believes that they are the logical outcome of the modern civilizations that preceded them. They were harbingers of modernity’s sinister underbelly, a testament to an ideological problem common to modern Europe in its entirety.

Nabokov and Bataille: A Response to Global Crisis

In the context of the premises and conclusion of Bauman's analysis of the totalitarian versions of modernity, Bataille's and Nabokov's opposition to global ideas and support of heterogeneity represent an intellectual reaction to the fallout of modernity. Their texts reflect an awareness of the shortcomings of modernity and respond by presenting an alternative mode of thought founded upon a structure that logically negates the validity of totalitarian ideology.

In *Eroticism, Death, and Sensuality*, Bataille directly addresses the danger of "homogenizing" discourses and ideologies. He points to the irreducible opposition between rationality and excess to emphasize the duality that characterizes nature and the human experience. He uses this principle in his critique of philosophy to demonstrate the impossibility that systematic knowledge could account for the entirety of human experience. By demonstrating how mystical phenomena such as eroticism, taboo, and transgression cannot be understood in terms of philosophical discourse, he argues that this discipline has limited authority as a source of knowledge. This conclusion directly opposes modernity's belief in the supreme authority of human rationality and the human capability to entirely understand reality. Consequently, Bataille's theory undermines totalitarianism by negating the possibility that its universalizing ideology can lead humanity to its utopian objective. Jürgen Habermas interprets Bataille's rejection of totalized thought as an example of a belief that was informed by fascism. He writes; "There is no theory of contemporaneity not affected to its core by the penetrating force of fascism. This holds true especially of the theories that were in their formative period in the late 1920s and early 1930s...no less than of Bataille's heterology" (171) In addition

to exposing this limitation, Bataille seeks to empower the individual. His notion of transgression allows for any person to rise against social norms and liberate himself from the realm that suppresses his nature. This potential power reinforces individual sovereignty and heterogeneity by allowing man to deviate from the homogenizing effect of mainstream social norms. It rejects modernity's tenet that privileges an abstract objective over the human being, and instead demonstrates how the individual exceeds social ideology. It resists the transformation of a human being into a functionary tool of a greater idea, a modern principle employed by totalitarian governments in order to usurp and maintain hegemony over the state.

Although deconstructing assumptions that foreground Bataille's theory, Nabokov's *Lolita* echoes the opposition to global ideas found in *Eroticism, Death, and Sensuality*. Humbert, the villainous narrator, resonates with the homogeneous thought that Bataille criticizes. Nabokov represents him as a *poetic totalitarian* who is only sensitive to what panders to his obsession and relentlessly imposes his sensual ideology onto others without respect to their individual autonomy. By valuing his ideal vision of utopia over anything else and objectifying the "other" in pursuit of this dream, Humbert is able to justify his criminal violation of Lolita's life and childhood. Nabokov's novel depicts the tragic outcome when one's belief in the supremacy of one's vision of utopia supersedes recognition of the individual rights of others and their right to freedom. In his interpretation of *Lolita*, Richard Rorty writes,

But the moral is not to keep one's hands off little girls but to notice what one is doing, and in particular to notice what other people are saying. For it might turn out, it very often does turn out, that people are trying to tell you that they are suffering. Just insofar as one is preoccupied with building up to one's private kind of sexual bliss, like Humbert, or one's private aesthetic bliss, like the reader of

Lolita who missed the sentence about the barber the first time around, people are likely to suffer still more (164).

Rorty's analysis of Nabokov's novel aligns *Lolita* with Bataille's critique of totalized thought. He perceives it as the demonstration of the moral necessity for the recognition of the "other" and his or her right to freedom and individuality as equal to one's own sense of freedom and pain. The failure to do so can transform a poetic dreamer, who does not care about universal utopias, into an abusive tyrant. This stance is antithetical to the totalitarian tactic that dehumanizes the "other" in order to justify and facilitate the extermination of this unwanted human element. It instead advocates a spirit of diversity, heterogeneity and acceptance of personal differences.

In his introduction to *Lolita*, Alfred Appel writes; "The transcendence of solipsism is a central concern for Nabokov. He recommends no escape" (xxii). In spite of his assumption of totalized, interpretive power, Humbert is never able to transform his ideals into practice. His persistent attempts to do so result in the destruction of himself and the object of his desire. Humbert's demise is symbolic of the failure of global ideas. In the context of the novel, the ideology that motivates Humbert's transgression is a self-reflexive delusion.

The recurring appearance of this heterogeneous, inclusive framework in Nabokov's and Bataille's other writings and scholarly projects emphasizes the significance of these ideas throughout their respective bodies of work. In 1945, Bataille created a journal called *Critique*, a publication that included essays from a wide variety of disparate disciplines. His intention was not to synthesize dissimilar articulations of knowledge, but instead to juxtapose contrasting ideas in order to recognize the

differences and similarities between them (Surya 369). As a publication meant to cultivate greater knowledge, Bataille, its editor, felt that he could not exclude essays expressing controversial or unpopular opinions (ibid. 374). The journal included works relating to topics ranging from literature, philosophy, politics, and religion. In his analysis of the journal, Surya states, “one cannot fail immediately to be struck by the apparent disparity of themes and texts” (373). The historical implications that Surya perceives within Bataille’s journal are ironic. As the editor, Bataille chose to include a variety of opinions so that the journal would remain politically neutral (ibid. 374). This inclusive approach nevertheless resulted in a text indicative of the political atmosphere from which it arose. In reference to the stark disparity between the pieces included in the journal, Surya writes, “*Critique* bears witness to this play that no longer forms ideas and this plasticity that has withdrawn from them...this was one of the many effects of the war: thought had fallen from grace” (372).

Despite his stated disinterest in politics, Nabokov specifically critiques Russian and German totalitarianism in his fiction. Charles Nicol, author of an essay on Nabokov’s politics, believes that, “anti-communist politics at the philosophical level were among the concerns of Nabokov’s novels during most of the period girdling the Second World War” (626). In support of this claim, he points to *Invitation to a Beheading* (1959 U.S. publication), a novel set in a dystopian, futuristic Russia “where even individual thought is outlawed” and *Bend Sinister* (1947), which “portrays the plight of a philosopher caught in the net of a tyrant, whose state is a mixture of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia” (ibid.). Nabokov confirms this interpretation; he says they portray “absolutely final indictments of Russian and German totalitarianism” (qtd. in Andrews 38).

Nabokov's method of literary criticism is also reflective of his appreciation of individual freedom. It requires the reader to respect the text as a complete entity in and of itself, carefully observe its details, and refrain from reducing it to an overarching idea (Andrews 40). Andrews adds, "Most fundamentally, Nabokovian aestheticism is an ideology that emphasizes careful perception of all phases of worldly uniqueness. 'Careful' is the key word, implying an ethical concern for things external to the self" (ibid.). In addition to expounding this principle, Nabokov criticizes grand narrative literature that treats an abstract idea as a universal account of human existence. In the afterword of *Lolita*, he writes "the Literature of Ideas, which very often is topical trash" (315).

In spite of the authors' resistance to ascribing political meaning to their respective texts, *Eroticism, Death, and Sensuality* and *Lolita* represent an intellectual reaction to the social crisis of the first half of the 20th century. Their relevance with regard to the rise of totalitarianism and the problems of modernity demonstrates that they are not solely a product of their respective authors' idiosyncratic, perverse, or depraved interests. Instead, they are engaged with the issues and events that plagued western civilization. Although the literal link between the authors and their social context varies, the formative impact they had on the future development of critical discourse and literature reinforces the social relevance of their contributions. While the rise of fascism marked the crisis of modernity, Bataille and Nabokov signaled the development of a new mode of thought that would lay the foundation for the postmodern movement.

Conclusion

Although the dearth of scholarship comparing Nabokov and Bataille implies the absence of a meaningful relationship between the two, an analysis of their respective interpretations of eroticism points to a meaningful correspondence between them. They take opposing views with respect to the salutary effects of erotic transgression, but their respective texts *Eroticism, Death, and Sensuality* and *Lolita* deconstruct global ideology and support the preservation of individuality. Bataille expresses this belief by arguing that an individual can liberate himself from society and reinforce his sovereignty through the violation of taboo. Nabokov's *Lolita* qualifies Bataille's broad claim by demonstrating how the unrestrained personal freedom of one person can infringe upon another's and how respect for others is necessary for individual liberties to be available to all. Due to the absence of direct links between the authors during their lifetimes, it can be concluded that the development of two similar belief systems, concerned with a similar phenomenon (eroticism), during a similar time frame is merely a coincidence. But an analysis of the analogous political context they inhabited and their respective responses to it demonstrates that their shared support of personal freedom is not arbitrary. It is informed by the rise of totalitarian regimes, and it represents an intellectual opposition to this movement that would transform literature and critical thought in future decades.

A comparative analysis between these works illuminates how the status of the individual became an important subject of philosophical and literary discourse in the aftermath of fascism. The decades prior to political upheaval were characterized by the idealistic notion that science and human rationality could result in universal, and definitive knowledge. In spite of its optimism, this ideology is structured by the

assumption that the individual is reducible to this abstract system. Bataille and Nabokov's works represents a movement away from that theory. According to them, no overarching idea can fully account for humanity, its language or knowledge in its entirety. The juxtaposition of Nabokov and Bataille not only explains why a belief arose when it did, but it also highlights the nuances of theories of individual sovereignty. By drawing attention to Bataille's blind spot in his propagation of individual liberation from the bounds of society, Nabokov's *Lolita* raises the question about the balance between the exertion of personal freedom and respect for others. It depicts a pitfall of extreme individualism by demonstrating how a sense of unlimited personal power unjustly deprives other people of their rights and ultimately reestablishes the same oppressive power system that the individual wanted to escape in the first place. It also raises the question of how to distinguish between the violation of norms as a type of revolt against repression and the appropriation of this idea as an excuse for depraved self-indulgence. The details are important because despite the fact that these texts were considered to be anomalies upon their initial publication, the fundamental ideas within them would play a crucial role in the future development of critical theory and literature.

Their deconstruction of global ideas paved the way for the growth of post-structuralism, the dominant trend in literary theory beginning in the 1960's. The ideology behind this intellectual movement is based on the premises that no single idea can function as a universal explanation of the human experience, that there is no knowable objective truth, and that knowledge is contingent upon the social, political and temporal context from which it arises (Bressler 101). These ideas revolutionized the way people thought about literature, sociology, gender studies, psychology, and cultural studies.

Although Bataille's work has been relatively under-acknowledged, several seminal postmodern scholars, such as Derrida, Foucault, and Kristeva, have pointed to the critical influence he has had on their work. In the essay "The French Path to Postmodernity," Habermas draws attention to how Bataille's work has laid a critical foundation that informed the ideas of Derrida and Foucault (Botting and Wilson 7). In the introduction to the anthology *Bataille: A Critical Reader*, Botting and Wilson include a quotation by Denis Hollier who writes, "Bataille suffered from a lack of recognition. The dynamic and influential thinking of the last twenty years owes so much to him (and paradoxically owes so much of its influence to him) that we ourselves find it difficult to believe in its lack" (qtd. 6).

Nabokov, and *Lolita* in particular, have likewise had a perennial influence on literature and culture in America and abroad. *Lolita* sparked a proliferation of criticism addressing the novel's stylistic, ethical, and cultural implications. Alfred Appel claims that the author's innovative vision of the novelistic form "kept alive an exhausted art form not only by demonstrating new possibilities for it but by reminding us, through his example, of the variegated aesthetic resources of his great forebears" (xx). Susan Elizabeth Sweeney notes that Nabokov influenced other writers such as John Updike, Thomas Pynchon, and John Hawkes (81). Since its 1958 publication, *Lolita* has become a cultural artifact. Graham Vickers writes, "in *Lolita*'s name the world has now been given erotic lithographs and weird, fashion movements, artful spin-off novels and miscellaneous movies, awkward theater dramatizations and ill-judged musical entertainments, and vile Internet subcultures, and lurid newspaper clichés" (3). The duality of *Lolita*'s resonance, its transformation of the art of the novel and its continuous

re-inscription into popular culture, is a testament to its own diversity that continues to permeate our epoch.

Bibliography

Alexandrov, Vladimir E., ed. The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov. New York: Garland Publishing, 1995.

Alexandrov, Vladimir E.. Introduction. The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov. Ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov. New York: Garland Publishing, 1995. xiii-xv.

Andrews, David. Aestheticism, Nabokov, and Lolita. Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1999.

Appel, Alfred, Jr. Nabokov's Dark Cinema. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

---. Introduction. The Annotated Lolita. By Vladimir Nabokov. Ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. New York: Vintage Books, 1991. xvii-lxvii.

Bataille, Georges. Eroticism: Death & Sensuality. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986.

---. "The Notion of Expenditure." Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1930. Ed. Allan Stoekl. Trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985. 137, 168-181. Scribd Social Publishing Site. 16 Mar. 2011 <
<http://www.scribd.com/doc/10268941/Bataille-the-Notion-of-Expenditure>>.

Bauman, Zygmunt. "The Century of Camps." The Bauman Reader. Ed. Peter Beilharz. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2001. 230-80.

Botting, Fred and Scott Wilson. Bataille. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Botting, Fred and Scott Wilson. Introduction. Bataille: A Critical Reader. Ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. 1-23.

- Boyd, Brian. Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Bressler, Charles E. Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice. 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc, 2007.
- Connolly, Julian W. A Reader's Guide to Nabokov's Lolita. Boston: American Studies Press, 2009.
- Connor, Peter Tracey. Georges Bataille and the Mysticism of Sin. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- Davydov, Sergej. "Poshlust." Alexandrov. 628-633.
- Diment, Galya. "Strong Opinions." Alexandrov. 685-695.
- Direk, Zeynep. "Erotic Experience and Sexual Difference in Bataille." Reading Bataille Now. Ed. Shannon Winnubst. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. 94-115.
- Foucault, Michel. "A Preface to Transgression." Bataille: A Critical Reader. Ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. 24-40.
- Habermas, Jurgen. "The French Path to Postmodernity: Bataille Between Eroticism and General Economics." Bataille: A Critical Reader. Ed. Fred Botting, and Scott Wilson. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. 167-190.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor Adorno. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." Dialectic of Enlightenment. Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Hussey, Andrew. Inner Scar: The Mysticism of Georges Bataille. Atlanta, GA: Rodopi,

- 2000.
- Lemert, Charles C., and Garth Gillan. Michel Foucault: Social Theory and Transgression. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Moynahan, Julian. "Nabokov and Joyce." Alexandrov 433-444.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. The Annotated Lolita. Ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.
- . Afterword. The Annotated Lolita. By Vladimir Nabokov. Ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. New York: Vintage Books, 1991.
- Peterson, Dale E., "Nabokov and Poe." Alexandrov. 463-472.
- Naiman, Eric. Nabokov, Perversely. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010
- Nicol, Charles. "Politics." Alexandrov. 625-628.
- Noys, Benjamin. Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction. Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2000.
- Rorty, Richard. Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Shute, Jenefer. "Nabokov and Freud." Alexandrov. 412-420.
- Surya, Michel. Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography. Trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson. New York: Verso, 2002.
- Sweeney, Susan Elizabeth. "By some sleight of *land*: how Nabokov rewrote America." The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov. Ed. Julian W. Connolly. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 65-82. Google Books. 17 March 2011.
<<http://books.google.com/books?id=ICgm-nDYLrYC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>>.

- Trilling, Lionel. "The Last Lover: Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita." Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987. 1-11.
- Vickers, Graham. Chasing Lolita: How Popular Culture Corrupted Nabokov's Little Girl All Over Again. Chicago, Ill.: Chicago Review Press, 2008.
- Winnbust, Shannon. Introduction. Reading Bataille Now. Ed. Shannon Winnbust. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. 1-12.
- Wyllie, Barbara. Nabokov at the Movies: Film Perspectives in Fiction. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2003.