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Through the Surface, Through the Cage:
Reading *Lolita* within its Frame

Humbert Humbert's crafty and twisted narrative serves as a kind of surface noise above the moral arena in which questions of Nabokov's *Lolita* beg to be fought. This surface noise of the prose is our interface for addressing the conflicting arguments of the foreword and afterword (for either an ethical investigation or pure aesthetic bliss). In reading *Lolita*, we become invested in a startling, bewildering, visceral account of the most illicit activity by the most endearing pedophile literature could conjure. Though we are distanced from the time and place of the story, the prose itself stops us in our tracks, confronting and instigating us.

Humbert, whose confessions crackle and spark with comedic double entendres, puns, anagrams, and other devices, incessantly provokes us. For example: "I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor. Absolutely no harm done. The conjurer had poured milk, molasses, foaming champagne into a young lady's new white purse; and lo, the purse was intact" (62). This melding of physical presence, mixed metaphor, play on words ("and lo"), alliteration, all over the roiling undercurrent of the actual morally abhorrent interpretation of the scene: How can we reconcile this prodding, scintillating reading experience with the blatantly moral and ethical questions the book encourages? One reason can be found in the idea of distancing methods. The novel, written in the past tense, is also framed between two interpretive commentaries by two analytical figures (Nabokov and John Ray). This, in a sense, excludes us from experiencing the narrative in the present. But at the same time, Humbert's witty

confessions leap from the page with energy and immediacy. *Lolita* treats our own paradoxical experience with the text as we grapple for reason, meaning, loose threads, coincidences, ethical common ground.

The idea that Nabokov's intention may have been to provoke us into taking sides with either the foreword or the afterword has its roots in a critical yet understated sentence nestled *Lolita's* afterword:

“The initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage.” (311)

Nabokov goes on to say that the above passage was of little importance to the novel's conception, and that there are greater and more easily relatable inspirations behind *Lolita*. However, this image of the ape can be interpreted as an appropriate metaphor for us, the reader. Nabokov is the scientist, we are the ape, confined by the text, seeking to draw meaning from our confinement.

Nabokov, from the afterword, appears to have been absorbed by this project, as he adopts Humbert's voice in retelling his relationship with the text: “The first little throb of *Lolita* went through me in late 1939...” (311). Like Humbert, the importance of the novel's conception began to wear on him. “Around 1949, in Ithaca, upstate New York, the throbbing, which had never quite ceased, began to plague me again” (312). Just as Nabokov exploits *Lolita* through Humbert, Nabokov exploits us through *Lolita*.

An important facet of this idea is that Nabokov simply can't say it outright. It would defeat the purpose of every minutely-crafted word and phrase. "There have been a number of wise, sensitive, and staunch people who have understood my book much better than I can explain its mechanism here." (315) This is again a nod to the reader as the ape, who acknowledges the confines of *Lolita's* literary reality after much coaxing by a wily protagonist and a startling plot, while simultaneously trying to tease out an appropriate reading.

The statements above show Nabokov's resistance to simply providing us with a reading of the novel. The afterword claims *Lolita* is only "aesthetic bliss"... neither "topical trash" nor "Literature of Ideas" (315). This is significant for us because the more we read, the more *Lolita's* prose stops us in our tracks, reminding us that as a reader, we have a task at hand.

Given this reading, *Lolita's* foreword becomes contradictory. On first read it seems grave, lofty, and responsible. When re-read directly after finishing *Lolita*, we cannot trust John Ray Jr, and we can't accept his assertion of a solely moral reading of the book, however tempting it may seem.

John Ray's second paragraph starts, "My task proved simpler than either of us had anticipated" (3). In other words, John Ray purports to have done very little. But Ray's "correcting solecisms and a careful suppression of a few tenacious details" would truly shape the novel, adulterate the story. John Ray, really, is claiming a sort of authorship, as *Lolita* is built on names and places, especially through the novel's second half. Just consider the convenience of "and lo" from the passage discussed above (62). All names are absolutely and intricately suited to Humbert's narrative. Ray even asserts that Humbert fabricated his own name: "Its author's bizarre cognomen is his own invention; and, of course, this mask—through which two hypnotic

eyes seem to glow—had to remain unlifted in accordance with its wearer’s wish” (3). Yet Humbert Humbert is so integral to the story’s cadence and meaning. Lolita says “Mummy and Hummy” on page 81. Humbert writes “Hum and Mum” in mimicry. Humbert refers to himself as Humbert the Hound (60), Humbert the Hummer (57), Handsome Humbert (72), the list goes on, page by page. The electric charge of the prose is built into the names, images, places, and no Ph.D could seriously admit to changing them all while retaining the text’s fiery cadence.

John Ray insists that “H.H.’s crime may be looked up by the inquisitive in the daily papers... its cause and purpose would have continued to remain a complete mystery, had not this memoir been permitted to come under my reading lamp.” (4) But John Ray did not cause this ‘memoir’ to become available. In fact, on the previous page, Ray said Humbert willed it for publication. So it likely would have happened regardless. And the pseudonym Humbert Humbert, along with the diligent reconstruction of every name and place, would be pointless if one were really able to fact-check Humbert’s true name and case in the daily newspaper.

Lolita’s resident Ph.D, John Ray, claims to “have no intention to glorify H.H. No doubt, he is horrible, he is abject, he is a shining example of moral leprosy, is not conducive to attractiveness... He is not a gentleman. But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!” (5). When we re-read this passage after having experienced Humbert, there is no way to acquiesce to John Ray Jr’s assertion. Humbert is so clearly perceptive, wily, jovial, handsome, dashing, gentlemanly, and lovable: “‘John,’ cried Jean, ‘she is his child, not Harold Haze’s. Don’t you understand? Humbert is Dolly’s real father’” (101). Humbert even seduces his fellow characters.

John Ray concludes by saying that “In this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac—these are not only vivid characters in a unique story: they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils.” (5-6) However, as we noted of the afterword, the lurking, dangerous lesson is that while reading we feel tempted to see these things at all, and when we do see them, we are left alone to wrestle with them, sifting through the surface noise, or grabbing at Humbert’s metaphors and doublespeak as evidence for ethically-charged interpretations.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. New York: Second Vintage International Edition, 1989.