

## BELINDA IN AMERICA

1. Now that *Lolita*<sup>1</sup> has been published in England with belated circumstance, it is perhaps time for critics to isolate themes from it for particular treatment without doing the work violence or diminishing from its total effectiveness. *Lolita*, « a classic American brat »<sup>2</sup> adds another chapter to the history of innocence and morality which runs from *Clarissa* to *Temple Drake*<sup>3</sup>, or, in the American sense, more precisely from *Hester Prynne* to *Temple Drake*. Various magazines and articles published in the heat of controversy have covered variously matters of its literary nature, traditional borrowings, pornography (or not), humor, Poe, Rabelais and Dante; one comment suggests what seems to me the inevitable response to *Lolita*:

Humbert emerges from the book as a lone lost nineteenth century European romantic in a crowded established twentieth century American prison<sup>4</sup>.

This is the theme, the book in the light of an American tradition, which strikes me as central and obvious. *Lolita* has appeared in the preface to *The Satyricon of Petronius*<sup>5</sup> which is not surprising, and in the preface to a recent issue of Henry James's *Watch and Ward*<sup>6</sup> which is. Yet taking the theme of James's work as the moral fable of Europe and America, the conjunction of Nabokov and James should not be surprising. James took his Americans to Europe in all his major fiction, excepting *The Europeans*, and even in

<sup>1</sup> The edition used here, however, is the French edition, Paris 1958, second printing, in two volumes (L 1 & L 2).

<sup>2</sup> W. WASSERSTROM, *Heiress of all Ages*, University of Minnesota, 1959, note p. 150. *Vide* particularly Chapter 5, «The Spirit of Myrrha» & Chapter 6, «Nymph and Nun».

<sup>3</sup> LESLIE FIEDLER, «From Clarissa to Temple Drake», *Encounter*, VIII, (March 1957), pp. 14-22.

<sup>4</sup> HUGH PROBYN, *Geste, Lolita* issue, University of Leeds, March 1959, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Translated by W. ARROWSMITH, Michigan, 1959, note p. xi.

<sup>6</sup> London, 1960. Mr. Edel finds that *Watch and Ward* has a «peculiar sexuality of its own», and that its theme is the same as that of *Lolita*.

that « sketch » the moral implications are confused by the fact that his Europeans are only foreigners of some sort, expatriated Americans<sup>7</sup>. Still the general pattern emerges as elsewhere, of a corrupt but seductive Europe and an innocent America (never of course so bold bald and simple in the actual fiction): Eugenia, morganatic wife of a German prince about to be repudiated in favor of a State marriage, brilliance and deceit incarnate, is properly dismissed by the virtuous Wentworths who, to a European reader, tend to be very dull indeed for all their moral tone. Nabokov we might say examines the myth from Europe's point of view: his European is explicitly corrupt (the precise moral perversion typifying the European way of life) and he comes to test the innocence of America (typified by another Daisy Miller).

2. The novel, as H. H. constantly reminds us is about Lolita, but in the introductory essay (by John Ray, Jr., Ph. D., Mass.), its subtitle is given as the « Confession of a White Widowed Male ». It is H. H. who tells the tale, or his version of it, and, warning us on the first page that a murderer can always be counted on for a fancy prose style [*L*, 1, 15] fascinates us, and Miss Pratt, with « the admirable way foreigners — or at least naturalized Americans — use our rich language » [*L*, 2, 77]. It is as a foreigner that Miss Pratt feels he cannot know that Dolores uses words she should not know about, words he will neither know nor understand (though the word in question is an obscene four-letter word in low Mexican!). H. H. was born in Paris (*the* wicked city of the American fable) and his father is a « Swiss citizen, of mixed French and Austrian descent, with a dash of the Danube in his veins » [*L*, 1, 16]; his mother died when he was three, and his father is much absent:

I grew, a happy, healthy child in a bright world of illustrated books, clean sand, orange trees, friendly dogs, sea vistas and smiling faces (*L*, 1, 17).

<sup>7</sup> The Holts' parentage is interesting: Felix says his father was the Sicilian born of American parents; he himself with an American mother was born in France and Eugenia in Vienna.

His brain was naturally tuned to the things that interested those « intelligent European preadolescents in our day and set » [L, I, 19], and after trying psychiatry, he turned to English literature, publishing the odd essay in obscure journals. An unsuccessful European marriage is terminated by an inheritance in America which requires residence. Meanwhile his attitude to sexual relationships has crystallized in a partiality for young girls between the ages of nine and fourteen who conceal, beneath an innocent exterior, a certain nymphic (demoniac) quality: the combination of nymph and nun which he calls, nymphet. This nymphet reflects his first love Anabel for whom he is continually searching, and whom he thinks he recognises in these young girls. He himself is attractive to women (there is no reason to disbelieve him):

an exceptionally handsome male; slow-moving, tall, with soft dark hair and a gloomy but all the more seductive cast of demeanour (L, I, 36).

Later he describes himself as having a cleancut jaw, muscular hand, deep sonorous voice, broad shoulders and a queer accent [L, I, 61] and gloomy good looks [L, I, 141] and finally when presented to Dolores' husband he sees himself as seen by them as:

her fragile, *frileux*, diminutive, old-world youngish but sickly, father in velvet coat and beige vest, maybe a viscount<sup>8</sup>.

Through this Byronic figure, Nabokov conducts his enquiry into the American way of life; admitting the perversity of Europe, he examines the innocence, and the proprieties of America.

After a brief period with advertising (shades of James's Chad Newsome?) and an expedition to the Eskimos where he is blissfully untempted, he returns to take a job with a Mr McCoo only to find on arrival that McCoo's house has burned down overnight, and that he has, consequently, made the extraordinary arrangement for H. H. to stay with a friend, whose car now awaits him. He is dumped unceremoniously on the Haze doorstep, abandoned in the hall by a maid who smells something burning, and finally meets Mrs Haze

<sup>8</sup> L, 2, 177. Pope's « rapist » is of course a baron.

(who strikes him as a weak solution of Marlene Dietrich) and her awful house:

with bedraggled magazines on every chair and a kind of horrible hybridization between the comedy of so-called «functional modern furniture» and the tragedy of decrepit rockers and rickety lamp tables with dead lamps. I was led upstairs, and to the left — into «my» room. I inspected it through the mist of my utter rejection of it... (*L*, 1, 53).

Old world politeness again compels him to persevere with the ordeal, and suddenly, in the garden, he meets the daughter of the house, Dolores: the perfect nymphet:

What drives me insane is the two-fold nature of this nymphet — of every nymphet, perhaps; this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snubnosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures, from the blurry pinkness of adolescent maidservants in the Old Country (smelling of crushed daisies and sweat); and from very young harlots disguised as children in provincial brothels; and then again, all this gets mixed up with the exquisite stainless tenderness seeping through the musk and the mud, through the dirt and the death, of God, of God (*L*, 1, 62).

Lolita is soon sent away, however, to a summer camp to help form her character; and whilst this camp is teaching Dolores to grow in health, knowledge and temper, Mrs Haze sets out to capture H. H. whose «dark European romantic way» attracts her, and who, she hopes, will not be shocked by her advances:

I know how reserved you are, how «British». Your old-world reticence, your sense of decorum may be shocked by the boldness of an American girl! (*L*, 1, 93-4)

He marries her with Dolores in mind and finds her, matrimonially, a nuisance, for he has to fulfil her ideas of a dark romantic European lover, and produce a list of mistresses «all nicely differentiated, according to the rules of those American ads» [*L*, 1, 109]. His first plan to murder her fails<sup>9</sup>, but when she discovers his secret diary

<sup>9</sup> A plan which has strong reminiscences of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*.

and gets the intimate life she desired previously, she is so shocked she runs out and gets killed in an automobile accident: so here we have « a brand new American citizen of obscure origin » [L, I, 143] pretending that Dolores is really his natural daughter, and ignoring the legal requirements of guardianship. Taking his « daughter » from her summer camp, Dr Edgar H. Humbert begins, with Kumfy Kabins, a tour of American civilization — hotels, motels and drive-in cinemas, hoping somewhere to ravish her. But his first experiment has surprising results. He gives her a sleeping pill, hoping to preserve her purity « by operating only in the stealth of night, only upon a completely anesthetized little nude »: but Lolita is not really another Annabel:

Of course, in my oldfashioned, old-wordly way, I, Jean-Jacques Humbert, had taken for granted, when I first met her, that she was as unravished as the stereotypical notion of « normal child » had been since the lamented end of the Ancient World B.C. (L, I, 166).

Even bearing in mind the American system of education, this idea persisted, and he simply had not understood that Dolores « had *already* proved to be something quite different from innocent Annabel » [L, I, 167]. The pill is a failure and a sleepless night is passed in satirical vexation at American hotels. But the night passes and ends; unexpectedly:

Frigid gentlewomen of the jury! I had thought that months, perhaps years, would elapse before I dared to reveal my self to Dolores Haze; but by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me (L, I, 177).

This is the center of the book's moral fable; Rousseau Humbert is astonished. Dolores Haze is no Daisy Miller: there is no ambiguity about her immodesty for she is not even a virgin. The summer camp last year had seen to the loss of virginity whilst forming health, knowledge and temper, with the cooperation of the camp-mistress's son, Charlie, a thirteen year old male with as much sex appeal as a raw carrot, and a fascinating collection of contraceptives fished

out of a nearby lake! Every morning, «through the beautiful innocent forest brimming with all the emblems of youth, dew, bird-song», Dolly and a friend went with Charlie to copulate behind a bush [*L*, 1, 184]. As Brian King writes, the story of *Lolita* is about:

a twelve year old girl so debauched by co-educational schools, summer camps, and teenage mores that even her perverted seducer is shocked<sup>10</sup>.

3. From this point in the book, the dance of death is on, through a world of motels — «clean, neat, safe nooks, ideal places for sleep, argument, reconciliation, insatiable illicit love» [*L*, 2, 9], and running parallel with the nightmare vision of America is H. H.'s personal nightmare of controlling Dolores. He tries threats, and attempts to fill her with the spirit of Myrrhe:

The wise mother (and your poor mother would have been wise, had she lived) will encourage a companionship between father and daughter, realising — excuse the corny style — that the girl forms her ideals of romance and of men from her association with her father (*L*, 2, 15-6).

Haunted by the ghost of the innocent Annabel, he has to face the fact that Dolores emits some special sort of glow which attracts «garage fellows, hotel pages, vacationists, goons in luxurious cars, maroon morons near blueed pools, into fits of concupiscence» and that whenever she goes out alone she always returns with one or two «gangling, golden-haired highschool uglies, all muscles and gonorrhoea» [*L*, 2, 28]. He must of course put her in some school, American neighbourliness makes settling down dangerous. He finally places her at the Beardsley School for girls, an expensive day-school whose syllabus stresses the four D's: Dramatics, Dance, Debating and Dating. At Beardsley he is vouched for by another sham, his friend Gaston Godin:

devoid of any talent whatsoever, a mediocre teacher, a worthless scholar, a glum repulsive fat old invert, highly contemptuous of the American way of life, triumphantly ignorant of the English language — there he

<sup>10</sup> BRUCE KING, «Sense and Sensibility at mid-century», *Geste*, cit., p. 3.

was in priggish New England, crooned over by the old and caressed by the young — oh, having a grand time and fooling everybody (*L*, 2, 59).

The whole school episode naturally gives Nabokov splendid opportunities for satire; and perhaps the most ironic scene is that in which H. H. is summoned by the worried headmistress, Miss Pratt (*sic*) who suggests that as he is an old-fashioned Continental father, he is unaware that his daughter is shuttling between the anal and genital zones of development, and for her age, « remains morbidly uninterested in sexual matters » [*L*, 2, 73-5]. They leave Beardsley and the disillusion of America continues:

I remember as a child in Europe gloating over a map of North America that had « Appalachian Mountains » boldly running from Alabama up to New Brunswick, so that the whole region they spanned — Tennessee, the Virginias, Pennsylvania, New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine — appeared to my imagination as a gigantic Switzerland or even Tibet, all mountain, glorious diamond peak upon peak in the blue, giant conifers, *le montagnard émigré* in his bearskin glory, and *Felis tigris goldsmithi*, and Red Indians under the catulpas. That it all boiled down to a measly suburban lawn and a smoking garbage incinerator, was appalling. Farewell, Appalachia! (*L*, 2, 94).

Dolores, too, he sees with a dreadful lucidity:

Her complexion was now that of any vulgar unridy highschool girl who applies shared cosmetics with grubby fingers to an unwashed face and does not mind what soiled texture, what pustulate epidermis comes in contact with her skin. Its smooth tender bloom had been so lovely in former days, so bright with tears, when I used to roll, in play, her tousled head on my knee. A coarse flush had now replaced that innocent fluorescence (*L*, 2, 86-7).

4. For sometime, too, H. H. has had the obsession of being followed, and when a mutual fever puts Dolores in hospital and himself in bed, he recovers to find her gone with her « Uncle Gustave ». Pursuing her through yet another endless string of motels with literary clues in hotel registers to guide him, he loses her. This loss, even coupled with the recognition that she is no second Annabel does not however cure him. As he says, two years of monstrous

indulgence have left him with certain habits of lust, and so, in depraved May, somewhere between Montreal and New York, he picks up Rita, twice Lolita's age and a good sport, and for two years hears and enquires — in his polite European way — in every town; but nothing more of his Dolores-Lolita. A letter from his lawyer about the estate coincides with a letter from Dolores, married, pregnant and in need of money. This awakens his dormant desire for revenge, but when he arrives and finds her happily married to Dick Schiller he gives her the money, gets the name of the villain who abducted her, and says goodbye to his « American sweet immortal dead love » [L, 2, 186]. Walking through the town he finds himself alone:

Nobody strolled and laughed on the sidewalks as relaxing burghers would in sweet, mellow, rotting Europe. I was alone to enjoy the innocent night and my terrible thoughts (L, 2, 188).

Not least of these thoughts is the recognition that he has deprived Dolores of a family; that the parody of incest, which was all *he* could offer her was not as good as even the most deprived family life. Tracking down the man who took Dolores away, CQ, he kills him, and this death scene is a grotesque parody of the Western barroom fight, terminated by the arrival of guests for a cocktail party. With difficulty, H. H. unparks his car, drives on the wrong side of the road (again how « British »!) and is soon taken by the police. His car is called McImoth; and his death later in prison from coronary thrombosis adds the last irony to the career of a European in America.

5. This is only one theme; it seems to me the central one of *Lolita*: H. H. as a second Tocqueville, a disillusioned Chateaubriand. The book is full of art: its fine writing and subject suggest Whitman, Kerouac and Salinger on the American road together with James Joyce; and its tremendous involvement with literary traditions prepares us for the final reflection in H. H.'s Gothic confession:



I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita (*L*, 2, 223).

A conclusion strikingly similar to that of another tale of a rape, elegantly told by Alexander Pope.

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