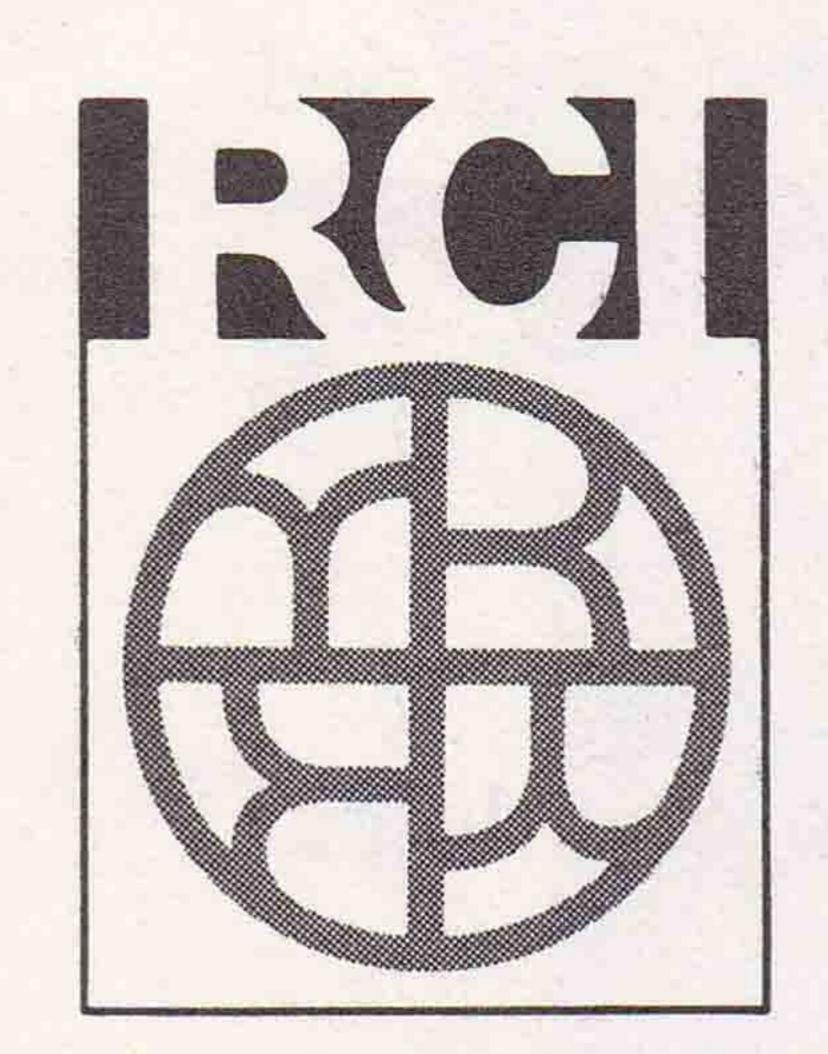
Nabokov Remembered



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"Oh, How You Have to Cringe and Hide!"

Vladimir Nabokov: Lolita; G.P. Putnam's Sons; New York, 1958.

by Dain A. Trafton

In his essay "On a Book Entitled Lolita," Vladimir Nabokov gives a humorous but troubling account of his difficulties in finding a publisher for the book that is now considered his masterpiece. After he had finished "copying the thing out in longhand in the spring of 1954," he dispatched it to four American presses, one after another, and received four letters of rejection in return. It seems that the novel was even more shocking than either Nabokov or "a wary old friend," who advised anonymous publication, had foreseen. One publisher opined that Lolita could send both him and Nabokov to jail. Another "regretted there were no good people in the book." Some assumed the work to be deliberate pornography (and, Nabokov suggests, may have been not only shocked but bored). All considered the theme—the passionate love of a middle-aged man for a twelve year old girl, a "nymphet"— "utterly taboo."

Nabokov claims that he did not care whether his novel was judged pornographic or not. "Lolita," he asserts, "has no moral in tow," and aims only at affording an experience of "aesthetic bliss." The rest of us, however, ought to care whenever narrow-mindedness and lack of imagination in high places (whether in government or business) fail to distinguish between true art and pornography. Every time the publication or sale of a Madame Bovary, a Ulysses, or a Lolita is hindered, another "martyr" is created that can be exploited by pornographers to discredit the fight against real filth. That Lolita finally appeared under the auspices of the Olympia Press in Paris, a house known for its trade in erotica, provides a sad comment on the judgment of American publishers. Lolita is not pornographic. Nor, in spite of Nabokov's rather defiant assertion, is the "aesthetic bliss" that the novel furnishes devoid of morality. It may be true that the book contains no "good people," but taken as a whole it expresses the rich, humane, and moral vision of life that informs all great art. Indeed, Lolita instructs us in the qualities that

separate conscientious artistry from meretricious sensationalism.

As Nabokov himself points out, pornography cannot be defined simply as literature that deals with sex. The term describes not the subject matter of a work but rather its manner and spirit. Above all, the pornographer aims at one effect the stimulation of lust—and he scrupulously subordinates every detail to that end. "Thus," Nabokov writes, "in pornographic novels, action has to be limited to the copulation of clichés. Style, structure, imagery should never distract the reader from his tepid lust." There is nothing tepid about Lolita's treatment of sex, but neither is it lustful. On the contrary, "action," "style," "structure," and "imagery"—often thought of as merely aesthetic or technical elements—function to control the presentation of the novel's shocking events and place them within a context of broader human concerns.

Lolita is cast as a memoir written from prison by the main character, Humbert Humbert, "a neurotic widower of mature years and small but independent means, with the parapets of Europe, a divorce and a few madhouses behind him." He tells his story—his early life in Europe, his marriages, his move to America, his obsession with nymphets, and especially, of course, his love affair with Lolita, the daughter of his second wife—as he awaits trial for the murder of one Clare Quilty, a playwright and fellow nympholept who stole Lolita from him. At times Humbert indulges in paeans to the intoxicating joys of his obsession, but the structural device of the memoir, which makes us aware from the outset that his joys have led to crime and despair, shadow every effusion. Characteristically, moreover, the effusions themselves lose their bloom as they develop. The style shifts. Richly sensuous images of enchantment give way to sinister tones, and irony cuts into self-indulgence.

Consider the long passage that introduces the reader to the almost mythical power of nymphets. Humbert begins by evoking an "enchanted island" in time, surrounded by "mirrory beaches and rosy rocks," and inhabited by maidens between nine and fourteen whose beauty is ir-

resistible. As he proceeds, however, it becomes clear from his own words that this beauty is not only irresistible but also dangerous and reprehensible. Nymphets possess a "fey grace," but their charm is "insidious" and "soul-shattering." To love them, you have to be "an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine (oh, how you have to cringe and hide!)." Here the imagery and even the syntax the effect of the parenthesis, for example -clearly function as instruments of moral judgment as well as means to "aesthetic bliss": "a bubble of hot poison" is not an invitation to vicarious lechery.

Surely Humbert is not a "good" man of the kind that one editor simplistically required, but his view of himself is hardly justificatory, and his presentation of Lolita refrains from dwelling upon her as a mere object of desire. Indeed, the honesty with which he portrays her adolescence compels him to record his gradual recognition of the monstrosity of what he does to her. Near the end of the novel, having understood that Lolita has abandoned him forever—she has left Quilty and is more or less contentedly married to a very ordinary fellow named Dick—Humbert recalls an earlier scene, during their affair, when he caught her observing the normal affection between another father and daughter: "I saw Lolita's smile lose all its light... It had become gradually clear to my conventional Lolita during our singular and bestial cohabitation that even the most miserable of family lives was better than the parody of incest, which, in the long run, was the best I could offer the waif."

The story of the love between the man who wrote this and the "waif" he describes cannot be reduced to "the copulation of clichés." Pornography dehumanizes because it incites us to think of men and women as mere instruments of pleasure; *Lolita* steadfastly refuses the reductionism of lust.

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