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UNFAIR USE:  
PARODY, PLAGIARISM, AND OTHER SUSPICIOUS  
PRACTICES IN AND AROUND  
*LOLITA*<sup>1</sup>

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**I**n 1999, the American publishing house Foxrock put out an English translation of Italian author Pia Pera's novel *Diario di Lo* (*Lo's Diary*). The book presents the story of a young American girl by the name of Dolores Maze who, after the death of her mother in a car crash, becomes the legal ward and illicit lover of her French expatriate stepfather, Humbert Guibert, traveling with him across the United States. The novel's foreword, purportedly written by a certain John Ray, explains that the now-adult Dolores has decided to publish her private diary in order to correct the misrepresentation of her relationship with her stepfather as described previously in a book concocted by Guibert.

Pera uses her heroine's attempt to set the record straight as an opportunity for literary criticism. While technically the diary by its *a priori* status (it having existed before the stepfather's memoir) cannot be labeled "derivative," the foreword, insofar as it justifies the diary's publication with reference to the stepfather's work, in fact implicitly

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Julia Bekman Chadaga, Avram Brown, John Foster, Leona Toker and Anna Wexler Katsnelson for their insightful and helpful suggestions at various stages of this article's development.

allows that it can. The structural irony of the diary's existence complicates the relationship between the two texts.

The act of keeping the diary is a rebellious gesture; it is an attempt to gain some form of agency, even co-authorship, over the events it narrates, thus shaking the authority of the stepfather's text and changing the reader's view thereof. For the diary's publication to fulfill its aim, then, it has to be read alongside the original rendition of events, starkly affirming its parodic status; the word "parody" is derived from the combination of the Greek *para*, "alongside," and *oide*, "song." According to Russian Formalist Iurii Tynyanov, parody performs a dual function: it imitates and transforms (104). Without knowledge of the original text, the reader of the diary would be unable to appreciate its transformative, parodic purpose.

In the English translation of *Diario di Lo*, however, the foreword of the fictional John Ray is preceded by another, in this case attributable to an actual person – Dmitri Nabokov, the son of Vladimir Nabokov, who wrote the original novel alluded to in the body of the Italian text and whose estate owns the copyright thereto. In his foreword, Dmitri Nabokov questions the transformative purpose of *Lo's Diary* and claims that the novel constitutes an act of piracy, plundering and devaluing his father's original work. Nabokov thus evinces the view that the author of the derivative work should have recompensed his father's estate monetarily for the aesthetic value that it diminishes in the original. The foreword is provided for by a settlement clause in the agreement reached between Dmitri Nabokov and Barney Rossett, the owner of Foxrock Books. That Rossett also happens to have formerly headed Grove Press is perhaps ironic, insofar as Grove sought the rights to publish the first American edition of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* in 1955, when many other publishers refused to take on such a controversial book.<sup>2</sup> With *Lo's Diary*, Rossett had once again stepped up to the plate to champion another contentious literary work, in this case after its would-be English-language publishers (Farrar, Straus & Giroux in the U.S., and Macmillan in the U.K.) had backed out of their contracts with Pia Pera upon being sued by Dmitri Nabokov, who accused them of plagiarism and copyright infringement.

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<sup>2</sup> Grove was unsuccessful in this attempt, and the first American edition was published by Putnam the same year.

This high-profile literary affair provoked a great deal of publicity, but seemingly little comment or analysis in literary scholarship. Meanwhile, the lawsuit, and the foreword from which it results, beg a number of fascinating questions: can a literary character be in someone's sole possession? After all, *Lo's Diary* is an example of what Alastair Fowler calls the "elaborative type," a work that "exploit[s] the fictive world of some great or popular predecessor" – a "numerous type, for there are hundreds of *Robinson Crusoes* and *Gullivers*; scores of elaborations of the *Hamlet* world; many *Alices* ... *Huck Finns* and *Jane Eyres*" (127); does the mere existence of a living, litigious copyright holder spell a lawsuit for an "elaboration," or might a particular ideological challenge to its source help the "elaboration" earn this distinction? Why, for that matter, is the retelling of content (in this case, plot details) considered derivative, but the copying (imitation) of style – undoubtedly a feature of Vladimir Nabokov's own prose, and that of authors he valued most highly – parodic<sup>3</sup> and hence permissible, even praiseworthy? But if we defend Pera's work as parody<sup>4</sup>, placing it under the protective umbrella of fair use, what risks do we incur? Can parody be, in fact, a crime? Does it undermine the right of an author to his/her own fictional space? Does parody, in reevaluating a work, reduce its aesthetic value? (Or, paradoxically, increase it?) And what, ultimately, is aesthetic value, and how is it measured in modernist and postmodernist practices? To the discussion of the unstable positioning of Nabokov's texts on the border between modernist and

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<sup>3</sup> In the story "Granita," another Italian, Umberto Eco, painstakingly, provocatively, and recognizably replicates the mannerisms of Nabokov's prose in *Lolita*, yet no one accuses him of theft; while Pera, pursuing her own literary agenda, replicates the details of Nabokov's plot, only to find herself entangled in a lawsuit. Moreover, Michael Maar has recently suggested that Nabokov might have taken up rudimentary plot elements from Heinz von Lichberg's short story "Lolita" (Berlin, 1916), a possibility complicating issues of origin and intellectual property still further. Maar concludes that such a borrowing of plot details on Nabokov's part is an instance neither of plagiarism nor cryptoamnesia, but rather of modernist playfulness or, as Thomas Mann put it, "higher cribbing" (Maar 58).

<sup>4</sup> Martin Garbus, an attorney representing Foxrock, decided not to go that route, specifically indicating in an article on the case that "*Lo's Diary* is not a parody or criticism." My attempt to contact Mr. Garbus to ask about the legal reasoning behind this conclusion was unsuccessful. Leaving aside the law, however, *Lo's Diary* is unquestionably a parodic work as the concept is understood in literary scholarship, satisfying as it does the three defining criteria outlined by Gary Saul Morson: "(1) It must evoke or indicate another utterance, which I will allude to henceforth as its 'target,' 'object,' or the 'original utterance'; (2) it must be, in some respect, antithetical to its target; and (3) the fact that it is intended by its author to have higher semantic authority than the original must be clear" (110). The fulfillment of the first two criteria is evident in my short summary of the fictional preface to *Lo's Diary*; I will discuss how Pera's work satisfies the third criterion later in this essay.

postmodernist strategies, this paper will add the analysis of Pera's novel as a postmodern critique of the modernist aestheticism that, it might be argued, Nabokov's text espouses.

Remarkably, Nabokov *fils*'s foreword, beyond expressing his aversion to the existence of Pera's novel, serves another important function: it forces upon Pera his permission for publication, which in fact she had never requested. Nabokov thereby both rejects and adopts the dreaded *Lo's Diary*,<sup>5</sup> contributing to the expansion of the intertextual space initiated by his father's *Lolita* and engaged by Pera's text. I will argue here Dmitri Nabokov's initiation of a lawsuit against Pera's book in reality constitutes a shrewd attempt on the plaintiff's part to have the last word in Pera's debate with Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* on the ethical value of aesthetics. While ostensibly enforcing the containment of *Lolita* within the limits delineated by its author, the author's son *de facto* facilitated an even further explosion of Nabokov's themes and characters beyond the borders of the novel into extratextual space – the sort of spill-over Nabokov's controversial book has tended to produce. I am interested in this paper not so much in *Lolita* itself, but its afterlife. While there may have been, arguably, more successful attempts at parodying Nabokov's novel<sup>6</sup>, it is the author of *Lo's Diary* that found herself in a peculiar debate with another reader of *Lolita*, the debate that had some “real-life” ramifications. It could be noted that *Lolita* has had other non-literary aftereffects, such as the proliferation of “Lolita”-themed pornography, or the incorrect attribution of this name to a hypothetical over-sexualized child seductress. But it is in the case of Nabokov v. Pera, I would argue, that the novel's central aesthetic issues, the existence of bad taste

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<sup>5</sup> This act of appropriation is further underscored by the novel's convoluted copyright page, which lists the copyright holders of the Italian-language original, its English translation, and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, informing the reader moreover that “[t]his edition of *Lo's Diary* is published by arrangement with the Estate of Vladimir Nabokov.” The copyright page of the Russian edition of Pera's book (made from the English translation and in arrangement with the Nabokov Estate) is even more surprising, as it acknowledges Dmitri Nabokov's foreword, while the volume itself strangely omits it. I am grateful to Yuri Leving for bringing this curiosity to my attention.

<sup>6</sup> The same year that Pera's book was published in English saw the appearance of Emily Prager's *Roger Fishbite*, a remarkably funny novel about a twelve-year-old girl's relationship with her pedophilic stepfather told from the girl's point of view. At the end of the text Prager states that her novel is a parody both of *Lolita* the book and *Lolita* the phenomenon. Less clearly parodic, but with some recognizable allusions to *Lolita*, is A. M. Holmes's horrific *The End of Alice*.

and its relationship to crime and law, left the parameters of strictly literary debate and revealed extratextual consequences.<sup>7</sup>

### *PARODY, PECCANCY, AND PECCADILLO IN LOLITA*

In Nabokov's *Lolita*, questions of parody, crime, and aesthetic value are curiously entangled. Numerous critics have discussed the meta-literary character of the novel.<sup>8</sup> Some have noted that despite Nabokov's own emphasis on aesthetic bliss as the only ultimate purpose of his creative work, the novel is by no means devoid of ethical considerations, thematizing and exploring as it does the relationship between the ethical and the aesthetic. One of the ways to approach this relationship in Nabokov is to suggest, as does Richard Rorty in "The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty," that in his novels Nabokov explores his fear of cruelty by probing the capacity of art to overcome it. Examining Humbert's cruel incuriosity, specifically in the episode in which the eponymous barber tells the uninterested Humbert about his dead son, Rorty argues that Nabokov exorcises his fear that art might not necessarily involve empathy by creating aloof artists whose autonomy/originality precludes compassion (148). A similar argument is made by David Rampton, who in his study of *Lolita* states that "Humbert's description of Lolita at tennis is an exercise in the special art of seeing her as an object, an art that only aesthetic detachment makes possible. And his 'Confession,' the product of that detachment, is at the same time a study of its limitations" (116). In conjunction with these interpretations, a key observation of Ellen Pifer – that "[c]areful attention to the text [of *Lolita*] reveals the ways in which it is designed to reveal what the narrator attempts to conceal, or blindly ignores" (187) – might suggest that Humbert, while deficient as a

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<sup>7</sup> Approaching the issue from a legalistic point of view, a recent article by David Roh "Two Copyright Case Studies from a Literary Perspective" argues the opposite. In my opinion the consequence of Nabokov's very public lawsuit and no less emphatic foreword is a broadening of the boundaries of the literary dialogue; David Roh, however, reads the copyright dispute, despite Pera's ostensible victory, as a potential agent of suppression in the process of literary evolution. Such highly publicized cases of copyright disputes, Roh asserts, will make publishers avoid appropriative works, thereby squelching potentially fruitful literary and ideological debates.

<sup>8</sup> On Nabokov's parodic method and aims in *Lolita*, see the studies of, among others, Alfred Appel, Jr., Thomas R. Frosch, Brian Walter, and Julia Bader.

human being, is not in fact compromised as an artist, because despite his authorial intentions he has created a text that, just like Dolores Haze, resists authorial control and is both aesthetically and ethically whole.<sup>9</sup> While I find these readings compelling, my own interpretation sides not so much with the discernment of a compromise in the novel's very fabric of the author's own vision of ethical aesthetics as with the view of Humbert's art as lacking. Leland de la Durantaye, for example, reads *Lolita* as an examination of the artist's relationship to his art and to external reality, noting that while Humbert possesses a "spinal sensitivity," a faculty Nabokov considered indispensable in an artist, he lacks empathy. This lack ensures that Humbert subjects external reality, and specifically Lolita, to his aesthetic will, reducing her from ethical subject to object of aesthetic contemplation: "Instead of giving life to art, Humbert treats life as art, and the moral message of the work appears to be that this error is a deadly one" (de la Durantaye, "Lolita in *Lolita*" 191). Thomas Frosch proposes that "what is on trial [in *Lolita*] is Humbert's uniqueness and originality, his success in an imaginative enterprise" (179); in Frosch's persuasive reading, Humbert is a failed poet.

Humbert's plight, then, is that of an aesthete forced in the process of writing to experience doubt in his aesthetic discernment, to confront, and try to overcome, his inability to produce original art due to certain stilted views, habits, and vision-dimming obsessions. Nabokov's oeuvre in general interrogates the view that in choosing multifarious, mysterious life as a subject of art, a true artist does not force it to serve his base needs, but attempts to immortalize it in all its complex vitality.<sup>10</sup> In "Lolita: The Springboard of Parody," Alfred Appel Jr. notes that "the attempt to transcend solipsism is one of Nabokov's major themes" (205). Authorship entails communication with one's subject, the subjection of one's purpose to the needs of the material, indeed, to *serve* the material; one of Humbert's last lines directed to Lolita reads: "[O]ne wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations" (*Lolita* 309).

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<sup>9</sup> Another possible explanation for this textual excess is that offered by dramatic irony, by which the implied author, not Humbert, reveals what Humbert, the unreliable narrator, attempts to conceal. Such an argument, made by Leona Toker in *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (203-4), sheds light on the structure of the work, but does not address the question of how Humbert's own aesthetic sense relates to ethics.

<sup>10</sup> This theme of immortality through art figures especially, for instance, in *The Gift* and *Speak, Memory*.

The reader, however, tempted to seek out the “moral apotheosis” hinted at by the unreliable fictional editor John Ray, Jr. in his preface to Humbert’s memoir (*Lolita* 5), or even tempted to believe such a thing possible, risks being branded unnuanced and naïve. One is frequently reminded in the critical literature that in Nabokov nothing is as it appears; scholars warn against trusting in Humbert’s desire to transcend his own egoism, to repent of his criminal use of his stepdaughter.<sup>11</sup> It seems, however, that in arguing that H. H. remains until the very end exactly what he appears to be, i.e., a narcissistic pedophile, these scholars trip upon the very fallacy they warn against, because if nothing is as it seems on the surface in Nabokov, then this premise should also hold with regard to Humbert. And so despite my familiarity with Goethe’s *Faust*, or perhaps because of it, I choose to believe Humbert when he describes his revelation as he stands listening to the voices of children at play: “[T]hen I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord” (308). Here Humbert not only finally realizes that he has destroyed Lolita’s childhood – which destruction, it could be argued, he has sensed all along – but also shows himself capable of putting her tragedy before his own, a feat hitherto, till this very end of the narrative, beyond his abilities. Supporting my contention that here Humbert is capable, however momentarily, of transcending his limitations is the fact that in this passage he can at last apprehend the world through hearing, in contrast to vision, the sense that has been throughout the narrative associated with Humbert’s sexual pathology (“I was to her not a boy friend, not a glamour man, not a pal, not even a person at all, but just two eyes and a foot of engorged brawn,” 283).<sup>12</sup> This “moral apotheosis” afforded Humbert at the end of the novel immediately follows, and is a consequence of, his realization that his prior claims to the status of artist were unsubstantiated, that his perception of the object of his desire has been lacking in imagination and originality (she is much more than what his limited vision allowed her to be), as has his understanding of his own feelings for her –

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<sup>11</sup> Skeptics include Harold Bloom, for whom Humbert’s transformation is simply unpersuasive; Sarah Herbold, who maintains that a Humbertian turn to morality would have precluded the commission of murder; Duncan White, who believes Humbert writes in bad faith, deluding himself that he has repented his criminal desire; and, in accord with White’s view, Leona Toker, who notes that, even after the purported recognition of his wrongdoing, Humbert is still comfortably writing in his memoir about his pedophilic bliss.

<sup>12</sup> The centrality of the scopic drive to Humbert’s behavior is discussed by Maurice Couturier in “Narcissism and Demand in *Lolita*” (24).

viewing these as he does as a form of psychological compulsion has kept him from discerning a more complicated, unique, and lasting emotion.<sup>13</sup> When Humbert meets the grown-up, pregnant Lolita “with her adult, rope-veined narrow hands and her goose-flesh white arms, and her shallow ears, and her unkempt armpits,” he surprises himself with an overpowering feeling of tenderness for this emphatically non-nymphetic Lolita.<sup>14</sup> In the passage that follows, Humbert attempts to persuade his readers (“you may jeer at me, and threaten to clear the court, but until I am gagged and half-throttled, I will shout my poor truth” [278]) that his attachment to Lolita was more than just pedophilic lust. But most eloquent here is the emotive and unnecessary “thank God” which betrays Humbert’s earlier misreadings of his own self, his relief upon realizing that he is capable of more than he had given himself credit for: “She was only the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of a nymphet … but thank God it was not that echo alone that I worshipped” (278). His own newly discernible three-dimensionality leads him to deconstruct his previously composed portrait of Lolita; doing so, he treads lightly, seeking to avoid the shortcomings of his earlier, failed creative work. He searches for gaps in his conception of Lolita without trying to fill them with new fictions of memory. These gaps penetrate

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<sup>13</sup> Critics have noted that while in Humbert’s rendition of events, this passage follows his encounter with the changed Lolita and his realization about his undying love for her, the actual occurrence of standing on the hill and listening to the music of children at play is supposed to have taken place much earlier, soon after Lolita’s escape. Humbert tells us that he had “evoked” this moment of hilltop epiphany just before being taken away by the police, presumably for his murder of Quilty: “And while I was waiting for them to run up to me on the high slope, I evoked a last mirage of wonder and hopelessness” (307). Mirage, derived from the French *se mirer* (to be reflected), is of course especially associated with the thirst-induced optical illusion of water in a desert; as such it has strong connotations of wishful thinking. It is the reflection of his/her own desire that the wanderer sees. And so for the purpose of gauging Humbert’s transformation, the question of whether two years previously Humbert had, in fact, experienced this remorseful epiphany is entirely immaterial; what matters is that by the end of the novel, when he tells us about it, he experiences it as a mirage, i.e., he wishes that he had experienced it. The mirage, the wish fulfilled, represents the adoption of a moral point of view – an instance of ethical thinking on Humbert’s part.

<sup>14</sup> Leland de la Durantaye proposes that the astute reader should find Humbert’s moral apotheosis in this encounter with the pregnant Lolita rather than where it has usually been detected, in the above-mentioned episode on the hill (*Style is Matter* 89). While I agree that this remarkable scene is epiphanic, its self-referentiality would seem to mitigate its moral force. Nabokov may very well have subscribed to the ideology of love, having himself asserted that “Humbert Humbert in his last stage is a moral man because he realizes that he loves Lolita like any woman should be loved” (quoted in *Style is Matter* 90). But it is a separate question whether Humbert’s love here is *agape* or *eros*, and whether any instance of the latter can be said to be either moral or immoral. Either way, if, as de la Durantaye argues elsewhere, Humbert’s moral advance comes with the acquisition of empathy, an ability “to think from the standpoint of someone else” (“Lolita in *Lolita*” 191) – and de la Durantaye is surely correct in this regard – then Humbert’s feelings toward the pregnant Lolita, while revelatory, do not yet foreground empathy per se; Humbert here seems most focused on the wrong he has done to himself – in having ruined any opportunity for happiness with Lolita – which is not the same thing as understanding the great harm he has done her.

Humbert's objectification of his desire, hinting at a depth and wealth of Lolita's world Humbert cannot define for us; her subjectivity shines through in its unknowability, in its potential:

There was the day when having withdrawn the functional promise I had made her on the eve ... I happened to glimpse from the bathroom, through a chance combination of mirror aslant and door ajar, a look on her face ... that look I cannot exactly describe ... an expression of helplessness so perfect that it seemed to grade into one of rather comfortable inanity just because this was the very limit of injustice and frustration – and every limit presupposes something beyond it – hence the neutral illumination.

(283-84)

These late moments of illumination (the classical *anagnorisis*) expose Humbert's defining trait, which is not, contrary to his own perception, his pedophilia; nor is it, however much it might disappoint him to realize, poetic talent. Rather, Humbert is defined by perpetually errant judgment, a characteristic that in the classical style renders him a tragic hero, inexorably destroying him and the girl he had loved.

Recapitulating Humbert's earlier assertion that "poets never kill" (88), the murderous dénouement of the novel overturns the narrator's prior self-conception as poet. In the process of introspection and writing, Humbert learns to pay attention, to listen and notice, transforming himself from a hack who deforms and destroys into an artist who recovers Lolita. To achieve this transformation, Humbert has had to undergo a series of literary trials and tribulations; ultimately the novel ends with the validation of art and its incompatibility with crime, the book's last line affirming immortality, the gift of life as art's purpose.<sup>15</sup> By rendering its subject aesthetically, art provides it with timeless meaning, gives it eternal life. In his afterword to the novel, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," Nabokov directs his audience toward such a reading. The difference between art and that which only pretends to be so, he asserts, is that the former provokes in the reader the feeling of "aesthetic bliss," "that state of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness,

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<sup>15</sup> "And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita" (309).

ecstasy) is the norm” (314-15). By contrast, mediocrity and banality, like pornography, lack autonomous vision and rely on the reuse and reiteration of clichés: “Obscenity must be mated with banality because every kind of aesthetic enjoyment has to be entirely replaced by simple sexual stimulation which demands the traditional word for direct action upon the patient.... Thus, in pornographic novels, action has to be limited to the copulation of clichés” (313). The ethical value of aesthetics lies in the fact that it is capable of rejuvenating, resurrecting stilted, conventional forms; as Edmund White has suggested, Nabokov, by imaginatively filtering various generic clichés through the prism of his parodic vision, helps the conventional to transcend itself (19).

Throughout his oeuvre, Nabokov associates crime with a lack of taste and artistic sensibility<sup>16</sup>, a parallel he draws discursively in his essay “The Art of Literature and Common Sense”:

Criminals are usually people lacking imagination, for its development even on the poor lines of commonsense would have prevented them from doing evil by disclosing to their mental eye a woodcut depicting handcuffs; and creative imagination in its turn would have led them to seek an outlet in fiction and make the characters in their books do more thoroughly what they might themselves have bungled in real life. Lacking real imagination, they content themselves with such half-witted banalities as seeing themselves gloriously driving into Los Angeles in that swell stolen car with that swell golden girl who had helped to butcher its owner. True, this may become art when the writer’s pen connects the necessary currents, but in itself, crime is the very triumph of triteness, and the more successful it is, the more idiotic it looks. (376)

This limit of imagination is Humbert’s fatal flaw, the impetus of his crime. (By “crime,” I mean, following Humbert’s own estimation, primarily his violation of Lolita: “Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape, and

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<sup>16</sup> Here we might adduce the murderers of David Krug, who await their punishment stoically, “putting on a brave show, due mainly to a lack of imagination” (*Bend Sinister* 228).

dismissed the rest of the charges” [308].) Humbert commits this violation by way of constantly misinterpreting his own criminal behavior as the work of an artist: “The gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept were the patrimonies of poets – not crime’s prowling ground” (131). Humbert may well be in the process of becoming a poet as he writes his memoir, but there are no indications that he had indeed been an artist while co-habiting with Lolita. Despite his constant claims to poetic sensibility, the meager proof of Humbert’s vocation as a writer are his magnum opus on French poetry (which seems never to be finished, suggesting a possible writer’s block), his perfume ads, and his poems addressed to Lolita and Quilty. The first poem sounds rather like a ditty, and the second is marred by such inelegances that Quilty, even in mortal danger, cannot help remarking: “A little repetitious, what?” (300). His delusions of artistic grandeur and of the poetic nature of his affliction (its originality of course compromised by his own rendering of numerous instances of pedophilia both in art and life) are abetted by his indifference to Lolita the human being for the sake of his imagination-concocted Lolita the nymphet. It is his perpetual ability to look the other way that renders him a criminal and a criminally bad artist: “I always preferred the mental hygiene of noninterference. Now, squirming and pleading with my own memory, I recall that on this and similar occasions, it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita’s states of mind while comforting my own base self.... But I admit that a man of my power of imagination cannot plead personal ignorance of universal emotions” (287).

Humbert’s artistic delusion is pierced with the aid of the novel’s parodic doubling, which presents a mirror in which the trite and clichéd confronts its own reflection, recognizing its insufficiencies such that it can attempt to transcend them. This is the mechanism behind the existence of the vulgar Clare Quilty, whom Humbert ritualistically eliminates as that part of himself that is in bad taste before endeavoring to correct aesthetically the damage he has caused; and behind the playful undercutting of the reader’s expectations, by which recognizable generic conventions are presented, and then with a wink taken in unexpected directions.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Appel proposes that the targets of the novel’s parodic devices are the reader’s expectations: “The novel becomes a gameboard on which, through parody, Nabokov assaults the conventions and the worst pretensions of his readers” (“*Lolita*: The Springboard of Parody” 221). Although Nabokov himself states

### PIA PERA'S LO AND FOUL PLAY

In a statement issued through her publisher, Pia Pera suggests that her literary experiment in *Lo's Diary* has been legitimized by Nabokov's text itself, by its intertextuality, its parodic playfulness and encouragement to join its literary games: "All I did was to accept Nabokov's challenge, his implied invitation to a literary tennis match that, it seems to me, has a long and well established tradition behind it." Pera reads Humbert's tongue-in-cheek bemoaning of his own maleness – "Oh, that I were a lady writer who could have [Lolita] pose naked in a naked light" – as just such an invitation (quoted in Blumenthal). Pera's response to this provocation, then, is to follow with meticulous precision every detail of the original text, attempting to reconstruct it through the vision of the teen-age girl.

In creating a parody of Nabokov's *Lolita*, Pera attacks precisely the book's belief in the ethical value of aesthetics. In its anti-aesthetic stance, Pera's text is rabidly postmodern; her parody attempts to undermine what might be called the modernist cliché of elitist aestheticism. The fact that Pera's novel is formally unassuming (it was critically panned for its lackluster writing) merely underscores the distrust in aesthetics that informs its content.

According to Morson, parody woos an audience to its side in its battle with its target by recontextualizing the original: "Parody aims to discredit an act of speech by redirecting attention from its text to a compromising context" (113). The attention redirected in this case being that of the reader, Morson's theory of parody radically diverges from that of the Russian Formalists, who argue that, in contrast to satire, which attacks extraliterary vices, parody assaults textual matters, specifically style or artistic method. For Tynyanov, parody's strictly literary aim is the rejuvenation of outdated forms, and it, rather than political or social change, drives the process of literary evolution.

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that "satire is a lesson, parody is a game" (*Strong Opinions* 75), there is a lesson in Nabokov's ludic web – namely, how to be a less complacent, more attentive reader.

Yet even when attacking purely rhetorical devices, parody undermines the ideologies and philosophies relying thereupon. And so, for Morson, and Bakhtin, on whose concept of double-voicedness Morson's theory of parody rests, parody's focus on context and its orientation toward an audience render it not so much a meta-literary, formal matter as a manner of acting and being in the world, of bringing art into the world external to it. In *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, Linda Hutcheon builds on this conception, suggesting that postmodern parody is always ideological: “[T]he parodic appropriation of the past reaches out beyond textual introversion and aesthetic narcissism to address ‘the text’s situation in the world’” (116). In the postmodern period, then, parody takes on functions previously fulfilled by satire. Implicating an original work in ideological contexts excluded by the work’s author, parody exposes ideological ramifications and ousts the author as arbiter of meaning. Postmodern parody attacks modernist “elitism” by breaking down the border between high and low culture and “restoring to literature [a pre-modernist] ‘awareness of [its] sexual-, racial-, and class-content’” (Hutcheon 81). With respect to sexual content, Pera’s text attempts to accomplish precisely that.

Pera is troubled by Humbert’s (or is it Nabokov’s?) belief in his power to destroy and then aesthetically reassemble reality; his seeming presumption that reality will not resist these machinations. The power relationship thus envisioned between the author and his subject takes on extra significance when viewed in terms of gender dynamics: the source-text’s author after all, marked by the text as male, wields enormous power to aesthetically create, redeem, or immortalize his female-marked object. To negate this authorial control, Pera’s text renders the moral-aesthetic apotheosis at the end of the original story impossible in several poignant ways:

- 1) Pera’s most significant blow against Humbert’s project of resurrection through creative memory is not so much her Lo’s vapidity and deplorable accessibility, but the very fact of her physical survival. Unlike Nabokov’s, Pera’s Lolita does not die in childbirth. Moreover, Lo’s own story is not published posthumously, and so can in no way be regarded as some attempt to live on in art. Pera seems to suggest that Nabokov’s novel needed to kill off the heroine first so that it can later accomplish her aesthetic

resurrection. In response to John Ray's explanation as to why he and her stepfather had her declared dead in their version – “It was my suggestion,” says Ray. “[R]eaders like stories with a moral.” – Lo retorts: “You mean those in which the characters can't have other stories?” (*Lo's Diary* 4). Allowing Lo to live and persevere, the author obviates the very idea of aesthetic immortalization, implicitly rejecting Humbert's claim to any justification for his writing that is not completely self-serving.<sup>18</sup> If Lolita can survive without anyone's help, then why does one need art at all?

2) By turning over the narrator's role to a teen-age girl, an angry and coarse-spoken one intent on “telling it like it is,” Pera removes the layer of literariness and style that is supposed to redeem this story otherwise interpretable as *obscene*; thus, after all, was Nabokov's book originally received by inattentive and conservative readers, who were interested not in the position of the author or the redeeming quality of the novel's language, but only in the obvious fact of its obscene topic. Nabokov, who held obscene language to be in bad taste, clothes his obscene subject in the heavy drapery of literary stylization, layers of metaphor and image, pathos, tragedy (“The tragic and the obscene exclude each other,” he asserts [*Selected Letters* 184]), and finally various dimensions of parody. For her part, Pera deplores pretensions to good taste that obscure the obscene, instead purposefully affirming it; she exposes Lolita “in a naked light” in all her vulgarity and the affair in all its sordidness. No details are spared.

According to Baudrillard, obscenity is a postmodern condition commencing “when there is no more spectacle, no more stage, no more theater, no more illusion, when everything becomes immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication” (21). This complete access to information is what Nabokov's text denies: Lolita remains a shimmering, enigmatic, unattainable image that can never be fully possessed or apprehended. Pera's revision, by contrast, renders both text and heroine infinitely accessible. This absence of mystery, moreover, constitutes an ideological stance; denuding and availability are not shortcomings but principles of Pera's work.

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<sup>18</sup> Incidentally, in Pera's rendition, the incestuous stepfather also survives unchanged in his pursuit of forbidden pleasures, a fact clouding any possible instantiation on his part of transformation-through-memoir-writing, and rendering the question of life through art, in his case, not so pressing a concern.

3) As Pera herself admits, she is a (willfully) bad reader of Nabokov's story. Disappointing Nabokov's hope for an implied ideal reader who will understand his encoding of the text and enjoy the aesthetic experience it affords, Pera takes the story, as she puts it, "at face value." Her removal of Nabokov's characters, again in Pera's words, "out of Nabokov's world"<sup>19</sup> entails a travestying<sup>20</sup> thereof, as is readily seen in Lo's killing of small animals and Humbert's toothless mouth. Humbert and Lolita appear differently at different points in Nabokov's novel; Pera's characters, on the other hand, are static and two-dimensional, the traits suggested by Humbert's narrative now exhibited in caricaturishly hyperbolic form. Pera's Lo is an exact reproduction of the image Humbert creates at his worst moments, those when his aestheticism and curiosity are at their nadir and his self-deception and egoism their zenith. This skin-deep, two-dimensional portrayal of the girl renders any self-realization on the part of an artist, any epiphanic coming-to-terms with the mysterious subjectivity and autonomy of Lolita, completely impossible, for this Lo lacks the depth that would make her immortalization either attainable or worthwhile. In Pera's Lo there is neither "garden," nor "twilight," nor "palace gate"; there are no "dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to" Humbert and to us, his readers. All that remains are "awful juvenile clichés."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Lo's vulgarity and cynicism do not appear as the result of Humbert's violation, but exist *a priori*. In creating such a brash Lo, Pera disempowers Humbert. Her purpose is to show that Humbert is powerless to deprave and destroy, or by

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<sup>19</sup> As Pera told a lecture audience, "I incarnate [Nabokov's] bad reader, a character who takes the story at face value and takes on a life of her own. I take Lolita out of Nabokov's world" (quoted in Manus).

<sup>20</sup> The "elaborative type," as mentioned at the beginning of this essay, is not uncommon; twentieth- and twenty first-century examples of the borrowing of literary characters and retelling of plots from their perspective include Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, and Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone*. One wonders whether the vituperation the "elaboration" occasionally elicits, as in the case of *Lo's Diary*, is due to a kind of unspeakable crisis of origin. That is, characters in the "elaboration" are like clones, replicating their originals in form, but diverging from them in substance. And objections to the existence of clone characters in literature have their analogies to arguments against the cloning of humans; there is the religious argument (the author is a God, the imitation of whom constitutes "satanic pride"); the medical-cautionary one, warning of the possible defects pursuant to tinkering with genetics/origins; and the secular/ethical objection that cloning of people/characters might reduce their uniqueness.

<sup>21</sup> Nabokov's text reads: "I simply did not know a thing about my darling's mind and ... quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate – dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me, in my polluted rags and miserable convulsions" (284).

the same token, to redeem and resurrect, Lolita; and the same goes for Nabokov and his aesthetic project.

Several reviewers of *Lo's Diary* suggested that a sexually ravenous, dirty-talking Lo, one who is not used by Humbert but herself does the using, is unbelievable and thus aesthetically unmotivated. But this objection is beside the point; I would stress rather that such constant attention to sexual matters, to the life of, as Bakhtin has it, the “lower body stratum,” is a weapon in Pera’s ideological assault upon aestheticism. Let us recall the foregrounding of the body in the Bakhtinian interpretation of the medieval carnival.<sup>22</sup> In the culture of the marketplace, the body’s centrality “is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body” (Bakhtin 19). The sublimation of the bodily to which Bakhtin here alludes is part of the mechanism by which ecclesiastical authority and social hierarchy established themselves: those who were in charge of their own physical nature laid claim to control those who were not, who still resided in a natural state. The carnival focus on the body represents a return to the universal and natural as opposed to the socially-constructed and hierarchical: “[T]he body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people’s character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized” (Bakhtin 19). Pera’s subversion-via-vulgarity assault upon Nabokov’s authorial domination, then, proceeds much as, in Pierre Bourdieu’s interpretation of Bakhtin, the carnivalesque popular imagination reacts against social elites with “a strategy of reduction or degradation, as in slang, parody, burlesque or caricature, using obscenity or scatology to turn arsy-versy, head over heels, all the ‘values’ in which the dominant groups project and recognize their sublimity … reduc[ing] the distinctive pleasures of the soul to the common satisfactions of food and sex” (Bourdieu 491). The insertion, in *Lo's Diary*, of painfully specific descriptions of Lolita’s sexual life into Nabokov’s plot represents a reinstatement of the triumphant *natural*, its escape from the artful control of the original author; Pera’s is a rebellion against Nabokov’s claim to creative authority and an attempt

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<sup>22</sup> My comparison of Pera’s use of the body to the role of corporeality in marketplace culture was inspired by Hutcheon’s discussion of the similarities between modern metafiction and Bakhtinian carnival parody (72).

at liberation of his readers, who in the original text are supposed to follow the author in awe and marvel at his magic.

In order to accomplish this overthrow, Pera defends bad taste, reinterpreting the lack of aesthetic discernment as a pathway to truth, which for its part is here reconceptualized as not an affirmation of particular values, but the absence of pretense to *having* values. In Pera's work, aesthetic refinement equals deception; her characters are divided into truthful, that is, unpretentious and unrefined, and those with pretensions to good taste. While in *Lolita*, Charlotte Haze could be read as yet another double of Humbert, especially in her propensity to write confessional letters, Nabokov's novel upholds a distance between them. It is by eliciting the recognition that her suburban-housewife tastes, which Humbert abhors, are not that far from the tastes of the self-proclaimed aesthete that Nabokov's text deflates its protagonist's would-be aesthetic superiority. Pera's book reduces to naught the difference between Humbert's aestheticism and Lo's mother's pseudo-refinement (an imitation of societal conventions); for both, refinement and good taste become the window-dressing behind which they hide their revolting habits from others and, most significantly, from themselves. In several instances Pera's Lo directly compares Humbert to her mother, whom she calls Plasticmom, specifically referencing their shared disinclination to distinguish between truth and falsehood (136, 149). Lo's truth lies in the absolute rejection of refinement and good taste and, along with them, any claim to moral values; for example, Lo's disillusionment arises not because her parent insists on being her lover, but because her lover unromantically demands to be acknowledged as her parent.

One of the most telling moments in this respect is Pera's explanation for the episode in *Lolita*, much analyzed by critics, of the eponymous heroine's crying. In Nabokov's novel, Lolita's nightly sobs, which her stepfather chooses to ignore, compromise Humbert's claims to superior vision and devotion to aesthetic harmony:

We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, 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. (*Lolita* 176)

In Pera's novel, Lo's crying comes across not as an unconscious indictment of Humbert's limitations as artist and human being but as a conscious rebellion against Humbert's pretenses:

I don't care one bit about a stupid dance with a stupid Frenchman in a jacket and bow tie who is pretending to be my father, and as soon as we get back to the room, in a fury at this ridiculous scene acted out in front of the exclusive clientele of the hotel with dinner and dancing, prix-fixe all inclusive, I start crying hysterically and in my frenzy beat my head against the wall. (*Lo's Diary* 138)

The two quoted passages both refer to sobbing. But in Nabokov, Lolita cries in solitude, waiting till after she thinks Humbert is asleep to give expression and outlet to her distress. Not meant for an audience, the sobs are a glimpse into that part of Lolita that transcends her stepfather's control and design; as such, they are dangerous to Humbert's self-conception as artist, if not to the success of his crime. In the second quote, by contrast, the sobs are ostentatious and forceful, accompanied by strategic wall-banging, which could draw not only Humbert's attention but, perilously, that of other hotel guests as well. While in the second instance, the sobbing has the potential to expose Humbert, the first describes exposure of a more subtle nature: the hollowness of Humbert's pretensions are revealed both to himself and to his readers.

While, as mentioned, *Lo's Diary* blurs the distinctions Nabokov draws between Humbert and Lolita's mother, Pera's novel "corrects" the source-text's doubling of Humbert and Clare Quilty, here called Gerry Sue Filthy. Not "clearly guilty" (as Appel [*Lolita* ix] etymologizes Nabokov's character), Filthy shares with Humbert neither pedophilic tendencies nor mock-refinement; his playacting is precisely that – part of his repertoire as an actor and playwright – rather than the pretension to be someone he is not. Lo latches on to him as she finds his lack of refinement refreshing, and sees in him

potential salvation from the unnatural, inauthentic life she leads with Humbert. Filthy is able to fulfill this role because he does not seek to sexually exploit Lo, but only engage in some wholesome fun at Humbert's expense and bestow freedom upon his poor captive. Everyone is a bad artist in Pera's book, but some pretend to be good, while others are reconciled to their own bad taste. Crime exists, but it does not hinge on poor judgment.

#### *LO AND LAW: DMITRI NABOKOV'S LAWSUIT*

Dmitri Nabokov's initiation of a copyright infringement lawsuit against Pera's book constituted an attempt to revitalize his father's correlation between crime and bad taste. Copyright laws do not differentiate whether intellectual property theft is committed in good taste or bad, but both Dmitri Nabokov and his lawyer allowed themselves to muddle their legal arguments with constant references to the poor quality of *Lo's Diary*. In documents filed in court Pera's novel was branded "inferior and amateurish merchandise" (quoted in Blumenthal), and in an interview, Nabokov's lawyer Peter Skolnik stated that "number one, it is a very bad book," describing it subsequently as "vulgar," "badly done," "lewd," "tawdry," "cheap," and "crass" (quoted in Manus). The aim of such characterizations, albeit an unstated, possibly unconscious one, seems to be the reassertion of the parallel – irrelevant in law, but vital in the context of Vladimir Nabokov's aesthetics – between crime and bad taste.

The heading of Dmitri Nabokov's foreword, "On a Book Entitled *Lo's Diary*," recalls his father's afterword "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," written to accompany *Lolita*'s first appearance in the U.S. (in the form of excerpts published in *The Anchor Review* in 1957). Undoubtedly, this *apologia* for *Lolita*, which features some of Nabokov's major pronouncements on aesthetics, was meant to preempt the negative reaction of hostile readers; considering the difficulties encountered in publishing the book, Nabokov's concerns in this regard seem justified. The afterword was necessary, and the text unable to speak for itself, because of a readerly unsophistication afoot that refused to distinguish between bad fiction and sublimely ethical art.

In this connection, Pia Pera stands, to Dmitri Nabokov, as a glaring object lesson on the phenomenon of the inattentive reader, her interpretation of *Lolita* allowing him to reiterate the concept of aesthetic value so central to his father's oeuvre. The son's method of paying Pera back for being a bad reader of his father is to badly read *her* novel, willfully refusing to acknowledge its parodic distancing. While the lawsuit hinged upon disproving parodic purpose (under the fair use clause, a protected category), I would argue that the threat of parody – that is, the fact that *Lo's Diary* represents not merely an imitation, but also an ideological challenge – is precisely what inspired these legal proceedings in the first place. In Vladimir Nabokov's work, parody transcends that which is clichéd and criminal; hence it provokes both aesthetic and ethical questioning, and constitutes a potent form of attack. In Pera's parody, what is under attack is the validity of Nabokov's aesthetic views. The strongest defense against parody, meanwhile, is to not acknowledge it as such, to ignore its ideological critique. When Dmitri Nabokov writes that feminists had "mixed feelings" about the *Lolita* that emerges in Pera's novel as, in his words, a "calculating harpy" ("On a Book Entitled *Lo's Diary*" viii), he is making the case that *Lo's Diary* fails to ideologically transform. (The implication being that all that is left is imitation.) In this narrow regard, he is right, of course; Pera's parody is not motivated by feminist critique. But, as Dmitri Nabokov must have understood, the book *does* have a transformative program; hence my assertion that his objection was not so much to its potential damage to its source-text's *monetary* value, but rather its parodic challenge to the aesthetic *value system* of that source-text.

Using Pera's novel's non-feminism to deny any parodic purpose on the part of the work, and so to treat it merely as a copyright infringement, an unlicensed, and poor, reproduction of a superior artifact, Dmitri Nabokov ignores its critique. Beyond this, however, he uses the opportunity of his foreword to defend his father's aesthetic philosophy against Pera's attack, using Pera's own case for support. Pointing to Pera's obscene reading of his father's novel, which rejects aesthetic judgment as a saving grace, Dmitri Nabokov argues that such a dismissal of aesthetics is in fact a crime. His use in his preface of the initials "PP" for Pia Pera, reminding us of the "H. H." of Nabokov's novel, suggests that akin to H. H., PP is a parasite who has used and abused *Lolita*: "Outright piracy persists in Russia, and in the Western world, as some readers may know, one Pia

Pera (henceforth ‘PP’), an Italian journalist, author of some stories that I have not read and of a translation of *Eugene Onegin* into Italian which I have, decided to seek inspiration, fortune, and fame from a book called *Lolita*” (vii). Although in this foreword Nabokov abstains from explicitly labeling Pera’s novel an inferior work of art, the derisive tone is unmistakable; his low estimation of the book is summed up in his recounting of how Pera, upon completion of her manuscript, sent it to him for approbation, receiving no reply: “Pera did send her text to me in Sardinia. While there was no mention of permission or copyright, hope seemed to glimmer for evaluation and support from me. I try to be a nice guy. I did not know how to reply and therefore, if I recollect correctly, said nothing” (ix). The aspersion-muting politeness implied here does not prevent Dmitri Nabokov from stating that permission for publication of *Lo’s Diary* was granted “regardless of its literary merit” (ix), clearly judged in this view to be low.

Dmitri Nabokov’s obvious revulsion toward Pera’s work turns his discussion of copyright and the infringement thereof into a metaphor for the aesthetic value of superior artifacts such as his father’s novel.<sup>23</sup> “Is *Lolita*,” he asks, “to pay this price because it is too good, too famous?” Despite the fact that “this” is before his reader in the form of the book thus foreworded, we are left to guess exactly what “price” it is that *Lolita* is forced to pay; but it seems clear that Dmitri Nabokov approaches the fate of his father’s book as Vladimir Nabokov treats the plight of Lolita – as the objectification and utilization of an autonomous being for criminally sordid purposes. Thus for Nabokov *fils*, the intertextual life of *Lolita*, in all its uses and abuses, continues the themes explored in the book. No wonder Pera retorts that in his foreword, the son plays the role of his father’s double; this foreword also tells the story of the downfall of a bad artist. The question remains, however, whether Dmitri Nabokov, by recognizing *Lo’s Diary*, albeit grudgingly, and bringing it with his foreword into the familial and even thematic orbit of *Lolita*, might in fact have provided it with an aesthetic afterlife, an aesthetic redemption, that it would likely not have enjoyed on its own, precisely because of its ideological hostility toward such a possibility.

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<sup>23</sup> Nabokov in fact stresses his unwillingness to benefit financially from the lawsuit; his portion of the proceeds from the publication of *Lo’s Diary* were to go to the International Pen Club. This potential beneficiary’s status as promoter of literature and defender of writers’ freedoms foregrounds a principled correlation between aesthetics and ethics, inasmuch as the club’s dedication to the cultivation of aesthetics is driven by ethical imperative.

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