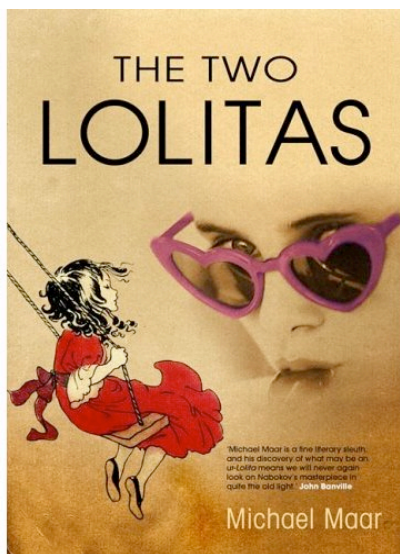


***The Two Lolitas*, by Michael Maar. Trans. Perry Anderson. Trans. of Appendix: Will Hobson. Verso, New York, 2005; 107 pp. Appendix: Two Stories by Heinz von Lichberg: “Lolita” and “Atomite.” Bibliography. \$23 (cloth).**



In the opening chapter of his book *The Two Lolitas*, Michael Maar claims that the origin of Nabokov’s *Lolita* “has elements of the fantastic about it — indeed, may sound like a tall tale. Yet no over inventive author but rather life itself is responsible for [the story’s] volutes and arabesques. It is a true story, and we will begin with its end” (4). Thus Maar sets up his project of proving that Vladamir Nabokov purposefully incorporates details from the short story “Lolita” by Heinz von Lichberg’s into his own novel of the same name. While Maar succeeds in presenting an original thesis backed by convincing evidence, the style with which he does so is exaggerated and full of gratuitous and clichéd metaphors which detract from the overall effectiveness of his book.

Maar organizes his investigation into the connection between Nabokov’s and Lichberg’s *Lolitas* as though it were a mystery novel. He writes: “A cultivated man of middle age recounts the story of his *coup de foudre*. It all starts when, traveling abroad, he takes a room as a lodger. The moment he sees the daughter of the house, he is lost. Heedless of her tender age, he becomes intimate with her. In the end she dies, and the narrator—marked by her forever—remains alone. The name of the girl supplies the title of the story: ‘*Lolita*.’ It is the ninth of the fifteen tales in the collection *The Accursed Gioconda* [by Heinz von Eschwege-Lichberg], and it appeared forty

years before its famous homonym” (11). After outlining the similarities in plot between the two stories, Maar proposes three possible explanations for these similarities: coincidence, cryptomnesia (unconsciously incorporating previously read material into one’s own work) or “higher cribbing” (85). He discounts the first two possibilities and argues for the third: that Nabokov had indeed read Lichberg’s work, and intentionally incorporated Lichberg’s themes and characters into his own, “higher” work.

To prove this, Maar moves from outlining the similarity in the plots and titles of Nabokov’s and Lichberg’s works to a consideration of how the biographies of the two authors could further substantiate the link. He argues that the two authors would likely have crossed paths since both lived in southwest Berlin until 1937. Since Lichberg was a prominent reporter in Berlin during this time, it is probable that Nabokov would have at least been familiar with his work (18).

Maar goes on to show that the similarities between the stories go beyond their shared plot and title. They both contain a demonic theme: Lichberg’s “Lolita is under a curse and a demonic repetition compulsion” (35). Similarly, in *Lolita*, Humbert is put under a spell by Annabel and can only escape “by allowing [Annabel] to rise again in Lolita” (37). In both stories, there are “twins” as well. These are the literal twins of Lichberg’s version, and Humbert and Quilty who are figuratively twinned through their rivalry for Lolita in Nabokov’s version. Finally, both stories end in the death of Lolita. “Lichberg’s Lola is murdered shortly after the death of her daughter. Nabokov’s Lolita dies in the weeks following childbirth, having given issue to a still born girl” (39).

Towards the end of his investigation, Maar draws in evidence from other stories by both Lichberg and Nabokov. For example, he outlines the striking parallels between the plot of Lichberg’s story “Atomit” and Nabokov’s play “The Waltz Invention.” Maar discusses how the names of several characters in Nabokov’s novels *Ada* and *Look at the Harlequins!* play on Lichberg’s own name, or on the name of one of his characters. He argues that accepting the link between Nabokov and Lichberg “becomes almost irresistible” when we read the screenplay of *Lolita* that Nabokov wrote in 1960. Nabokov includes sentences such as, “Hold it Lolita, no waltzes”; “in the early light, a smile plays over her flickering lips, like that of a little Gioconda” and “aren’t you kind of Spanish, Lolita?” (quoted in Maar 75), all of which seem like overt references to Lichberg’s work. Interestingly, Maar also draws a link between the Walzer brothers

in Lichberg's "Lolita" and the set of twins found in a story called "The New Neighbour" which he says that Nabokov wrote. It is unclear, however, where Maar found this story because it appears that Nabokov wrote no such story.

Maar concludes with the assertion that Nabokov's use of details from Lichberg's work is not a case of plagiarism because Nabokov elevates the details he uses to an entirely new level. He suggests that by recognizing the relationship between the two authors, we learn something about the interplay between "high and light" literature in Nabokov's work, something about Nabokov's relationship to Germans and something about his "art of controlling and sometimes misleading his admirers" (76).

Maar presents convincing evidence to support his claim that Nabokov created an intentional correspondence between his *Lolita* and Lichberg's "Lolita." The author also proposes convincing reasons why this is a productive way to read *Lolita*. He includes two stories by Lichberg in the appendix, which is helpful for the reader who is likely to be unfamiliar with these works. Despite these strengths, however, Maar's book also has several shortcomings. The style Maar uses to present the links between the Nabokov and Lichberg's works partially obscures the strength of his argument. In what appears to be an attempt to heighten the suspense of the mystery he is unveiling, Maar introduces information at the beginning of the study without exploring its full significance until later in the book. Rather than proceeding in a linear fashion, his argument is presented in a circular manner. He raises Nabokov's play "The Waltz Invention" as evidence early on in the book, but only completes his consideration of it in the final chapter. Similarly, he proposes details about Lichberg's involvement with the Nazi party in the chapter "Little Lotte and the Fuhrer" but does not fully explore the significance of this with respect to his argument until the final chapter, "Atomite and the Wizard of Os." While this technique does create a sense of foreshadowing, it also makes his argument seem unorganized and redundant at times.

Another problem with Maar's writing style is his excessive use of metaphor throughout the book. He refers to Nabokov's *Lolita* as the "black swan" of literature, and Lichberg's "Lolita" as the "ugly duckling." Later, he claims that if Lichberg fashioned his story with "linen, wood, paper and string," Nabokov "used similar materials but out of them he fashioned a kite that would vanish into the clear blue air of literature" (76). Perhaps these metaphors work in their

original, but in English they appear trite and distract the reader from the overall strength of Maar's argument.

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