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**MAKING HISTORY FROM THE FUTURE:  
*LOLITA* AND PROUST'S CAHIER 36**

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What is history? Dreams and dust.

Vladimir Nabokov

*On finit un jour par la connaître sur les lieux  
mêmes où tant de fois on feignait de ne pas la voir.  
C'est l'Histoire!*

Marcel Proust

**I**n *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, Marcel<sup>1</sup> recounts finding Albertine “tossing up and catching again at the end of a string a weird object which gave her a look of Giotto’s

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\* I am indebted to a number of Proust scholars who helped me rule out the tantalizing possibility that Nabokov might have seen the contents of Proust’s Cahier 36. I am especially grateful to Pyra Wise, who answered my Proust-related questions with patience, solicitude, and reams of documentation. Additionally, Joseph Brami, Bernard Brun, Nathalie Mauriac Dyer, Emily Eells, Marion A. Schmid, Katharine Streip, and Inge Wimmers shared their expertise with me. Brian Boyd assisted me with his characteristic generosity on the Nabokov side. I am also grateful to my colleagues at Carleton University who helped me in various ways to write this essay: Siobhain Bly Calkin, Brian Johnson, Catherine Khordoc, Julie Murray, Franny Nudelman, and Janice Schroeder.

The first epigraph constitutes the opening lines of Nabokov’s review published under the title “Mr. Masfield and Clio” on December 9, 1940 in *New Republic*, 808-9, and reprinted in the recently published collection of Nabokov’s writings under the title *Think, Write, Speak: Uncollected Essays, Reviews, Interviews, and Letters to the Editor*, ed. Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019, p. 148. The second epigraph appears in Cahier 2 of Proust’s exercise books for the *Search*. Published in “Cahiers Marcel Proust, Nouvelle série 6,” *Études proustiennes*, vol. 1, Paris: Gallimard, 1973, p. 306, it is a preliminary sketch for what will become Marcel’s extended reflection on the Muse of History in *Albertine disparue* (*SLT* 5.918-19; *RTP* 4.254-55). English-language citations of Proust’s novel refer to the six-volume edition of *In Search of Lost Time* translated by C. K. S. Moncrieff, T. Kilmartin, and A. Mayor, and revised by D. J. Enright, New York: Modern Library, 2003. They are identified by the acronym *SLT* followed by volume and page numbers. French citations refer to the second Pléiade edition published in four volumes, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié, Paris: Gallimard, 1987-1989. In-text references to these editions are identified by the acronym *RTP* followed by volume and page numbers. All translations from so-called Esquisse XIII are mine.

‘Idolatry.’” He identifies this “weird object” as a “diabolo,” and observes further that it “has so fallen into disuse now that, when they come upon the picture of a girl playing with one, the commentators of future generations will solemnly discuss, as it might be in front of the allegorical figures in the Arena Chapel, what it is that she is holding” (*SLT* 2.637; *RTP* 2.241).

In Proust’s Cahier 36, an analogue to this “weird object” might cause similar perplexity to “commentators of future generations.” This time, the “diabolo” is a character who never made it into the definitive text of *À la recherche du temps perdu* but who seems to have surfaced, via some clandestine crossing of literary borders, in Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Though in Cahier 36 he serves as a foil to Swann, for readers of *Lolita* he bears a striking resemblance to Humbert Humbert:

*Tandis que le fameux faux savant Humberger, dit Humberg, dit Hum, qui faisait semblant de détester le monde et n’aimait que cela, prenait toujours en entrant dès l’antichambre un air effaré, navré de pouvoir rencontrer des gens, confus d’être en veston et roulant des yeux timides et sauvages qui s’adoucissaient en tendres souris à toutes les princesses qu’il apercevait et à qui il faisait signe qu’il était trop timide pour aller près d’elles, Swann qui arrivait généralement vers la même heure faisait un parfait contraste avec lui. (RTP 4.677)*

Whereas the notorious *faux savant* Humberger, also known as Humberg, also known as Hum, who pretended to hate society but cared for nothing else, put on a frightened air as soon as he made his entrance, worried by the possibility of running into people, embarrassed by the fact that he was wearing a jacket and rolling his eyes—at once timid and savage—that softened into tender smiles towards all the princesses within his notice and to whom he signalled that he was too shy to approach them, Swann, who usually arrived approximately at the same time as he did, served as his perfect antithesis.

This passage appears under the title “Esquisse XIII,” a rubric used by the Pléiade editorial team for the sake of imposing a semblance of order upon the draft materials that never made it into

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<sup>1</sup> Because Proust’s narrator identifies himself as “Marcel” hypothetically on one occasion, scholars have been reluctant to refer to him in this way. Some scholars call him either “the Narrator” or “Marcel,” but most scholars refer to him exclusively as the Narrator. In keeping with Nabokov in his lectures on Proust, I refer to Proust’s narrator as “Marcel” throughout this essay.

Proust's definitive text. Preserved at the Bibliothèque nationale, Cahier 36 [can be seen on Gallica](#) and is identified by the call number 16676 in the "Nouvelles acquisitions françaises" (NAF 16676) section of the Library's Manuscript collection.<sup>2</sup>

The puzzling affinity between Proust's "*fameux*" bogus scientist "*Humberger, dit Humberg, dit Hum*" and Nabokov's genuinely famous "Humbert Humbert" poses a number of literary-historical questions that may be productively viewed as another version of Albertine's diabolò. When the problem is viewed through the lens of this analogy, the commentators of future generations could be Nabokov's readers who might say that Proust's play on Humberger's name is more "Nabokovian" than "Proustian."<sup>3</sup> But how might we explain that Proust and Nabokov seem to be playing with a similar "weird object" at two different points of our literary history? As in the case of the anachronistic diabolò, the mysterious affinity between Proust's "*Humberger, dit Humberg, dit Hum*" and Nabokov's Humbert Humbert poses fascinating questions from the vantage point of the future.

The natural place to begin is with the phonemic coincidence itself. In Proust, the "*fameux faux savant Humberger*" pretends to be what he is not and serves as a contrast to Swann. Nabokov's Humbert Humbert also pretends to be what he is not and, as I will argue, can also serve as Swann's foil. The telegram he sends to make a reservation for himself and Dolly at The Enchanted Hunters doubles as an experiment in phonemic duplicity: "What should I put: Humbert and daughter? Humberg and small daughter? Homberg and immature girl? Homburg and child?"<sup>4</sup> When they arrive at The Enchanted Hunters, the words he addresses to "Mr. Swine" at the reception desk underscore the theme of duplicitous naming and continue to bear a remarkable resemblance to Proust's play on the name Humberger: "The name," Humbert tells Mr. Swine, "is not Humberg and not Humbug, but Herbert, I mean Humbert, and any room will do, just put in a cot for my little daughter. She is ten and very tired" (110).

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<sup>2</sup> Humberger appears on pages 11r and 12r of Cahier 36. In the spring of 1979, Bernard Brun published an *inventaire détaillé* of the contents of Cahier 36 in *Bulletin D'informations Proustiennes*, no. 9 (1979): 55-61. He mentions the "*fameux faux savant Humberger*" only in passing and as an antithesis to Swann (57).

<sup>3</sup> I am paraphrasing Brian Boyd here who was struck by this affinity as much as I was even though he was unable to provide me with a possible historical connection between Nabokov and Proust's exercise books.

<sup>4</sup> Nabokov, *Lolita*. 1955. *Novels 1955-1962: Lolita, Pnin, Pale Fire, Lolita: A Screenplay*, ed. Brian Boyd, New York: The Library of America, 1996, 1-298, p. 102. All subsequent in-text citations from *Lolita* refer to this text.

Like Proust's "Humberger," Humbert is French and goes by a number of appellations and epithets: Charlotte Haze and her friends call him "Monsieur Humbert" (33, 69), and after their marriage, Charlotte shortens his name to "Hum." He also refers to himself as "Humbert le Bel" (37), "Humbert the Cubus" (66), and "Mr. Edgar H. Humbert" (70). Proust's "*Humberger, dit Humberg, dit Hum*" also calls to mind Mrs. Pratt's gleefully careless references to Humbert as Dr. Humburg, Dr. Hummer, and Mr. Humberson (*Lolita* 166).

What do we make of this mysterious correlation between Proust's Humberger, who never makes it into the definitive form of Proust's novel,<sup>5</sup> and *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert, Nabokov's most famous literary creation? The most appealing way to interpret the correlation would be to pinpoint a moment in history when Nabokov might have seen this paragraph nestled in Proust's Cahier 36 and remembered it when he invented Humbert Humbert. Such a possibility would turn Proust's bogus scientist into a prototype of *Lolita*'s infamous narrator. However, the grounds on which such a hypothesis might be pitched are shaky if we insist that this hypothesis be anchored in an event that happened in history. Though it is not *entirely* impossible that Nabokov might have seen the contents of Cahier 36, it is extremely unlikely that he did so.

The paragraph in question made its first public appearance (under the title "Esquisse XIII") in the fourth volume of the second Pléiade edition of the *Search* published under the direction of Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 1987-9). This fourth volume was published by Gallimard in 1989, thirty-four years after *Lolita*'s debut from Olympia Press. The exercise books, along with other Proust manuscripts, remained in private hands until they were acquired by the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1962. My consultations with Équipe Proust, the group of scholars tasked with

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<sup>5</sup> Though *Humberger* does not make it into Proust's novel, the man who inspired his invention gets a fleeting mention (as "Schlumberger") in *Le Côté de Guermantes* (SLT 3.286; RTP 2.510). Léon-Gustave Schlumberger (1844-1929) was an eminent historian of Byzantium and a notorious anti-Semite whom Proust met at the salon of Geneviève Straus. In his biography of Proust, William Carter quotes the following recollection by Schlumberger: "On a stool at the feet of Madame Geneviève Straus one constantly saw the bizarre Marcel Proust, still a young man, who since then has written books admired by some and quite incomprehensible to others, including myself" (qtd. in Carter, *Marcel Proust: A Life*, with a New Preface by the Author, New Haven: Yale UP, 2013, p. 94). The original quote appears in Gustave-Léon Schlumberger, *Mes souvenirs : 1844-1928*, vol. 1, Paris : Plon, 1934, p. 305. Proust's satirical portrait of Humberger was instigated by the news that Schlumberger stood for election at the Académie Française (Jean-Yves Tadié, *Marcel Proust: A Life*, trans. Euan Cameron, Penguin, 2001, p. 509; see also Proust, *Selected Letters. Volume 2 : 1904-1909*, ed. Philip Kolb, trans. Terence Kilmartin, London : Collins, 1989, pp. 374-5, 378-9). Frederick John Harris reports that Proust never forgave Schlumberger for being an anti-Dreyfusard and quotes from the letters in which Proust refers to Schlumberger as a "blackguard [*crapule*]," "prehistoric buffalo," and "complete *imbecile*" (Frederick John Harris, *Friend and Foe: Marcel Proust and André Gide*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002, pp. 60, 63n48; Proust, *Selected Letters*, 2.375, 2.378, 2.431).

deciphering, transcribing and publishing Proust's *cahiers* at the Institut des Textes et Manuscrits Modernes (ITEM), make me pessimistic about the possibility of finding a historical link between Nabokov and Proust's Cahier 36.

Though it is unlikely that Nabokov crossed paths with Proust's niece, Adrienne (Suzy) Mante-Proust, during the time he spent in Paris as a Russian émigré, such a possibility is nonetheless tantalizing given that Mante-Proust did show pages of her uncle's *cahiers* to others. It is also at least conceivable that he heard or overheard private literary lore from those to whom Mante-Proust had shown the contents of the *cahiers*, such as André Maurois. Nabokov, for instance, did socialize with French and American literati between 1937 and 1940 when he shuttled between Paris and the French Riviera while trying to secure a teaching position in England or the United States. He was in contact with the editors of the *Nouvelle revue française* and *Mesures*; he socialized with Paul and Lucie Léon, Jean Paulhan, Jules Supervielle, Charles-Albert Cingria, Henri Michaux, Henry Church, Adrienne Monnier and Sylvia Beach.<sup>6</sup> He was working at this time with a French translator, Denis Roche, and he sold the French rights of *Despair* to Gallimard (VNRY 434, 438, 440). It is, indeed, not impossible that these contact networks might have provided an occasion for Nabokov to glimpse or hear about some of the contents of Proust's Cahier 36.

Nabokov's ears would certainly have pricked had such an opportunity presented itself, for by his late thirties Nabokov was already an avid reader and even parodist of Proust. Nabokov is on record in a letter to Véra dated 2 June 1926 as having finished reading *Albertine disparue*, and, later that same month, he praises Proust's "perfect artistry, depth, divine tongue-tiedness."<sup>7</sup> Boyd reports that Nabokov confided to Nikolai Raevski in 1930 that he "simply adored" Proust and that he had already read through all twelve volumes twice (VNRY 354). As Jane Grayson noted in 1977, Nabokov's *Camera Obscura* (1933) contained an extended parody of Proust's style and thematic preoccupations. He deleted the parody when he translated the Russian novel into English as *Laughter in the Dark* (VNRY 445).

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 434, 437. All subsequent in-text citations from the first volume of Boyd's biography refer to this text.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, ed. and trans. Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015, pp. 51, 96.

Yet in spite of Nabokov's profound interest in Proust and his circulation among Paris's networks of literary association before his escape to the United States, it is nonetheless extremely unlikely that Nabokov had seen or heard of the contents of Cahier 36. It is also important to remember that the French chapter of Nabokov's biography was a harried one. His time was consumed not only with writing and his efforts to secure employment beyond the shores of Europe, but also by his affair with Irina Guadanini. As Boyd tells us, his negotiations with Gallimard for *Despair* also served as cover for secret meetings with his lover (VNRV 440).

Another potential route to connect Nabokov to Proust's exercise books is Bernard de Fallois, who had access to the *cahiers* in the early 1950s when he was preparing for publication Proust's *Jean Santeuil* (1952) and *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (1954). However, Fallois did not retrieve anything from Cahier 36 in these two posthumously published works. What is more, there is no record of contact between Nabokov and Fallois until August 5, 1971, when Marie Schébéko, Nabokov's agent at the Bureau Littéraire Clairouin, wrote Véra Nabokov that Fallois was interested in publishing a great deal of Nabokov.<sup>8</sup> As any reader of *Lolita* will know, this letter postdates Nabokov's writing of the novel by two decades.

These abortive efforts to connect Nabokov to Proust's exercise books make it impossible to locate an historical occasion on which Humbert's name could have been inspired by the contents of Proust's Cahier 36. The lack of historical occasion for such an encounter gives rise to a critical melancholia that frequently attaches to literary scholarship. Though the desire to know will sometimes lead to discovery, it will—just as frequently—lead to frustration. What follows is a meditation on the promises and limitations of scholarly speculation when history refuses to yield a tangible connection between a text and what might appear to be its intertext. This meditation produces a *rhetorical* occasion for finding value and meaning even if such value and meaning cannot be located in historical influence.

### ***The Muse of History***

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<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Brian Boyd for supplying me with this information about Nabokov's contact with Fallois in the seventies. Fallois also visited Nabokov at Montreux in the spring of 1974 bearing a typescript of Gilles Chahine's translation of *Ada* (Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 644).

The brute fact of history that Nabokov is unlikely to have known about the contents of Proust's Cahier 36 is already pregnant with interpretive possibility given Proust's and Nabokov's complicated relationship with history. Marcel, for instance, declares in *Albertine disparue* that “the Muse of History” is best ignored “for as long as possible if we wish to retain some freshness of impressions, some creative power [*la Muse qu'il convient de méconnaître le plus longtemps possible si l'on veut garder quelque fraîcheur d'impressions et quelque vertu créatrice*]” (SLT 5.918; RTP 4.254). Less “exalted” than the “Muses of philosophy and art,” the Muse of History is—counterintuitively—“not founded upon truth,” but depends upon the “merely contingent” (SLT 5.919; RTP 4.254). Still, people do encounter history during moments of intellectual torpor, such as—for instance—“when suddenly they feel less susceptible to the eternal beauty” found in the carvings on an altar or a brass plate on a prie-dieu (SLT 5.918-19; RTP 4.254).

In *Le Temps retrouvé*, Marcel is made to confront an historical fact that destroys his fictional universe. Coming upon the heels of a reference to the Larivière couple, Marcel's confession is disquieting in a narrative that seems to be so deeply beholden to historical reality. Millionaire cousins of Marcel's housekeeper Françoise, the Larivières are said to have come out of retirement for the sake of working fifteen-hour days, without wages and without holiday, in the small café owned by the widow of their nephew who was killed in the trenches of northern France (SLT 6.224–25; RTP 4.424–25). Their heroic self-sacrifice moves Marcel to make a peculiar claim about his novel's relationship to history:

In this book in which there is not a single incident which is not fictitious, not a single character who is a real person in disguise, in which everything has been invented by me in accordance with the requirements of my theme [*selon les besoins de ma démonstration*], I owe it to the credit of my country to say that only the millionaire cousins of Françoise who came out of retirement to help their niece when she was left without support, only they are real people who exist. (SLT 6.225; RTP 4.424)

Marcel's confession that—with the exception of the Larivières—“everything has been invented” seems strangely at odds with the novel's legacy. Edmund Wilson, for example, asserted in *Axel's*

*Castle* that “Proust is perhaps the last great historian” of his time.<sup>9</sup>

Nabokov would have agreed that artistic inventiveness can be made to look like historical accuracy. This is a key claim in his review from 1940 of John Masefield’s *Basilissa, a Tale of the Empress Theodora*. Though Nabokov opens his review with the assertion that “history” is “[d]reams and dust,” he also asserts that an artist’s “genius” can placate Clio, the Muse of History, just as readily as an historian’s efforts “to unearth and combine all pertinent facts and details.” The implication here is similar to Proust’s claim that the Muse of History is less exalted than her sister muses of art and philosophy. According to Nabokov, the historian’s efforts to resuscitate the past are more laborious and potentially less fruitful than the artist’s capacity to “transcend all aspects of time” and thus “transform a certain remote epoch into the everlasting reality of human passions.”<sup>10</sup>

Proust’s and Nabokov’s shared tendency to ascribe greater powers of insight to art than to history is no surprise given their status as artists. Still, history plays a key role in their oeuvres. As Tadié notes, Proust loved history and his fascination with heredity was a consequence of his fascination with history.<sup>11</sup> John Burt Foster, Jr.’s comment about *Bend Sinister*’s relationship to history can be extended to the entirety of Nabokov’s corpus. As Foster writes, Nabokov responds to history “by translating the extremity of its epoch into concrete, individualized situations and images.”<sup>12</sup>

Nabokov can also be said to have shared Marcel’s reflection that “it is best to ignore” the Muse of History “for as long as possible” (*SLT* 5.918; *RTP* 4.254). Recalling his years spent in European exile, Nabokov describes how the all-consuming drama of his inner life insulated him from the sense of living in history:

As I look back at those years of exile, I see myself, and thousands of other Russians, leading an odd but by no means unpleasant existence, in material indigence and intellectual luxury,

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<sup>9</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Axel’s Castle: A Study of the Imaginative Literature of 1870–1930*, New York: Charles Scribner, 1931, p. 190.

<sup>10</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, “Mr. Masefield and Clio,” in *Think, Write, Speak: Uncollected Essays, Reviews, Interviews, and Letters to the Editor*, ed. Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019, p. 148.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Yves Tadié, *Marcel Proust: A Life*, trans. Euan Cameron, Penguin, 2001, pp. 60, 98.

<sup>12</sup> John Burt Foster, Jr., “*Bend Sinister*,” in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir Alexandrov, New York: Garland, 1995, p. 29.



among perfectly unimportant strangers, spectral Germans and Frenchmen in whose more or less illusory cities we, émigrés, happened to dwell. These aborigines were to the mind's eye as flat and transparent as figures cut out of cellophane, and although we used their gadgets, applauded their clowns, picked their roadside plums and apples, no real communication, of the rich human sort so widespread in our own midst, existed between us and them. It seemed at times that we ignored them the way an arrogant or very stupid invader ignores a formless and faceless mass of natives; but occasionally, quite often in fact, the spectral world through which we serenely paraded our sores and our arts would produce a kind of awful convulsion and show us who was the discarnate captive and who the true lord.<sup>13</sup>

Though he identifies history here as a “spectral world,” Nabokov also admits that history would often come crashing through the walls of his private life. This image of history as always present in spite of being willfully ignored bears a remarkable resemblance to the sketch that predates Marcel's ranking of the muses in *Albertine disparue*. In Cahier 2, Proust states that history dwells in the very places in which we pretended not to see it: “*On finit un jour par la connaître sur les lieux mêmes où tant de fois on feignait de ne pas la voir.*”<sup>14</sup>

But what happens when one examines the “spectral world” of history and does *not* find an answer to one's questions? This melancholy predicament animates Nabokov's commentary to *Eugene Onegin* and his invention of Kinbote in *Pale Fire*. Kinbote is unsettled by the various linguistic and thematic coincidences that seem to connect him to the dead Hazel, and these enigmatic coincidences have fueled *Pale Fire*'s so-called internal-authorship problem. In spite of his own scholarly exactitude in his work on *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov frequently engages in flights of historical fancy. Among the most beguiling is his speculative reconstruction of Pushkin's duel with the Decembrist Kondraty Ryleev in the spring of 1820 at Batovo.<sup>15</sup> More speculative still is his hypothesis that Coleridge's Abyssinian maid singing of Mount Abora in “Kubla Khan” might have been Pushkin's great-great-grandmother and, further, that Pushkin's great-great-grandfather might have been a son of Dr. Johnson's Rasselas. He justifies these dizzying conjectures with the

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<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited: Novels and Memoirs 1941–1951*, ed. Brian Boyd, New York: The Library of America, 1996, pp. 594–95.

<sup>14</sup> Proust, “Cahiers Marcel Proust, Nouvelle série 6,” p. 306.

<sup>15</sup> Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 407; Aleksandr S. Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, trans. with commentary by Vladimir Nabokov, vol. 2, New York: Bollingen, 1964, pp. 431–34.

following conclusion: “There is nothing in the annals of Russian Pushkinology to restrain one from the elaboration of such fancies.”<sup>16</sup>

### ***Going Medieval***

Nabokov’s commentary to *Eugene Onegin* and Kinbote’s commentary to John Shade’s “Pale Fire” suggest that Nabokov reflected long and hard on the matter of unexplained textual coincidences and made the most of their rhetorical and hermeneutic potential. One way to confront the status of the historically unknowable is to find some interpretive purchase in the common pool of images and concerns that Proust and Nabokov might have dipped into when assigning names to their characters or determining upon what Marcel calls “*les besoins de ma démonstration*.”

We find a precedent for such an approach in the scholarship of the Middle Ages. Medievalists are regularly confronted with texts that tell the same narratives but have no discernible causal relationship to a source text.<sup>17</sup> Though there is substantial difference in the plots and verse forms of these variants, they tell—roughly—the same story. Scholars of the Middle Ages refer to such texts as *analogue* texts and define them as texts that resemble each other in significant ways but cannot be considered as having been influenced by a common source or one another. Still, the absence of a distinct causal relationship does not lead to a critical surrender of value and meaning. Indeed, medievalist scholars such as Paul Zumthor in *Essai de poétique médiévale* (1972) and Bernard Cerquiglini in *Éloge de la variante: Histoire critique de la philologie* (1989) make a strong case that correlation is intellectually rewarding. To study analogue texts is interesting in and of itself because we see how different authors, scribes, and translators handle certain issues and to what distinctive artistic effect. Zumthor’s concept of *mouvance* describes the high degree of instability in medieval-text traditions and the inappropriateness of applying modern concepts such as “textual authenticity” as benchmarks for editorial or critical practice.

### ***Distant Reading***

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<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, “Abram Gannibal,” in *Notes on Prosody and Abram Gannibal: From the Commentary to the Author’s Translation of Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964, p. 161.

<sup>17</sup> Bound by the conventions of influence and causality, nineteenth-century philologists often imagined a source for a story’s variants and represented this imagined source in italics on the stemmata of different versions of the same story.

In what follows I approach Proust's Cahier 36 and Nabokov's *Lolita* as a medievalist might approach them from a future significantly more distant than ours. It is important to note at this juncture that such an approach is not as radical as it might appear to be. First, both the *Search* and *Lolita* already encourage a "hindsight" view: in both cases, the reader encounters a retrospective narrative of events that has already concluded. Second, this "hindsight" approach incurs the same cost that Franco Moretti identifies with "distant reading." Unlike "close reading," where analysis is treated like a theological hermeneutics focused on textual minutiae, distant reading privileges the panoramic vista where distance becomes "a condition of knowledge." Though Moretti finds this kind of "distant reading" to be highly productive for capturing the richness of the texts that convene under the rubric "world literature," he also recognizes that something significant is lost in the sweep of such a vision. As he notes, "the text itself disappears." Though Moretti acknowledges that this is nothing short of a "pact with the devil," he considers it to be an acceptable price to pay for understanding "the system in its entirety."<sup>18</sup>

Moretti's account of the promises and limitations of "distant reading" serves as a useful heuristic for what is to follow. To see the phonemic coincidence from an hypothetical distant future might reveal "the system in its entirety," or, what Van Veen calls—on the subject of unexplained coincidences—"the living organism of a new truth."<sup>19</sup> What follows, then, is predicated upon the interpretive purchase that an hypothetical medievalist might acquire by analyzing Cahier 36 and *Lolita* from the vantage point of a distant future.

### ***Fathers and Daughters***

Proust's Humberger does not play an important role in Cahier 36. He makes one more appearance before vanishing for good to make room for a narrative about Swann's futile efforts to introduce his daughter to his friends the Duc and the Duchesse de Guermantes. This narrative provides, in far more condensed form, a story that is dispersed in the definitive text over many volumes—namely, the story of Swann's careful education of his daughter in matters of art and taste, his passionate but unfulfilled desire to introduce her to his aristocratic friends, and—most poignant of all—his daughter's cruel disloyalty to his memory after his death.

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<sup>18</sup> Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, London: Verso, 2013, pp. 48-9.

<sup>19</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, in *Novels 1969-1974*, ed. Brian Boyd, New York: The Library of America, 1996, p. 288.

*Lolita* and the so-called Esquisse XIII share a number of thematic preoccupations that could be productively analysed in an expanding register of meaning and significance. At the local level, there is a remarkable similarity between Humberger's position among the high-society women of the Faubourg Saint-Germain and the social position Humbert enjoys among Ramsdale's gullible society ladies. Proust's "grotesque Humberger" cultivates a habit of social preening that is not unlike Humbert's preening during his short-lived marriage to Charlotte:

*Il donnait toujours rendez-vous dans toutes les maisons à un certain nombre de jeunes femmes qui étaient persuadées qu'il était un grand savant et se posaient en effet dans l'esprit de certains hommes du monde, en ayant l'air de se mettre toujours dans le monde à côté de l'homme le plus intelligent. Sa rudesse—feinte—les effrayait un peu. « Il faut passer là-dessus, c'est un homme si savant, » disaient-elles à Swann « Oh ! princesse si ce n'est que sa science qui vous retient, » disait Swann qui était non seulement mille fois plus intelligent mais plus instruit. (RTP 4.678)*

He always set up meetings in all the homes with a number of young women who were persuaded that he was a *grand savant* and affected the spirit of certain men of the world by always placing themselves by the side of the most intelligent man. His brutality—which was fake—scared them a little. "One must rise above such matters, he's such a learned man," they said to Swann. "Oh, princess, if it's only his learning that moves you..." said Swann who was not only a thousand times more intelligent but also a thousand times better educated.

My hypothetical medievalist of the future will not be impressed by this correlation between Humberger's manipulation of the young women of Parisian high society and Humbert's similar manipulation of Ramsdale's bourgeois matrons. She might say that these are not variants of the same basic story, but very different stories yoked together by an accidental phonemic coincidence and a shared interest in snobbery.

But perhaps there is a way to convince my hypothetical medievalist that the sketch published under the rubric "Esquisse XIII" and *Lolita* can be legitimately considered analogue

texts. For they do stage—even if loosely and even if in reverse—a version of the same dramatic situation. Both stories use a father-daughter relationship to anatomize the unthinkable and unintelligible. Though at first glance the main focus of the sketch seems to be Swann’s exquisite charm, elegance, and courtesy, its real focus is his love for his daughter. In ways that recall his love for Odette, this love makes him behave in humiliating and undignified ways. Humbert’s kinship to Proust’s Humberger might be said to go beyond the merely phonemic because Humbert also offers “*un parfait contraste*” to Swann (RTP 4.677) by inverting and perverting the love that Swann bears his daughter. In short, both Humbert and Humberger are foils to Swann. For Humbert is not only a *faux savant* (like Humberger) but also a *faux father* (unlike Swann).

Referred to throughout the sketch as “*la petite Swann*,” Swann’s daughter remains unnamed in Cahier 36. This has to do with the fact that the contents of Cahier 36 represent an early iteration of Proust’s conception of Swann’s story. As Anthony R. Pugh has noted in *The Growth of À la recherche du temps perdu*, the novel gets launched in Cahier 4, which mentions Swann’s daughter as “*la jeune marquise de Cardaillec née Forcheville*.” She is said to have both Swann and Forcheville blood and we are also told that she inherits Swann’s intelligence even if she does not honour his memory. Earlier in Cahier 4, the Narrator mentions a Mme de Forcheville whom he would visit at Combray.<sup>20</sup> These characters are developed further in Cahier 36: here, we glimpse the consequences of Swann’s unconventional marriage and his ambitions for the daughter who was the fruit of that marriage.

Though Swann’s daughter remains unnamed in Cahier 36, I will refer to her as Gilberte, the name she goes by in the definitive text. (Following the same logic, I will refer to her mother—also unnamed in the sketch—as Odette.) For those who knew Swann intimately, Gilberte’s many gifts—her intelligence, her artistic taste, her remarkable refinement—are visible markers of her paternal inheritance. On the many occasions that they spend with her, the Guermantes relive the pleasures they experienced in Swann’s charming company: “*Ella a dit comme Swann*”; “*Je croyais entendre Swann*” (RTP 4.687).

Though Humbert’s conduct toward Dolly is a travesty of the conduct expected of a father toward his child, Cahier 36 can serve as an interpretive tool for diagnosing with detailed precision

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<sup>20</sup> Anthony R. Pugh, *The Growth of À la recherche du temps perdu: A Chronological Examination of Proust’s Manuscripts from 1909 to 1914*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004, p. 7.

the promises and failures of his actions. Swann, for instance, gives his daughter “*une éducation artistique très soignée*” which endows her with a knowledge of painting and poetry far greater than the cultural education accumulated by the aristocratic families of the Faubourg St. Germain (RTP 4.686). Humbert similarly attempts to provide Dolly with a refined artistic education. When they settle in Beardsley, he tries to interest her in reading *A Girl of the Limberlost*, *Arabian Nights*, and *Little Women* (Lolita 162); when she is convalescing at the hospital in Elphinstone, he buys her “Browning’s *Dramatic Works*, *The History of Dancing*, *Clowns and Columbines*, *The Russian Ballet*, *Flowers of the Rockies*, *The Theatre Guild Anthology*,” and “Tennis by Helen Wills, who had won the National Junior Girl Singles at the age of fifteen” (Lolita 227).

The educations Gilberte and Dolly receive from Swann and Humbert help them engineer their respective escapes from them. Humbert’s permission for Dolly to participate in the staging of *The Enchanted Hunters* serves as the backdrop for her affair with the play’s author, Clare Quilty. As heiresses of Swann’s enormous fortune,<sup>21</sup> Odette and Gilberte place that fortune in the service of a quick social ascent. Odette agrees to marry the comte de Forcheville on the condition that he secure her entry into his family’s aristocratic circles (RTP 4.684). Forcheville not only delivers on his promise, but also adopts Gilberte. Adorned by a newly acquired aristocratic family name and a dowry of four million, Gilberte becomes a regular guest in the salons of the Faubourg St. Germain. When her husband suggests that they also begin to receive her, Mme de Guermantes makes no protest (RTP 4:685). As the bearer of her biological father’s social graces, Gilberte captivates the Duc and the Duchesse de Guermantes in short order. She knows, for instance, how to appreciate the art collection that they had assembled with Swann’s guidance (RTP 4.686). Her special talent to please is also part of her paternal legacy: for instance, she promises the Duchesse de Guermantes to bring back the afternoon sun *just for her* (“*vers 4 heures pour vous*” [RTP 4.687]).

### ***Love and Rhetoric***

The thematic links that I have taken as license to consider the sketch nestled in Cahier 36 as an analogue text of *Lolita* go beyond their preoccupation with father-daughter relationships. In

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<sup>21</sup> Swann’s considerable fortune triples in size during his last illness because he inherits the enormous fortune of a rich German uncle (RTP 4.684).

both texts, the father-daughter relationship serves as a springboard for a meditation on the ways in which people accommodate themselves to thoughts and actions that are—by every rational standard of moral judgment—incomprehensible. What is more, both texts seem to acknowledge that love and rhetoric are complicit in normalizing the unthinkable.

The sketch in Cahier 36 describes a situation so preposterous as to require nine pages of close social, psychological, and even political-philosophical investigation. It states that Swann had been the oldest and the most cherished friend of the Guermantes for thirty years and that he visited them *daily* for the last twenty-five years of his life (RTP 4.680, 4.684, 4.685). During his final illness, the Duke and the Duchess prove their loyalty by visiting him daily, by bringing him comforting gifts, and by spending long periods of time with him (RTP 4.682). And yet, in spite of this mutual devotion, “the Guermantes refused with greater energy than ever” to allow Swann to introduce them to his daughter (RTP 4.682). Marcel admits that such conduct is so shocking that his readers might accuse him of exaggeration.

To explain the inexplicable, Marcel goes to great lengths to provide various reasons why Mme de Guermantes adopts such an “*attitude presque militante*” (RTP 4.680) toward her friend’s ardent desire to introduce her to his daughter. The first impediment is her aristocratic snobbery toward Odette. But the explanatory power of this snobbery turns out to be limited given that other aristocratic families who are far less intimate with Swann but are no less snobbish than the Guermantes agree to receive Gilberte (RTP 4.681).

Acknowledging the insufficiency of this explanation, Marcel is moved to argue that Mme de Guermantes’ inexplicable conduct might have been driven by the same abstract principles and considerations that guide high-stakes political diplomacy. Her refusal to be introduced to Gilberte becomes analogous to a statesman’s refusal to meet during a strike with a delegation of *grévistas* on the grounds that he has nothing to discuss with them (RTP 4.681). But even this explanation is unpersuasive because he feels compelled to submit another. This time, he argues that Mme de Guermantes’ intransigence was a consequence of an ideological commitment to personal autonomy and freedom of conscience (RTP 4.683).

None of these reasons prove to be sufficient explanations, however, and this insufficiency leads Marcel to return to the earlier premise that it was snobbery that made Mme de Guermantes refuse to meet Gilberte during Swann’s lifetime. After Odette and Gilberte don the name of

Forcheville and begin frequenting the society of their adoptive aristocratic family, Mme de Guermantes concedes to her husband that “*je ne vois aucun inconvénient à ce que nous connaissions cette petite*” (RTP 4.685). After the first meeting takes place, Gilberte becomes as indispensable to the Guermantes as her father had been before her and, in a twist of heartbreaking irony, this new friendship leads to an unspoken moratorium on speaking about Swann (RTP 4.686-7). The fulfillment of his greatest desire comes at the cost of his relegation to total oblivion.

The reasons that Marcel and Mme de Guermantes invoke to explain her refusal to receive Gilberte while her father is alive strike me as incoherent as the reasons Humbert invokes to justify his conduct towards Dolly. Here is an example from Cahier 36 in which Mme de Guermantes insists to a friend that Swann cannot possibly love his daughter as much as his actions suggest: “if you wish to know what I really think, I believe that—at bottom—he doesn’t love his daughter as much as that, that his daughter and his wife put him to sleep, that he likes coming here precisely because he can forget them a little with us and that we couldn’t do anything more disagreeable for him than to invite her [*si vous voulez savoir le fond de ma pensée, je crois qu’au fond il n’aime pas tant que cela sa fille, que sa fille et sa femme l’assomment, qu’il se plaît ici justement parce qu’il peut les oublier un peu avec nous et que nous ne pourrions rien lui faire de plus désagréable que de l’inviter*]” (RTP 4.682). Mme de Guermantes brings herself to believe that she is doing Swann a favour by offering him a place of refuge from the daughter that he cannot possibly love as much as his actions indicate.

Provoked by the scandalous nature of *Lolita*’s subject matter, recent readers of Nabokov have been reluctant to certify Humbert’s claim that he loved Dolly from the moment he glimpses her sunning herself on a suburban lawn in Ramsdale. Though such readers might concede that he does experience love for her when he meets her at Coalmont, they ascribe other signifiers (such as lust, passion, or erotic desire) to refer to his feelings for her younger self. Reading this reluctance to take Humbert at his word through the lens of Mme de Guermantes’ insistence that Swann “doesn’t love his daughter as much as that” reminds us that both people and texts resist the neat nomenclatorial categories that we tend to impose upon them.

To concede that Humbert does love Dolly from the time he begins scheming to seduce her is not identical to saying that his actions toward her are morally permissible. What it does suggest is that “love,” as a signifier, is not a reliable measuring stick for moral judgment. Clio, the Muse



of History, might remind us that love is coded as exclusively virtuous and ennobling in the moral language of our particular time. The ancients and the early moderns viewed love as far more unstable than our current moment would have it. Love was viewed as a morally unreliable passion that elevated or degraded, comforted or injured. Proust knew this well. In the *Search*, love is portrayed as a beneficent attentiveness to the beloved (as in Marcel's grandmother's tender gestures of care toward him) or as a pathology (as in Swann's abject love for Odette or Marcel's jealous love for Albertine).

A medievalist looking back upon the twentieth century through the lens of the work of Proust and Nabokov might conclude that there was nothing particularly "modern" about their portrayal of love. Tadié's assertion that Proust "look[ed] upon love as a disease"<sup>22</sup> maps neatly onto Nabokov's later oeuvre in which love seeks expression in rape, incest, and pedophilia. She might also discover, with a shudder of literary-historical recognition, that Proust and Nabokov portray love as belonging to the same order of derangement as *rhetoric*. To see love and the art of persuasion as versions of the same illness is hardly modern and can be traced back to Erasmus.

In *Ciceronianus, or A Dialogue on the Best Style of Speaking* (1528), Erasmus provides us with a precedent for Proust's and Nabokov's view of love as sharing an important bond of kinship with the art of persuasion. Intriguingly, this bond of kinship is keyed into insanity. Nosoponus, the target of the dialogue's satire, has been rendered ill by his obsession with reproducing the elegance of Cicero's prose style. He explains that his relentless labor of ten-years' standing has been dedicated to "the goddess which moves men's souls," whom the Greeks call "*πειθῶ* [persuasion]." Bulephorus recognizes that there is an erotic subtext to this obsession with style, and he assures his ailing friend that he is intimately familiar with the condition that afflicts him: "I know what a powerful thing Love is and what it is to be *νυμφόληπτον*." The ancient Greek compound word that Bulephorus invokes—*nympholepton*—means "captive of a nymph."<sup>23</sup> This stitching together of the art of persuasion with imprisonment by nymphs anticipates Nabokov's self-styled nympholept who tries to captivate his readers with his eloquence.

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<sup>22</sup> Tadié, *Marcel Proust*, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *Ciceronianus; or, A Dialogue on the Best Style of Speaking*, trans. Izora Scott, New York: Columbia University Press, 1908, p. 21. For a more detailed engagement with this material, see Dana Dragunoiu, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Moral Acts*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021.

Humbert might strike us here once again as Swann's antithesis, for Swann seems hopelessly ineloquent in his efforts to convince the Guermantes to receive his daughter. In short, Swann is as poor a practitioner of the art of persuasion as Humbert is expert. Indeed, Humbert is so fiendishly successful in persuading his readers that his sexual abuse of an underage girl is a highly romantic love affair that the first reviewers of his memoir fell under his spell. Most famously, Lionel Trilling confessed that in spite of knowing that Humbert's abuse of Dolly was criminal and immoral, he was "plainly not able to muster up the note of moral outrage."<sup>24</sup> Perhaps this is, ultimately, what the medievalist from the future might discern by reflecting upon the meaning of the phonemic coincidence in *Lolita* and Proust's Cahier 36: namely, that outrage is an emotion too smug and facile when it comes to the enigmatic complexities of art and love. Though the *Search* and *Lolita* portray with confident authority what love *ought not* to be, they fail to tell us what love *is*.

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<sup>24</sup> Lionel Trilling, review of *Lolita* in *Encounter*, October 1958. Reprinted in *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Norman Page, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982, p. 94.

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