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TRANSPOSING *LOLITA*: VIRTUAL EMIGRATION

MAINTAINING NORMALITY

The intricate world of Vladimir Nabokov's writings, full of cross-references, allusions, codes and riddles, has provided fertile soil for an abundance of research and scholarly discoveries that often bend back to the author and his work.¹ Yet this ostensibly self-contained and artificial world transcends its insularity and reveals its relevance – sometimes in quite unexpected ways – to the critical concerns of our times.² A noteworthy recent

¹ For parallels with Nabokov's life and prototypes for people and places see the two major biographies: Andrew Field's *Nabokov and His Life in Art* and the two volumes by Brian Boyd, *Nabokov: Russian Years* and *Nabokov: American Years*. Dominique Desanti's *Vladimir Nabokov*, written as a second-person narrative and combining research with the author's memoirs of Nabokov in Paris, provides some quite novel perspectives on Nabokov and his work, one of them being Nabokov's relation to Jewishness, including his family traditions and personal development. Galya Diment (37-53) offers an analysis of Nabokov as autobiographer, who is well aware of the literary conventions of the genre and employs the devices identified by Russian Formalists, such as "the baring of the device."

² Nabokov's (and Sirin's) apparent disdain for politics was already identified and lauded by the early critic, Mikhail Osorgin, in 1926: "What is splendid is the absence of all political tendentiousness and that cheap journalism which spoils artistry in contemporary Russian literature, both abroad and in Russia itself"(45). Although Nabokov would not deign to engage in political affairs of his day, political affairs constantly engaged with him: his biography is marked by several flights from totalitarian regimes – from Bolshevik Russia, Nazi Germany and Vichy France – and by loss of estate, social status, and a literary career as a Russian writer and poet. The attitude toward his work was equally negative on the part of the Soviet regime and Nazi leaders. Leland de la Durantaye, who analyzes *Lolita* through Hannah Arendt's Kant, discusses a connection between the Nazi leadership and Nabokov's characters (in particular, Humbert Humbert) based on their inability to engage in empathetic thinking. Nabokov, for his part, kept all references, however obvious, strictly literary and not pinned to specific historic times and places. See, for example, Priscilla Meyer's analysis of "Cloud, Castle, Lake" (127-9).

example of transcultural relevance is provided by Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.³ The following analysis of Nabokov's *Lolita* and Nafisi's *A Memoir in Books*, as she defines the genre of her writing in the text's subtitle, approaches these two works in combination as a case study of how a literary text, which apparently goes against, rejects and ridicules all norms, turns out to be the only ground for maintaining normality in abnormal conditions.⁴

The following analysis will not so much be concerned with Nabokov's art *per se*. Rather, it will concentrate on the ways Nabokov's art communicates with the world external to it and the messages it conveys. Nafisi's book, as worthy of separate treatment as it may be, will not be interpreted for its own sake, but rather will be used as an instance of the kind of transcultural perception that is becoming more frequent in the context of globalization. This approach will also draw on Immanuel Kant's thought and its contemporary readings.⁵

The eponymous heroine of *Lolita* shares the fate of the handful of literary characters whose proper names have transcended the textual realm and entered life to name particular phenomena. Accordingly, "Lolita" does not call for quotation marks when used descriptively and does not even require knowledge of either the writer Nabokov or his novel. "Lolita" (as well as "nymphet") came to mean that little seductive thing of a girl. Nafisi's book bears testimony to this textual transubstantiation right in the title: "Lolita" is neither italicized nor distinguished in

³ Ellen Pifer offers an analysis on the subject in "The *Lolita* phenomenon," concentrating more on Nabokov and just sketching a trajectory to Nafisi. See also Leving's review.

⁴ Nabokov's fiction is instrumental in maintaining the sense of what is normal because, as Suzanne Fraysse shows, Nabokov always ensures that his texts may mimic madness, but are never mad: "Le texte nabokovien mime la folie, mais n'est pas fou, ne saurait être fou: le sillon du texte est dans le texte, la référence survient à l'acte de lecture. La hantise de la folie n'est pas pour autant conjurée" (16). Nabokov's ostensible reverence of art at the expense of reality allows him to be viewed as an artist working "beyond good and evil," in the realm where morality has no say and where aesthetic playfulness rules. Lilly calls Nabokov *homo ludens* and Dolinin discusses this definition in *Istinnaiia zhizn' pisatel'ia Sirina* (35-45). Renate Hof dedicated her book to the problem of the play of Nabokov's "unreliable narrator." See also Fowler and Wood (103-50). Playfulness as an approach to catastrophes aiming at the maintenance of normality is something that Nafisi and her students readily try themselves, for example, when they engage in a word play.

⁵ Dana Dragunoiu's article offers a trenchant Kantian analysis of *Ada* and provides many Kantian points of reference for *Lolita*.

any other way. At the same time, the reference is not merely to an underage seductress, but also clearly to a book, as is indicated by “Reading” in the title. In this context, “Lolita” comes to signify a special kind of a book that steps forward not as a singular instance, but as a distinct species of reading matter. *Lolita* belongs to a class of books that are hated as vehemently as they are admired and that appear hopelessly foreign no matter the context in which they are read and yet manage to relate to readers with a special form of intimacy.

Nafisi and her students read quite a few books in Tehran, including others by Nabokov as well as those by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jane Austen, Henry James and more. Yet *Lolita* is the book that appears in the title of this memoir. The reasons Nafisi gives for making it the primary text are straightforward:

Like *Lolita* we tried to escape and to create our own little pockets of freedom. And like *Lolita*, we took every opportunity to flaunt our insubordination: by showing a little hair from under our scarves, insinuating a little color into the drab uniformity of our appearances, growing our nails, falling in love and listening to forbidden music. (Nafisi 25-26)

In the Islamic Revolutionary Republic of Iran the marriageable age became nine and prepubescent girls were given to old men to satisfy their needs. *Lolita* is a child, but so are Iranian girls, as one of Nafisi’s students stresses in her mock address to an imagined jury: “Child, please remember, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, although this child, had she lived in the Islamic Republic, would have been long ripe for marriage to men older than Humbert” (Nafisi 43).

Yet the main reason for choosing *Lolita* as the top-billed title is because it goes “against the grain of all totalitarian perspectives” (Nafisi 35), i.e. against the all-inclusive perspectives

that do not permit any interpretations other than ones officially promulgated.⁶ It should be stressed that the novel counters every totalitarian perspective by literary means and not political ones. It ridicules all totalizing structures, such as the classical notion of fate or simplistic straightforward approaches to morality right in the process of depicting them.⁷ Like all Nabokov's novels, *Lolita* presents a carefully constructed and self-enclosed universe. At the same time, this universe opens itself to many of the major problems of the world outside its confines, including, among others, foreignness, virtual and real emigration, gender relations, the individual versus the collective (or the mass), meta-discourses (with their imitations) versus unique narratives, and the universality of subjective and objective judgments.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE JUDGMENTS

Nabokov's novel challenges easy classification precisely by its forceful combination of artistry with abhorrent subject matter.⁸ An appreciation of this contrasting engagement of ethics

⁶ How much of a despot Nabokov is himself within the world of his aesthetic creation has been one of the focal points of scholarly discussion. Maurice Couturier views him as a tyrant of an author, who carefully controls both characters and readers. This approach has been challenged by many scholars, including Brian Boyd and Ellen Pifer among others. Yona Dureau sees in Nabokov's purposefully placed "blanks" and omissions an invitation to open-ended readerly interpretations.

⁷ Within the space of the novel, Nabokov manages not only to question established norms, but also their negation. Thus, the author makes his readers seriously doubt that the moral of the story, as put by John Ray, Jr., Ph.D. in his preface to Humbert's text, is that adolescents need more attention from adults (and not the type of attention that Humbert generously bestows on Lolita) (Nabokov, *Lolita* 5). At the same time, Nabokov throws in – or, rather, buries – a hint that this is precisely the case: that fateful summer when a thirteen-year old Humbert fell in love with Annabel, his father was not there for advice and comfort. In fact, he was "touring Italy with Mme de R. and her daughter," which is a perfect germ of Humbert's involvement with Charlotte Hase and her daughter (Nabokov, *Lolita* 11).

⁸ The issue of the relationship between form and content, or between aesthetics and ethics in Nabokov's fiction has been a subject of many discussions. Page Stegner's *Escape into Aesthetics* was one of the first books on Nabokov that treated his work from the standpoint of form rather than content. Later works, such as Ellen Pifer's *Nabokov and the Novel*, "develop [. . .] the argument that Nabokov is indeed a humanist, that the emphasis on artifice in the criticism has skewed 'the question of realism' in such a way that readers have been unable to perceive the ethical concerns of the novels." (Roth, 24) According to Pifer, "The best available criticism on *Lolita* avoids [. . .] pitfalls by negotiating, rather than neglecting, the complex relationship between the novel's outrageous subject and its cunningly wrought design." ("Introduction," 10) Pifer states that her intention is "to demonstrate that even the most intricate of Nabokov's artifices reflect the author's abiding interest in human beings, not only as artists and dreamers but as ethical beings subject to moral law and sanction. Because Nabokov's characters are frequently

and aesthetics will benefit from an analysis based on Immanuel Kant's philosophy, for Kant considers aesthetics on a par with morality. He also distinguishes between the notions of "good" and "moral," treating the predicate "good" first in the Aristotelian sense, i.e. as a description of an object that is adequate to its purpose. Using the terminology of Kant's aesthetics, *Lolita* divorces the beautiful, created by means of language, from the moral, which is made ostensibly irrelevant to the plot.⁹ By doing so, it also plays with the Kantian predicates of universality and communicability. The good, according to Kant, is universally communicable because it is based on a concept: a thing is good when its particular realization accords with its purpose and concept. The beautiful, by contrast, cannot be judged conceptually, for it does not have an obvious purpose. Yet Kant states that the beautiful *is* nonetheless universally communicable, although not objectively, but subjectively, because all judging subjects are expected to agree about the purposiveness of the beautiful. Considering the antinomy of taste, or the controversy between the statements that tastes differ and that the beautiful can be seen as such universally by all judging subjects, Kant resolves it on the supersensible level (Kant, *Critique of Judgment* 29-214; 5: 337-341). Such a resolution, and with it the subjective universal communicability of the beautiful, will appear suspect to someone grounded in materialism. The objective universality of the good

charged with being mere puppets of their master, my point of departure is [. . .] 'the question of character'" (*Nabokov and the Novel*, i-ii). Nabokov's ethics are closely related to the other-worldness in his works, which is discussed in Boyd's "Nabokov's Philosophical World," Maxim Shrayner's book, *The World of Nabokov's Stories*, and treated at length by Michael Wood, who writes: "Another ground, crucial in Nabokov but very hard to discuss, is the ethical. This is the realm of the unspeakable for Nabokov, but it is none the less (or for that very reason) everywhere implicit in his work. He is neither the aesthete that he himself and his early readers kept making out he was, nor the plodding moralist that recent criticism, with an audible sigh of relief, has wheeled on to the page. Moral questions, like epistemological ones, are put to work in his fiction. Nabokov doesn't write about them; he writes them" (7). Leona Toker discusses Nabokov's ethics, aesthetics, and his non-engagé stance as well as his "Bergsonian" time in "Nabokov's Worldview." In her book, *Nabokov*, she offers broader analysis of Nabokov's humanism, discussing it in conjunction with Schopenhauer, the notion of taboo, and Bergson's approach to laughter and memory as a bridge connecting the physical and the spiritual. Brian Boyd discusses the relationship between Nabokov's style and his metaphysics and ethics in "Nabokov as Storyteller" (31).

⁹ Thus, *Lolita* is an heir to the approach first articulated by Thomas De Quincey in "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts," where he states that murder can be grasped by two aspects: the aesthetic and the moral (De Quincey, 6:114).

seems easier to grasp. Yet *Lolita* and its contemporary readings cleverly lead us to see things in a different light.

We live in a world where the precise meaning and content of concepts and purposes are constantly shifting. All of a sudden, a good passenger jet is not one that flies safely, but one that crashes and kills in the most devastating way. In such a world the objective universality of judgments about the good does not seem to hold any more. But even if conceptual objective universality may appear increasingly questionable, subjective universality turns out to be securely in place. A vivid example of the universal communicability of the beautiful can be found in Nafisi's book, and it concerns neither Nabokov nor even literature, but cinematic art. Here is her description of the phenomenon of Andrei Tarkovsky's cinema in the Islamic Revolutionary Republic of Iran¹⁰:

Although the films were censored and shown in the original Russian with no subtitles, there were lines outside the cinema hours before the box office opened. Tickets were sold on the black market at many times the actual price, and fights broke out over admittance, especially among those who had traveled from the provinces for the occasion. . . .

Looking back on that time it seems to me that such rapture over Tarkovsky by an audience most of whom would not have known how to spell his name, and who would under normal circumstances have ignored or even disliked his work, arose from our intense sensory deprivation. We were thirsty for some form of beauty, even in an incomprehensible, overintellectual, abstract film with no subtitles and censored out of recognition. (Nafisi 205-206)

Art absolutely foreign to the ideology of the regime is welcomed as an art of the beautiful. The audience, consisting of intellectuals with Western proclivities, traditional poorly educated folk, Islamic revolutionaries, and men and women habitually divided in their conceptual frameworks, exhibits the Kantian universal subjective communicability when it comes to aesthetic judgments about the beautiful. Unlike the Western literature the author

¹⁰ However interesting in itself the Iranian cinema might be, during the times described by Nafisi it was reduced to mere propaganda.

teaches and that not all of her students find compelling, the visual representations conveyed by the films meet with unanimous approval.

The features Nafisi singles out about Tarkovsky put into strong relief what she and other aesthetically deprived Iranians were looking for in art in general – not only in film, but also in literature.¹¹ First of all, of course, it is artistic beauty: the beauty of language in literature and the beauty of images in film, in both cases quite abstract. Furthermore, both Nabokov and Tarkovsky are or at least are perceived as artists in exile.¹² Finally, both Nabokov and Tarkovsky are absolute foreigners to Iran: not only did they create their art in a foreign language and a foreign environment, but their foreignness has been fortified by the absence of translation in the case of films and the patent untranslatability of ethical concepts into acceptable norms in *Lolita*. Both forms call for appreciation not on the level of concepts, but on the aesthetic level.

The choice of Nabokov's *Lolita* by a group of Iranian women in their quiet opposition to a totalitarian regime signifies that subjective universality abides when objective communicability loses its trustworthiness. The concepts of the highest good for society are multifarious: Marxism, free markets, and Islamism have their ardent supporters in Nafisi's book. Each ideology exhibits, to varying degrees, rational validity, and evokes emotional responses in its respective supporters. The conceptual "good" ceases to be moral once a particular concept – in this case, Islam – becomes a ruling ideology, since its mode of securing support switches from persuasion to coercion. When it commands its norm as absolute and does not tolerate other views, this very intolerance makes the universality of concepts of the good suspect.

¹¹ Nabokov always managed to remain not fully translated – just like the untranslated films by Tarkovsky – even if read in the same language that the work was written in. First, and naive readings, uncovered probably just as much of his text as the unsupplemented visual component says about the film to the viewer who needs subtitles. Leving's "Vokzal-Garazh-Angar" provides many examples of codes and allusions that need translation.

¹² Tarkovsky is described as an "exiled Russian director" (Nafisi 205). Nabokov saw every true artist to be an émigré of sorts: "The very term 'émigré author' sounds somewhat tautological. Any genuine writer emigrates into his art and abides there." (Quoted and discussed by Dolinin, "Nabokov as a Russian writer," 57.)

On the other hand, while concepts multiply and contradict each other, the beautiful, with its evasive supersensible purposiveness, remains universal and, in that sense, reliable. Nafisi describes the variety of meta-discourses that constitute the background of the members of the reading group: her own enchantment with Marxist-Leninist discourse, some students' firm Islamic beliefs, others' fascination with America and yet others' unbending patriotism. Despite their disagreement with each other on what is "good," they are all equally capable of appreciating the beautiful: in this case, the beautiful that is conveyed first and foremost through language.¹³

FOREIGNNESS

The concepts of subjective and objective universal communicability are closely related to the concept of foreignness, for judgments are conveyed through language, and one's language is the first and immediately obvious aspect of behavior that marks a foreigner as foreign. Foreignness is recognized as such when it is presented to an otherwise homogenous environment. This presentation is, however, inevitable. In 1795, Kant asserts that since the world is a globe and therefore finite in extent, trespass is unavoidable. Thus, every person has an inherent right to be somewhere other than where he or she originally found him- or herself:

The right to visit . . . belongs to all men – the right belonging to all men to offer their society on account of the common possession of the surface of the earth. Since it is a globe, they cannot disperse infinitely, but must tolerate each other. No man has a greater fundamental right to occupy a particular spot than any other. (Kant, "To Eternal Peace" 448-449; 8:358)

¹³ Notwithstanding the probability and even provability of the existence of *Lolita's* precursors, with similar or identical names and plots, including Heinz Von Lichberg's novella (included in Maar's book), none of them has what makes *Lolita* the *Lolita* and what encompasses too many qualities to discuss in a short note, such as language, style, high comedy, a recreated America, the nature of true art and/or true love, and numerous puzzles for characters and readers to solve.

The right is restricted to visitation; therefore, the guest would always remain a foreigner. But who is a foreigner? In the globalized world of ours this question constantly rises to the surface. Are Jews foreigners in the countries where they have lived largely assimilated generation after generation? Are the people of colonies foreigners in the “mother” country? Are adepts of other than the main religious denominations foreigners in those of their homelands that are theocracies?

Nabokov’s novel takes on the question of foreignness in the figure of its hero. The mixed origins of Humbert Humbert make him foreign in practically any setting: he lives in France with a Swiss passport; he marries a Polish woman only to experience his foreignness to her “Slavic” identity and her Russian lover; and he moves to the United States to write “the comparative history of French literature to English-speaking students” (Nabokov, *Lolita* 34). When he is close to marrying Charlotte, she first wants to find out precisely how foreign he is: she can tolerate a “Turk” as one of his ancestors as long as he himself is truly Christian (Nabokov, *Lolita* 79). The Farlows, Charlotte’s friends, have a vague suspicion there may be Jewish blood in him (Nabokov, *Lolita* 83). He is a foreigner from more than one angle, and he therefore raises suspicions.¹⁴

In the case of Humbert Humbert the suspicions evoked by his foreignness become justified: he does have a dark secret to hide. But with a characteristic twist, Nabokov shows that no matter how justifiable the suspicions may be, they have nothing to do with Humbert’s foreignness. The presence of an American *Doppelgänger*, Clare Quilty, guilty of the same crime

¹⁴ In the same manner, Bulgakov’s Woland in *The Master and Margarita* arrives as a foreigner and turns out to be a devil, thus quite justifying the validity of the Soviet slogan “Never talk to strangers” (7). As Jacques Derrida remarks in *Of Hospitality*, a foreigner is perceived to be a parricide (Derrida 3-11).

of pedophilia – and, coincidentally, of anti-Semitism – shows that the line of suspicion on the basis of foreignness goes completely astray and, in fact, only obscures the picture.¹⁵

In the realm of Nafisi's book, foreignness and the suspicions attending it achieve quite absurd extremes. Everything foreign is suspect. First of all, of course, everything American is branded as imperialistic expansion, and the American embassy in Tehran is nothing but a "nest of spies" (Nafisi 105). Neutral Switzerland – coincidentally, Nabokov's final abode – comes forward as another country denominating the ultimate hostility of the foreign and as the emblem of internal foreignness in Tehran: "Switzerland had somehow become a byword for Western laxity: any program or action that was deemed un-Islamic was reproached with a mocking reminder that Iran was by no means Switzerland" (Nafisi 9).

The notion of external foreignness is further augmented with internal foreignness. This augmentation puts extra demands on hospitality, extending it in negative terms. Having practiced the opposite of Kantian hospitality to outsiders and having become rid of them, the regime created foreignness from within to sustain the practice.¹⁶ Jean-François Lyotard analyzes this invention of the internal enemy as a verbalization of "something" (which may be termed as "jew") that is always present in any totalitarian regime, even if it remains unexpressed:

This [the fact that a Japanese political philosopher refers to European Jews] is because the various politics of popular power and of state decision-making are never satisfied to designate their visible adversaries in the folks and States they are fighting. You would say they have a need to invent the pestilence of an internal contamination. In truth, they do not at all invent it. In effect, they have to silence something that, below the scene on which they operate and represent their tragedies, never stops threatening that scene itself, by questioning and miming the spectacle of the political. "Jew" is the name of that which resists the principle of self-assertion, "jew" is that which laughs at the will to power and criticizes the blind narcissism of the community (including the Jewish community) haunted by

¹⁵ Quilty says to Humbert: "You are either Australian, or a German refugee. Must you talk to me? This is a Gentile's house, you know. Maybe, you'd better run along" (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 315). See the discussion in Fowler (154-56).

¹⁶ For a discussion of the subject see Hannah Arendt's "The Origins of Totalitarianism."

the desire of its own subjectivity. Under the epithet “jew” is denounced the conviction that dependence is constitutive, that there is the Other, and that wanting to eliminate that Other in some universal project for autonomy is an error and leads to crime. (Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables* 109)

Lyotard states that foreignness can be found within any presumably homogeneous environment, and totalitarian regimes are always apt at identifying it, as the constant purges in such countries show.¹⁷ Characteristically, such identifications are performed with the purpose not of hospitality, but of its opposite. Two important aspects come into play here. One of them is the intensity of identification. Hospitality aims at allowing a stranger to feel at least somewhat at home in a foreign land, thus performing his or her conversion from an outcast into a co-resident, even if not with all the privileges, but at least with certain rights, as was the case in the Ottoman Empire for Jews and Christians.¹⁸ Therefore, hospitality aims at reducing the intensity of status of foreigner. Since the very nature of hospitality is geared toward the diminution of foreignness, it is also much less sharp in identifying foreignness. Inhospitableness, on the other hand, aims at exposing foreignness in the most conspicuous manner; it functions by emphasizing any foreign aspect as some irreconcilable and therefore dangerous difference from the native order of the land. Exaggeration is thus essential to inhospitality, and it extends from hyperbolizing foreignness in someone known as foreign to discovering foreign aspects in those who used to pass for natives.

The other aspect of the complex hospitality/inhospitality is the expected reciprocity, or anticipated universality of treatment. Hospitality offers the other the same treatment one would

¹⁷ Maxim Shrayer and Dominique Desanti offer background history and a discussion of Nabokov’s views toward Jews. Douglas Fowler discusses Nabokov’s attitude toward totalitarianism and anti-Semitism (154-170). The remarkable absence of anti-Semitism in Nabokov’s outlook is actually one of the most notable demonstrations of his attitude toward the “otherness” that Lyotard labels as “jew” [lower case in original]. Savelii Senderovich and Elena Shvarts bring together multiple details pertaining to Jewishness in Nabokov’s life, family, history, and writings and organize them into a plot worthy of Nabokov’s hand.

¹⁸ See Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*.

like to receive him- or herself and, by extension, the treatment one would like to be universal. Thus, hospitality, as one might expect, is in step with Kant's categorical imperative. Inhospitality, on the other hand, is strictly one-sided: a xenophobe who kills every foreigner he comes across in his own land hardly does it for the purpose of being killed the moment he crosses the border of his own country into another. Yet in this mode of thinking, a foreigner is always suspected of the same hostility that he or she is subjected to. Such suspicions cannot be relieved by the foreigner's good will, because the responsibility lies with society which ought to establish norms that do not equate foreignness with criminality.

In Nabokov's text, xenophobia is a double trap: it evokes suspicions against Humbert Humbert and the impurity of his intentions, but since these suspicions are misplaced, he is able to cast them off easily. Thus, when Humbert checks in into "The Enchanted Hunters," he almost does not receive a room, but not because the administration suspects him for what he is: an incipient child molester with the victim in tow. Instead, they suspect him to be a Jew and as such not deserving of their hospitality.¹⁹ Humbert mollifies their misgivings by clarifying the mixup with the names and by pointing to what should have actually implicated him – had the administration been looking for the real issues instead of practicing inhospitality: he points to Lolita. Lolita clearly does not live up to the stereotype of Jewish appearance, and Humbert is made welcome (Nabokov, *Lolita* 125). Instead of trapping Humbert the criminal, it traps "The Enchanted Hunters" within which – in the room-trap of his choice and Lolita trapped there – he is free to perform his crime. Nabokov further suggests the disconnection between foreignness and crime when years later Humbert wants to revisit the hotel with his quite legitimate adult

¹⁹ The advertisement of the hotel as being "Near churches" is code for "no Jews" (Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 435 [note]).

companion, Rita. When making reservations, he gives the Jewish-sounding version of his name – “Professor Hamburg” – and is promptly rejected (Nabokov, *Lolita* 277).

In Tehran, xenophobia plainly serves the task ridiculed in Nabokov’s novel: it creates enemies where there are none by drawing out the slightest difference and then assigning a criminal status to anyone who happens to practice a different religion or dares to have a different worldview. The wider the areas to practice hospitality are, the less the chances that it will indeed be practiced, for foreigners are usually singled out as such for the purpose of inhospitable demonstrations.

The problem of internal foreignness has long history, which is addressed, among others, by Derrida. Foreigners *par excellence* are those who speak an incomprehensible language:

In the *Apology of Socrates* (17d), at the very beginning of his defense, Socrates addresses his fellow citizens and Athenian judges. . . . He declares that he is “foreign” to the language of the courts, to the tribune of the tribunals: he doesn’t know how to speak this courtroom language, this legal rhetoric of accusation, defense, and pleading; he doesn’t have the skill, he is *like* a foreigner. (Among the serious problems we are dealing with here is that of the foreigner who, inept at speaking the language, always risks being without defense before the law of the country that welcomes or expels him; the foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated, the right to asylum, its limits, norms, policing, etc. He has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State, the father, etc. This personage imposes on him translation into their own language, and that’s the first act of violence.) (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 15)

Language thus is used as a tool both to identify foreignness and to inflict violence on a foreigner. A foreigner to courts, a dissenter, and a humorist who asks for the punishment of free lifetime meals at the expense of the city, Socrates receives a death sentence. The foreigner Humbert also dies in jail, although punished not for his foreignness, but for his criminal passion that led him to murder. Nabokov divorces foreignness from crime by combining them in one character only to ridicule the assumption that the former presupposes the latter. In Nafisi’s

Tehran the ridicule is disposed of and foreignness is equated to crime. Thus, when a Baha'i woman dies, her family cannot bury her, because "there were no burial places for Baha'is," just as "Baha'is had no civic rights under the new Islamic constitution and were barred from schools, universities and workplaces" (Nafisi 230, 229). Yet to the reader, who is conversant in Nabokovian, the grimness of the situation does not quite cancel its dark humor.

The utmost hostility that foreignness meets in a totalitarian regime is the extreme extension of quite natural suspicions that people tend to have against outsiders or, for that matter, suspicions that any human being holds against his neighbor, for the neighbor may want what one has and may try to get it by force. As Kant puts it, an individual "expects resistance everywhere, just as he knows of himself that he is inclined to resist others" and "arrange[s] everything according to his own ideas" (Kant, *Idea for a Universal History* 122). Humbert is the ultimate exemplification of this hostile foreignness where all suspicions appear to be justified. Yet his foreignness within the plot of the book and its suspiciousness to the others is only a dim shadow of the extreme foreignness that radiates throughout the narrative, such as his foreign choice of words, his logic and ethical pathos, his word play and his dallying with concepts. Humbert's language addressed to the readers of his confessional exposes him as foreigner more than the matter of his narrative. Language comes forth and stresses its role as the main sign of foreignness. Yet this foreignness of language does not and should not imply evil, for it has nothing to do with it. The mistrust of foreignness only impedes and obscures judgment, both aesthetic and otherwise.

Nabokov forces his readers to divorce evil from foreignness while he combines them in one person. This is noticed up by Nafisi and the women of her reading group. By no means do they identify with Humbert the child molester, yet they find much in common with him as a

foreigner in strange surroundings. They are foreigners to the extent that they do not share the language of the meta-narrative in the Islamic Revolutionary Republic of Iran, the rhetoric of hatred of everything Western, which includes standards, ideas and literature. When they read, admire, analyze, discuss and empathize with English and American literature, they speak a language that is foreign to Tehran. The situation they are in is rather similar to Derrida's discussion of the *Apology*, for Socrates receives his death sentence in the language that is foreign to him – the language of courts:

What does Socrates say at the moment when . . . he is praying for his life and is going to lose it in this game? What does he say in presenting himself as *like* a foreigner, at once *as though* he were a foreigner . . . and *inasmuch as* in effect he does become the foreigner by language . . . , a foreigner accused in a language he says he doesn't speak, a defendant required to justify himself, in the language of the other, before the law and the judges of the city? (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 17)

Being a foreigner and insisting on one's foreignness appears to be as dangerous now as it was in antiquity. But Kant reminds us that we all are foreigners somewhere, and that going somewhere is inevitable since we inhabit a globe (Kant, "To Eternal Peace" 448-449; 8:358). Kant considers people traveling to places other than their homeland; Nabokov portrays a traveler with no particular homeland; and Nafisi depicts those who are foreigners in their homeland. Obviously, hospitality is a dire necessity.

GENDER RELATIONS

Women in *Lolita* are, of course, seen through the eyes of Humbert Humbert, but this view deserves attention, for his ideal of a female is not too far off from a stereotype of a perfect bride still current in the Islamic Revolutionary Republic of Iran: a minor fully controlled by a man. Women are left with no right to say "no"; their "no" can in the best case go unnoticed, in the worst case it leads to severe punishment. Either way, this is a rape. This may be the reason why,

although other literary texts play just as significant a role in Nafisi's narrative, the one that makes it to the title is Nabokov's novel about the rape of a child by a middle-aged man.

Nafisi feels this connection to *Lolita* can be all too obvious, and she denies this obviousness:

Why *Lolita*? Why *Lolita* in Tehran?

I want to emphasize once more that *we* were *not* Lolita, the Ayatollah was *not* Humbert and this republic was *not* what Humbert called his principedom by the sea. *Lolita* was *not* a critique of the Islamic Republic, but it went against the grain of all totalitarian perspectives. (Nafisi 35)

This observation calls for closer consideration because it does more than deny the most immediate parallels. The relation between genders appears to be in the center of both texts. Yet Nabokov's novel goes far beyond the explicit topic of the rape of a girl, and Nafisi's narrative aspires to do the same. The reality of the Islamic Revolutionary Republic of Iran readily offers itself for the expansion of the rhetoric of rape. A radical Islamist employs it when denouncing American literature and culture in a discussion of *The Great Gatsby*:

"All through this revolution we have talked about the fact that the West is our enemy, it is the Great Satan, not because of its military might, not because of its economic power, but because of, because of"—another pause—"because of its sinister assault on the very roots of our culture. What our Imam calls cultural aggression. This I would call a rape of our culture," Mr. Nyazi stated, using a term that later became the hallmark of the Islamic Republic's critique of the West. "And if you want to see cultural rape, you need go no further than this very book." He picked his *Gatsby* up from beneath the pile of papers and started waving it in our direction. (Nafisi 126)

In this context "rape" stands for anything that does not agree with the precepts of the totalitarian perspective of the Islamic Revolutionary Republic of Iran. Nabokov's text is, in this terminology, a "rape." This move is not anything new for *Lolita*, which was taken to be just as offensive by many western readers when it first appeared. Nabokov's choice and treatment of the subject – the rape of an adolescent child – was supposedly demeaning to women. Humbert's

abuse of *Lolita*, presented poetically and with apparent sympathy, seemed to negate all the achievements of civilization regarding the equality of women and the protection of children. Or, rather, *Lolita* reintroduced the subject, presenting it from the perspective of an individual and not from the standpoint of established morals and institutions. Both the victim and the victimizer appear all too human, they exhibit both bad and good sides and break off from a simple black-and-white schema. Rape is reinstated not as a crime against a legal system, but as a violation of the rights of an individual. Thus it wins back its meaning with all its connotations. If one deals only with legality, then rape as defined by one system of laws may turn into an accepted and legal activity under another system. For the individual victim, a rape remains a rape no matter the legal system.

Humbert's dreamy ruminations on times when and places where fornication with underage females was accepted socially and confirmed by law are easily surpassed by the quotidian reality of the Revolutionary Republic of Iran. Within the frame of reference of modern western society Nabokov's novel has the semblance of an exculpation of rape; within the society that exonerates by law sexual cohabitation with little girls, *Lolita* presents this practice, legal or not, for what it is – a rape. Novels that focus on individuals and not on the grandiose narratives of the system provoke the kind of indignation that labels them as “a rape.” The choice of terms is characteristic: the shift of blame is signified by applying to the novel precisely the label that characterizes the ethos of the accusers.

Humbert Humbert prefers little girls to women because women are “too much” for him: too much flesh, too much hair, too much muscle, too much femininity of form and too much of formed opinions. In short, there is in them too much strength and identity. Girls are supposedly both easier to understand and handle than women. Easier understanding is derived not only from

a simpler mind than that of a mature human being, but also from the fact that a girl in her figure is much less different from a boy than a typical adult woman is from a man. By virtue of that, girls are closer to (immature) males and can be easier related to by men than a woman complete in her femininity. And they can be easier manipulated because they are not yet strong enough. In short, Humbert prefers girls because they are beings in the state of indeterminacy and dependency. As such they are readily available for rape.

In Nafisi's Tehran, women are treated like dependent or underage girls: their dress code and behavior are dictated for them, and men are assigned as their grownup guardians (women do not have the right to appear in public places without a male relative). *Lolita* helps us to understand that on national level such a policy allows one part of the population to keep the other part in a condition where, even if they are not raped at present, they are always available for rape. The other side of the coin is that such a state secures underdevelopment and makes a woman – "the other" or "a neighbor" – less threatening and less competitive. But, as Kant points out, competition is precisely what drives maturation. The lack of the need for competition holds back development. In this case, the development held in check concerns the male part of the society that has secured the underdeveloped and therefore non-competitive state of its female counterpart. In this way, society as a whole is kept in check and, as such, is prone to a totalitarian discourse that offers ready prescriptions and does not require autonomous thinking.

Political and religious totalitarian discourses operate on group level; they do not deal with individuals. But literature does. What is an insignificant detail in the achievement of a higher cause expressed in a political language becomes a crime against an individual in the sphere of literature. The clash between the approaches of literary and political discourses takes place on the level of an individual word. Nabokov retrieves it to cast it in a special setting and with

special lights, to make it show its nuances and also to show the deteriorating effects not solely on the victim, but also on the victimizer and all those who happen to be drawn into the circle. The political discourse of a totalitarian regime appropriates the word as one-dimensional, thus violating the word “rape.” This one-dimensionality assigns the word only one, politically prescribed, sense: as signifying anything that opposes political dictatorship. So appropriated, the word is no longer allowed to function in its other more essential senses, and fundamentally, in the sense of a crime against an individual.

*META-DISCOURSES (WITH THEIR IMITATIONS) VERSUS UNIQUE NARRATIVES:
AN INDIVIDUAL VERSUS THE COLLECTIVE (OR THE MASS)*

The rape of a single individual is aided and abetted if a mass of individuals is kept in a condition that makes them available for rape. The condition of dependency can be maintained through a variety of authorized and enforced meta-narratives that take away the rights of individuals to make decisions. In the Islamic Revolutionary Republic of Iran, these are religious legitimizations and the corresponding laws of the country. Lyotard connects the linguistic demand of legitimization with cultural imperialism. When he distinguishes between narrative and scientific discourses, literary discourse plays the role of what Lyotard calls “narrative,” while political discourse in a totalitarian society presents itself as “scientific”:

I have said that narrative knowledge does not give priority to the question of its own legitimation and that it certifies itself in the pragmatics of its own transmission without having recourse to argumentation and proof. This is why its incomprehension of the problems of scientific discourse is accompanied by a certain tolerance: it approaches such discourse primarily as a variant in the family of narrative cultures. The opposite is not true. The scientist questions the validity of narrative statements and concludes that they are never subject to argumentation

or proof. He classifies them as belonging to a different mentality: savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, customs, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology. Narratives are fables, myths, legends, fit only for women and children. At best, attempts are made to throw some rays of light into this obscurantism, to civilize, educate, develop.

This unequal relationship is an intrinsic effect of the rules specific to each game. We all know its symptoms. It is the entire history of cultural imperialism from the dawn of Western civilization. It is important to recognize its special tenor, which sets it apart from all other forms of imperialism: it is governed by the demand for legitimation. (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 27)

The proponents of Islamism in Nafisi's book see in literature (Lyotard's "narrative discourse") a threat to their absolute right for legitimization on solid grounds (religious for them, "scientific" in Lyotard's terms). It is not the case that literature could undermine the legal authority, but it can undermine the "scientific" – that is, objectively correct – appearance of this legitimization. In other words, literature has the power to present the rules of a prevailing ideology as arbitrary.

The opposition between the approach of literature and mass approaches, which plays itself out in gender, also emerges in the opposition between meta-discourses (with their imitations) versus unique narratives. Meta-narratives attempt to be all-inclusive and are, in this specific way, easily manipulated by those with totalitarian urges. In *Lolita*, Nabokov's scorn of meta-discourses is expressed by Humbert Humbert, who ridicules Freudianism, looks down upon religion, makes fun of scientific approaches to child-rearing and home-making, and does not tire to show his contempt for the school system. At the same time, the choice of this iniquitous character as the mouthpiece of views that the author presumably shares allows Nabokov to do more than show contempt. It also allows him to show how easily meta-discourses can be used and manipulated. Humbert Humbert tricks his psychoanalysts and assures Charlotte of his belief in God. To pursue his pedophilic desires and get closer to Lolita, he uses Charlotte's aspirations, nurtured by societal norms, to have a presentable house and husband. Then he uses his neglected

wife's "scientific" recordings of her daughter to buy gifts for the girl with the purpose of seduction. Later, he carefully chooses the school for Lolita to keep her away both from boys and from the type of education that would allow her to obtain gainful employment. At the same time, he makes sure that his choice of school for his "daughter" will provide himself with convenient opportunities to watch schoolgirls.²⁰

The lack of resistance to his manipulations testifies that people rely on meta-narratives wide and deep. Meta-narratives are tempting because they relieve one of making independent judgments and remove personal responsibility by offering socially or politically approved prescriptions. In 1784 Kant defined liberation from dependency as the process of enlightenment:

Enlightenment is man's exit from his self-incurred minority [dependency]. Minority is the incapacity to use one's intelligence without the guidance of another. Such minority is self-incurred if it is not caused by lack of intelligence, but by lack of determination and courage to use one's intelligence without being guided by another. (Kant, "Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" 135)

Contemporary society, as it becomes reflected in Nafisi's book, might have bypassed the Enlightenment project and replaced it by other, but it has not surpassed it. In fact, a dependency on meta-narratives starts with the author, who admits to her long-standing infatuation with proletarian-revolutionary discourse. In general, as society progresses, it creates, on top of the older meta-narratives, such as religion or nationalism, new ones. Marxism has been a vivid example; the meta-narratives of post-colonialism and political correctness appear to have grown into similar phenomena. Granted, all these meta-narratives may start well-intentioned enough, but they typically end up abused and manipulated – by Humberts and his ilk. This is bound to happen because being prone to manipulation is an inherent part of any meta-narrative: mass

²⁰ For references to Freudianism and its manipulation, see *Lolita* 36, 43, and 205-6.

guidance promotes a state of dependency and a lack of self-reliance; dependency creates fertile soil for abuse, manipulation and rape.

The problem is not so much with the content of a meta-narrative as with its comprehensive form. A meta-narrative that dictates everything removes personal decision-making and personal responsibility. Thus, with regard to political correctness Lyotard has a character in a philosophical fable say: "My proof, he reminded us of Kant: think for yourself, and according to yourself. Today, they say, that's logocentric, not *politically correct*" (Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables* 6). The "politically incorrect" Kant is echoed in equally "politically incorrect" Nabokov, and the state of minority, or dependency, is literalized in the image of the perfect and perfectly dependent female lover, who is a minor and therefore in need of an adult male to speak for her. *Lolita* is as much a novel of the eponymous heroine's breaking out of being a minor as it is about anything else. As such, the novel once again calls upon the individual and his or her responsibility to take charge of his or her life, which begins in speaking for oneself. This task of literature, or the Lyotard's narrative discourse, is at odds with what claims to be a scientific discourse or the latest meta-narrative.

Nafisi's book adds another meta-narrative to the many with which Nabokov is at odds. This meta-narrative is the discourse of post-colonialism, and its main danger comes from the fact that, like other meta-narratives, it aspires to substitute literature with itself. For the proponents of meta-discourses, individual and unique literary texts have to be subsumed to a meta-discourse, preferably, before reading them. Postcolonial discourse plays this role in a regime that wants to be viewed as ex-colonized and therefore a constant victim, justified in any violence, for such violence can be presented as "liberation" or a "defense" against real or imagined enemies,

external and internal. Nafisi's radical student judges literature without bothering to read it. Instead, he reads Edward Said:

It was only later, on a trip to the States, that I found out where Mr. Nahvi was getting his ideas from when I bought a copy of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. It is ironic that a Muslim fundamentalist should quote Said against Austen. It was just as ironic that the most reactionary elements in Iran had come to identify with and co-opt the work and theories of those considered revolutionary in the West. (Nafisi 290)

Said's narrative was indeed revolutionary, for it went against established canons. But once canonized, it became both temporally and spatially all-inclusive, and thus, within the frame of reference of Nafisi's Tehran, it had the power to obliterate unique literary narratives, substituting them with itself. For *Lolita's* readers, this discourse is geared toward segregation (into ex-colonized and colonizers), while they strive to achieve, through literature, precisely the opposite goal: to feel not separated, but as individual human beings among individual human beings.

The sphere where individuals obtain voices is not politics, but literature. In politics, only meta-narratives become heard. Individual self-expression, however, is much harder to hear than mass narratives with their amplified volume. The art of Nabokov is one of the great examples of individual and purposefully individualized narrative: he conspicuously goes against all accepted meta-narratives. Yet in his proud dismissal of these, he does what literature has to do: he places the emphasis on the individual subject, with his or her flaws, set-backs and vices, and brings him or her face to face with readers, making them acknowledge his unlikely heroes as human beings deserving consideration and respect.

The anti-totalitarian role of literature, with its focus on individuals, puts it in opposition to politics and theorizing tendencies. This happens even when the incentive to write is political,

as is the case with George Orwell (Orwell, "Why I Write" 1082-1085). It is also the case even when the subject of literature is political, as Lyotard notes in a discussion of 1984:

Orwell does not put forward a theoretical critique of bureaucracy. This novel of totalitarianism in action does not set out to be a political theory. Orwell, in writing a literary work, suggests that the genre of criticism is incapable of resisting the coercive sway of bureaucracy. There is instead an affinity or complicity between them. Both attempt to exercise complete control over their respective domains. But literary writing, artistic writing, because it demands privation [*dénuement*], cannot cooperate with a project of domination or total transparency, even involuntarily. (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained. Correspondence 1982-1985* 87-88)

Even when it depicts politics, literature remains opposed to the paradigms of political discourse. A novel like *Lolita* makes this opposition more pronounced by ostensibly steering away from any discussion of politics, even if the time period depicted in the work, with its echoes of the Russian Revolution, World War I and World War II, seems to call for it.

Literature evokes judgment and by virtue of that nurtures tolerance, for it makes us consider the right of existence, and even to a happy existence, of such types and characters that a reader might despise or hate in real life. When *Lolita*'s narrator pours out his disdain of Charlotte and even of his beloved Lolita, the readers can share in some of his frustrations. They may even identify to a degree with his condescending attitude toward the mundane, vulgar and narrow-minded Charlotte, or the consumerist, lying, cheating and cruel Lolita. Yet they would not (and the book would not allow them to) entitle Humbert to assign to others their rewards and punishments.

Lolita achieves many acts of liberation from totalitarian discourses through its creation of characters as persons, and it also does it through its endless and intricate play with language. In an allegory of liberty, individual words break free from the frozen meanings that are prescribed to them by meta-discourses. A liberated word liberates memory and individuality. That is why

Nafisi's students plunge so happily into their game of words that is inspired by Nabokov. It becomes another path in resisting and fighting a totalitarianism that imposes its own language, thus defacing events and people. For them, the situation is not much different from that in *1984*: "As Newspeak spreads, culture declines. 'Basic language' is the language of surrender and forgetting" (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained. Correspondence 1982-1985* 94).

The fact that Nabokov's novel becomes the focus for individuals under a totalitarian regime is emblematic. His writing has chosen its readers: the ones who refuse to be dissolved into the mass, who are not satisfied with literature decomposed into political material, who refuse to become faceless under the black scarves dictated by the mandatory religious meta-narrative. These readers are women who are defaced more than men in their own culture. They commit virtual emigration by trespassing the borders of their gender and their culture to find the value of the individual narrative as presented by a man of Russian origins, a European background and an American lifestyle.

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