

## Authorship in Nabokov's Prefaces



# Authorship in Nabokov's Prefaces

By

Jacqueline Hamrit

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P U B L I S H I N G

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To Marine



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## INTRODUCTION

In the following study, I wish to explore the problematic aspects of Nabokov's prefaces as regards the issue of the author, authorship and authority. My choice to focus on liminary texts such as prefaces, postfaces, forewords or introductions written by Nabokov on his own fiction, is for methodological and strategic reasons. As they are all short, non-fictional, seemingly secondary texts, situated at the threshold of the main fictional text, they question the fictional text and textuality in general and so allow for an oblique and original analysis of Nabokov's works.

There have been two main theoretical studies of prefaces, one written by Gérard Genette in 1987 entitled in French *Seuils*<sup>1</sup> and *Thresholds* in English, and the essay situated at the beginning of Jacques Derrida's *Dissemination* entitled 'Hors Livre'<sup>2</sup> in French and 'Outwork'<sup>3</sup> in English. Genette offers a typology of prefaces and wonders about their function, and defines the preface as any liminary text (be it preliminary or postliminary), written by an author or by somebody else, and consisting of a discourse produced about a subsequent or a preceding text.<sup>4</sup> Prefaces may be fictional (such as John Ray's foreword in *Lolita*) or authentic. I will consider the authentic ones. As for Derrida, he states that "Il n'y a que du texte, il n'y a que du hors-texte, au total 'une préface incessante'"<sup>5</sup> ["There is nothing but text, there is nothing but extratext, in sum an 'unceasing preface'"].<sup>6</sup> According to him, the preface raises issues of genre, history, text, meaning and ultimately the very question of the author.

More recently Maurice Couturier has extensively studied the figure of the author in Nabokov's works, in *Nabokov ou La Tyrannie de l'auteur*<sup>7</sup> published in 1993 and in *La Figure de l'auteur*<sup>8</sup> (1995). In these works Couturier considers that the problematic of the author raises the issue of the relationship between the author and the reader and that, whereas the reader of Nabokov's texts has the illusion that he masters the game of deciphering and interpreting, he is merely subjected to the law of the author who is the real master of the game. For Couturier, Nabokov is an authoritarian, even tyrannical author, a self-sufficient one whose figure invalidates the theory of the death of the author. We may have the impression that Couturier is right when we remember what Nabokov wrote in the foreword of his screenplay. Here are his words:

By nature I am no dramatist; I am not even a hack scenarist; but if I had given as much of myself to the stage or the screen as I have to the kind of writing which serves a triumphant life sentence between the covers of a book, I would have advocated and applied a system of total tyranny, directing the play or the picture myself, choosing settings and costumes, terrorizing the actors, mingling with them in the big part of guest, or ghost, prompting them, and, in a word, pervading the entire show with the will and art of one individual.<sup>9</sup>

Yet whereas Couturier has based his approach mainly on Barthes's analysis of the author in "La Mort de l'auteur"<sup>10</sup> [The Death of the author] and the ultimate rehabilitation of authorship in *Le Plaisir du texte*<sup>11</sup> [*The Pleasure of the Text*], I wish for my part to develop another perspective by returning to Maurice Blanchot's and Jacques Derrida's studies of authorship. Indeed, I intend to show that Nabokov as an author plays intermittently on apparitions and disappearances, that he not only tries to reinstate the status of the author, but ultimately disappears in a gesture combining mastery and loss of mastery, which for Derrida is named 'exappropriation'—that is both appropriation and expropriation. I would therefore like to insist, in opposition to Couturier's perspective, on the ultimate self-effacement (and therefore no longer the tyranny) of Nabokov as an author, a critic and a subject. To provide evidence of this theory, I will mainly analyse three liminary texts, *Lolita*'s postface, that is 'On a Book entitled *Lolita*,' written in 1956, then the introduction to *Bend Sinister* written in 1963 and the foreword of the revised autobiography written in 1966.

To date, there have been three studies on Nabokovian prefaces that I know of—the articles published first by Charles Nicol, in 1994,<sup>12</sup> and secondly by Corinne Scheiner, in 2003,<sup>13</sup> as well as an essay written by Marilyn Edelstein in 2008.<sup>14</sup> Nicol offers a paradigm of Nabokov's introductions which appears as follows:

I. Personal and bibliographic (two-three paragraphs):

- A. Personal situation during the novel's composition
- B. Bibliographic information on its initial and subsequent publication
- C. Explanation of the title
- D. Statement concerning the translation, if applicable

II. Miscellaneous comments prompted by this particular novel (one paragraph)

III. Polemic statements (one paragraph):

- A. Rejection of comparisons and influences
- B. Denial of moral purpose and social commentary

- C. Rejection of "general ideas" and trashy authors
- D. One-sentence rejection of Freudian content
- IV. Elliptical commentary on the plot (one paragraph)<sup>15</sup>

Thus Nicol considers that the prefaces are generally composed of personal and bibliographic items such as the personal situation during the novel's composition, some bibliographic information on its publication, an explanation of the title, a statement concerning the translation, if applicable, then some polemical statements about the rejection of comparisons and influences, of general ideas and eventually of Freudian content. This useful description gives a good account, not only of the recurrent items of the contents, but mainly of the tone of the discourse (polemical and constantly denying previous comments on his work). As for Corinne Scheiner, she is mainly interested in the act of, and commentary on, self-translation by Nabokov, whereas Marilyn Edelstein focuses on *Lolita's* paratexts.

As far as I am concerned, I wish to study the three prefaces I mentioned from the perspective of, first, the relationship between the author and the reader, then, the relationship between the author and his text, and finally the relationship between the author and himself, as a subject.

## Notes

- 1 Gérard Genette. *Seuils* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).
- 2 Jacques Derrida, "Hors livre, préfaces," *La Dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972) 9-67.
- 3 Jacques Derrida, "Outwork, prefacing," *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981) 3-59.
- 4 Genette, *Seuils* 150.
- 5 Derrida, *La Dissémination* 50.
- 6 Derrida, *Dissemination* 43.
- 7 Maurice Couturier. *Nabokov ou La tyrannie de l'auteur*. (Paris: Seuil 1993).
- 8 Maurice Couturier. *La Figure de l'auteur*. (Paris: Seuil, 1995).
- 9 Vladimir Nabokov, "Foreword," *Lolita: A Screenplay* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974) ix-x.
- 10 Roland Barthes, "La Mort de l'auteur," *Essais critiques IV. Le Bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984) 61-67.
- 11 Roland Barthes. *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973).
- 12 Charles Nicol, "Necessary Instruction or Fatal Fatuity: Nabokov's Introductions and *Bend Sinister*," *Nabokov Studies* Volume 1 (1994): 115-29.

13 Corinne Scheiner, "In Place of a Preface: Reading Chapter one of Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* as a Foreword to the English translation," *Proceedings of the International Nabokov Symposium 2002*. 26 June 2003.

(<http://www.nabokovmuseum.org/PDF/Scheiner.pdf>) It seems difficult to access the article online as it is mentioned in Corinne Scheiner's CV but I heard her presentation and she kindly sent me a copy in July 2003. So, it may be advised to ask her for one at [cscheiner@coloradocollege.edu](mailto:cscheiner@coloradocollege.edu). She also gave a presentation in April 2003 at the Annual Meeting of the ACLA, in San Diego, California, which was entitled "Nabokov's use of Paratext: Instructions on how to read Properly (That is, with the Spine)."

14 Marilyn Edelstein, "Before the Beginning: Nabokov and the Rhetoric of the Preface," *Narrative Beginnings. Theories and Practices*, ed. Brian Richardson (Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 2008) 29-43. In her bibliography, she mentions her 1984 Dissertation (SUNY at Buffalo) entitled "At the Threshold of the Text: The Rhetoric of Prefaces to Novels."

15 Nicol, "Necessary Instruction or Fatal Fatuity: Nabokov's Introductions and *Bend Sinister*," 115.

## CHAPTER ONE

### ON A BOOK ENTITLED *LOLITA*

My intention is to begin with *Lolita*'s postscript, called "On a Book Entitled Lolita" (subsequently referred to as OBEL), in order, first, to recall the circumstances of its genesis, before presenting examples of the scholarly analyses it has prompted and finally proposing a brief summary prior to exploring the problematics the text raises.

It was on November 12, 1956 that Nabokov put his signature to OBEL.<sup>1</sup> It was a particular time indeed as his novel had been rejected by all the American publishers and had only been published in Paris by Maurice Girodias at Olympia Press on September 15, 1955. According to Brian Boyd, the American publisher Jason Epstein from Doubleday had proposed to Nabokov that extracts from *Lolita* should appear in a number of the literary review issued by Doubleday and entitled *Anchor Review*. Nabokov was delighted to agree and met Melvin Lasky, the editor of *Anchor Review* as well as Fred Dupee of Columbia who wished to write a long introductory essay.<sup>2</sup> The issue of *Anchor Review* appeared in June 1957 and contained excerpts from *Lolita* as well as articles about the novel by Nabokov and Dupee. Nabokov's essay was to be inserted in all the ensuing editions of *Lolita*, from the first American edition in July 1958 at G.P. Putman's Sons in New York, to the first British edition in November 1959 at Weidenfeld and Nicolson in London and the corrected American edition by Alfred Appel, Jr. in 1970 in New York.<sup>3</sup> It is now impossible to read the novel without its afterword which produced reactions I now intend to sum up.

In the 1990s, that is in the heyday of Nabokov scholarship, both Brian Boyd and Maurice Couturier commented on OBEL. Boyd considers that this "elegant" afterword is "witty and profound, [...] nimble, elusive, deceptive" and that Nabokov "defends the novel from any charge of pornography by its sheer certainty that a novel on *this* artistic level need not descend to self-defense."<sup>4</sup> As for Couturier, in 1995 in *La Figure de l'auteur* he considers that Nabokov, as an American citizen, wanted to offer a token of his morality to the country he had adopted, uselessly

apologizing in fact for shocking it.<sup>5</sup> In the 2000s, two articles on OBEL appeared, one by Jennifer Ingleheart entitled “Burning Manuscripts: The Literary *Apologia* in Ovid’s *Tristia* 2 and Vladimir Nabokov’s ‘On a Book Entitled *Lolita*’” in 2006 and another one by Jacques Sohier entitled “Féerie pour un scandale: l’art et la morale dans *Lolita* (1958) de Vladimir Nabokov” in 2010. Comparing Ovid’s and Nabokov’s strategies, Ingleheart asserts that not only do both defend their work but they play on the genre of the literary *apologia*, through irony and ambiguity, and assert the power and autonomy of the artist.<sup>6</sup> As for Sohier, he also considers that Nabokov claims artistic independence but Sohier wonders mainly about the problematic of art in its relationship with morals,<sup>7</sup> a problematic which is at the core of OBEL and which will be developed further after the brief summary I now wish to present.

In OBEL, Nabokov presents the circumstances and steps of the composition and genesis of *Lolita*, the obstacles and conditions of its publication and his reaction to the reception of his novel, ending with what he considers to be true literature and literary criticism. Nabokov therefore begins by narrating how “the first little throb of *Lolita*” (311) came in late 1939 or early 1940 in Paris and was prompted by his reading of a newspaper article about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes who thanks to the coaxing of a scientist had managed to produce a drawing representing the bars of his cage.<sup>8</sup> The impulse resulted in a short story of about thirty pages which he wrote in Russian<sup>9</sup> and which told the story of a man from Central Europe who married the sick mother of a nymphet in order to approach the nymphet. Nabokov says he was not satisfied with the novella and thinks that he destroyed it—but he did not—when he arrived in America in 1940. He goes on to specify how inspiration seized him again in 1949 in Ithaca and how he began writing, this time in English, what was to become a fully-fledged novel in which he kept the marrying-the-mother idea. The book, he says, “developed slowly, with many interruptions and asides” (312) because he was faced with the task of “inventing” America at the age of fifty and he even thought once or twice of burning the work but finally refrained his impulse for fear that he might regret it. The book was finished in the spring of 1954 and Nabokov immediately set about finding a publisher. Although he was advised by a friend to publish it anonymously, he decided to put his signature to *Lolita*. The book was turned down by four American publishers who were shocked by it. Nabokov considers that the difficulties he met gaining publication were due to the fact that it had been read as a pornographic book whereas, for him, it was first and foremost an artistic one. He was, he says, surprised by some reactions of readers who recommended extravagant modifications,

but he appreciated the elegance and soundness of the interpretation by an American critic who wrote that *Lolita* was the record of his love affair with the romantic novel, though here Nabokov suggested substituting “English language” for “romantic novel”. So OBEL appears indeed not only as a defense of the novel but goes beyond that as it stages the relationship Nabokov as an author here engages with his readers.

I therefore now propose to study this relationship with, *primo*, his first readers, among whom are the publishers, then his “good” and/or “bad” readers before ending with the hypothesis of Nabokov—the author—as a Janus-like persona.

## Publishers and First Readers

### Desire to Publish

Nabokov writes in OBEL that as soon as he “finished copying the thing [*Lolita*] out in longhand in the spring of 1954, [he] at once began casting around for a publisher” (312). This desire to publish and to be published is well analyzed by Maurice Blanchot who wrote in the chapter entitled “La puissance et la gloire” [Power and glory] in *Le Livre à venir* [The Book to come]<sup>10</sup> that a writer seeks not only to let some of his/her private life (the inner self) pass into the public sphere (the outside), to address his book to friends, family or social classes, but he/she addresses everybody and nobody: the others. According to Blanchot, the need to be published has its origin in the work itself as a memory of the movement it comes from and this explains why there is a wish to remain anonymous to give account of the impersonality of a literary work but, at the same time, a need to communicate in society and henceforth be recognized, have a reputation, and thus have one’s name known.

This analysis is not at variance with what Nabokov asserts in OBEL:

At first, on the advice of a wary old friend, I was meek enough to stipulate that the book be brought out anonymously. I doubt that I shall ever regret that soon afterwards, realizing how likely a mask was to betray my own cause, I decided to sign *Lolita*. (313)

It is almost for political reasons or even militancy (Nabokov mentions his “cause”) that he accepts the assumption of juridical responsibility. This juridical responsibility is, according to Gérard Genette, the main effect of signing a book, of exposing one’s name to society.<sup>11</sup> If Nabokov’s friend had advised him to publish the book anonymously, it was, of course, because of the theme of the book - pedophilia. Yet Nabokov refused to

hide behind a mask, which is surprising or at least significant as he does not usually refrain from dissimulating his name behind the pseudonym Sirin or anagrams (the most famous one being Vivian Darkbloom). This play with anagrams shows the author's propensity to appear and disappear intermittently, as an anagram both hides and reveals the name more than a pseudonym which only hides the name. So Nabokov considered that *Lolita* deserved the promise of a faithful commitment as regards the law, society and censorship as his desire to publish faced resistance since "the four American publishers W, X, Y, Z, who in turn were offered the typescript and had their readers glance at it, were shocked by *Lolita* to a degree that even [his] wary old F.P. had not expected." (313)

### Resistance to Publish and Censorship

According to Brian Boyd, the publishers were Pascal Covici of Viking Press, editors of Simon and Schuster, James Laughlin of New Directions and Roger Strauss from Farrar, Strauss. They all refused to publish the book for fear of being prosecuted and in order to protect the author's reputation. So did Doubleday who had published *Pnin* and *A Hero of our Time*. This explains why Nabokov turned to Europe and had *Lolita* published by the French Maurice Girodias.<sup>12</sup> According to Maurice Couturier, who devoted a chapter on the history of the censorship of *Lolita* in his book entitled *Roman et censure ou la mauvaise foi d'Eros* [The Novel and censorship or Eros's bad faith], censorship is not only linked with prohibition but it in fact intends to silence a text, to impose one's law on the text and one's authority over it.<sup>13</sup> Couturier's statement is both akin to Michel Foucault's position and at variance with it, as Foucault explained in *La Volonté de savoir* [The Will to Know] in 1976 that censorship of sexual matters did not mean repressing sexuality as is often pretended but was the mark of the mechanisms of power. Censorship has social and political dimensions. To understand the portent of this notion, one might turn to Georges Bataille and Jacques Derrida. Bataille explains in *L'Érotisme* [Erotism] that censorship is an attempt to kill new speech and corresponds to a social and juridical response to the inner transgression of a written text.<sup>14</sup> This would explain why *Tristram Shandy*, *Madame Bovary*, *Ulysses* were attacked. It was not because of their contents but because they were subversive and revolutionary. As for Derrida, he takes the more recent example of Salman Rushdie in the interview he granted Derek Attridge in April 1989 entitled "Cette étrange institution qu'on appelle la littérature" [This Strange Institution called Literature]. In this interview, Derrida explains that, for him, literature is a



rather recent institution, with conventions and rules, but also an institution which gives fiction in principle the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them. Literature is thereby related to democracy, even if it is a democracy to come. He writes:

Ce que nous appelons littérature suppose que licence est donnée à l'écrivain de dire tout ce qu'il veut ou tout ce qu'il peut dire en restant à l'abri de toutes les censures, qu'elles soient religieuses ou politiques.<sup>15</sup>

What we call literature (not belles-lettres or poetry) implies that license is given to the writer to say everything he wants or everything he can, while remaining shielded, safe from all censorship, be it religious or political.<sup>16</sup>

It seems strange or even paradoxical to pretend that one is entitled to say everything in fiction regarding self-censorship or legal proceedings but this position is rather invigorating as it associates literature and writing to an experience of freedom, to the approach and transgression of limits, the questioning of taboos.

Nabokov's position on censorship focuses on taboos, as he writes in OBEL:

Not all the four firms read the typescript to the end. Whether they found it pornographic or not did not interest me. Their refusal to buy the book was based not on my treatment of the theme but on the theme itself, for there are at least three themes which are utterly taboo as far as most American publishers are concerned. The two others are: a Negro-White marriage which is a complete and glorious success resulting in lots of children and grandchildren; and the total atheist who lives a happy and useful life, and dies in his sleep at the age of 106. (313-314)

In spite of the apparent lightness of the ironical overtones, it seems that Nabokov really meant what he was saying, as he reiterated these examples in the lecture he gave on April 10, 1958 entitled "Russian Writers, Censors, and Readers," where he said:

If I, an American writer, decide to write an unconventional novel about, say, a happy atheist, an independent Bostonian, who marries a beautiful Negro girl, also an atheist, has lots of children, cute little agnostics, and lives a happy, good, and gentle life to the age of 106, when he blissfully dies in his sleep – it is quite possible that despite your brilliant talent, Mr. Nabokov, we feel [in such cases we don't *think*, we *feel*] that no American publisher could risk bringing out such a book simply because no bookseller would want to handle it.<sup>17</sup>

According to the *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, what is taboo is what is "set apart as venerable", what is therefore sacred, inviolable, what is "outlawed by common consent." A taboo is "a prohibition instituted for the protection of a cultural group", "a prohibition imposed by social usage or as a protective measure." Nabokov therefore considers that, with *Lolita*, he has gone to the limit of what is lived as acceptable by American society, he has transgressed the prohibitions of human and natural law, he has faced the unthinkable and therefore shaken the foundations of this society and its coherence based, he alludes, on religion (God as opposed to atheism), Puritanism (with sexual issues) and racism (with the ingrained tensions between blacks and whites). Censorship was consequently the reaction of this society trying to protect itself from a dangerous intrusion, to protect its territory by silencing a speech characterized by its freedom of thought regarding the dark side of evil, human enslavement. Far from advocating pedophilia and incest, *Lolita* deals with the emancipation from the constraints of an oppressive doxa, the taboo being the inner limit of a power which reduces freedom.

So it seems that the reason why, according to Nabokov, the first readers were so taken aback by the novel is because they form "an interpretive community", to use Stanley Fish's expression, a community "made up of those who share interpretive strategies,"<sup>18</sup> with its rules and conventions because literature is, as we have seen, an institution which becomes a control mechanism.

### **Incorrect Interpretations**

In OBEL, Nabokov tries to defend his novel by counteracting some of the first misreadings. Nabokov adamantly asserts that *Lolita* is, first, not pornographic, then, not moral and finally, not anti-American. He thus raises the issues of the genre of the novel, the problematic of ethics as opposed to aesthetics and finally its political dimension.

The issue of pornography as opposed to eroticism is not a new one. Nabokov devotes a whole paragraph to the criticism of pornography as he wishes to distinguish *Lolita* which is not pornographic, according to him, but artistic. Although he concedes that there do exist lewd successful comic or satiric works as in the eighteenth century,<sup>19</sup> he attacks the modern use of pornography because it "connotes mediocrity, commercialism, and certain strict rules of narration." (313) Nabokov here condemns the commercial use of writing and the reduction of the activity of reading to mere consumption. He also establishes a hierarchy between good literature and what he calls "topical trash" (315) and we think of the

Nabokovian cannon with his famous, sometimes controversial, likes and dislikes. He alludes to the rules of narration and values the conventions of a genre. There has been a lot of critical literature on the issue of genre (from Aristotle to Genette to Derrida)<sup>20</sup> but it seems that there is a consensus on the presence of literary prescriptive, normative conventions which Derrida calls “the law of the genre”<sup>21</sup> creating an expectation which, when it is frustrated, induces, as in the case of *Lolita*, according to Nabokov, misunderstanding and misreading. Yet here Nabokov plays a kind of double game as he resorts to sexual terminology when he alludes to the characteristics of pornographic writing, that is its *clichés* and its banality. He mentions “the *copulation* of clichés” (313) and says that “obscenity must be *mated* with banality because every kind of aesthetic enjoyment has to be entirely replaced by simple sexual stimulation” (313) [my emphasis]. For Couturier, this would be a perfect example of what he calls the bad faith of Eros, but I think that it corresponds to Nabokov’s ambivalence as he denounces sexual matters while at the same time taking them for granted. Nabokov does use sexuality in his novels, notably *Lolita* and *Ada*, but he refuses to be reduced, as in pornographic novels, to this issue and claims the recognition of artistry, which may explain why in an interview, he declared, “Let us skip sex.”<sup>22</sup> Yet, it seems as if he appreciates lingering on the blurred boundary between pornography and eroticism, or, to use Couturier’s neologism, poeroticism, that is, a mingling of poetry and eroticism. It is undeniable that there is a literature which induces a “security of satisfaction” (313)—and this literature can be pleasant for some. But it is certain that it does not correspond to Nabokov’s work, as his texts demand a high and intense intellectual participation. Besides, what Nabokov is saying about pornography is not only meant to distinguish his novel but also to prevent future interpretations which would be limited to this question, foreseeing the commercial drifts of the novel and the persona of *Lolita*.

Having asserted that *Lolita* is not a pornographic novel, Nabokov also declares in the afterword that it is not moral, playing once more a double game in the opposition between ethics and aesthetics, just as he oscillated between sexuality and art. It seems, at first sight, that Nabokov considers that *Lolita* does not teach anything and should be appreciated only for its artistry when he writes:

There are gentle souls who would pronounce *Lolita* meaningless because it does not teach them anything. I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray’s assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me, a work of fiction exists only in so far it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss [. . .]. (314)

He is therefore apparently contradicting the fictive editor John Ray, Jr. who, in the foreword, had affirmed:

As a work of art, it [*Lolita*] transcends its expiatory aspects; and still more important to us than scientific significance and literary worth, it is the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader; for in this poignant personal study, there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egoistic mother, the panting maniac—these are not only vivid characters in a unique story; they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils.<sup>23</sup>

By juxtaposing the two contradictory assertions about the morality of the novel, in the foreword and the postscript, that is in the beginning and at the end, Nabokov places them in the way Derrida was to spatially juxtapose two columns dealing respectively with Hegel and Genet in *Glas*, again performing the issue which is at the core of the novel, namely the undecidability of interpretation.<sup>24</sup> Derrida defined this key-notion of his in *La Dissémination* [*Dissemination*]. (1972) He wrote:

Une proposition indécidable, Gödel en a démontré la possibilité en 1931, est une proposition qui, étant donné un système d'axiomes qui domine une multiplicité, n'est ni une conséquence analytique ou déductive des axiomes, ni en contradiction avec eux, ni vraie ni fausse au regard de ces axiomes. *Tertium datur*, sans synthèse.<sup>25</sup>

An undecidable proposition, as Gödel demonstrated in 1931, is a proposition which, given a system of axioms governing a multiplicity, is neither an analytical nor deductive consequence of those axioms, nor in contradiction with them, neither true nor false with respect to those axioms. *Tertium datur*, without synthesis.<sup>26</sup>

Derrida clearly specified that he was calling the operation “undecidable” only by analogy, as the definition applies mainly to the science of logic. What interested him in the concept was the fact that there is no synthesis, no dialectical reconciliation of two opposites. As for the relevance of this concept as regards *Lolita*, it seems in keeping with some of the previous criticism which mentioned the ambiguity and the tensions present in the novel, the oscillation between the insistence on the aesthetic dimension of the novel or the ethical one. One cannot choose between the two contradictory meanings of the novel without reducing its strength. If one focuses on aesthetic pleasure, one disregards the moral outrage, and *vice versa*. It is not only a question of hesitation, as the impossibility of choosing ends in fact in a real choice and decision. Undecidability is

indeed, for Derrida, an ordeal one has to go through in order to be free, just, and responsible, as justice is beyond mere law. Derrida wrote:

Le droit n'est pas la justice. Le droit est l'élément du calcul, et il est juste qu'il y ait du droit mais la justice est incalculable, elle exige qu'on calcule avec de l'incalculable ; et les expériences aporétiques sont des expériences aussi improbables que nécessaires de la justice, c'est-à-dire de moments où la *décision* entre le juste et l'injuste n'est jamais assurée par une règle.<sup>27</sup>

Law is not justice. Law is the element of calculation, and it is just there be law, but justice is incalculable, it demands that one calculate with the incalculable ; and aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of justice, that is to say of moments in which the *decision* between just and unjust is never insured by a rule.<sup>28</sup>

To denounce pedophilia, Nabokov did not resort to mere doxa and common sense, but forced the reader, the student or the critic to first experience undecidability and go beyond this oscillation, beyond Puritanism and monstrosity, to really take his or her position and endorse responsibility. It was the only way to convincingly treat the theme, as there is no doubt that Nabokov precluded easy tolerance and advocated vigilance, as he was to declare: "In fact I believe that one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel—and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride."<sup>29</sup> This may be the reason why *Lolita* had been at first misread, read superficially, and not recognized as the masterpiece it actually was, an American masterpiece, according to Nabokov.

Nabokov indeed contends in OBEL that *Lolita* is considered neither as purely pornographic nor moral, nor eventually anti-American. The charge of anti-Americanism was, Nabokov says, what pained him even more than "the idiotic accusation of immorality." (315) He used in *Lolita* the frame of American landscapes and mores but it was not a mere sociological documentary. It is true that, when we think of certain characters in the novel such as Charlotte Haze, Miss Pratt, Valeria or even sometimes Lolita, it seems obvious that they are the targets of Nabokov's criticism but the satiric devices do not mean the rejection of a society. On the contrary, satire is meant to correct or improve certain of its aspects. What Nabokov wanted to denounce through satire and comedy is, he says, the philistine vulgarity that is present in "any proletarian from Chicago [who] can be as bourgeois (in the Flaubertian sense) as a duke." (315) In an article entitled "Philistines and Philistinism," Nabokov strongly condemns philistinism which, he says, corresponds to what is called *poshlust* in

Russian and is mainly characterized by vulgarity, mediocrity and banalities. The philistine is a fraud and a conformist, at the extreme opposite of “the genuine, the guileless, the good.”<sup>30</sup> So for him this state of mind is represented in *Lolita* but is not specific to America. Nabokov affirms, on the contrary, that he always wished to be recognized as an American writer. In an interview he gave in 1962, he declared: “In America I’m happier than in any other country. It is in America that I found my best readers, minds that are closest to mine. I feel intellectually at home in America. It is a second home in the true sense of the word.”<sup>31</sup> In another interview he gave in 1964, he reiterated his love for his adopted country by saying:

I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany. I came to America in 1940 and decided to become an American citizen, and make America my home. It so happened that I was immediately exposed to the very best in America, to its rich intellectual life and to its easygoing, good atmosphere. I immersed myself in its great libraries and its great Canyon. I worked in the laboratories of its zoological museums. I acquired more friends than I ever had in Europe. My books—old books and new ones—found some admirable readers. [...] In consequence, I am one-third American—good American flesh keeping me warm and safe.<sup>32</sup>

This is undoubtedly an affirmative declaration of love for America which takes into account the different facets of his identity and history: the USA, Russia, Europe. But to what extent can he really be considered as an “American writer”? Not in terms of his nationality but in terms of his belonging to American literary tradition? What about his link with Russian literary history? This issue has often been raised in Nabokovian scholarship<sup>33</sup> and most critics consider it difficult or even impossible to place him in a rigid classification or category. In his book on the modern American novel, Malcom Bradbury compares him to Beckett and Borges, “two other non American authors who were to have a massive influence on American fiction in the 1960’s” and adds that “Nabokov represents a major link between the earlier European stages of the modern movement and the development of that kind of writing in the United States that came to be called ‘postmodern.’”<sup>34</sup> It is true that Nabokov links an American literature with a European one but except for some American writers such as Poe or James, Nabokov does not take his inspiration from American literature and is, on the contrary, very far from Whitman or Emerson, for example. Besides, no American book was selected by him in the list of his great masterpieces of twentieth-century prose, which were Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Kafka’s *Transformation*, Biely’s *Petersburg* and Proust’s *In*

*Search of Lost Time*. Yet even though he was not strictly influenced by American writers, he did influence younger American writers such as John Barth or Thomas Pynchon. In fact, he is a citizen of the world, an immigrant who writes a literature of exile and who provides evidence of what Derrida refers to as a “trouble in identity”<sup>35</sup> when he mentions his own double origin (from France and North Africa). We should not understand “trouble” only as a form of psychological disorder or flaw but more as an absence of essence and purity, a hybrid crossing of identities just as Judith Butler talks of trouble in gender. This trouble also concerns citizenship as Nabokov was to become an American citizen but with the memory of his Russian birth. His identity may therefore be another undecidable issue as he was neither “completely” Russian nor “completely” American but Russian *and* American at the same time or, to put it in other terms, neither and both at the same time.<sup>36</sup>

### Misunderstandings

So Nabokov disagrees in OBEL with those first readers or critics who considered *Lolita* to be a pornographic novel, a moral/immoral one, and an anti-American one. These are therefore misreadings and misinterpretations. This issue is at the core of the activity of reading and/or literary criticism. To what extent is an interpretation right or wrong? What is the role of the author in the evaluation of good or bad readings, of misunderstandings? What is at the origin of misinterpretation? The answer is, of course, inexhaustible and has been the concern of numerous literary theories.<sup>37</sup> According to the Yale critics, and notably J. Hillis Miller and Paul de Man, the multiplicity of possible readings is due to the very nature of language. Paul de Man has even developed a whole terminology regarding misinterpretation which he calls “aberrant reading” characterized by blindness as opposed to insight, and such aberrant reading gives evidence of the impossibility of reading (“unreadability”), as he reproached Heidegger for having misread Hölderlin and Derrida for having misread Rousseau.<sup>38</sup> The reader may see in the text something which is not said or not present. The reader, in that case, fits his reading into his system and imposes his own subjective projections. This is maybe what Nabokov implies when he ironically mentions the case of a reader who wanted, for example, to turn *Lolita* “into a twelve-year-old lad and [have] him seduced by Humbert, a farmer, in a barn, amidst gaunt and arid surroundings” (314) or another one who wanted to reduce the second part. We sense Nabokov’s irritation and, how, according to him, these are bad, unreliable and unfaithful readers.

So if the reader is not the one who holds the right meaning of a literary text, is the author at the origin of sound interpretation and should we find the solution in the author's intention? Nabokov, well aware of this problematic, offers the following:

Teachers of Literature are apt to think up such problems as "What is the author's purpose?" or still worse "What is the guy trying to say?" Now I happen to be the kind of author who in starting to work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book and who, when asked to explain its origin and growth, has to rely on such ancient terms as Interreaction of Inspiration and Combination—which, I admit, sounds like a conjurer explaining one trick by performing another. (311)

Nabokov is here giving his position on the debate opposing the intentionalists and the anti-intentionalists as regards meaning, a debate whose issue is made clear by the title of W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's 1946 essay "The Intentional Fallacy."<sup>39</sup> The idea behind this title seems to be that we should not trust what the author says he meant to say, what he had the intention of saying, acknowledging thereby D. H. Lawrence's aphorism "Never trust the artist, trust the tale". Meaning indeed overflows authorial intention. Nabokov seems therefore to claim here that knowing his intention is neither available nor desirable because he had no clear and definite intention when he began writing and that writing is therefore not a question of transmitting a message, but a strange aporetic experience, both pleasant and painful, or at least disturbing—he wants to get rid of the book he is writing. Writing is consequently a question of desire carried away by inspiration, something that remains an inexplicable secret.

If I say that meaning overflows authorial intention, it does not mean that authorial intention is not relevant (neither Wimsatt and Beardsley, or even Derrida, pretended that, Andrew Bennett claims in his book *The Author*) but that there is a gap, an opening (in French, we say "béance") between saying and meaning, because, according to Derrida, the writer "might say more, less, or something other than he *would mean*."<sup>40</sup> Reading begins for him, Bennett adds, in that authorial ignorance of what is being said and the uncertainty of authorial intention is what distinguishes literature from other discourses such as philosophy for example. Therefore in the text there may be elements that are unperceived by the writer and that the reader reveals.

Nabokov seems to acknowledge this idea when he writes: "there have been a number of wise, sensitive, and staunch people who understood my



book much better than I can explain its mechanism here.” (315) Opposed to misinterpretations and bad readers, there are consequently good readers.

## Good Readers and Good Interpretations

### *Lolita* as a love affair

Reading is not for Nabokov a mere question of sense-making. It also concerns the affective side of the reader. Nabokov indeed asserts that he appreciated the “elegant formula” of an American critic who suggested that “*Lolita* was the record of [his] love affair with the romantic novel.” (316) What is significant in this phrase is not only the fact that the critic ignores the so-called love story of the characters of the novel by emphasizing, on the contrary, the relation it has with a genre, but mainly the fact that he uses a very weighty word: love. Love is not merely a concept but an affect. It deals with emotion, the senses rather than the sense, passion rather than reason. In her book on theories of reading, Karin Littau emphasizes the role of the body during the activity of reading, and its physiological reactions such as tears or prickles.<sup>41</sup> She dates the opposition between pathos and reason back to Nietzsche and Kant. But when she mentions the presence of “spine tingling”<sup>42</sup> in the activity of reading, this reminds us of Nabokov’s own description of the pleasures of literature.

## Good Readers

Nabokov indeed wrote at the end of the lectures he gave on literature in American universities:

In this course I have tried to reveal the mechanisms of those wonderful toys—literary masterpieces. I have tried to make of you **good readers** who read books not for the infantile purpose of identifying oneself with the characters, and not for the adolescent purpose of learning to live, and not for the academic purpose of indulging in generalizations. [...] I have tried to teach you to feel a **shiver** of artistic satisfaction. [...] The main thing is to experience that **tingle** in any department of thought or emotion. We are liable to miss the best of life if we do not know how to **tingle**, if we do not learn to hoist ourselves just a little higher than we generally are in order to sample the rarest and ripest fruit of art which human thought has to offer.<sup>43</sup> [my emphasis]

Nabokov devoted a whole lecture, “Good Readers and Good Writers,” on what he considered a good reader was. He indeed begins the lecture with a question “How to be a Good Reader?” and answers it by saying “the good reader is one who has imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense.”<sup>44</sup> Even if he mentions imagination, he insists here on the cognitive dimension of the activity of reading requiring memory and semantic research. Yet the artistic sense is related to the other sensuous dimension which is alluded to in the previous quotation with its tingling and is developed at the end of the lecture as follows: “a wise reader reads the book of genius not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine. It is there that occurs the telltale tingle [...]. Then, with a pleasure which is both sensual and intellectual we shall watch the artist build his castle of cards and watch the castle of cards become a castle of beautiful steel and glass.”<sup>45</sup> Nabokov mentions here an experience which is not only “sensual and intellectual” but actually physiological—a tingle seeming to advocate a suspension of the mind but actually supporting a complex state of being that Nabokov describes at length in *OBEL* with his definition of artistic delight. He indeed writes:

For me a work of fiction exists only in so far as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. (314-15)

A key-term here is “bliss”. Nabokov expresses the delight he experiences when he reads a good work of fiction and defines what, according to him, is good literature by the effect it produces and not by its form or its meaning. Moreover, this term—like “wonder”—belongs to Nabokov’s favorite and idiosyncratic terminology and has led to numerous different translations into French. For example, the first translator of *Lolita* in France, Éric Kahane, used the word “volupté” [voluptuous delight]. A French critic—Danièle Roth-Souton—talks of “félicité”. Whereas Maurice Couturier rightly reproaches Kahane for having ignored the two aspects of bliss, the profane and the secular, he proposes in his 2001 translation of *Lolita* the word “jubilation” [exultation] while the *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* defines “bliss” as “complete or ecstatic happiness,” “perfect and exalted joy of saved souls: beatitude.” It seems therefore that aesthetic pleasure is a welcoming of the gift of art which induces in the receiver a complete happiness, an intense joy approaching an epiphany. Wishing to clarify this aesthetic emotion Nabokov describes it with highly indeterminate and enigmatic words. By saying that this delight is “a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected to other

states of being”, he sees it as a phenomenological, almost existential experience pregnant with a “*je ne sais quoi*” expressed by phrases such as “a sense of” or “somehow, somewhere”. The interesting word “somewhere” initiates the drift towards a space, a place, an elsewhere—what Maurice Blanchot would call “a literary space” and Gilles Deleuze “a territory.” This space is not so much a world as a country where “art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm.” The use of the parentheses is noteworthy here and recalls the famous parentheses Nabokov uses in the second chapter of the first part of *Lolita* when he alludes to Humbert’s mother’s death.<sup>46</sup> The lightness of the device paradoxically stresses the importance Nabokov gives to his definition of art as an experience which is not only epistemological and/or heuristic—due to the curiosity it requires and induces—but ethical as it is related to tenderness and kindness. These are two notions which may be surprising when we remember the cruelty characterizing some characters of Nabokovian fiction, such as Humbert for example. Yet Nabokov continuously proclaimed in his interviews that he abhorred cruelty and advocated kindness. In a 1969 interview, he considered that the worst thing men do was “To stink, to cheat, to torture.” Whereas the best was “To be kind, to be proud, to be fearless.”<sup>47</sup> This insistence on tenderness and kindness not only expresses Nabokov’s propensity for generosity and altruism but affords an almost “feminine” dimension to his ethics, in the sense which Emmanuel Lévinas uses when he refers to woman.<sup>48</sup> So reading is, for Nabokov, an almost transcendent experience, or at least an ecstatic one which should generate “elegant” interpretations. Nabokov indeed considers that it was elegant on the part of the American critic to estimate that *Lolita* was “the record of [his] love affair with the romantic novel.” He was to use the same adjective—“elegant”—in a 1962 interview when he said: “Why did I write any of my books, after all? For the sake of the pleasure, for the sake of the difficulty. I have no social purpose, no moral message; I’ve no general ideas to exploit, I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions.”<sup>49</sup> So is a good interpretation, for Nabokov, more a question of convincing aesthetics than a mere issue of correct and sound meaning, of truth? It seems indeed as if Nabokov advocated, and had the intuition of, a kind of literary criticism that was to be creative writing. This may explain why, when he exposes his own interpretation of *Lolita* in OBEL, he does not refrain from expressing himself poetically.

### Nabokov’s Interpretation

He concludes OBEL by writing:

After Olympia Press, in Paris, published the book, an American critic suggested that *Lolita* was the record of my love affair with the romantic novel. The substitution “English language” for “romantic novel” would make the elegant formula more correct. But here I feel my voice rising to a much too strident pitch. None of my American friends have read my Russian books and thus every appraisal on the strength of my English ones is bound to be out of focus. My private tragedy, which cannot, and indeed should not be anybody’s concern, is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile tongue for a second-rate brand of English, devoid of any of those apparatuses—the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions—which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way. (316-17)

So *Lolita* is indeed, for Nabokov, a love affair, a love story, the love story of a writer for the English language. Nabokov’s bilingualism is a well-known fact to which Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour devoted a whole article in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. She recalls how Nabokov knew how to read, speak and write English when he was a child. As for George Steiner, he insists on Nabokov’s multilingualism in his article entitled “Extraterritorial,”<sup>50</sup> as Nabokov was to write not only in Russian and English but also in French. Both critics emphasize Nabokov’s experience of strangeness coming from this multilingualism and his feeling of uprootedness. Beaujour writes: “Nabokov was both a native speaker of English *and* a foreigner at the same time. The real point is that he was not a *monolingual* native speaker of either English or Russian.”<sup>51</sup> Here she interestingly and paradoxically refers to the term “monolingual” just as in 1996 Derrida was to write a book on the issue of language and identity entitled *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre* [Monolingualism of the Other]. Derrida asserts:

1. *On ne parle jamais qu’une seule langue—ou plutôt un seul idiome*
2. *On ne parle jamais une seule langue—ou plutôt il n’y a pas d’idiome pur.*<sup>52</sup>

1. One only and ever speaks just one language—or rather just one idiom.
2. One never speaks just one language—or rather there is no pure idiom.<sup>53</sup>

This experience of being at the same time not merely a native speaker of different languages but a native speaker and a foreigner to one’s mother language displays an inner crack or flaw generating suffering and a feeling of exile within oneself. For Nabokov, it was the process of the loss of a language, the fact that he had to abandon his natural idiom that was his personal tragedy. He moreover expresses a different love for the different

languages he used. He preferred Russian for the mastery he had of it and deprecated his English for its artificiality. It seems strange to read such a statement when we know of Nabokov's virtuosity in English. We may yet understand him when he mentions the magical tricks he resorts to when he uses his Russian idiom. Writing is indeed for him a scene, a scene of magic. He had already compared himself beforehand, we may recall, to "a conjurer explaining one trick by performing another." (311) What characterizes a conjurer is that he hides what happens in the background and the figure Nabokov offers us is thus one of a magician who clings to what he calls "the secret points" (316) corresponding to "the nerves of the novel" (316). Secrecy, therefore, typifies literature for him and is different from and beyond mere meaning. Secrecy, too, is what is at the origin of the passion Derrida feels for literature. He writes in *Passions*:

Si, sans aimer la littérature en général et pour elle-même, j'aime quelque chose *en elle* qui ne se réduise à quelque qualité esthétique, à quelque source de jouissance formelle, ce serait *au lieu du secret*. Au lieu d'un secret absolu. Là serait la passion. Il n'y a pas de passion sans secret, ce secret-ci, mais pas de secret sans cette passion. *Au lieu du secret* : là où pourtant tout est dit et où le reste n'est rien—que le reste, pas même de la littérature.<sup>54</sup>

If, without loving literature in general and for itself, I love something *within itself* which would not be reduced to some aesthetic quality, to some formal pleasure, it would be *at the locus of the secret*. At the locus of the absolute secret. Passion would be there. There is no passion without the secret, this secret, but there is no secret without this passion. *At the locus of the secret*: where however everything is said and where the remainder is nothing—but the remainder, not even literature.<sup>55</sup>

I quote Derrida at length because he may help us grasp more subtly this notion of secrecy in Nabokov's magical fiction. The origin of a book, Nabokov says, cannot be explained, deciphered, revealed, reached. The "secret points" of the novel, Derrida helps us to understand in his various commentaries on the secret in literature,<sup>56</sup> are situated at the limit of the unsaid, the half-said and the to-be-said. They are blindingly visible and readable but at the same time at the threshold of the invisible and the unreadable, at the limit of the conscious and the unconscious, like "the subliminal coordinates by means of which the book is plotted" (316). Their silence generates in the reader the desire to keep on exploring riddles and a passion for discovery as he knows that he is facing a strange and elusive *persona*, that of a manipulating author/conjurer.

## **The Author as a Janus-like Persona**

### **The Author as a Constraining Figure**

Most Nabokov scholars have agreed with the fact that OBEL is mainly a defense of the novel. Nabokov has indeed criticized what he considers to be incorrect interpretations and has, on the contrary, praised good ones. He therefore acts as a professor who grants good or bad grades, corrects, guides, judges, validates or invalidates, authorizes or forbids readings and interpretations. But beyond acting as a professor, what is his role as an author reading and judging his own text, an author reading and judging his readers' interpretations? To what extent is his own interpretation valid and does it have priority? These questions are, of course, again enormous and raise issues in literary theory of meaning, the nature of the text and the role not only of the author but also of the reader. For Michel Foucault, the author is the one who limits the excessive proliferation of meaning. He writes: "The author allows a limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations within a world. [...] The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning."<sup>57</sup> The author is then literally a safeguard against delirious interpretations, as Nabokov would agree with the statement that one cannot say anything about a text. The freedom of interpretation that he acknowledged when he mentions those "wise, sensitive, and staunch people who understood [his] book much better than [he] can explain its mechanism" (315) should be limited. But does the author have "the last word," to use Kinbote's phrase in *Pale Fire*? By being the reader of his own text, he is facing a paradoxical situation as he is not only the author of the text—so not a reader like any other one—and thereby entitled ("authorized") to give his own particular opinion by virtue of coherence, but also a reader like any other reader and thereby allowed to express a new discourse that can be deconstructed just like the previous one since an author cannot exhaust the secret of his own unreadable text.

### **The Author and the Reader Facing Each Other**

According to Nabokov himself and later Maurice Couturier, an encounter occurs between author and reader. Nabokov writes in "Good Readers and Good Writers":

The art of writing is a very futile business if it does not imply first of all the art of seeing the world as the potentiality of fiction. [...]