A Lingering Sense of Absence in the Fiction of Vladimir Nabokov

Greg Bevan*

When Vladimir Nabokov published his first English-language novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in 1941, the American critic Edmund Wilson hailed it in terms that would come to typify the prevailing view in the West of its author’s genius:

If I say that Nabokov, who was educated in England [...] turns out to be a master of English prose—the most extraordinary phenomenon of the kind since Conrad—this is likely to sound incredible. If I say that Nabokov is something like Proust, something like Franz Kafka, and, probably something like Gogol, I shall suggest an imitative patchwork, where Nabokov is as completely himself as any of these others—a man with a unique sensibility and a unique story to tell. (qtd. in Flint 18)

Contrast this—the last few words of it especially—with this assessment of Nabokov from the great Russian Jewish writer Isaak Babel: “He can write, but he’s got nothing to say.” (qtd. in Ehrenburg 110).

That Nabokov seems to be a different writer viewed from his adopted America—where *Vanity Fair* declared his most famous novel *Lolita* (1955)
“the only convincing love story of our century” (Rezzori 80)—than from his native Eastern Europe is clear when we add to Babel’s view those of other luminaries of the region. The Serbian novelist Danilo Kiš writes that Nabokov’s is “a magnificent, complex, and sterile art” (154). The Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko said that he could “hear the clatter of surgical tools in Nabokov’s prose” (106).

Why this critical schism should be so geographically traceable is a question which will need to be taken up in the course of the present discussion, which will aim to sketch Nabokov’s body of work as one from which something is indeed palpably missing, and—with the aid of the Russian Formalist criticism which so influenced him—to suggest in what that absence may consist. Textual analysis will focus in particular on Lolita for three reasons: because it is the novel on which Nabokov’s stature is principally founded; because it deals explicitly with absence as a theme, holding the prospect of insight into its author’s abiding artistic intentions; and because it has been clouded since its publication in a controversy of its own, connected to—but in important ways distinct from—the disagreement over Nabokov’s oeuvre as a whole.

Like Allen Ginsberg’s Howl, published the following year, Lolita draws much of its iconoclastic power from the straight-laced decade in which it appeared, and whose scandalized critics one cannot resist quoting. Here is Orville Prescott from a 1958 New York Times review in the wake of the book’s American publication:

Lolita, then, is undeniably news in the world of books. Unfortunately, it is bad news. There are two equally serious reasons why it isn’t worth any adult reader’s attention. The first is that it is dull, dull, dull in a
pretentious, florid and archly fatuous fashion. The second is that it is repulsive. (qtd. in Appel xxxv)

A more perceptive review from the same year comes from author and critic Lionel Trilling:

We find ourselves the more shocked when we realize that, in the course of reading the novel, we have come virtually to condone the violence it presents [...We] have been seduced into conniving in the violation, because we have permitted our fantasies to accept what we know to be revolting. (qtd. in Tamir-Ghez 65)

From such descriptions, and the soon-famous bones of the novel's plot—a goatish middle-aged European bachelor marries an American widow to gain access to her twelve-year-old daughter, and then spirits her away to a smutty succession of highway motel rooms—Lolita attracted the immediate attention of pornography enthusiasts, who were generally as puzzled by the book as the publishers who read it in manuscript form, as described by Nabokov in the book's Afterword: “They expected the rising succession of erotic scenes; when these stopped, the readers stopped, too, and felt bored and let down” (313-314). For what Nabokov had written was not a pornographic novel at all—and it is this demonstrable misapprehension that distinguishes the 1950s controversy around Lolita from the disagreement attending Nabokov’s oeuvre today—but what Alfred Appel calls “surely the most allusive and linguistically playful novel in English since Ulysses and Finnegans Wake” (xi).

It is an allusive novel, as well as a house of mirrors, beginning with its fictional Foreword by a Dr. John Ray Jr., which parodies the psychiatric case-history. It was these qualities that ensured that the same Lolita that
was spurned by the American establishment of the 1950s would be embraced by postmodern critics in the decades that followed. In 1998 it placed fourth on the Modern Library’s ranking of the best novels of the twentieth century. A book that had first been perceived as a scandalous affront to morality was now a symbol of resistance to oppression, as witnessed by Azar Nafisi’s bestselling 2003 memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

But it is worth returning to the image of the furtive pervert in 1958, flipping feverishly through the pages of *Lolita* in search of sex scenes that are scarcely to be found. For the novel has maintained about it a lingering sense of something missing. Nabokov himself was well aware of this, and made two comments that may help us zero in on what absence makes this novel so singular, and also to determine whether its formidable latter-day stature is deserved.

The first is from the Afterword, which was originally written to accompany the excerpted American debut of the novel in *The Anchor Review*, and which essentially lays out Nabokov’s theory of fiction:

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 insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss. (*Lolita* 314)

This stance has one foot in the postmodern period, anticipating Derrida’s famous dictum that “there is nothing outside the text” (158). At the same time (and because postmodernism itself has the same roots), it recalls the “Art for Art’s Sake” movement of the nineteenth century, exemplified in
Edgar Allan Poe’s 1850 statement that “under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble, than [...] this poem written solely for the poem’s sake.” (892) Poe’s famous poem “Annabel Lee” is heavily alluded to in Lolita, in the form of Annabel, the childhood love Humbert attempts to reincarnate years later in the novel’s title character. As we shall see, Humbert’s doomed quest is not to deflower Lolita so much as to fix her elusive beauty to the page. (His author, an avid lepidopterist, wrote the novel during butterfly-collecting trips through the American west.) Nabokov’s undertaking here is a rarefied exercise in aestheticism, and his stance would seem to be that the moralists who attacked the book on its release were therefore as misguided as the perverts.

The second quotation is from a note Nabokov wrote to Appel, who was preparing the notes to The Annotated Lolita: “The type of writer I am, half-painter, half-naturalist, finds the use of symbols hateful because it substitutes a dead general idea for a live specific impression.” (qtd. in Appel 364) This quote does more than explain Nabokov’s famous hatred of Freud: it draws our attention to the striking fact that, for all its vivid visual imagery, Lolita contains virtually nothing that could be called symbolic. In the absence of symbolism from the novel we can see the influence of Russian Formalist critics like Viktor Shklovsky, who wrote that “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” (“Art” 12).

In Lolita, then, we have—at least in its author’s figuration—a novel built without any moral component, and missing the symbolic machinery to which readers tend to look for underlying meaning. The absence does not end there—for the reader who opens the novel finds its specter hanging over the
very first pages. John Ray, Jr.’s Foreword introduces us to a cast of characters who are all dead: Lolita’s mother struck down by a car, Humbert’s doppelgänger and rival Clare Quilty murdered by Humbert, who is himself now dead of a heart attack, and Lolita dead in childbirth. Indeed, absence sits at the heart of this novel and provides its metaphysical interest. Reading the suspenseful sequence at the Enchanted Hunters hotel, where Humbert waits for the sleeping pills he has given Lolita to take effect so he can have his way with her, the pornography devotee will begin to understand that the approaching climax is not the sort he came for, because Humbert’s long-sought Annabel has eluded him:

Human beings, attend! I should have understood that Lolita had already proved to be something quite different from innocent Annabel, and that the nymphetamine evil breathing through every pore of the fey child that I had prepared for my secret delectation, would make the secrecy impossible, and the delectation lethal. I should have known [...] that nothing but pain and horror would result from the expected rapture.

Oh, winged gentlemen of the jury! (124-125)

This is Humbert the unreliable narrator at the top of his game, erasing Lolita’s victimhood and replacing it with his own. Indeed, the erasure of Lolita is the ongoing preoccupation of this novel, even though it begins and ends with her name. And her physical disappearance late in the novel, when she runs off with Clare Quilty (Humbert calls this part of his story, in a Proustian reference, “Dolorès Disparue”), is actually the least profound of the ways in which she is missing. We will briefly examine three others.

The first is an absence based on the metaphysics of fiction and storytelling. *Lolita* deals forthrightly with something most novels only
implicitly touch on: the limitations of the story form itself, the futility of its endeavor to pin an evanescent life to the page. Like Nabokov, Humbert strives above all for "aesthetic bliss," and James Tweedie explains the dangers therein:

The nature of his medium, the necessity of creating images through a string of words in the indefinite time of reading, confronts Humbert with the paradox of his attempt to "fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets": although he strives to preserve Lolita's idiosyncrasies, he also risks reducing and abstracting them, transforming her into a specimen devoid of that particular "magic." (163)

The closest Humbert comes to his goal is probably in the famous tennis sequence at a Colorado resort late in the novel, where, as he watches Lolita serve, his language achieves heights of observation and eloquence that are almost unmatched in modern literature:

My Lolita had a way of raising her bent left knee at the ample and springy start of the service cycle when there would develop and hang in the sun for a second a vital web of balance between toed foot, pristine armpit, burnished arm and far back-flung racket, as she smiled up with gleaming teeth at the small globe suspended so high at the zenith of the powerful and graceful cosmos she had created for the express purpose of falling upon it with a clean resounding crack of her golden whip. (231-232)

In that long sentence the entire novel is distilled: the impossible wish to capture a moment in time forever, and the proposition that a universe can be devoted to aesthetic bliss and nothing more.

Humbert’s watching eye is, paradoxically, the second agent in Lolita’s
erasure: for all the keenness of his observations, he is hopelessly self-absorbed. Feminist critics such as Linda Kauffman have focused on the gender implications of Nabokov’s choice of point-of-view character: “[Nabokov] is writing a book that elides the female by framing the narrative through Humbert’s angle of vision...The victim’s viewpoint in Lolita is elided.” (141) Dana Brand writes,

Everything outside of Humbert’s consciousness is deprived of its independence and is transformed in such a way that Humbert is ultimately surrounded by the equivalent of photographs, corpses, and dead butterflies [...] His world, however beautiful, is a solipsistic dream, echoing himself back to himself. (19)

One of the best illustrations of this is the early scene in which Humbert takes Lolita into his lap and plays out his beauty-and-the-beast fantasy while she obliviously eats an apple. “Lolita had been safely solipsized” (60), he writes, and his rumination afterward can be read as a comment on the psychology of objectification and pornography:

Thus I had delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe—and I was safe. What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own. (62)

After Lolita runs away with Quilty, Chapter 25 begins with the line, “This book is about Lolita” (253). Michael Wood’s commentary on this line bears quoting:

What he mainly means is that his “three empty years” without her, after her departure with Quilty, are not part of this story, which is
about her and not about him. But the emphasis is odd, invites us to quarrel a little. And even if we don’t, Humbert is soon to tell us that he “simply did not know a thing” about the girl’s mind, and to conjecture, with dim and belated condescension, that “quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate...” “It was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita’s states of mind while comforting my own base self.” Touché, as Humbert might say. This book is not about Lolita, or only about Lolita in a peculiarly displaced or refracted way. It is about “Lolita,” about the obsessive dream of Lolita, which captured the actual child and took her away. (23)

This brings us to the third sense of Lolita’s effacement, the one that makes the novel a kind of tragedy: the theft of her childhood by Humbert. “Despite John Ray’s assertion,” Nabokov writes, “Lolita has no moral in tow.” Nonetheless, Ray’s depiction of the story as “a tragic tale tending unswervingly to nothing less than a moral apotheosis” (5) leads us to expect Humbert to realize and to repent for what he has done. Some critics do find a remorseful Humbert winning our sympathy in the novel’s final pages. Nomi Tamir-Ghez writes, “Only at the end, when he leaves behind all pretense of self-justification and turns instead to self-castigation, does Humbert win over the reader and close the distance between them” (66).

The most obvious problem with this reading is that Humbert never does stop downplaying his crimes. Here is the famous passage at the end of the novel (by which time Lolita is grown, married to someone else and pregnant), with Humbert on a hillside listening to the sounds of children at play:
I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord.

(308)

Note, beneath the tenderness of the language, that Humbert is alluding to two things at once. “The absence of her voice from that concord” can refer to his abduction of Lolita from the world of children that it was her birthright to be part of—but it can also simply imply that she has grown from a child into an adult like anyone does. By conflating his crime with a natural passage of life, Humbert ends the novel on a note of self-serving trivialization.

One might object that the very question of sympathy with Humbert—or for that matter with Lolita—is a naïve one in a novel written only for the purpose of “aesthetic bliss.” But coming to the end of a novel rife with sly games and puzzles, and reading Nabokov’s insistence that Lolita has “no moral in tow,” 1 one cannot escape the feeling that this claim is just another smokescreen. With its taboo-violating subject matter, Lolita practically demands the reader to make a moral judgment: whether “aesthetic bliss” can be a justification for making art from depravity. Wood writes, “This is a book about a guilt that both glorifies itself and grovels in self-accusation and can therefore scarcely avoid raising moral questions in the reader’s mind—even if the once and still scandalous premise of the story didn’t raise such questions.” (18)

When we turn to the Russian Formalist critic Shklovsky, in whom, as we have said, can be found the roots of Nabokov’s dislike of symbolism, we
find the limit of the former’s influence on the latter to be very point where this notion of moral judgment arises. According to Shklovsky’s influential theory of “enstrangement” (alternately translated as “defamiliarization”), the more we look at a thing the less we can see it, and so a writer should describe it without naming it, as if seeing it for the first time. Nabokov’s prose glitters with such enstrangements; take for example this description from *The Gift* (1963) of an oil-slick on the street: “a rainbow of oil, with the purple predominant and a plumelike twist. Asphalt’s parakeet.” (34) The critic James Wood, with reference to this passage, writes:

[T]he Nabokovian idea of cherished detail and stuffed perfection is too artistic an idea for a form that must surrender itself to the freedom of its characters. For characters are generally not artistic at all, are they? In this respect, novels are not like poems, and it is wrongheaded to try to turn them into poems. We do not read novels to feel the constant artistic control of the author, but to share in the wayward, inartistic freedom of created human beings. (That such humans are set free by that same artistic control is, of course, merely a trivial paradox, and not a hindering one.) Thus, the problem with Nabokov’s beautiful details, his “making strange,” is that they are the kind of details that only Nabokov could notice and write up so perfectly. Very few of us will come to see an oil slick as “asphalt’s parakeet.” As a result, Nabokov is forced either to speak over his characters, or to make them into artists of one kind or another.

This sense of speaking over his characters is pervasive in Nabokov’s fiction—to the point that the elementary critical blunder of equating author and narrator begins to seem, in the accounting above of Humbert Humbert’s
self-absorption, not so wrongheaded after all.

By no coincidence, Shklovsky’s original example of “making strange” is from one of the most moral writers of any age, Leo Tolstoy:

In “Shame” Tolstoy enstranges the idea of flogging by describing people who, as punishment for violating the law, had been stripped, thrown down on the floor, and beaten with switches [...] In a note on this passage, Tolstoi asks, “Just why this stupid, savage method of inflicting pain and no other: such as pricking the shoulders or some other part of the body with needles, squeezing somebody’s hands or the feet in a vise, etc?” (Theory 6)

In other words, Tolstoy not only cannot comprehend torture, he cannot comprehend popular comprehension of it. It is difficult to ignore how Tolstoy’s moral sense makes Nabokov’s perceptions—for all his erudition, and for all the freshness of his descriptive eye—seem glib. This may well explain the cool reception Nabokov has received in Eastern Europe, which saw enough tragedy in the twentieth century—the pogroms, Stalinism, the Jewish ghettos and concentration camps of Poland, and the police states of the Cold War—to make such fiction seem a frivolous luxury.

Or perhaps the antipathy runs deeper. Keeping in mind that history of oppression, recall James Wood’s observation that a novel “must surrender itself to the freedom of its characters,” and then note Nabokov—being told that E. M. Forster talked about his characters taking over his novels—replying, “My characters are galley slaves.” (qtd. in Gold)

It would be both unfair and beyond the scope of this discussion to impugn Nabokov’s politics, which as it happens were classically liberal, and opposed to all forms of autocracy and totalitarianism. But there can be little
doubt that his aristocratic upbringing gave his view of character in fiction a
different coloration than that of a commoner like Anton Chekhov, who was
not only a short-story writer and playwright but a tireless doctor to the
Russian masses. Remarking on the peasant in a Chekhov story who hears
“an expensive-sounding” accordion—an example of prosaic metaphor in
Chekhov that Nabokov disliked—Wood writes,

This seems to me a much purer idea of “making strange” than
Nabokov’s more obvious, “artistic” one. And Nabokov’s version is easier
too, in the end, than Chekhov’s. Chekhov’s involves the surrendering of
the “artistic” while, of course, retaining final artistic control; Nabokov’s
involves the mere assertion of artistic control. After several hours of
effort we might well come up with, in our study, “asphalt’s parakeet.”

But you have to know a community to let a character hear “an
expensive-sounding accordion.” That takes a lifetime.

Though “an expensive-sounding accordion” seems clearly an invalid example
of enstrangement as Shklovsky defined it—the modifier draws its
incisiveness from the peasant’s familiarity with accordions, not their
defamiliarization—the comparison with Chekhov and his use of metaphor
brings into focus the defining absence of Lolita. It is not the absence of its
title character but of the entire notion of character: of fictional people who
strike us as something more than pawns in their author’s design, people for
whom our feelings can run as deep as they do for our friends.

It is not surprising that Lolita has become a canonical novel, in a
postmodern age that holds such reactions to be naïve, and in which, as John
Gardner writes, “the professor, and indeed his whole profession, [tends] to
choose not the best works of literature but those about which it is most
possible to make subtle observations” (13). But Kiš’ dissent that Nabokov’s is a “sterile art,” remote from authentic human experience, is one that critics beyond Eastern Europe have raised. The labyrinthine *Pale Fire* (1962), a spoof of literary exegesis enclosing a murder mystery in a poem and its accompanying critical commentary, appeared forty-nine spots below *Lolita* on the Modern Library’s “100 Best Novels” list, and yet its initial publication too got a cool reception from some quarters. In a *New York Times* review George Cloyne took issue with the layers of artifice shrouding the narrator’s invented home country of Zembla:

In order to react to the notion of an imaginary country the reader has to see it in a vivid light. He has to feel himself involved. Invented countries with the ring of imaginative truth about them, such as Lilliput, always have a certain simplicity to justify their existence […] But a world that has laboriously to be constructed through footnotes, is likely to intrigue its creator alone.

American fiction writer and critic Charles Baxter more recently concurred:

[Nabokov], with his aristocratic intelligence and fierce game playing, is capable of giving his readers a failing grade if they forget where they saw that image or that phrase before. *Pale Fire* and *Ada* can sometimes seem more like final exams than novels. They are gorgeous, in their various ways, but their symmetries gently close out much of the world. (155-156)

One can level this critique and nonetheless argue for Nabokov—with a sweeping display case of gleaming quotations, lovingly procured—as one of the great prose stylists of the twentieth century. No one could deny that he had the requisite credentials to fault Dostoevsky’s narrative eye in his
Lectures on Russian Literature—but note, if we shift the focus from physical description, how well the criticism applies to his own work:

When introducing this or that [character, Dostoevsky] always gives a short description of their appearance, then hardly ever refers to it anymore. Thus his dialogues are generally free from any intercalations used by other writers—the mention of a gesture, a look, or any detail referring to the background. One feels that he does not see his characters physically, that they are merely puppets, remarkable, fascinating puppets plunged into the moving stream of the author's ideas. (Lectures 129)

The response to this seems clear: that clearly visualizing a puppet—even "making it strange" in order to see it as though for the first time—cannot transform it something actually alive.

Notes

1. It may seem inadvisable to interpret the turn of phrase “moral in tow” too literally, but it is evident from his Afterword that in “didactic fiction” Nabokov is thrashing something of a straw man. Critics who have found Lolita lacking in the terms explored here have not been calling for moral commentary within the novel; their position is one that Flannery O’Connor spelled out to college students in a lecture published almost simultaneously with Lolita, and one that Nabokov surely knew himself:

[A piece of fiction] must carry its meaning inside it...You can’t make an inadequate dramatic action complete by putting a statement of meaning on the end of it or in the middle of it or at the beginning of it. When you
write fiction you are speaking *with* character and action, not *about* character and action. The writer's moral sense must coincide with his dramatic sense. (75-76)

**Works Cited**


