The Last Word in Nabokov Criticism

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Charles Kinbote may be right when he notes at the end of his Preface to "Pale Fire" that it is always the commentator who has the last word, but lately in Nabokov studies there have been different sorts of commentators and different sorts of last words. In the space of a few years we have seen a seminal biography and a number of impressive critical books which have expounded Nabokov's work in terms of his own aesthetics and metaphysics. But there have been other developments which may be equally significant in terms of their implications for how critics interested in Nabokov might proceed in the next decade. I am thinking in particular here of Richard Rorty's 1989 book, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. In a chapter devoted to Nabokov, he redescribes the fiction as it appears to an American pragmatist who is sceptical about metaphysics and interested in exploring the rival claims of self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity. Rorty's background, range of interests and point of view make for substantial differences in his critical approach. His reading of Nabokov ignores all the "wayside murmur[s] of a hidden theme," and concentrates instead on what his fiction can teach us. Like recent critics, he takes Nabokov seriously as a thinker, a moralist, and as a comic writer of genius, but he is not primarily interested in studying how the novels orchestrate the novelist's beliefs, for he disputes some of Nabokov's most important claims about the nature of his fiction and about fiction in general, and deals with him, not irreverently — he admires Nabokov enormously — but somewhat unceremoniously. He repeatedly discusses the novels in ways that his subject would have disapproved, by comparing him, for example, with writers whom he detested, or by musing about the links between Nabokov's family background and his predilections as an author.

But the most important part of the chapter is Rorty's discussion of the two novels he takes to be Nabokov's best, *Lolita* and *Pale Fire.* He links Humbert and Kinbote as two examples of what he calls a "genius-monster," a "monster of incuriosity," and claims that this creature is "Nabokov's contribution to our knowledge of human possibilities." He notes that, even though Nabokov loathes these characters, "they write as well as their creator at his best," and Rorty insists that they subvert the Nabokovian notion that "artistic gifts" are "sufficient for moral virtue," that they prove "that there is no connection between the contingent and selective curiosity of the autonomous artist," on the one hand, and "the creation of a world in which tenderness and kindness are the human norm," on the other. Nabokov, says Rorty, may claim in the Afterword to Lolita that art is to be identified with "curiosity, tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy," but in his best novels he exhibits "his inability to believe his own general ideas." Rorty concludes:

> Nabokov knew quite well that ecstasy and tenderness not only are separable but tend to preclude each other — that most nonobsessed poets are, like Shade, second rate. This is the "moral" knowledge that his novels help us acquire, and to which his aestheticist rhetoric is irrelevant. He knows quite well that the pursuit of autonomy is at odds with feelings of solidarity. His parenthetical moral philosophy would be sound only if it were true that, as Humbert says, "poets never kill." But, of course, Humbert does kill — and, like Kinbote, Humbert is exactly as good a writer, exactly as much of an artist, capable of creating exactly as much iridescent ecstasy, as Nabokov himself. Nabokov would like the four characteristics which make up art to be inseparable, but he has to face up to the unpleasant fact that writers can obtain and produce ecstasy while failing to notice suffering, while being incurious about the people whose lives provide their material. He would like to see all the evil in the world — all the failures in tenderness and kindness — as produced by nonpoets, by

> generalizing, incurious vulgarians like Paduk and Gradus. But he knows that this is not the case.[1]

It is easy to imagine what a general answer to such claims might look like. Those who are convinced that the most important things in Nabokov's work are deliberately hidden from the ordinary reader, and who see a clear link between his aesthetic principles, as articulated in the interviews, essays, and lectures on literature, and his fiction, might point out that any critic who proposes to write a commentary on Nabokov's work without using as a *point de départ* his metaphysical, aesthetic and moral assumptions, as gleaned from his non-fictional writings, is hopelessly compromised from the outset. According to this view, Rorty here pays insufficient attention in his comments to Nabokov's deliberate "irrationality," his preference for mixing metaphors when called upon to offer arguments. Pragmatist logic stands poking its alpenstock in a gaping crevice, while Nabokov has laughingly left logic behind by leaping across. Moreover, the attempt to link Nabokov, a novelist who is *sui generis* if there ever was one, to thinkers of the "What is to be done?" sort, and in the process to figures like Orwell who thought of writing as something one does in order to change people's lives, is an exercise that could only be inspired by a perverse desire to make it new, given how essentially unlike such figures he is. Furthermore, our critic might argue, Nabokov's criteria for authentic art are borne out in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, not contradicted by them, because Humbert and Kinbote are failed or flawed artists, and grotesquely inferior to their creator whose life and art serenely exemplify the criteria his aesthetic itemizes. The judgments which Rorty's iconoclasm hurries him into are also flawed: the suggestion that Shade is a second rate poet, whose wistful curio, "Pale Fire," is only interesting because it is illuminated by the dazzle of the *apparatus criticus* that surrounds it, is going to be rejected by those with a higher opinion of Shade's poetic talent. And if one refuses to accept his secondary status, one will also have trouble with the notion that Kinbote gets all the ecstasy and Shade the tenderness, because one will see in Shade's own poem an ecstatic celebration of the subjects that fascinate him: married love and the rôle of chance in the universe. Rorty's claim that the artist's autonomy precludes an interest in solidarity could be answered by pointing to passages which invoke the "thousands of dreamers" who share Nabokov's high standards, or the ones in which he says all sorts of laudatory things about democracy in his comments on life in America. His insistence that "incurious vulgarians" are responsible for most of the evil in the world is confirmed by even a cursory glance at Lenin on literature, or Stalin on linguistics, and so on.

I do not believe that Rorty's claims can be refuted quite this easily, nor do I think that ultimately there is any real need to refute them, no need to have the last word in this particular regard. But even if one does find fault with him on the basis of every one of the above points, the basic challenge that such criticism offers remains: i.e., although it pays close attention to individual details, it argues for a plausible alternative to the notion that the "good reader," a ubiquitous phrase in Nabokov criticism, should always conceive her task as a search for patterns, which can then be used, along with his comments on his own enterprise, to resolve a variety of problems in some provisional or definitive way. Rorty's argument also implies that the quest for a key that unlocks Nabokov's novels entails a number of essentialist assumptions about his fiction, assumptions that are as open to question as anything else in his work. This is a large topic, and in this paper I shall limit myself to considering its implications for some aspects of *Lolita*, the most famous of the genius-monster monster novels.

Before I turn to the novel itself, just a word on Nabokov as metaphysician. The recognition of Nabokov the thinker has been somewhat slow in coming. Partly, this derives from the fact that in his novels there is a dearth of characters who engage in sustained discussions or arguments with others, compared to, say, the novels of Dostoevsky, Lawrence, Mann or Proust, for example, or, to update our list a little, those of Solzhenitzyn, Murdoch, Sartre, or Bellow.

[1] *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 159-60.

Nabokov's fictional predilections militate against lengthy dialogues. Arguments require that "a vocabulary in which to state premises [be] shared by speaker and audience,"[2] and Nabokov's protagonists are often engaged in creating their own private vocabulary to justify their own private ends. Besides, his characters are generally too busy dealing with their all-consuming obsessions to concern themselves over much with discursive sorties. Thus the critic intent on finding metaphysical argument *per se* is forced to fall back on Nabokov's autobiography, his many interviews, his volumes of criticism. The dazzling mix of *obiter dicta,* stylish wit, and pointed observation in Nabokov's non-fictional prose has been a rich source of material, and recent critics have relied heavily on one text in particular, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," a lecture attached to the first volume of *Lectures on Literature,* that does contain a distinctive set of metaphysical and aesthetic propositions. I propose to consider *Lolita* in the light of Nabokov's discursive claims about his fiction, and to use the results to comment on the approach taken by Rorty, with a view to teasing out some of its implications for the way Nabokov's novels might be written about in the future. Let us see if the interplay between Nabokov's criticism and his novels is as complex as Rorty suggests, if Nabokov the novelist interrogates his own formulas, if there is some sense in which he could be described as denying himself the right to have the last word.

Consider, for example, the famous scene in which Humbert Humbert muses about what he has done to his ward, records his contrition, acknowledges just how useless such a feeling is since it comes too late to make any difference, and wryly concludes: "The moral sense in mortals is the duty, / One has to pay on mortal sense of beauty." The resemblance between Humbert's position and Nabokov's in an essay like "Literature and Commonsense" is certainly suggestive. A recent gloss on this much discussed passage reads: "an individual's perception of something or someone as beautiful automatically awakens an ethical faculty in that person; this emerges as a function of being alive, or 'mortal'," and goes on to suggest that "the importance of the network of connections among perception, beauty, and ethics for understanding *Lolita* is that it is identical to Nabokov's own as he describes it in 'The Art of Literature and Commonsense'."[3] What Rorty's criticism reminds us of is that this particular correspondence will be less illuminating for some than for others. Humbert's sense of beauty manifests itself on practically every page of his story, and he is supremely gifted with the "capacity to wonder at trifles," which Nabokov insists is "the highest form of consciousness," but why does it awaken his ethical faculty so late in the day? Or does he always know the difference between right and wrong even though he cannot bring himself to do the right thing? But if that is the case, why is the ethical faculty so underdeveloped, a 98-pound weakling to Humbert's virile sense of the beautiful? Even the phrase "highest form of consciousness" needs some preliminary unpacking. Does "highest" mean the most estimable — in ethical terms? in aesthetic terms? — or does it mean that which puts us in touch with the atemporal?[4] If both, does the moral claim, for which one can marshall some empirical evidence, differ in kind from the metaphysical one, for which one cannot? The point is not so much that the argument of the novel is supported by or runs counter to the one posed in the essay, but that both require certain arbitrary choices to be made before they lead to any particular conclusion.

There are a number of other problematic links between novel and essay. We notice that common sense, the villain in the essay, could plausibly be construed as the hero in *Lolita.* Five minutes commonsensical reflection would have told Humbert that sequestering a 12-year-old for his exclusive delectation would inevitably end in catastrophe. Like Hermann in *Despair,* Humbert commits his crimes because he is not commonsensical enough, too imaginative, not too dull. His highly wrought fantasies make him kill Quilty in what amounts

[2] Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 93.
[3] Vladimir Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 183.
[4] See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* p. 151.

to a grotesquely conventionalized execution scene, replete with readings from poems, movies clichés, and so on. Even Marta and Franz in *King, Queen, Knave* are, as would-be murderers, more interesting than that great undifferentiated mass of criminals whose activities, listed annually in the New York Times Index under "Murder," have as little aesthetic or moral significance as the daily routine at a slaughter house. In scenes such as this one, Humbert in effect threatens to become the sensitive killer, the imaginative rapist, the morally-minded criminal whose very existence Nabokov's argument in the essay would seem to militate against. And the hypnotic power his energetic evil exerts on the reader is the main source of the novel's tension and drama.

If *Lolita* can plausibly be seen as an object lesson in what happens to one man who tries to see the aesthetic and the ethical as inextricably bound up together, and fails, and as proof that the two realms are not as inextricably bound up together as Nabokov wants them to be, this is not "the last word" on the novel but simply another provisional reading. Humbert has also been identified both as the last in a line of great lovers in western culture, and as "a vain, cruel wretch who manages to appear 'touching'."[5] And there have been a large number of responses along the spectrum whose ends are defined by such disparate readings. Since his narrative moves among a dizzying array of vocabularies — moral, aesthetic, psychoanalytical, judicial, as well as those of popular romance and detective fiction — and because Humbert alternately uses and mocks all of these vocabularies, all the critical disagreement is understandable enough. This does not mean that we should stop arguing about such matters, but it does suggest that there is a contingency, an arbitrariness built in to such deliberations that might make us dubious about the prospect of resolving these things once and for all. This need not be regarded as a despairing point of view, quite the contrary. As with many great novels, it might simply be prudent to admit that the morality of Lolita is most usefully seen as dialectical rather than exemplary, and its value lies less in its "commendation of any readily-definable moral positions than in the liveliness of [its] challenges to moral presumptions."[6]

The essentialist view of the self that goes hand in hand with an essentialist morality gives rise to other problems that may be impossible to resolve definitively. Humbert begins his meditation looking for answers to questions, answers that would supply reasons for acting compassionately or suppressing illicit desires. But, as Rorty points out in a paper on Freud, such questions "can *only* be answered by philosophical metanarratives that tell us about ... a world and a self that have centres, centres that are sources of authority."[7] Humbert certainly begins by believing in such centres, but in the course of telling his story he describes himself as a murderer, a poet, a moralist, a child therapist, a sensualist, a doting father, so many different selves in short that he ends by abandoning his search for an essential one altogether. When he remarks on the last page of the novel that "At this or that twist of [my story] I feel my slippery self eluding me, gliding into deeper and darker waters than I care to probe" (280), he may not be admitting cowardice or defeat. Rather he may be suggesting that there is no such thing as an essential Humbert Humbert, because there is no intrinsic human nature or internal source of moral obligations or shared humanity on which one can base certain universal conclusions. Even what he has learned has shown him how cut off he is from others, not what he has in common with them.

In Nabokov's novels, the search for reasons for doing or believing anything often ends in frustration, because his heroes seem to inhabit a world in which a wedge has been permanently driven between the reasoning and the moral faculties. In a famous passage, Hume notes: "'Tis not against reason to prefer the obliteration of the whole world to the

[5] See Lionel Trilling, "The Last Lover: Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*," *Encounter*, 11, Oct. 1958; and Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), p. 94.
[6] Cedric Watts, *The English Novel* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1976), p. 11.
[7] *Essays on Heidegger,* p. 75.

scratching of my little finger."[8] This proposition is one more nail in the coffin of the old world order, because it identifies a world in which the ability to compose logical arguments for or against something no longer entails a consideration of moral consequences. The monstrous selfishness that results may be damnable in the eyes of the "whole world," but that need not trouble the madman who articulates the notion. When Hermann in *Despair* argues that if killing an ape is not a crime, killing a series of apes that ascend by insensible gradations to the status of a human being is not a crime either, he indulges in precisely this sort of amoral reasoning. Humbert's casuistical justification of rape — Dante ogled Beatrice as did Petrarch his Laura, and older men often wed young girls--involves him in similarly ingenious reasoning. The rational, in these novels, sometimes seems to be telling us, not how essentially good the world is, but that as a faculty it has nothing whatever to do with good or bad.

Rorty notes that "if one holds the view of the self as centerless ... one will be prepared to find the relation between the intellectual and the moral virtues, and the relation between a writer's books and other parts of his life, contingent."[9] This is what Nabokov's critics have not been enthusiastic about doing, because, understandably enough, they have felt obliged to defend Nabokov against a number of critical notions — hat he is a mere aesthete, that moral questions are irrelevant in his fiction — which beleaguered his work for many years. Thus they have tended to argue that the relation between intellectual and moral virtues is not contingent, despite all the evidence of twentieth century literature that suggests that it does not take a good human being to produce good literature, and all the evidence in his novels that suggests that Nabokov's fiction thrives on the tensions between these two virtues.

A great deal of the most interesting material written on Nabokov in the past 25 years has been a study of Nabokov in control, and there is every reason to think that this will continue to be the case, particularly given the kinds of primary material now becoming available. But those who choose not to work intensively on the minute particulars of the Master have something to tell us too. By redescribing Nabokov's work on their own terms they can perform a variety of useful functions. They can, for example, follow Rorty's lead and link it to a range of nineteenth and twentieth-century fiction. Does the romantic egoism in Conrad have anything in common with its Nabokovian counterpart? Does the contingency of self-creation in Proust? The ironizing of general ideas in Thomas Mann? The use of ironic double coding in an age of hyper self-consciousness in Umberto Eco? How does Nabokov's interest in the transcendental link him, not only with the Russian symbolists, a connection that has received some attention, but with the novels of John Barth and Thomas Pynchon? Yeats wrote that "no man can create as did Shakespeare, Homer, Sophocles, who does not believe with all his blood and nerve, that man's soul is immortal."[10] If George Steiner is right in using such claims as evidence of the widening gap between all kinds of artists and those who "accept the constraints on permissible discourse prescribed by logical atomism, logical positivism, scientific proof-values, or ... liberal scepticism,"[11] Nabokov has more in common with his fellow writers than has been generally recognized, and his interest in the "otherworld" begins to look less quaint, less idiosyncratic than it might at first appear.

At a time when literary criticism is becoming increasingly recondite, books which link author and text, text and readership, in a series of stimulating ways are to be applauded. What Rorty shows us is that these connections can be made in ways that Nabokov might not have approved, ways that make his books "useful" in the sense that he never thought of them as being. When Rorty notes that "the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but

[8] See A.D. Nuttall, *Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment": Murder as Philosophic Experiment* (Edinburgh: Scottish Press for University of Sussex Press, 1978), p. 100.
[9] *Essays on Heidegger*, p. 78.
[10] Quoted in George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 228.
[11] Steiner, p. 227.

steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress"[12], he is making an explicit link between the extraordinary achievement of *Lolita* or *Pale Fire* and the sort of "topical trash" which Nabokov dismissed so zestfully. If Rorty is right, he has supplied us with yet another reason for writing and talking about these novels. If we can emulate the intellectual energy with which he and the authors of recent books on Nabokov have done their work, we shall not be hearing the last word on or from this particular author any time soon.

[12] *Essays on Heidegger,* xvi.