Innocence and Experience Replayed: From *Speak Memory to Ada*

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Shortly after Lolita was published in the United States, Leslie Fiedler had this to say about the novel: "Richardson, Dickens and Henry James are controverted, all customary symbols for the encounter of innocence and experience stood on their heads. Nowhere are the myths of sentimentality more amusing[ly] and convincingly parodied."[1] In *Love and Death in the American Novel,* Fiedler takes his point further: "it is the naive child, the female, the American who corrupts the sophisticated adult, the male, the European." Nabokov's child, he concludes, is Poe's "Annabel Lee as nymphomaniac, demonic rapist of the soul."[2]

It is easy enough to dismiss Fiedler's flamboyance, consigning his comments to the realm of hyperbole. Yet when we turn to the more tempered remarks of an eminent Nabokovian, we find that his viewpoint, if not his tone, is essentially in accord with Fiedler's. In his Introduction to *The Annotated Lolita,* published a dozen years after the novel's appearance in America, Alfred Appel, Jr. maintains that Lolita satirizes "the romantic myth of the child, extending from Wordsworth to Salinger." If, Appel adds, "the origin of modern sentimentality about the child's innocence can be dated at 1760, with the publication of *Mother Goose's Melodies,* then surely Lolita marks its death in 1955."[3] In Appel's view as in Fiedler's, Lolita's début was at once fatal and salutary. By the time that the novel arrived on the literary scene, "the romantic myth of the child's innocence" had dwindled to a rag-and-bone shop of feeble clichés. In a brilliant stroke of literary composition, Nabokov delivered us of this tiresome tradition.

The most striking challenge to this skeptical vision of the child's representation in modern literature comes, interestingly enough, from *Lolita*'s author. Almost five years before his novel first appeared in print, Nabokov, with characteristic precocity, was already challenging the position that his future critics would adopt. Publicly reprimanding those "who denounce" the theme of the child's innocence as "sentimental," he accused them of ignorance; such "people," he said, "are generally unaware of what sentiment is."[4] The forum for these outspoken remarks was a course on European Fiction that Nabokov inaugurated at Cornell University during the academic year of 1950-51 — the same period during which he began to compose *Lolita* in earnest.[5] In a series of lectures comprising one section of this course, Nabokov paid annual tribute, for nearly a decade, to a novelist who, more than any other, translated Romantic faith in the child into the great prose fictions of the nineteenth century.[6] That author, of course, was Charles Dickens, whose mighty novel, *Bleak House,* Nabokov both analyzed and celebrated in his posthumously published lectures.

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[1] Leslie Fiedler, "The Profanation of the Child," *New Leader* 41 (June 23, 1958), 26-29; cited by Phyllis A. Roth, "Introduction," in *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov,* ed. Phyllis A. Roth (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984) 13.

[2] Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960) 326-27. Fiedler's remarks on Lolita are a revised version of those appearing in the earlier, New Leader essay.

[3] Alfred Appel, Jr., "Introduction," in *Vladimir Nabokov: The Annotated Lolita,* ed. and with preface, introduction and notes by Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970) l n.2.

[4] Vladimir Nabokov, "Charles Dickens (1812-1870), Bleak House (1852-1853)," *Lectures on Literature,* ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980) 86. Subsequent references to this edition will henceforth be cited in parentheses in the text.

[5] See Chapter 9, "Teaching European Fiction: Cornell, 1950-51" in Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991) 166-98, which also records Nabokov's steady progress on Lolita.

[6] Boyd, *The American Years* 166, 171.

Every year, then, during the course of his discussion of *Bleak House,* Nabokov took pains to criticize the ease with which contemporary readers and critics dismiss what Fiedler calls the "cult" of childhood innocence as so much "sentimentality." No doubt, Nabokov tells his students, the "story of a student turned shepherd for the sake of a maiden is sentimental and silly and flat and stale." With regard, however, to Dickens's evocation of "the plight of children" — the "strain" of "specialized compassion" and "profound pity" that "runs through *Bleak House*"--he refuses to admit "the charge of sentimentality" (*Lectures* 86-87). Instead, Nabokov singles out for ringing praise Dickens's "striking" theme of innocent children — "their troubles, insecurity, humble joys, and the joy they give, but mainly their misery." The "most touching pages in [*Bleak House*]," he avows, "are devoted to the child theme" (65). In language that deliberately echoes Dickens's own incantatory rhythms, the lecturer delivers from the podium a veritable litany of the "poor children" who inhabit *Bleak House* (70, 74, 88, 91).

While Nabokov, in his lectures on *Bleak House,* frankly expressed his admiration for Dickens, he did keep a few things to himself. He did not share with his students, for example, a personal observation noted in the margins of his teaching copy of the novel. These marginalia have been reproduced, however, in his published *Lectures,* where they appear on two pages illustrating the list of Characters from Nabokov's edition of *Bleak House* (66-67). Here, in handwritten asides, *Lolita*'s author draws a direct mental connection between Dickens's "poor" children and his own famous offspring. (Nabokov will later claim that epithet for Lolita, by the way, referring to her, in a 1966 interview, as "my poor little girl.")[7] In the lower left-hand corner of the second illustrated page, readers may note the following comments in Nabokov's hand:

> 1. Charlotte (=Charley) Neckett (Esther's maid) as rosy and pretty as one of Flora's attendants
> 2. Ada "my darling, my beauty"
> 3. Rose [Rosa] (LD's [Lady Dedlock's] made [*sic*]) "the timid little beauty ["]
> 4. Carolin[e] Jellyby ("Caddy") "with her pretty face on fire"

Underneath this inscription, Nabokov sums up his list of Dickens's innocent girl-children as follows: "all flushing prettily, all belong to one genus of gentle little nymphs attending to [the] wants of other people" (67). While his reference to "gentle little nymphs" is obviously meant for the author alone, Nabokov's private musings echo the gist of his formal lecture, where he draws his students' attention to those "children" in *Bleak House* who "are little helpers, who assume the responsibilities of grown-up people" (91). Indeed, it is Dickens's poignant description of "rosy" Charlotte Neckett — barely thirteen years old and already looking after the younger children as though she were their mother — that prompts Nabokov to challenge those who would "charge" the author of *Bleak House* with "sentimentality" (86).

To readers of *Lolita*, the association Nabokov draws between Dickens's innocent maidens, whom he describes as touching little "nymphs," and Humbert's own unfortunate "darling," the "nymphet" Lolita, is striking. Such circumstantial evidence only serves to confirm what any careful reader of the novel may discover for himself: far from sounding a death-knell to "the romantic myth of the child," *Lolita* breathes new life into that resonant "myth" and reaffirms the values that inspired it.[8] Rejecting old theological notions of original sin, the

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[7] Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973) 94. Lolita, Nabokov told an interviewer, was both the "most difficult" of his books to write and at the same time "a special favorite" of his (*Strong Opinions* 15).

[8] In *The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (London: Macmillan, 1984), Laurie Clancy calls Nabokov the "last of the great Romantics" (11); in "Parody and Authenticity in *Lolita*," *Nabokov's Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on His Life's Work,* eds. J. E. Rivers and Charles Nicol (Austin: U of Texas P, 1982), Thomas R. Frosch says that "parody is Nabokov's way of getting as close to the romantic novel as possible," by "recreating it in a new form" (182).

Romantics discovered the child's original innocence, which became for them a dominant literary theme. A similar faith in the innocence of children — and hence the original innocence of us all — permeates Nabokov's thought and fiction. Not only in *Lolita,* but in works ranging from *Speak, Memory* to *Bend Sinister* and *Ada,* all the resources of the novelist's art are placed at the disposal of the child's sacred innocence. What Nabokov said every year to his students about Dickens might well be said of himself: that for this novelist, "a child" is simply "the finest creature upon earth" (*Lectures* 8).

The distinction between sentiment and sentimentality that Nabokov was careful to draw in his lecture should not be forgotten, however. In no way does the celebration of the child's innocence blind this writer — anymore than it blinded Blake, Wordsworth, or Dickens — to the rampant cruelty and evil, stupidity and corruption of which human beings are capable. Rather, as Vladimir Alexandrov has recently pointed out, Nabokov regarded human evil not as the manifestation of some vital presence or absolute force but rather as the result of a drastic absence — the absence of good. Evil arises when human beings give themselves up to blindness; by forfeiting or disregarding wonder and imaginative insight, they lose contact with their own innate goodness.[9] All the obvious pain and cruelty he observed in life did not sway Nabokov from his self-declared, "irrational belief in the goodness of man." On this "irrational" faith rests his vision of the human being's original innocence and creative potential.[10]

Nabokov identifies the energies of art with the child's intensity of perception. Like his Romantic precursors, he believes that children have an "imaginative vitality that they lose as adults," once they become entrenched in the world of routine, habit and convention.[11] Just as consciousness plays a crucial role in Nabokov's vision of reality, so the child — as emblem and embodiment of this creative process — occupies a central position in his universe. A recent emissary from the mysterious origins of existence, the child arrives in the timebound world to provoke resonant "Intimations of Immortality." In a way that recalls Wordworth's famous ode, Nabokov marvels, in *Speak, Memory,* at "the dark-bluish tint of the iris" in his infant son's eyes. Their depth of color seems, to the novelist, "to retain the shadows it had absorbed of ancient, fabulous forests ... where, in some dappled depth, man's mind had been born." The birth of human consciousness, Nabokov postulates, was a sudden, glorious flowering — an intuitive leap, a "stab of wonder" by which the dreaming mind awakened to the world. Each child, in turn, repeats that miracle as he recapitulates that original awakening — which Nabokov calls "the initial blossoming of man's mind."[12] To borrow from F. R. Leavis's comments on Dickens, Nabokov "can feel with intensity that the world begins again with every child."[13]

For Nabokov as for his literary precursor, the child — whose innocence has not yet been ravaged by experience, whose wonder at the concrete splendors of the world is still fresh — emblemizes the wondrous capacity of human beings to dream, invent and create. The "most essential visions and values of life," he contends, "are beautifully round, as round as the universe or the eyes of a child at its first circus show." The patently "childish" gift of

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[9] Vladimir Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991) 53-55. In his discussion, Alexandrov draws heavily on Nabokov's important essay, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," cited below.

[10] Vladimir Nabokov, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," *Lectures on Literature* 373. References to this essay will henceforth be cited in parentheses in the text.

[11] Vladimir Nabokov, interview with Henry Jaton, Radio Suisse Romande, 5 Oct. 1963; cited from a typescript in the Vladimir Nabokov Archives, Montreux, by Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990) 58.

[12] Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (rev. ed. New York: Putnam's, 1966) 227-28.

[13] F. R. Leavis, "Introduction," in Peter Coveney, *The Image of Childhood: The Individual and Society, A Study of the Theme in English Literature,* rev. ed. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1967) 23.

imagination achieves a vision of ultimate reality inaccessible to other forms of consciousness. "It is in this childishly speculative state of mind," a state of mind "so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good." Drawing on one of English literature's most famous children to illustrate his point, Nabokov adds: "In a sense, we are all crashing to our death from the top story of our birth to the flat stones of the churchyard and wondering with an immortal Alice in Wonderland at the patterns of the passing wall. This capacity to wonder at trifles — no matter the imminent peril — these asides of the spirit ... are the highest forms of consciousness" ("The Art of Literature" 372, 373-74).

Without dismissing any of the horror, cruelty and pain of mortal existence, Nabokov's fiction evinces an unshakable faith in the radiance of the inner life — and of the lucid realm shimmering just beyond the boundaries of mortal consciousness. This ground of certainty lends an unexpected stability and serenity to a universe otherwise and everywhere engaged in the ceaseless process of metamorphosis. Enmeshed in the convolutions and involutions of Nabokov's artifice — labyrinths so intricate they seem fashioned by a diabolical wizard — readers often register surprise or disbelief when they discover, at the heart of these cunningly wrought devices, the simple poles of good and evil, innocence and corruption, kindness and cruelty: distinctions that attest to the essential reality of goodness and to the evil that flourishes when such reality is ignored or betrayed.

In Nabokov's universe, however — and here he differs from Dickens — the child's natural innocence must not be confused with sexual ignorance or the ideal of chastity. Perhaps Fiedler, among others, rashly ignores the fact of Lolita's innocence because he overlooks this essential distinction. While his account of Lolita's sexual development is characteristically hyperbolic — he goes so far as to call her a "nymphomaniac" — it does suggest that Fiedler, for all his cultural radicalism, adheres to the Puritan identification of innocence with sexual inexperience. Nabokov, on the other hand, shares Blake's distrust of Puritan notions and does not regard sexuality as the catalyst for humanity's "fall." For him as for Blake, chastity is not the crucial source of innocence; nor is sexual knowledge intrinsically corrupt.

In *Ada,* Nabokov deliberately subverts the Edenic formula: the Tree of Knowledge, "terrible apple" and "fat snake" each make an appearance in Ardis. But that playful presence serves to parody rather than to rehearse the conventional version of Man's Fall from innocence to knowledge.[14] In Nabokov's Garden, unlike Eden, sexual knowledge proves the very essence and expression of "original joy" (70). The "corrupting serpent" that expels Van and Ada from the the Garden, threatening to destroy all happiness, is not sex or Satan but the lovers' own blindness, deceit and cruelty. Not coincidentally, the first (and ultimately fatal) casualty of Van and Ada's selfishness is "poor little Lucette" — their younger half-sister, who from the age of eight is both neglected and exploited by her strenuously self-absorbed siblings (267). Long before the lovers' careless indifference prompts Lucette to kill herself, Ada's infidelities and Van's jealousy reveal the potential hell, or *dis*, lurking in their private paradise.

In *Ada* as in *Lolita,* Nabokov reveals the process by which blind passion can poison the wellsprings of love — just as "the invisible worm" corrupts "The Sick Rose" in Blake's famous poem. The poet might well be speaking of Humbert or Van when he writes, in another *Song of Experience*: "Love seeketh only Self to please,/ To bind another to its delight;/ Joys in another's loss of ease, / And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite" ("The Clod & the Pebble" ll. 9-12). Just as Blake contrasts the cruel reality of self-serving passion with the hopeful innocence of love (invoked in the poem's previous stanza), so Nabokov contrasts Humbert's youthful ardor for Annabel Leigh with his destructive passion for Lolita, which "builds a Hell" for them both. Humbert's love for Annabel is mutual and trusting, innocent not of sexuality but of tyranny, rancor and deceit. Annabel is Humbert's willing and equal partner,

[14] Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969) 16, 60, 94-95. All subsequent references to this edition will henceforth be cited in parentheses in the text.

not the solipsized object of his self-serving fantasy. Although Annabel, like Lolita, meets an untimely death, it is not Humbert but the disease of typhus that robs her of her childhood.[15]
Similarly, if less lyrically, Lolita does not lose her youthful innocence during the experimental forays she makes with Charlie Holmes, the thirteen-year-old son of the director of Camp Q. While their clumsy activities satirically comment on the adults who claim to be supervising them, what Charlie and Lolita get up to in the bushes is little more than child's play (138-39). Even after Humbert and Lolita have, as he says, "technically" become "lovers," the adult cannot pretend ignorance of the child's vulnerability (134). "While eager to impress me with the world of tough kids," Humbert points out, "she was not quite prepared for certain discrepancies between a kid's life and mine. Pride alone prevented her from giving up" (135-36). Only when waxing metaphorical, however, can the narrator acknowledge the "wincing child" whose innocence he despoils (137).
Humbert's "nympholepsy," Nabokov makes clear, is not a clinical condition but a disease of the imagination — a corruption, if you will, of "the romantic myth of the child's innocence." Under the spell of this affliction, Humbert is at pains to distinguish the "nymphet" from "ordinary children, with their purity and vulnerability" — children for whom he avows his "utmost respect." Still, he insists, there are certain rare "maidens," existing between the ages of nine and fourteen, whose true nature "is not human but nymphic (that is, demoniac)." Among the "innocent throng" of "wholesome children," the ardent nympholept searches for this uncanny "demon child"--and finds, with a shiver of delight, a bewitching young "Lilith" for whom the "laws of humanity" conveniently do not obtain (18-22, 308). Through this elaborate trick of imagination, the child is transformed into a cruel enchantress, or "belle dame sans merci" and Romantic inspiration reduced to its mere simulacrum: a fairytale world existing outside the "laws" of time and "humanity." Here, in this "pubescent park" or "mossy garden," as Humbert puts it, he is free to dally and disport at will (23).
By blinding himself to the child's original innocence Humbert endeavors to cling to his "elected paradise" — a paradise "whose skies," he later admits, "were the color of hell-flames" (168). Having blotted out the image of the child with his rhapsodic vision of the nymphet, Humbert demonstrates the metaphysical principle by which, according to Nabokov, the absence of good opens the way to a "world of total evil" (286). Toward the end of his story, Humbert himself draws attention to this process. Describing, from hindsight, his cross-country journey with Lolita and their deteriorating relationship, he sadly acknowledges that despite having "been everywhere," they "had really seen nothing." Humbert adds, "And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night — every night, every night" (177-78).
Humbert's account concretely renders the metaphysical process by which a world emptied of good becomes a fitting habitation for evil. Consumed by passion, he sees nothing of the innocent and "dreamy" landscape, the beneficent order of reality, through which he passes like a blind man. For him this "lovely" country is only a grid, a blueprint, a series of marks on a map. Such an abstract universe, emptied of reality by human blindness, cruelty and indifference, signifies the moral vacuum that evil rushes to fill--just as Lolita's "sobs" fill the silence "every night." Recognizing that he has defiled both the child and the pristine beauty of the continent that is her rightful dominion, Humbert faintly envisions the connection, so clear to his author, between the radiant nature of reality and the child's natural innocence. To have robbed Lolita of her childhood constitutes nothing less, in Nabokov's universe, than a crime against the cosmos.

[15] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Putnam's, 1955) 15. All subsequent references to this edition will henceforth be cited in parentheses in the text.

Humbert's confession of guilt at the end of the novel — that "Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac" (285) — implicitly affirms a central tenet of Romantic faith: "the conviction that," as David Grylls says, "children being innocent, the wickedest thing one can do to them is to rob them of their childhood."[16] In Dickens's novel, *Dombey and Son*, Edith Skewton accuses her conniving mother of this very crime: "What childhood did you ever leave to me?" she demands. "I was a woman — artful, designing, mercenary, laying snares for men--before I knew myself ... Look at me, taught to scheme and plot when children play."[17] Victim of still fouler manipulations at the hands of a selfish adult, Lolita might well lay this charge to Humbert. Schooled by her "mercenary" relationship with a man who pretends to be her protector, she too is forced to "scheme and plot" when she should be at play.

Tyrannized by a vicious adult, Lolita's young life, like that of so many Dickensian children, is prematurely cut off by death.[18] Humbert, at least, is spared the recriminating knowledge that, as John Ray, Jr. tells us in the Foreword, Lolita dies at seventeen "in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl" (6, 268). The reader's discovery of this grim fact adds a final note of pathos — what Nabokov calls "divine" pity — to the theme of abortive childhood and thwarted innocence that runs throughout the novel. As much as any work by Dickens, Lolita owes its poignance and profundity to the sacred vision of the child reflected in its depths. The child's natural innocence is one legacy — one of the very few — that Nabokov proudly accepted from his Romantic precursors and bestowed on his literary offspring.

[16] David Grylls, *Guardians and Angels: Parent and Child in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978) 140.

[17] Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son,* Chapter 27: "Deeper Shadows" (New York: Fawcett, 1963) 406. This passage is also cited in Coveney, *The Image of Childhood* 149.

[18] "Persecution is one concomitant of Dickensian childhood innocence," David Grylls remarks in *Guardians and Angels;* "another is premature death" (135).