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The Writing of Taboo in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*

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Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault.
Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope.
They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty.
There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all.
Oscar Wilde, extract from The Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)

Introduction

> *The twelve-year-old Ada's precocious sexuality is bound to bring comparison to Lolita. Is there any other connection between the two girls in your mind? Do you have the same affection for her as for Lolita? Is it, as Van says, that "all bright kids are depraved"?*
> The fact that Ada and Lolita lose their virginity at the same age is about the only peg on which to hang a comparison. Incidentally, Lolita, diminutive of Dolores, a little Spanish gypsy, is mentioned many times throughout *Ada* (*Strong Opinions* 123).

This quote, drawn from an interview found in Vladimir Nabokov's *Strong Opinions*, could lead one to believe that the only elements linking *Lolita* (1955) to *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969) are the taboo of sexual precocity in the diegesis, and the allusions to *Lolita* which are to be found in *Ada*. The interviewer focuses solely on comparing the two female protagonists, rather than the novels, and linking the two characters through, supposedly, the only thing they have in common within their respective fictional worlds. This reduces the novels to their subject matter, and, even more telling, to one element of the diegesis: sexual precocity. Nabokov's answer leads one to believe that only one coincidence can be used to compare these two characters, and by extension, one can assume that the two novels, the titles of which both use the names of their female protagonists, have little to do with one another. In typical Nabokovian fashion, the author quickly brushes aside the mention of subject matter to focus on a literary concern, that of the allusions to *Lolita* in *Ada*. Although these allusions are amusing to uncover, the novels have a great deal more in common than what the interviewer and author imply. The taboo of sexual precocity is thus presented as obvious and unimportant, while the other taboos are simply ignored. Admittedly, the two novels deal with two serious taboos in our society, namely paedophilia and incest, and this perhaps does seem to be all too evident, which explains why they were not mentioned by either the interviewer or the author. *Lolita* depicts the life of a paedophile Humbert Humbert, along with his relationship with his step-daughter Dolores Haze, whom he names Lolita. She is twelve years old when they meet for the first time, and by the end of the novel she is seventeen. The story spans over the United States as we follow the two main characters along two road-trips across the country. *Ada*, Nabokov's sixth English novel, follows the tumultuous amorous relationship between Van and Ada, and spans over eighty years of their lives. The two protagonists are officially cousins, but it is revealed early on in the narrative that they are in fact brother and sister. The novel is comprised of four parts; the first, which composes more than half of the novel, depicts the two summers they spend together in their childhood home, Ardis Hall, in 1884 and 1888. The other parts fly over their separations and reunions over seventy years of their existence, and culminate

in their last reunion in their old age. Therefore, in *Ada*, the taboo of incest is at the centre of the diegesis, and in *Lolita*, we have the merging of two taboos, that of incest and paedophilia. The author's third and sixth English novels are the only two within Nabokov's oeuvre that deal with these taboos extensively. However, *Lolita* does have a literary precursor: *The Enchanter*, a novella which was published posthumously in 1986 by his son Dmitri and was originally written in Russian in 1939 (Bouchet 31). In this novella, an unnamed paedophile marries a mother to get closer to her young daughter; this is remindful of Humbert's strategy with Charlotte and Dolores Haze. While the two novels under study deal with these taboos in the diegesis, what is interesting is the way taboos are represented in a similar fashion: while they are part of the subject matter, focus is shifted away from them to a reflection on the act of writing and language itself. *Lolita* initiates this meditation on taboo and its link to language, while *Ada* propels it, that is, it brings it to a higher level. What this thesis will focus on is not the fact that both texts deal with taboo in their subject matter, but rather how they write about, that is *around*, taboo.

At this point, it is of paramount importance to dwell longer on the meaning of the word "taboo." The latter's etymology is quite telling: it was introduced into the English language in 1777 by James Cook in his work entitled *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean* under the meaning "consecrated, inviolable, forbidden, unclean, cursed," and was based on the Tongan word *tabu*[1]. Kate Burridge and Keith Allan in their book *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* mainly focus on the meaning "forbidden" and the idea of prohibition in the word's etymology (2), and they explain that Cook and his partner Anderson described taboo as "the behaviour of Polynesians towards things that were not to be done, entered, seen or touched" (4). Therefore, intrinsically, what is taboo is something to be avoided, to be left untouched. While this holds true of something that is forbidden, since we are encouraged not to transgress an interdiction, this can also be applied to something that is sacred. Leaving the latter untouched involves superstitions while avoiding the former is more important on a practical level and is done for the benefit of society. Language, as a reflection or representation of the world around us, mimics this fear of taboos and transgression through the use of euphemism. The latter is defined by Burridge and Allan as an alternative to a dispreferred expression (238). Etymologically, it comes from the Greek *eu* = "good," "well" and *pheme* = "speech," or "utterance"[2]. Thus, a euphemism is a better sounding expression which enables the speaker to avoid pronouncing a taboo term or dealing with a taboo topic directly. Through this device,

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[1] The etymology of taboo was found here: https://www.etymonline.com/word/taboo

[2] For the etymology of "euphemism" please consult the following website: https://www.etymonline.com/word/euphemism

speakers censor or restrict their language (1). While *Lolita* and *Ada* do tackle the taboos of incest and paedophilia by depicting three characters that indulge in transgressive behaviour, they abide, to a certain extent, by this censorship of language through the use of not only euphemism but also various other avoidance strategies which this thesis will attempt to elucidate. However, the reasoning behind it all is much more complex as both texts do not only avoid taboos by necessity, but also as a pretext to play with language.

How taboos are represented, rather than the mere representation of them, is thus at stake in both novels. While these taboos are part of the subject matter, focus is shifted away from them to a contemplation of the beauty of language and aesthetics. They are evaded through various avoidance strategies to create a beautiful text that relishes the substance of language. This displacement is due to the necessary avoidance of taboos, but it is also used as a source for artistic creation. Nabokov uses, in this sense, an aesthetic of the veil thanks to the constraint of taboos. In addition, the perception of taboo cannot be dissociated from reception: the fact that taboos, which are to be avoided at all costs, are used as a source for creating something beautiful is something that jars critics and readers alike; there is an unsettling mixture of immorality and beauty within the two texts. Taboos, through this process, are embellished: using taboos in works of art inevitably aestheticizes them, all the more so here considering Nabokov's insistent emphasis on the very beauty of language. I will therefore argue in this thesis that writing about taboo in an aesthetically pleasing way displaces the issue of the subject matter onto the writing itself, making the very texts of *Lolita* and *Ada* inherently taboo.

In order to do so, it will first be necessary to see how censorship, as a consequence of taboo, shapes these texts. In the beginning, focus will be put on the publication of *Lolita* and how it was deeply threatened by editorial, and later governmental censorship, and to what extent this affected the author. We will also dwell on how the novel was defended during this early period. This will lead us to a study of how censorship is represented within the two novels' diegeses. We will then explore the correlation between taboo and the censoring of language: both texts fall victim to it and are compelled to use euphemisms to deal with sensitive subjects, lest they be considered obscene and offend readers and authorities. However, Nabokov used this to his advantage, which points more towards voluntary censorship.

The second part comprises an in-depth study of how taboo, as an inherent constraint to avoid, is used as a pretext for artistic creation. We will see how Nabokov uses various avoidance strategies in a deliberate attempt to muddle the meaning of his texts. First, we will analyse how English euphemisms are eminently creative devices that enable the author and his narrators to

create new ideas and be creative with euphemistic metaphorical language. Then we will examine how Nabokov drew from the three languages he spoke (English, French, Russian), to cover meaning and create new words and expressions. Through his game with language, he displaces the focus from the subject matter onto language itself. The author also uses taboos as an excuse to play with form, and parody different literary modes and genres. Parody will be shown to be an inventive device which involves the reader deeply in the creative process of the texts. This culminates into an intellectual game between author and reader, in which nothing, not even the author himself or the paratexts can be ruled out of the game.

The last part will focus on the balance between concealment and revelation that the two novels cultivate, as taboos entail a drive to cover. The study of *Lolita*'s book covers offers a reflection on the physical veiling of the novel to attract readers, and how that affects the reading of the text itself. Moving onto the texts proper, we will see how the narrators use humour to hide their immorality and the suffering of other characters. Through the development of an aesthetic of the veil, we will scrutinize how the female characters within the texts and the texts themselves become a receptacle of desire. This leads to the displacement of the focus from the suffering of characters onto the text, which almost becomes a body to be relished by readers, as the narrators attempt to intellectually seduce their readers. As the text becomes the ultimate source of aesthetic pleasure, we will examine how the fact that immorality is hidden behind a lyrical veil poses an aesthetic and ethical dilemma for readers and critics alike.

Part One: Transgressive Texts: The Art of the Unwritable

I/ Censorship

A/ The Threat of Censorship

"*Were you surprised at the wild success when it came?*
I was surprised that the book was published at all."
(Vladimir Nabokov *Strong Opinions* 15)

The story of the publication of *Lolita* is a long and strenuous one, wrought with complications and obstacles. Vladimir Nabokov sought to publish *Lolita* in the early 1950s, a time when vigorous censorship loomed over literature in the United States, as well as other Western countries. Governmental censorship was at an all-time high with the Board of Censors reviewing and banning any book they deemed to be obscene or immoral. *Lolita*, due to its subject matter, would no doubt be examined. Before any of that, however, *Lolita* suffered from another kind of censorship: editorial censorship (Loison-Charles 2017 3). Editors refused to publish Nabokov's manuscript for two main reasons: on the one hand, editors rejected the manuscript on moral grounds; for instance, Simon & Schuster's deemed *Lolita* to be "sheer pornography" (Boyd 262). *Lolita*'s subject matter was far too scandalous for some editors. On the other hand, they were wary of censorship, and most importantly of expensive lawsuits (Loison-Charles 2017 4). Publishing houses feared that if they published *Lolita* they would lose money defending the book in court, and if they lost the case, they could risk imprisonment for obscenity along with the author. Even editors who had previously published Nabokov's works declined to publish *Lolita*; Laughlin, who published *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*—Nabokov's first English novel—did not want to publish *Lolita*, as he was fearful his and Nabokov's reputation might be ruined (Boyd 263). Nabokov himself worried he would lose his position at Cornell and ruin his reputation, and he planned on publishing *Lolita* under a pseudonym, which did not reassure editors: it would only make the work seem more suspicious in the eyes of a court and weaken its defence (Boyd 263; Loison-Charles 2017 3). Societal moral ostracization was an enormous concern for all parties involved. As John St Jorre points out, American editors were "constrained by legal sanctions without and self-censorship within" (Loison-Charles 2017 4). They thus regulated their content for fear of punishment. The violation of the taboo of sex and most importantly paedophilia was too much of a risk in the United States of the 1950s.

As a consequence, Nabokov, who was anxious to have the book published, set out to publish it in Europe with The Olympia Press (Boyd 267). The Olympia Press was a publishing house based in Paris which made it its mission to publish any works in English that were

declined by Anglo-Saxon censorship (266). *Lolita* was thus to be published alongside works with explicitly sexual content such as *The Sexual Life of Robinson Crusoe* (Clegg 9). Paris was, for many authors of the twentieth century, a safe-haven for literary works that would be banned by government authorities, such as *Ulysses* by James Joyce, first published by Shakespeare and Company, and Henry Miller's *The Tropic of Cancer* published by Obelisk Press (Loison-Charles 1). The fact that *Lolita* was published with Olympia Press was both a boon and a bane for Nabokov: it was positive in the sense that his masterpiece was finally published and available for all to read, overcoming editorial censorship, but negative because it was published by a publishing house with a dubious reputation:

> Girodias was hurrying to have *Lolita* published by August, since Olympia Press's only active period was the summer, when English and American tourists thronged Paris, eager to buy the hot novelettes unobtainable at home. Uneasy that the book would appear in such company, especially now that he had agreed to publish under his own name, Nabokov asked for review copies […] "You and I know," he wrote to Girodias, "that *Lolita* is a serious book with a serious purpose. I hope the public will accept it as such. A *succès de scandale* would distress me" (Boyd 269).

Not only did *Lolita* appear alongside erotic and pornographic novels, which dampened its literary seriousness, at least when it was just published, but Nabokov's relationship with Girodias, the editor of Olympia Press, soon deteriorated, ultimately resulting in ten years of friction (269).

B/ The Controversial Status of *Lolita*

Only a few months after publication, *Lolita* sparked controversy, prompting journalists and literary critics to take strong stances concerning the novel. As many critics point out, *Lolita* was propelled on centre stage by Graham Greene, who selected it as one of the three best novels he had read in 1955 in his column in the London *Sunday Times* (Bouchet 38; Boyd 293; Loison-Charles 2017 4). Upon publication, *Lolita* had mostly been ignored due to the fact that it had been published with The Olympia Press and that it had not been advertised (Boyd 293). Once wide attention had been brought on the novel by Graham Greene's favourable review, critics began taking strong stances:

> One Sunday at the end of February, casually flipping through the *New York Times Book Review*, Nabokov read […] about a literary squabble developing in Britain over a book entitled *Lolita*. At the end of January, John Gordon […] had used his weekly column to vent his outrage at Greene's recommending the novel: "Without doubt it is the filthiest book I have ever read. Sheer unrestrained pornography… Anyone who published it or sold it here would certainly go to prison. I am sure the *Sunday Times* would approve, even though it abhors censorship as much as I do." Greene had responded with the ironic suggestion that a John Gordon Society should be formed, a body of censors. […] With no

> inkling of *Lolita*'s future, Nabokov was vexed that his book had been labelled pornographic and that a scandal appeared about to break (295).

Thus began the controversy regarding *Lolita*: the novel was either hailed as a great work of art or it was accused of being obscene and pornographic. To Nabokov's dismay, a *succès de scandale*, as he put it, was about to bring *Lolita* to fame, with the problematic subject matter being at the centre of the debate. The transgression of social taboos has the ability to stir great outrage as well as delight:

> The book raised difficult questions about the representation of sex and desire in fiction, and since it shaded the distinctions between the sexual fictions of literature and pornography, *Lolita* troubled, delighted and frustrated readers and critics alike, many of whom were not sure what they were reading (Clegg 10).

However, *Lolita*'s sudden rise to fame brought it to the attention of censors and soon governments took action against the book (Bouchet 38). Its subject matter and the growing attention and antagonism surrounding the novel could no longer be ignored by various governments.

The latter began to ban *Lolita* on the grounds that it was a pornographic and obscene novel. The Olympia Press version was banned by the French government until January 1958 when Girodias won his lawsuit against the government, but it was banned again in May that same year under the law controlling published works destined for minors issued on the 16th of July 1949. While the ban on the English version of *Lolita* in France was effective, it was being translated, and then was published by Gallimard, a prestigious and serious publishing house in France, in April 1959 (Edel-Roy 11). The French translation of *Lolita*, quite conversely, was never banned, and Girodias based his defence on this contradiction. The French ban on The Olympia Press edition was subsequently lifted in July 1959 (Loison-Charles 5). Other countries that censored *Lolita* include Australia in 1955, Algeria, in which the novel was taken off shelves in three bookstores in 1959, Canada in 1958, New Zealand in 1960, and Belgium in 1960 for a short spell (5-6). *Lolita* was not censored in the United States, however, the reason of which will be examined shortly. It is clear that notoriety due to a wide scandal attracted governments' attention and, unfortunately, censorship.

Lolita, to this day, is a controversial novel, as its representation of paedophilia is still a point of contention among readers. Today the focus of outrage is no longer on the representation of sexual intercourse and desire but on the representation of a sexual relationship between a middle-aged man and a twelve-year-old girl. Paedophilia is one of the strongest taboos in Western society along with incest. As Christine Clegg points out, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D.H. Lawrence depicts an adulterous relationship which appalled readers in the mid-1950s, but

does not inspire outrage today, since adultery, though it is not condoned, is not as provocative a subject matter (9). The major difference is that adultery amounts to sexual intercourse between two consenting adults, whereas, by definition, sexual intercourse between a child and an adult cannot be consensual (9). Even though *Lolita* has never been officially censored by the government in the United States, it still faces obstacles on a smaller scale: "*Lolita* is now sixty years old, yet libraries in the United States regularly face inquiries for the book to be removed from their shelves […] or teachers are called into question for including it on their American literature curriculum"[3] (Loison-Charles 2017 8). Therefore, *Lolita* is still a target of censorship in the United States, even though it is not on the governmental scale. In Russia, which had censored Nabokov's novels on political grounds in the past, *Lolita* has faced strong pushes towards censorship, with an official representative of the Orthodox Church urging authorities to ban *Lolita* in 2011 (8). In 2013, prosecutors of the Stavropol region demanded that local schools remove their copies of *Lolita* and other novels because the prosecutors thought that these novels would scare children and encourage crime (8). Julie-Loison-Charles aptly points out that the reasoning behind the ban in the Stavropol region was exactly the same as in France in 1958; the reasoning is that *Lolita* should be censored in order to protect children, which is quite senseless as the text is not destined to that demographic (8). *Lolita* is thus not out of the woods just yet when it comes to censorship.

C/ Artistic Merit to Avoid Censorship

Over the same period, during obscenity trials in the United States concerning other authors, artistic merit and the social value of works were used as arguments to defend texts in court. The Supreme Court ruling *Roth versus United States* in 1957 declared that only texts which had no social value could not be protected by the first Amendment pertaining to free speech, while the *Obscene Publications Act* of 1959 in the United Kingdom insists that a work must have artistic merit (Loison-Charles 7). If a text had social value, it meant that it had some sort of far-reaching goodness about it, in the sense that it could change society for the better, that it was somehow preferable for the greater good. Artistic merit referred to the text's style and overall aesthetic prowess. If the text somehow worked for the advancement of art, it was

[3] My translation of the following quote: « *Lolita* a désormais soixante ans, mais régulièrement, des bibliothèques aux Etats-Unis font face à des demandes de retirer le livre de leurs étagères […] ou des enseignants sont remis en question pour l'avoir mis au programme en littérature américaine. »

said to have artistic merit. In Great Britain, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D.H. Lawrence was defended in court on similar grounds:

> In place of *Lolita*, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was selected as the test case in British law (1960). Throughout the course of the Chatterley trial, questions about the meaning of sex and the representation of sex in literature were much debated. The (literal) charges of obscenity were contested by literary counter-claims of artistic integrity and moral seriousness (Clegg 8-9).

If a work transgressed social taboos, it was thus of paramount importance to emphasize its relevance within the artistic world and to defend its social value, if it had any chance to avoid censorship.

It was no different for Nabokov and *Lolita*; to ward off censorship and public accusations of obscenity, *Lolita*'s and Nabokov's artistic merit were also used as an argument. Many of Nabokov's academic peers wrote scholarly articles hailing the quality of his text prior to the book's United States publication in the hopes of establishing *Lolita*'s literary merit, and strengthening its value in the eyes of censors (Bouchet 38). In this vein, Nabokov writes to Girodias:

> You and I understand perfectly well that *Lolita* is not the kind of book that should appeal to the kind of people you euphemistically call "amateurs". In fact, my friends here are waging an intensive campaign to establish the book as a literary achievement of artistic value and lasting importance, and to counteract the unfortunate publicity it received at the outset[4]. Only after this has been achieved can one hope to have *Lolita* published in this country (Clegg 11).

This campaign happened to be successful and *Lolita* avoided an obscenity trial, and was never officially censored by the government in the United States, even though some libraries refused to put *Lolita* on their shelves, and American customs seized copies in 1956 yet did not take any drastic action after that (Bouchet 38; Loison-Charles 2017 6). *Lolita* was successfully published by Putnam and Sons in 1958 (Loison-Charles 2017 7). Clegg contends that *Lolita*'s great success in the United States was not spontaneous literary recognition, it was orchestrated by the careful gathering of critical support by influential literary critics such as Lionel Trilling, Fred Dupee, and Kingsley Amis (11). Nabokov also wrote an afterword entitled "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," which was fixed to the novel's American edition in order to dispel charges of pornography and cement the novel's artistic merit (Boyd 300). In this afterword, Nabokov denies *Lolita*'s immorality and he informs his American readership that he has been a victim of censorship in Russia for political reasons: this, Loison-Charles points out, may have been a strategy to draw a parallel between the USSR and the United States; if the latter were to censor

[4] By "outset," Nabokov must mean from the time *Lolita* received more publicity, when Graham Greene involuntarily launched the debate regarding the status of the novel.

the novel, it would shed an unfavourable light on it, especially during the Cold War. This would convince people not to ban the book lest they be as immoral as the USSR at a time when these two countries were ideological enemies (2017 3). *Lolita*'s artistic integrity was furthered by the fact that Gallimard, one of the most prestigious publishing houses in France, considered publishing *Lolita* in French (Boyd 295). The fact that literature was so heavily censored during the 1950s compelled works that wanted to touch upon taboos into avoiding taboos in an artful way so as to have a possible defence in court: *Lolita*, almost by necessity, had to be aesthetically pleasing in order to avoid censorship.

Lolita was the third novel that Nabokov wrote and published in English. His artistic reputation was thus not yet completely proven in the English-speaking world. When Nabokov, then a respected émigré Russian writer, moved from Europe to the United States in 1940, he had to build his artistic reputation from the ground up in a new language, at midcareer (Boyd 5-6). Because of his fragile artistic reputation, it was no wonder editors shied away from such a bold novel as *Lolita*. When Nabokov attempted to get his novel published, he was however not a completely unrecognizable artistic figure; he had published two novels in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Bend Sinister*, and he also taught literature in Universities, which could be a possible defence in court. This is why editors such as Roger Straus counselled that Nabokov not insist on publishing the book pseudonymously, as his name would constitute a possible defence in court; he was a reputable man of letters who had written a first-rate work of art and dealt with a tricky subject matter with literary tact (263). If his name were hidden behind a pseudonym, it would be impossible for his previous works to be referred to, and it would send the message that Nabokov was ashamed of his work and knew full well he had written something morally questionable (Loison-Charles 2017 4). *Lolita* did not have to be defended in court in the United States, yet it is important to point out that these concerns were factors that influenced the novel's publication. Paradoxically, *Lolita*'s success, in its turn, insured Nabokov's artistic reputation and fame. The novel even afforded Nabokov financial security for the first time since the Russian Revolution, which permitted him to pursue his literary career full time (Boyd 365). Through the debate surrounding the novel (whether or not it was pornography or an excellent work of art), Nabokov's artistic talent came out triumphant.

By the time of the publication of *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* in 1969, Nabokov's sixth English novel, his artistic reputation had already been established. *Ada* caused no uproar even though it quite openly deals with the taboo of incest. The threat of censorship by then was long gone, as the victory in court of *Naked Lunch* by William Burroughs in 1966 put an end to

literary censorship in the United States (Loison-Charles 2017 10). *Ada*'s escape from the charge of moral outrage can be explained by the fact that it was published much later: different times call for different mores. As Maurice Couturier points out: "*Ada* is even more systematically poerotic than *Lolita*. At the end of the 60s, American novelists could write almost anything they liked, especially where sex was concerned, without fear of censorship" (8). Literary critics have written very little about the lack of moral outrage concerning *Ada*. One can deduce that after the publication of *Lolita*, the author's artistic reputation had been cemented. The fact that the novel escaped controversy and antagonism can thus be explained by two factors: times had evolved and what shocked audiences in the 1950s no longer did a decade later, which one can see through the repeal of governmental literary censorship, and Nabokov was by then a well-known artistic figure. Not only that, but *Ada* is an ambitious and complex work of art in which Nabokov's style had much evolved since *Lolita*. The novel is wrought with textual and scientific references that are intricately structured and a language that is more difficult to fathom. *Ada* is, in a sense, the culmination of Nabokov's career:

> *Ada* sums up everything that mattered to Nabokov. Russia, America, and exile. Family love, romantic love, first love, and last love. Three languages, three literatures: Russian, English, and French. All his other careers outside writing: lepidoptera, translation, his teaching the masterpieces of European fiction. But he did not indulgently pile up his private concerns and his private dreams. He took his world apart and painstakingly reconstructed it, square by square, to incorporate all the meaning and magic he could assemble (Boyd 510).

Ada masterfully pays tribute to Nabokov's oeuvre, and is more ambitiously artistic than *Lolita*. Its sheer complexity makes it an elusive text that cannot be mass read, unlike *Lolita*, which was a best-seller. This is not to say that *Lolita* is not a complex work of art interwoven with intertextual references, or that it lacks artistic merit due to its popularity, but *Ada* is the product of the evolution of Nabokov's style, which has complexified, and is thus much less accessible. The lack of a moral response towards a representation of incest, which remains quite a strong taboo to this day, could simply be explained by the fact that *Ada* is not as widely read as *Lolita*, which protects it from a global scandal. The novel is a text which readers find to be far too complex, and opaque in meaning, which makes it less accessible than its best-seller counterpart (541-542). Another explanation to the lack of moral outrage could be that *Ada* is simply less realistic, less tangible in a sense; Christine Raguet-Bouvart argues that: "With *Ada* (1969), sex, art, and what is forbidden go even further, but this novel is much less realistic than *Lolita*; thus, self-righteous critics did not rally against its author"[5] (1998 97). *Ada* is quite paradoxical in this

[5] My translation of the following quotation: « Avec *Ada* (1969), le sexe, l'art et l'interdit vont encore plus loin, mais ce roman étant moins réaliste que *Lolita*, la critique bien-pensante ne s'est pas mobilisée contre son auteur. »

sense: it deals with the taboo of incest and its relation to art and language in a more direct way (even though not completely overtly, as we will see), yet it did not provoke nearly as much outrage as *Lolita*. The fact that it appears to be more fictional, further removed from our reality and into the realm of art, so much so that the reader cannot relate, keeps it safe from moral outrage and censorship (98). By then, Nabokov's artistic dexterity and reputation made *Ada* much less vulnerable to moral castigation.

Lolita has thus suffered from the threat of censorship, whether it be editorial, or governmental, as opposed to *Ada*, which escaped its grasp. An author's transgression of various taboos is risky, and the fear transgression engenders can be felt within the narratives, as though the threat of censorship seeps through the plots, even in *Ada*, which was not even slightly threatened by censorship. The fear of being caught in an act of transgression permeates through both texts.

II/ The Representation of Censorship

A/ Transgression as a Pervasive Fear

The fear of the discovery of transgression suffuses the narrative of *Lolita*. The guilt Humbert feels regarding his perversion and his transgressive desire for young girls can be perceived throughout the text. The narrated Humbert is constantly afraid of being caught. Humbert the narrator gives a detailed account of his past self's fear even though he has already been caught and is confessing to his crimes in a prison cell. The representation of the fear of the narrated Humbert is thus of paramount importance to the plot as it foregrounds transgression and creates anxiety. This fear of discovery is closely linked to societal pressure and moral standards to which the character moulds himself, at least at first. In the very beginning of the novel, Humbert gives an account of his life before he met Lolita. In the latter, he tries to hide the fact that he is a paedophile in order to stay within societal standards: for instance, he marries Valeria to appear normal:

> But soon after, for my own safety, I decided to marry. It occurred to me that regular hours, home-cooked meals, all the conventions of marriage, the prophylactic routine of its bedroom activities and, who knows, the eventual flowering of certain moral values, of certain spiritual substitutes, might help me, if not to purge myself of my degrading and dangerous desires, at least to keep them under pacific control (*L* 24).

His marriage to Valeria is thus a way for Humbert to cover up his perversion, by fitting himself to what is expected of a man of his age. Marriage is eminently seen as conventional, something that is dictated by society. Not only that but it is presented as a possible cure for his 'sickness':

the choice of the word "purge" suggests that he is also attempting to either purify himself or control his desires. The style resembles a list of medication, as though the narrator were giving himself a prescription and listing off its benefits. This rhetoric is epitomized by the use of the word "prophylactic." The whole quote is qualified by modulating expressions such as "who knows," "might," "if not," and "at least," which points towards a casual attempt at 'curing' his disease. This is emblematic of Humbert's unreliability as it is important to remember that anything he says is to be taken with a grain of salt. It becomes increasingly clear that Valeria is mostly a cover for him. After all, he does describe her as "the comedy wife" (28); she plays a role alongside him, in the masquerade of their marriage, whether she is aware of it or not. Humbert through this act censors himself to fit society. And once he does indulge in his perversion by beginning an abusive relationship with Lolita, his guilt and paranoia are tangible. In almost comedic fashion, a police car patrols after Humbert and Lolita share a kiss in the car after Camp Q. The comedic aspect of the scene deflates the situation, and almost invites the reader to feel relief with Humbert over the fact that he did not get caught by the police for sharing an inappropriate moment with a minor. The paranoia felt by Humbert intensifies as the book progresses, and the most pregnant example of it is during the second road trip when he believes he and Lolita are being tracked by a detective. This is a sure sign of his acknowledgement that his deviation from the norm is problematic in a societal context: Humbert is not a character who indulges without impunity in his perversion; he does so, but by restricting himself, censoring himself because of a fear of being punished.

In *Ada*, the very act of transgression first appears not to be a problem for Ada and Van: the transgressive relationship is seen as normal, almost right. Unlike Humbert, who feels extremely guilty that he is a paedophile, Ada and Van indulge in their incestuous relationship without remorse. Brian Boyd rightly points out that Van and Ada are not only undisturbed when they discover that they are brother and sister, but are actually quite smug about it, as though this newfound closeness made their connection even more honourable (550). However, the threat of discovery still looms over the couple. In the attic scene, Ada and Van discover evidence that they are not cousins in the flower album Marina worked on around Van's birth. Van and Ada agree to destroy the evidence: "'[…] Now don't you think we should resume our shorts and shirts and go down, and bury or burn this album at once, girl. Right?' // 'Right,' answered Ada. 'Destroy and forget. But we still have an hour before tea'" (*A* 6). The act of burning the album is a sign that Van and Ada, even though they are not ashamed of their relationship, are aware that discovery would be detrimental to their relationship and would invoke a form of punishment. Even though the proof of their real relationship is a very obscure

and convoluted clue, they still decide to dispose of it in an attempt to ward off discovery. The casualness of their dialogue is also a sign that they are attempting to evade the gravity of the situation: not only do they want to hide their relationship, but also their fear. Furthermore, during their first separation, they use a code in their letters, in the hope, yet again, of hiding their relationship to the world. They experience a few close-shaves during their tumultuous relationship, with the very act of discovery presented as humorous; this is once more a way to create sympathy between the readers, Van and Ada, which invites readers to relate to the fictional couple and even become partners in crime with them. When Marina asks Van whether or not he has been indulging in "*cousinage-dangereux-voisinage adage*" (177), Van's mind instantly thinks of his relationship with Ada, but when it is discovered that Marina was referring to his relationship with Lucette, the relief creates a comedic moment marked by a misunderstanding. The most dramatic discovery, which marks the beginning of Van and Ada's third separation, is that of Demon. Once again, discovery is at first presented as comedic: "And here Ada entered. Not naked – oh no; in a pink peignoir so as not to shock Valerio – comfortably combing her hair, sweet and sleepy. She made the mistake of crying out '*Bozhe moy!*' and darting back into the dusk of the bedroom. All was lost in that one chink of a second" (*A* 343). Prior to her entrance, Van was trying to get rid of Demon in order to hide the fact that Ada was staying with him. Demon believed he was hiding another conquest and painstakingly took his time leaving: this build up creates tension. Her entrance could be taken straight out of a Vaudeville: she comes down casually in a peignoir, half-asleep, and her reaction is so over-the-top it triggers a moment of comic relief. The last sentence, however, shows the gravity of the situation, as indeed, everything is lost in that split second. The threat of discovery materialises and Van and Ada are forced by Demon, who calls on certain societal standards, to end their relationship:

> "The awfulness of the situation is an abyss that grows deeper the more I think of it. You force me to bring up the tritest terms such as 'family,' 'honor,' 'set,' 'law.' … All right, I have bribed many officials in my wild life but neither you nor I can bribe a whole culture, a whole country. And the emotional impact of learning that for almost ten years you and that charming child have been deceiving their parents –" (347).

Demon admits himself that he is not the purest of characters, by referencing his use of money to get out of situations, but he leaves out his own relationship to incest: he married his cousin Aqua and had a love child with his other cousin, Marina. The fact that it is the morally dubious character Demon who points out the negative impact of incest emphasizes the gravity of the transgression and stresses the fact that one cannot escape from societal ostracization if one indulges in incest. His use of hyperbole throughout the passage, although it may seem

exaggerated and is part of Demon's flourished manner of speech, underlines the negative impact of their incestuous relationship on the family. While this speech is powerful for the reasons stated above, it appears a little hypocritical coming from Demon, who partook in incest himself, but expects his children not to. His actions thus invalidate his speech, and may explain why the characters continue their relationship after his death. He only appears as a societal obstacle to their relationship. After his visit, it is once again marriage that is used as a cover up, since Demon forces Ada to find a husband, for her to lead a 'normal' life and pursue her acting career. The threat of discovery is mimetic of the threat of censorship, in the sense that one is afraid of punishment. For Van and Ada, who see nothing wrong with their relationship, it is only the fear of discovery and later punishment that looms over their transgressive relationship. It is the same for Nabokov and editors who refused his manuscript: the work of art itself was not the problem, the threat of censorship and punishment were the elements that hindered the publication of *Lolita*.

Secrecy and covering up Lolita and Humbert's, and Van and Ada's relationships are utterly necessary within the narratives to keep their relationships alive. As explained before, discovery by society would lead to the termination of the relationship. The ambivalent nature of a secret culminates in a tension between concealment and revelation: it is something that must be hidden but it will inevitably be revealed (Bouchet 83). This tension that surrounds the concept of secrecy is a force that drives the characters to use family ties to hide their relationships, complexifying the incestuous element in the sense that what they use to hide their transgression is the very element that makes their relationships problematic on a societal level. Van and Ada, and Humbert resort to familial titles to cover their real relationship. Humbert is Lolita's step-father, and uses this official title to his advantage. For instance, when Humbert arrives at The Enchanted Hunters, he refers to Lolita as his nine-year-old daughter and firmly asks for a cot in the single room to keep up the subterfuge and hide his true intentions towards her. Van and Ada are officially cousins. The fact that they are brother and sister is actually a big family secret. This family secret is deduced by the young lovers very early in their relationship, and is only officially confirmed to them by their father Demon when he discovers their relationship in the third part of the novel. Hiding their relationships from society is of paramount importance to perpetuate them, but their transgressive nature and the tension surrounding secrets make their relationships impossible and create suspense.

While Ada and Van keep their secret together as conspirators, Humbert, on the other hand, has to threaten, and later bribe Lolita to keep their relationship secret. One of his methods is retold by Humbert in a cold and detached argumentative rhetoric:

> Finally, let us see what happens if you, a minor, accused of having impaired the morals of an adult in a respectable inn, what happens if you complain to the police of my having kidnapped and raped you? Let us suppose they believe you. A minor female, who allows a person over twenty-one to know her carnally, involves her victim into statutory rape, or second-degree sodomy, depending on the technique; and the maximum penalty is ten years. So I go to jail. Okay. I go to jail. But what happens to you, my orphan? Well, you are luckier. You become the ward of the Department of Public Welfare – which I am afraid sounds a little bleak. A nice grim matron of the Miss Phalen type, but more rigid and not a drinking woman, will take away your lipstick and fancy clothes. No more gadding about! […] In plainer words, if we two are found out, you will be analyzed and institutionalized, my pet, *c'est tout* (*L* 150-151).

Humbert thus turns the blame to Lolita, making it seem like she is the one that corrupted him. With expressions such as "accused," "impaired the morals of an adult," "allow," "involves," he shifts all the blame onto her, exculpating himself in the process, almost making it seem like he would be sent to prison as an innocent man. He also makes it seem like she will be punished more severely than he will. Humbert terrorizes twelve-year-old Lolita with this threat, and she begrudgingly keeps their relationship secret. It is only in the latter part of the second part that Lolita takes some control back, and then finally escapes from Humbert's grasp. Humbert strongly suggests, though it is never confirmed, that she confided in Mona, her friend at Beardsley, and is scheming with her: "'Perfect. Yes. And I do not doubt you two made it up. As a matter of fact, I do not doubt you have told her everything about us'" (205). Through this process, he redoubles his accusatory stance at a moment in the diegesis where Lolita is no longer a dupe to his stratagem. By then, Humbert's paranoia, and fear of discovery and of losing Lolita are at their highest. The narrated Humbert is thus highly concerned by keeping their relationship secret out of fear of discovery, punishment, and loss, but that cannot be said about Humbert the narrator. Marie Bouchet argues that:

> The novel offers an interesting double bind of revelation and concealment: Humbert confesses to the reader everything of his clandestine infatuation for nymphets (or so it seems), while, from the point of view of the plot, he tells how he tried by all means throughout his life to keep his nympholeptic desire secret (84).

It is thus not only the diegesis but also the narrative which pose a paradox between secrecy and revelation; the novel is first described as a confession, creating the expectation within the reader that everything will be disclosed and nothing kept secret. The element of secrecy within the plot and the narration is used as a way to avoid discovery which leads to punishment, just as censoring obscene language by using euphemism is a means for Nabokov to avoid censorship. Not only that, but Lolita is uncooperative with Humbert's secretive stance; in order to keep

their relationship alive, the narrator resorts to the censoring her voice to protect their transgressive relationship. In this way, a paradoxical loop is created: censoring one's self or censoring others are ways to avoid punishment and censorship from authorities.

B/ Censoring the Female Voice

Lolita's voice is almost systematically censored throughout the novel, as it is considered by Humbert to be obscene and non-conducive to the covering of their relationship. As mentioned before, Lolita has to be coerced into keeping the relationship secret, but it does not stop her from being straightforward in her use of language, which readers can perceive when Humbert allows them to. The first part of the novel is where we get the clearest insight into Lolita's way of speaking as her speech is often reported in direct speech, which conventionally signifies fidelity of transcription. If there were obscenity, it would be found in Lolita's speech, as she is spontaneous and never sugar-coats anything, yet she is censored as soon as there is even a risk of vulgarity (Raguet-Bouvart 1998 148). In the second part of the novel, what she says is more systematically reported in indirect speech than in the first; Humbert can exercise full control over the content of what is being said and most importantly, the *way* it is being said. Humbert's voice is omnipresent throughout the novel, drowning both Lolita's voice but also her point of view and feelings, which readers must then infer from the little information given to them (Tamir-Ghez 24). Humbert is both the narrating-I and the narrated-I, while Lolita is solely the object of the discourse (Raguet-Bouvart 1998 153). Being the object of the discourse and not an agent, she is thus at the mercy of Humbert's control, in the narration just as she is for other reasons in the diegesis. The fact that Lolita is such an omnipresent character, since she is the focal point of the narrative, but that her voice is mostly censored is one of the paradoxes of the novel (Bouchet 84). Humbert has full control on how we perceive Lolita, and he presents her as "a corrupt, experienced, vulgar little girl, who knows no shame" (Tamir-Ghez 29). Humbert, for instance, includes this comment from Miss Pratt in the narrative: "'[…] Dolly has written a most obscene four-letter word which our Dr Cutler tells me is low-Mexican for urinal with her lipstick on some health pamphlets which Miss Redcock, who is getting married in June, distributed among the girls, and we thought she should stay after hours— […]'" (*L* 197). The obscene word is thus hidden behind the euphemism "four-letter word" and the way she chooses to express herself is censored in the process. Not only that, but she is painted as a corrupter: insisting on the fact that it was an unmarried woman who unwittingly spread the obscenity, paints Lolita as a debased child who threatens the innocence of others. The very

surname of the innocent teacher “Redcock” points towards the irony of the passage as it includes what is considered to be an offensive term in some contexts. Both Humbert and Nabokov choose names within the narrative, which shows a voluntary mockery of the avoidance of dirty words. Nevertheless, the obscene term is camouflaged as a surname and is emblematic of the narrator’s avoidance of vulgarity. The unfavourable description of Lolita which Humbert presents to the reader is an attempt to invalidate whatever she says, and creates an even greater distance between the reader and the character of Lolita.

It is the very fact that she is so straightforward that bothers the narrator and leads him to censor her language. Lolita’s words are indeed very forward, as she does not shy away from taboo terms, as opposed to Humbert’s speech which tries to circumvent anything unpleasant:

> “Look here, Lo. Let’s settle this once for all. For all practical purposes I am your father. I have a feeling of great tenderness for you. In your mother’s absence I am responsible for your welfare. We are not rich, and while we travel, we shall be obliged—we shall be thrown a good deal together. Two people sharing one room, inevitably enter into a kind—how shall I say—a kind—”
> “The word is incest,” said Lo— […]” (*L* 119).

Humbert’s reluctance to define his relationship with Lolita leads him towards a flourished and hesitant speech which tries to evade any plain or taboo expression. This strategy of avoidance leads him to elongate his speech and thus occupy more of the space of the novel. Lolita, on the other hand, manages to summarize in one sentence what Humbert is trying to avoid explaining. The fact that Lolita goes straight to the point is something that appals Humbert, as he is trying to hide the truth through language and avoidance strategies. This leads the narrator to gradually censor her speech, less because it deeply shocks him, than because she gradually disagrees with his actions and becomes more and more uncooperative. The opposition to his point of view has no place within a narrative which is trying to draw sympathy towards the narrator and aspires to elevate itself to fine literature. The excuse is thus to censor Lolita because she is far too vulgar for a high work of art, whereas her straightforward speech actually threatens Humbert’s self-justification. The disagreement between Humbert and Lolita culminates into this scene:

> “First of all you go upstairs,” I cried in my turn,— and simultaneously grabbed at her and pulled her up. From that moment, I stopped restraining my voice, and we continued yelling at each other, and she said unprintable things. She said she loathed me. She made monstrous faces at me, inflating her cheeks and producing a diabolical plopping sound. She said I had attempted to violate her several times when I was her mother’s roomer. She said she was sure I had murdered her mother. She said she would sleep with the very first fellow who asked her and I could do nothing about it. I said she was to go upstairs and show me all her hiding places. It was a strident and hateful scene (205).

This is taken from the second part of the novel in which what Lolita says is mostly reported in indirect speech. With the repetition of “she said,” which is the mark of indirect speech as

opposed to free indirect speech, it is clear that what she is saying is being mediated by the narrator. The use of indirect speech paradoxically makes the scene much less strident as everything that is said appears more distant. The "diabolical plopping sound" presents the scene in an almost grotesque light, drawing attention to the manner of speech and therefore evading its contents even further. The clearest sign of censorship in the passage is that Humbert refuses to report exactly what is being said because they are "unprintable": what Lolita says is supposedly so obscene, so horrible that it cannot be put on the page, it cannot be included within this work of art. However, within the content of the reported speech, there is no obscenity, which removes the legitimate motivation for censoring her: the narrator betrays his intention to censor her because he does not want her to shed a negative light on him. Even though Humbert is writing a confession, by the end of the novel, he attempts to make his piece appear as a highbrow piece of art: this is yet again used as an excuse for him to censor Lolita's speech. Her supposed vulgarity is however mainly incompatible with Humbert's goal to justify and even beautify his actions. This is the main reason why her voice is almost systematically censored in the novel.

On the contrary, in *Ada*, the writing of the chronicle is a collaborative process between Van and Ada; even though Van is the main narrator, which gives the novel a predominantly male voice. Ada in fact proofreads the manuscript, comments it, annotates it, and is sometimes given full reins on the narration of certain scenes (Raguet-Bouvart 2000 98-99). Ada's editorial, therefore, intellectual opinion on the manuscript is apparent throughout the novel through comments like these: "Hue or who? Awkward. Reword! (marginal note in Ada Veen's late hand" (*A* 6). The use of the word "marginal" is interesting; the latter refers to two things: one is the physical margin, and that refers to the act of editing, and the other is peripheral, marginal, something that is not very important. This sums up Ada's collaboration: her narrative presence is shown, but only in the margins; she is not a predominant voice. It appears only occasionally. For instance, she is not the only editorial presence in the manuscript; she shares this task with two other people; Van's secretary and Ronald Oranger (Raguet-Bouvart 2000 101-102). The narrative is thus not solely subject to Ada's intellect but also that of other characters. However marginal her narrational voice is, this collaboration between Van and Ada is a reflection of their relationship: even though it is incestuous, it is consensual; one character is not superior to the other and does not exercise control over the other. In other words, although their relationship may not abide by societal customs, it is still a true love story between two consenting adults. It may appear that Ada's notes are mostly suggestions, and that Van is in full control of his narrative. Indeed, what we have is mostly Ada's peripheral opinion on the matter. For instance,

when Ada writes "(I suggest omitting this chapter altogether. Ada's note)" (*A* 124), the chapter is still kept within the manuscript, only giving us what Ada thinks, but not putting her suggestion into action. However, this may be interpreted a different way, in the sense that leaving Ada's note without correcting the original is a way to show the writing and editorial process, and most importantly the collaborative process between the two protagonists. If the corrections had been taken into account and the comments taken out, one would not see this all important collaborative process; Ada's editorial presence would not be perceived. Even if Van told the reader that Ada had participated in the drafting of the manuscript, the reader would have to take it at face value; the notes have greater value in the sense that they are showing rather than telling[6]. Either way, *Ada* is a text that depicts two characters that do not censor each other, and value each other's intellectual opinions; this is mostly seen through Van and Ada's interaction during the novel but also their editorial collaboration. What is depicted is a couple with kindred spirits who have both a romantic and intellectual relationship.

The threat of censorship as we have seen can be sensed in the two texts through the fear of discovery and the pressure that societal standards exercise over the characters. This leads them to hide their relationships behind their 'official' relationship, their actions and language. Humbert uses coercion to keep Lolita quiet and goes as far as to censor her voice to keep the reader on his side. He is without a doubt a very fearful character who feels eminently guilty about his nature, but still tries to justify his perversion when he indulges in it. Van and Ada's approach to their relationship in relation to society is much more ambivalent: on the one hand they are not ashamed of their relationship, believing it to be right; on the other hand, they are very much aware that any discovery is threatening. The fact that the characters are aware of societal pressure, and the representation of censorship within the narratives are signs that Nabokov was clearly aware himself that the relationships he depicted were not conventional and would create some antagonism. What we will examine in the next part is whether this awareness affected the novels and compelled Nabokov to censor himself.

[6] The presence of notes also marks the unfinished nature of the manuscript, which is an indication that both characters died before its completion: "Their good-luck story wards off even the threat of lonely bereavement that might stretch its shadow over their sunset love, for they die together in their nineties, die as if *into* the manuscript record of their past that they continue to revise until the very last, as if into the timeless romance of their love" (Boyd 537).

III/ Self-Censoring

A/ *Lolita* and the Garden Incinerator

The anecdote of *Lolita* and the garden incinerator is of significance to our study of self-censoring: Nabokov did have doubts and insecurities about the novel prior to publication and went as far as almost burning his manuscript of *Lolita* because he thought it would not be published. Or if it were, it would not be well-received. In his interviews, this moment is often presented in an exaggerated way:

> *Is there anything you would care to say about the collaboration your wife has given you?*
> She presided as adviser and judge over the making of my first fiction in the early twenties. I have read to her all my stories and novels at least twice. She has reread them all when typing them and correcting proofs and checking translations into several languages. One day in 1950, at Ithaca, New York, she was responsible for stopping me and urging delay on second thoughts as, beset with technical difficulties and doubts, I was carrying the first chapters of Lolita to the garden incinerator (*SO* 105).

Nabokov, in dealing with a taboo subject, was thus not immune to doubts and tribulations while writing the novel. With hindsight, he presents this episode in his life as a disaster that was averted, with a description which is full of imagery as we are invited to imagine his bringing the manuscript to the fire, with his wife Véra stopping him at the last minute. Whether this happened exactly as Nabokov describes it does not matter; what is significant is how much importance, through exaggeration, Nabokov gives this incident. Burning a manuscript or book is a definite symbol of censorship. Considerations revolving around how society would treat his novel must have been nagging at him if he even considered burning the novel in progress. While he attempts to downplay his concern by putting "technical difficulties" before "doubts," the pressure he felt about the subject matter is tangible. The episode is almost presented in a comedic light, so as to make this critical moment in the book's writing seem more casual, or even trivial. He insists it was Véra who prevented him from this ultimate act of self-censorship. *Lolita* was a difficult book for Nabokov to write: he discloses that it was a theme that was so remote from his life and experience that it took him a lot of work and talent to make it real. As a consequence of this, completing the challenge gave him pride in his work (*SO* 15). To circumvent the difficulty of dealing with a taboo subject, lest he censor himself radically by burning his manuscript, he decided to use euphemisms to avoid dealing with taboos directly.

B/ Euphemism and the Censoring of Language

The use of euphemism in general, whether it be in everyday speech or in literature, is a form of self-censoring. When we refer to taboo subjects, we usually regulate our speech thanks to this alternative to a direct expression in order to protect the well-being of others and ourselves (Allan and Burridge 2). Euphemism is the expression that is the least direct and is usually perceived as the better sounding phrase (1). For instance, when someone says they are going to the powder room instead of the toilet, reality is embellished, and the taboo of bodily fluids is avoided. Allan and Burridge make a distinction between censorship and the censoring of language:

> A distinction can be drawn between *censorship* […] and *censoring*. The former is typically an institutionalized practice carried out by someone with the job description of *censor*. We shall use the phrase *the censorship of language* only for institutional suppressions of language by powerful governing classes, supposedly acting for the common good by preserving stability and/or moral fibre in the nation. […] The phrase *the censoring of language* encompasses both the institutionalized acts of the powerful and those of ordinary individuals: everyone *censors* his/her own or another's behaviour from time to time, and for such an occasion s/he can be justly described as a *censor*; but the title is temporary and contingent upon the occasional act of *censoring* (24).

Therefore, for these two critics, censorship is the act of imposing the suppression of language and is carried out by authoritative governments under the excuse that they are acting for the common good. The censoring of language is a more general phrase as it encompasses the restriction of language by both individuals and institutions: that is to say that they put pressure on other individuals or themselves to censor their language so as to make it inoffensive. Some taboos are subject to both censorship and censoring, such as child pornography, and some are just subject to censoring (24). It depends of course on the perceived gravity of the taboo. The use of euphemism is the way in which we conceal and avoid taboos, thus censoring our speech to appear politer. We use them under pressure; either under societal constraint or our own shyness *vis-à-vis* taboos. This personal shyness in relation to taboo is due to internalized societal pressure, and has mostly been constructed by culture. To take examples that are linked to the subject at hand, incest is taboo in most societies mainly because it leads to weaker offspring and endangers the survival of species (9). Sexual intercourse for the sake of pleasure and not procreation was also heavily tabooed for centuries in Western society for religious reasons, with only a slight loosening of social mores in recent times (145). Taboos depend on the context, the culture, and the times; there are no absolute taboos (11). The taboo and sanctioning of paedophilia have varied through cultures and time, but by the 1950s, when *Lolita* was published, it was considered unacceptable, and it is more so nowadays (160). As we have seen

previously, *Lolita* was, and has recently been, subject to censorship in various countries. *Lolita* and *Ada* deal with the taboos of incest, unprocreative sexual intercourse, and paedophilia, which makes them subject to censoring, and most importantly self-censoring. Nabokov portrays narrators and characters who censor their own language when they relate to taboos. We can only speculate whether or not this is a conscious or unconscious process for the author himself. The pressure surrounding taboos constricts speakers, the narrators of Nabokov's novels, and the author himself to conceal taboos through euphemism. The latter is a definite form of self-censoring of language.

Euphemistic and aesthetically pleasing language are used in *Lolita* to avoid being categorised as pornography and falling victim to censorship. Not only that but the power taboos and societal constraints hold over language pushes individuals to use euphemisms. They are both a necessity for Nabokov to avoid governmental censorship, and to avoid creating discomfort for the readers and the author alike. As it has already been stated in the introduction, the word 'euphemism' comes from the Greek term *euphemismos*, and is comprised of two parts: "eu-" means "good" or "well" and "-pheme" signifies "speech," "utterance," or "voice"[7]. A euphemism is thus a better alternative to another expression and cannot be dissociated from beauty and morality; with the meaning 'good' we have this idea of something that is morally right, and with "well," we can deduce a link to something that is well-put or sweet-sounding. Euphemisms, in other words, soften and embellish speech. Humbert, for instance, never uses the word paedophile to describe himself, as though this were too harsh a term: he prefers the expression "nympholept." The fact that he does not use the most direct term can be interpreted in different ways: he bypasses the term in order to avoid discomfort, whether it be his own or his imagined reader's, or it is a way for him to soften his status and to seem more appealing. Either way, it is done to cater to his imagined and ideal reader, and is part of his strategy of persuasion.

The infamous masturbation scene is a prime example of the use of euphemisms in the novel, as the whole scene is wrought with them. The act in itself, and the reference to sexual anatomy are completely covered up: "Sitting there, on the sofa, I managed to attune, by a series of stealthy movements, my *masked lust* to her guileless limbs. It was no easy matter to divert the little maiden's attention while I performed the obscure adjustments necessary for the success of *the trick*" (*L* 58, my emphasis). Humbert uses the euphemisms "masked lust," and "trick" to

[7] The information for this etymology was found on etymonline.com. For the full etymology, please visit this web page: https://www.etymonline.com/word/euphemism

refer to his erect penis and the act of masturbation respectively. In “masked lust,” he diverts from the physicality of what he is referring to by employing the concept and feeling of lust, something immaterial if not consumed. The use of “trick” to refer to the act of masturbation is in keeping with the theme of this entire scene: Humbert is a magician creating an illusion thanks to his dexterity, his furtiveness, and his wit. Other euphemisms used in this passage include: “magic friction” (59), “the hidden tumor of an unspeakable passion” (59), “my gagged, bursting beast” (59), or “the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known” (61)[8]. It is important to note the length of these euphemisms: in order to divert, H.H. uses an excess of words, that are slimly related to the element that is denoted. The last euphemism is the longest and attempts to reproduce, through language, the sexual pleasure he is feeling. The fact that he masks the action with euphemism is mimetic of what is happening in the diegesis: he hides from Lolita what he is really doing through stealthy movements, just as he conceals the physical action from the reader through language. The illusion he is trying to create is that of the protection of Lolita’s and the reader’s innocence. It is an illusion in the sense that we can still perceive the real action by reading through the carefully constructed discourse, and also because whether or not Lolita’s innocence is preserved is debatable. The fact that she becomes fidgety towards the end of the scene, when Humbert notices the bruise on her thigh, is a sign that she realizes something is amiss, even though she may not know exactly what is: “‘Oh it’s nothing at all,’ she cried with a sudden shrill note in her voice, and she wiggled, and squirmed, and threw her head back, and her teeth rested on her glistening underlip as she half-turned away […]” (61). The shrill note in her voice and the fact that she tries to turn away point towards an increasing awareness on Lolita’s part. When, later in the novel, we can read: “She said I had attempted to violate her several times when I was her mother’s roomer” (205), we can deduce that she is referring to this moment. Humbert diverts from the action and from Lolita, and concentrates on his own veiled passion. Euphemisms are thus used as a tool to mask taboo scenes, and make them appear much less tangible.

Another way Humbert circumvents the description of sexual intercourse is by using ellipsis: “But really, these are irrelevant matters; I am not concerned with so-called ‘sex’ at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (134). This passage emphasizes H.H’s nonchalant embarrassment in relation to sexual intercourse. Sex is referred to in a qualified way, and in the

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[8] With words such as “tumor,” “beast,” “monster,” we can decipher a certain amount of shame and guilt which is a common thread in the novel: Humbert often uses his guilt to redeem and justify himself to his readers. In this sense, he attempts to appear moral. By using these pejorative words, he also shows his disdain for the act.

process, he disassociates himself from the taboo term: he separates himself from the term by using the word “so-called,” which specifies that it is other people who call it that, not him. The use of the quotation marks further underlines the distance he is trying to create. The term appears too vulgar and must be watered down to be included in his manuscript. He does not repeat the term “sex” but opts for the expression “those elements of animality,” which demonstrates his disdain. The use of the determiner “those” as opposed to “these,” denotes the distance he is trying to establish between himself and vulgarity. If he finds it unworthy of description, then so should his learned reader. He stresses the banal and thus unimportant dimension of the act, hiding his embarrassment with nonchalance. In taboos, what bothers us is that they refer us back to our physicality, our animal nature. By not describing the scene, he makes it the readers’ responsibility to imagine the scene, which puts them in a taboo position. The opposition he makes between “irrelevant matters,” which refers to the crude sexual act between himself and Lolita, and a “greater endeavor,” which involves a quest for understanding and defining nymphets, creates a diversion from the taboo act. On the one hand, the emphasis is put on his intellectual investigation, something which, by definition, must be pursued, and is intangible. On the other hand, the present moment, that is the physical enactment of the taboo, is minimized, undermined. Humbert, through the strategy of ellipsis, only evokes and attempts to evade his physicality, his animal side by eliding it and diverting the reader’s attention to something more intellectual. In the latter half of the first part of the novel, Humbert is obsessed with the consummation of his relationship with Lolita, creating intricate plans to have his way with her; it thus seems paradoxical that the description of the act, the climax of the wait, should be omitted. This anti-climactic ellipsis points towards subversion of the pornographic novel’s structure (Manolescu 49). Whether it be through the use of ellipsis or euphemism, Humbert and Nabokov avoid explicitly referring to sexual acts. This is necessary to evade accusations of pornography and elevate the novel to the status of a work of art, not a crude piece of fiction. It is also a sign that societal pressure can be felt on the author’s way of writing about taboo: just as it is deemed unacceptable and impolite to refer to sexual acts explicitly in society, it is not done in *Lolita*. The novel thus falls victim to both censorship and the censoring of language.

Euphemisms are also used in *Ada* to describe sexual acts even though its publication was not threatened by censorship. The novel is thus only affected by the censoring of language and self-censoring. Nabokov self-censors himself out of social constraint, but most importantly to make his texts beautiful. If one takes the example of Ada and Van’s first sexual encounter, every means is used to avoid mentioning the word “penis.” Couturier argues that there is no sign of self-censorship (which we have defined thanks to Allan and Burridge’s terminology as

self-censoring) in this scene because it is quite evident all the expressions used refer to the male sexual organ (8-9). This is not entirely true, since even though the expressions used are unambiguous, the author is still self-censoring his speech as soon as he painstakingly avoids using a taboo word because of its directness. In this particular scene, as in most of *Ada*, the euphemisms that are used to divert from taboo subjects reflect the characters' intellectual predisposition: because Van and Ada want to show that they are erudite beings, they purposefully use complicated terminology to refer to crude subjects. Ada, in her discovery of the opposite sexual organ, uses geographical and botanical terms, as though she were making scientific observations, rather than participating in a sexual encounter: "'Relief map,' said the primrose prig, 'the rivers of Africa.' Her index traced the blue Nile down into its jungle and traveled up again. 'Now what's this? The cap of the Red Bolete is not half as plushy. In fact' (positively chattering), 'I'm reminded of geranium or rather pelargonium bloom'" (*A* 90). The exploration of Van's anatomy is thus described through displacement: the landscape of Africa and botanical terms are used as metaphors for his anatomy. It is left to the imagination to make the transposition between the metaphorical map and the actual gestures that are being made. Because Ada is presented as a scientist who is excited to make a discovery, her sexual excitement is also displaced to a scientific one. The expression "positively chattering" gives a clear image of the mad scientist taking pleasure out of their work. More to the point, scientific and sexual excitement mix together, as though one cannot exist without the other. It is through the prism of science that Ada can truly enjoy the act; the displacement is necessary for the enjoyment, as it adds an intellectual element to an otherwise crude act that is of no interest to her. In addition, the use of scientific euphemisms is a way to avoid embarrassing the reader:

> Nabokov avoids using any dictionary word to designate the penis, preferring this neutral deictic which not only shows that part of the boy's anatomy but above all the at once touching and exciting discomfort of Ada; he thereby makes it easier for the reader to read this passage without blushing, whereas the use of metaphors or scientific words would probably have marred the childish and erotic tone of the scene (Couturier 10).

Scientific euphemisms are thus used to escape shame while referring to taboo. Two children are discovering their sexuality, yet the tone of the scene contrasts with the content to downplay the taboo at hand: two children who are siblings having sexual intercourse. The displacement of the context by using an adult scientific tone thus helps us forget this particular setting. Unlike in *Lolita*, where Humbert displaces the physicality of the act to more intangible contexts, *Ada* does refer to physical objects, but still displaces the context to appease the reader. Even though *Ada* is "more systematically poerotic than *Lolita*" to use Couturier's terminology, it is still not completely overtly sexual (8). The eruditeness and complexity of the euphemisms used in this

scene blur the meaning of the term that is being referred to, since if one is not familiar with botany, one cannot access the meaning easily or directly.

As stipulated above, Nabokov goes to great lengths to avoid using the word "penis," even though this word is the most neutral way to refer to the male sexual organ. Allan and Burridge argue that even though words are arbitrary – there is no relationship between the sound and the object itself – language users still look for a meaningful connection between the sound of the word and what it denotes (241-242). Taboos and the dysphemisms[9] used to refer to them are thus considered as dirty words; the word itself is contaminated by what it represents, making it sound ugly or unpleasant to language users (242). The signifier is thus confused for the signified, making the word itself taboo. Nabokov thus treats the word "penis" as though it were a dirty word, implying that he not only finds the word too vulgar, but also too ugly for his work of art. Avoiding ugly or dirty words by using euphemistic expressions and metaphors is a way for him to create a beautiful text. By using a word that has the same referent and signified but not the same signifier, he attempts to detour taboo while creating a work of art. Paradoxically, Nabokov in *Lolita* and *Ada* violates taboos by dealing with them in the subject matter, but he does not do so explicitly through his use of euphemism.

C/ Voluntary Self-Censoring

Nabokov thus voluntarily does not use a single vulgar word to deal with taboo scenes, as he thinks they are banal or unartistic. Making his novels explicitly pornographic would be synonymous with creating a work with no artistic or aesthetic value. It is in the foreword by the fictional John Ray Jr. that we are told that there are no obscene words in *Lolita*: "True, not a single obscene term is to be found in the whole work; indeed, the robust philistine who is conditioned by modern conventions into accepting without qualms a lavish array of four-letter words in a banal novel, will be quite shocked by their absence here" (*L* 4). This passage stems as both an invitation for the reader to check whether this assertion is true or not, but also as a mockery of a reader who is looking for obscenity in a novel. The foreword offers a first reading suggestion – albeit a false one as it is also the first trap laid by Nabokov to his readers. With the expression "not a single obscene term," we have utter negation of obscenity. John Ray Jr. presents this lack of lewdness as an oddity in this confession which transgresses taboos. He then puts vulgarity on the same level as banality, by referring to philistines, that is, people who

[9] Dysphemism is the opposite of euphemism: it is the crudest way to refer to taboo elements.

are intrinsically linked to conventionality and platitudes, and who look for vulgarity and banality in works. This is where Nabokov shows a snippet of his views considering obscenity. He takes pride in subverting the expectations of a self-righteous reader and a reader of pornography by voluntarily avoiding obscene words. That there was a debate around *Lolita* being a pornographic novel at the beginning of its lifespan is no surprise: Nabokov, in the first part of the novel, parodies the structure and stereotypes of pornography: for instance, we find an extract from Humbert's diary, which mimics and parodies one of the techniques of that genre (Manolescu 49). As discussed a few paragraphs above, the structure of this part creates suspense and tension before the first sexual intercourse between the two protagonists, only to deflate the situation. In the Afterword to *Lolita*, he makes his position regarding pornography transparent: it is not because it is obscene that he has a dislike for this genre; it is simply because it revolves around "a copulation of clichés," in other words, it is unoriginal and banal (*L* 313). By deliberately choosing the word "copulation" to refer to "clichés," the author emphasizes the fact that not only does pornography depict sexual intercourse in its diegesis, but the structure of the text itself amalgamates stereotypes in the same vein as two bodies merging together. Among the elements that comprise a pornographic work, one of them is the direct reference to sexual organs and acts. The objective is completely different to Nabokov's vision of art:

> Nabokov's reaction reveals the gap which separates the objectives of pornographic literature, a literature that is direct and transparent and whose aim is to sexually stimulate the reader, and literature, an object which is more complex and refined, and surpasses simple sexual arousal – without excluding it – to address, first and foremost, aesthetic perception[10] (Manolescu 48).

It is thus important not to dissociate the avoidance of taboo and vulgarity with aesthetics, which is Nabokov's first concern. While the author copies the structure of pornographic novels in order to parody them, he avoids using obscene words to avoid falling into the banality and lack of style, which, according to him, are intrinsic to pornography (*L* 313).

In *Ada*, his views on this genre and its shortcomings are also apparent, but this time they are expressed within the plot: Kim Beauharnais's pornographic pictures of Van and Ada's relationship, which she brings to show to her brother and then to destroy, have ruined the idealized image they had created in their minds (Chupin 2009 213). Van, after perusing the album, gets his first impulse to write the chronicle we are reading: "'That ape has vulgarized our own mind-pictures. I will either horsewhip his eyes out or redeem our childhood by making

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[10] My translation of the following quote: « Cette réaction révèle l'écart qui sépare les objectifs de la littérature pornographique, une littérature directe et transparente, qui vise à la stimulation sexuelle du lecteur, et la littérature, un objet plus complexe et raffiné, qui va au-delà de la simple excitation, sans l'exclure, pour s'adresser en premier lieu au sens esthétique. »

a book of it: *Ardis*, a family chronicle'" (*A* 317). The fact that the pictures are lacking in artistic style and quality is the ultimate insult to their relationship, which they have embellished in their minds. Years later, they aestheticize it by writing the chronicle. While they go through the pictures, the emphasis is put on the mediocrity of the pictures, which underlines Van and Ada's disdain for not only the content, but most importantly for the lack of adequate aesthetic form. One of Van's impulses is to create a work of art to counter the vulgarity of Kim's pornographic photographs. Even though he postpones this idea, the chronicle is still written to take back narrative and aesthetic control over their relationship. It is as though the writing of an account of his relationship with Ada in an aesthetically pleasing way, that is thanks to euphemism as we have seen previously, is the only way in which he may right this *faux pas* in style.

Another element Nabokov considers to be banal is popular culture. In interviews, he makes his views on this subject abundantly clear:

> No, I loathe popular pulp, I loathe go-go gangs, I loathe jungle music, I loathe science fiction with its gals and goons, suspense and suspensories. I especially loathe vulgar movies – cripples raping nuns under tables, or naked-girl breasts squeezing against the tanned torsos of repulsive young males. And, really, I don't think I mock popular trash more often than do other authors who believe with me that a good laugh is the best pesticide (*SO* 117).

He thus shows utter disdain and dislike towards popular culture, which he assimilates to banality. He uses parody to counter vulgarity and to create something new[11]. He opposes art and beauty to it: "To play safe, I prefer to accept only one type of power: the power of art over trash, the triumph of magic over the brute" (182). What may seem contradictory is the fact that he deals with crudeness in *Lolita* and *Ada* in his choice of subject matter: The latter depicts the sexual life of two incestuous children and the former is about a middle-aged man who repeatedly rapes a teenage girl. However, these elements are dealt with indirectly through the use of metaphors, and euphemisms, which he equates with high art. What differentiates his work from vulgar popular culture and pornography is that he circumvents brutish subject matter with aesthetically pleasing language and metaphor. Thus, avoiding obscenity and pornographic tropes is not only something that he does out of social constraint, but an element that is of paramount importance to his conception of beauty and style.

In this part, we have seen that numerous kinds of censoring loom over *Lolita* and *Ada* due to the fact that these two texts represent various taboos, namely paedophilia, incest, and extra-marital and non-procreative sexual intercourse. The latter was a major taboo in 1950s

[11] A detailed analysis of Nabokov's use of parody will be explored in the next part.

Western society, but cannot be applied to the same extent nowadays, while paedophilia and incest remain strong taboos today. To this day, *Lolita* is controversial for that reason. It was censored prior to publication by editors and subsequently by governments once it was published. The threat of censorship was thus tangible and the fear of censorship and punishment can be felt in the diegesis, but also in the language that is used within the novel. The censoring of one's own language is achieved by using metaphors and euphemism to avoid dealing with taboo subjects in a direct way, and this can be seen as a way to avoid censorship from authorities and castigation from society. However, we also find signs of the censoring of language in *Ada*, which was never threatened by censorship. This can obviously be explained by the power that society holds over language users and the representation of taboo in art. In other words, it could be argued that obscenity is censored in *Lolita* and *Ada* by Nabokov to avoid censorship, imprisonment, or mere ostracization. Yet, more to the point, the use of euphemism is a way for Nabokov to deal with taboo in an artful and aesthetically pleasing way. Circumventing crudeness and vulgarity is tantamount and paramount to his aesthetics. By opposition, he considers pornography and obscenity as displays of banality and unoriginality. He states himself that he enjoys composing "riddles with elegant solutions" when he writes any of his books (*SO* 16). The very fact that one is obliged to deal with taboo by circling around it without touching it directly is a perfect pretext for creating a game, a problem to solve. The indirectness that the concept of taboo entails gives material for the author to create a riddle which his readers are invited to solve. The censoring of language is not solely due to societal constraint and aesthetic doctrine, but can be seen as a rule to be applied in a game. Just as in *La Disparition* by Georges Perec, which avoids the letter 'e' as an artistic constraint, Nabokov uses taboo and avoidance strategies as a creative outlet, a pretext to play with language and create something new.

Part Two: Taboo as a Creative Outlet

I/ Euphemism and Creation

A/ Euphemism as a Creative Device

Intrinsically, taboo subjects drive speakers to avoidance. Through this attempt to evade the unpleasantness of taboo, language users are driven to create new expressions or words thanks to euphemism, often displaying vast creativity. Keith Allan's main argument in his article on X-phemism[12] and creativity is that:

> X-phemism motivates language change by promoting new expressions, or new meanings for old expressions, and causing some existing vocabulary to be abandoned. […] There are basically two ways in which X-phemisms are created: by a changed form for the word or expression and by figurative language that results from the perceived characteristics of the denotatum. X-phemisms are motivated by a speaker's want to be seen to take a certain stance and by playfulness (38).

X-phemism, which includes euphemism, is thus a powerful creative force which pushes any speaker to be inventive with language. Allan makes a general distinction between two processes to create new X-phemisms: formal change through remodelling, and semantic change through figurative language (6). He gives a comprehensive list of processes in which figurative euphemisms are created which includes: metonymy (part-for-whole or general-for-specific substitution), hyperbole, and litotes among others (38-39). In this development, we will be focusing on semantic change and metonymic devices. *Ada* and *Lolita* both have non-lexicalized euphemisms that are used to describe taboo subjects or scenes. In the former, two different expressions are used to describe Van ejaculating: "Van […] could not help groaning as he dissolved in a puddle of pleasure" (*A* 90), and "Van emitted a long groan of deliverance" (306). It goes without saying that neither of these expressions are fixed in language, and taken out of context they could mean anything. In both cases, we have a part-for-whole metonymy. In the first quote, Van's whole body stands for the texture of the semen. The focus is also directed towards the sensation of pleasure felt by the subject rather than the physicality of this bodily fluid. In the second quote, we have a part-for-whole substitution as the focus is put on the sound that Van produces: the euphemism centres around one detail of the action to avoid describing anything else. In *Lolita*, a general-for-specific metonymy is used to describe sexual intercourse with the expression: "fancy embrace" (*L* 184). The addition of the word "fancy" presupposes that it is more intricate than a simple embrace, suggesting we are dealing with a euphemism. Substitution of an action for another displaces the focus to an action that is less offensive, and changes the image the readers construct in their minds. The use of non-lexicalized or invented

[12] X-phemism is the umbrella term used by linguists to refer to euphemism, orthophemism, and dysphemism.

euphemisms by Nabokov and his narrators displays their ability to be innovative with language in their dealing with taboo, but also shows that taboo is only a pretext for creation in both novels.

Avoiding and aestheticizing taboo also gave Nabokov inspiration not only to create new expressions but also new words and concepts. To refer to the taboo topic of paedophilia and female children, Nabokov, through his narrator Humbert, draws from mythology to create new words such as “nymphet” and its derivatives “nympholept,” or “nympholepsy.” To use Allan’s analytical frame, Nabokov uses the word “nymph” as substitution for a woman, which is not in and of itself a taboo term but is assimilated to many taboos, and adds the diminutive suffix “et” to refer to female children, which, within the context of paedophilia and sexual abuse of children, can cause uneasiness (6). This embarrassment towards using the term “girl” is not felt by the reader, but by Humbert, the paedophile, or the nympholept as he likes to call himself. It is through this new concept, that Humbert justifies his perversion, and attempts to convince his fictional readers that he is not despicable. Indeed, he argues that not all female children are nymphets:

> Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travellers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as “nymphets.” […] Between those age limits, are all girl-children nymphets? Of course not. Otherwise, we who are in the know, we lone voyagers, we nympholepts, would have long gone insane (*L* 16-17).

In this extremely famous, or infamous passage from *Lolita*, paedophiles are presented as erring travellers in the vein of sailors who are home-sick and love-sick, and also victims of evil creatures. The selected female-children, who apparently are inherently and mysteriously nymphets, are dehumanized, turned into monsters that trap grown men: their humanity is completely negated, as they are equated to demons, which makes them supernatural creatures and justifies any action taken against them. The parenthesis restricts the definition of nymphs and nymphets to demons: here Humbert is trying to subtly manipulate the meaning of these terms. With the term “bewitched,” we have an idea of passivity, of victimhood for these paedophiles. It also furthers the essential theme in *Lolita* of magic and enchantment. There is a complete role reversal in this passage: it is not paedophiles who prey on young girls, but female children who entrap and victimize older men. Humbert thus attempts to subvert his readers’ usual idea of paedophilia, in which the innocent child is violated by an adult. The fact that not all female children are nymphets is explained in a somewhat paradoxical way: as Monica Manolescu points out, this status is both said to be an intrinsic nature, but it is also constructed

by the nympholept from a vision, an obsession. In other words, it is both inherent and artificial (57). Through this contradiction, she deduces however that a nymphet is not objectively so, that to be defined as such depends on a consciousness, and a particular discourse which forges this identity: it is Humbert who constructs this idea, rather than the young girls being intrinsically mythical creatures (56). While Nabokov asserts that he created the term "nymphet," it has been disproved by a few critics, such as Manolescu: "Nabokov claimed to have invented the term 'nymphet' and to have added it into everyday language, but this word has existed in French ever since Ronsard used it in *Les Amours*, with a different meaning as it referred to the female loved one"[13] (55). As for the term "nympholepsy," it was used by William Faulkner in an eponymous short story; however, it was published posthumously in 1973. Therefore, there is a strong chance Nabokov was not aware of the word's existence in 1955, when he published *Lolita*. The etymological dictionary stipulates that the term "nympholepsy" was coined by Richard Chandler in 1775, and it merges the words "nymph" and "epilepsy" under the second meaning in Greek: "to take." The word is used to designate men who have been enthralled by nymphs and is to be associated with the ancient Greek term *nympholeptos*, one who has been caught by nymphs.[14] Nonetheless, short of creating new words, Nabokov ascribes new meanings to them, using them as substitutes to strongly tabooed terms such as "paedophilia," and "paedophile." While the idea of paedophilia is not new, it is presented as such through the association with mythology and magic. Humbert, for instance, emphasizes the novelty of the notion, while treating the reader as though they were a student learning a complex concept:

> Furthermore, since the idea of time plays such a magic part in the matter, the student should not be surprised to learn that there must be a gap of several years, never less than ten I should say, generally thirty or forty, and as many as ninety in a few known cases, between maiden and man to enable the latter to come under a nymphet's spell (*L* 17).

When Humbert says that "the student should not be surprised," he both accentuates the obviousness of the idea while managing to be condescending towards the reader with the use of the modal "should." The outlines given in the definitions, that is that the child must be between the ages of nine and fourteen and that the adult counterpart must be at least ten years older, is a glaring definition of paedophilia, but it is not named as such because it would be too forward to use that term. The precision of the delimitations gives us a frame with almost scientific rigour, but the formulation "I should say" betrays Humbert's subjectivity. Not only

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[13] My translation of the following quote: « Nabokov a prétendu avoir inventé le terme 'nymphette' et l'avoir introduit dans le langage courant, mais le mot existe en français depuis Ronsard (*Les Amours*), avec un sens différent, car il désigne la bien-aimée. »

[14] Etymology found on https://www.etymonline.com/word/nympholepsy

that, but the definition of paedophilia varies across time and space: the age delimitations are not the same in each country, and attempting to define paedophilia automatically displays one's moral standards. His hesitation and vague description of paedophilia disprove his claims that he is an expert in the matter: his description seems more like a whim rather than a statement. The novelty resides not in the idea that is being denoted but in the way it is being presented. Avoiding the taboo or direct terms is a way for Nabokov to play with language and the meaning of old words, to create a new myth.

Indeed, through the aestheticization of paedophilia, Nabokov arrives at the creation of a "personal myth" as Couturier phrases it (Bouchet 30). The avoidance of such terms as paedophilia and paedophile leads Humbert to displace the focus onto nymphs, Lolita as a nymphet instigating his desire, magic, and enchantment. This displacement makes the taboo more elusive and ungraspable, and ties many of the themes of the novel together. As Manolescu points out, there are many origins and meanings to the word nymph; this polysemy contributes to the formation of an enchanting myth. The first origin which comes to mind is the Greek meaning of this word, which is "bride": Humbert names both Annabel as his bride and Lolita as the reincarnation of the latter, tying in the theme linking these two important figures in the novel (56-57). In Greek mythology, and namely Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, nymphs are ever-changing creatures often associated to water (56-57). Butterflies are also called nymphs at a certain stage in their evolution:

> The fact that Nabokov was a professional lepidopterist, that is to say a specialist in butterflies, is essential to the understanding of this scientific approach. We can compare the nymphet to insects which, at a certain stage in their evolution, before fully maturing are called "nymphs": "a nymph is also defined as 'pupa,' or 'the young of an insect undergoing incomplete metamorphosis'" […][15] (56).

The mixture of the notion of nymphet with both an artistic and scientific past contributes to making the myth more polysemous. Humbert does approach this idea in both an artistic and scientific way, mixing two realms that are usually considered to be separate:

> You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine (oh, how you have to cringe and hide!), in order to discern at once, by ineffable signs—the slightly feline outline of the cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb, and other indices which despair and shame and tears of tenderness forbid me to tabulate—the little deadly demon among the wholesome children; *she* stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power (*L* 17).

[15] My translation of the following quote: « Le fait que Nabokov était lépidoptériste professionnel, spécialiste des papillons, est essentiel pour la compréhension de cette approche scientifique. On peut comparer la nymphette aux insectes qui, à un certain stade de leur évolution, avant d'atteindre la maturité, portent le nom de 'nymphes' : 'a nymph is also defined as a "pupa", or "the young of an insect undergoing incomplete metamorphosis"' […]. »

On the one hand, there is attention to detail and analysis, with such words as "discern," "ineffable signs," and "tabulate." The body of the nymphet is almost dissected, put into different categories, as opposed to a "wholesome child," who is left whole, untouched. On the other hand, the staccato rhythm, the inserted comments, and languid style postpone the revelation of the information, which in its turn creates a desire to access meaning. The fact that Humbert takes a long time to get to the point and then proceeds to cut the description short further mystifies the defining features of nymphets. His abundant use of metaphors and the fact that he compares himself to an artist further the artistic impression. His treatment of them is thus half-way between an artistic and scientific endeavour. This furthers the point towards the nymphet being a personal myth, as Nabokov was both an artist and a scientist who liked to think of both on the same level. Furthermore, the ambivalence of the term nymph is prolonged in the term nymphet, which designates a pubescent child. The latter is in a state of in-betweenness, of transformation, and of metamorphosis, similar to a caterpillar undergoing chrysalis. As Bouchet argues: "Lolita is an eminently ambivalent heroine, half-way between child and woman, both angel and devil. […] Lolita's ambiguity reflects that of her age: because of her metamorphic body, she personifies the threshold of adolescence. In-betweenness is her essence […]" (69). The impermanence of the heroine and the multi-faceted label "nymphet" contribute to a blurring of meaning in which all elements must be considered at once. And obviously, through this creation of a personal myth, we are far away from the crudeness of paedophilia.

On another level, this personal myth had to complete its maturation; it was not the first time that this myth had been explored in Nabokov's works: "According to him [Maurice Couturier] the mythical nymphet was not born with *Lolita*, but was the completion of a long creative process unique to Nabokov's fictional universe" (Bouchet 30). The immature myth of the nymphet can be found in the Russian novella *Volshebnik*, which was written in 1939, and published posthumously in English in 1986 by Nabokov's son, Dmitri, under the title *The Enchanter*, the story of which revolves around the relationship between a step-father and his step-daughter (31). It is immature in the sense that it lacks the poetic polish that is present in *Lolita* (31). The myth thus completes its maturation in *Lolita*, a novel that centres around the immaturity of the heroine's body and mind. While the nymphet myth is central to *Lolita*, it is only alluded to in *Ada*, with the word appearing a handful of times to define Ada and Lucette. That the term is associated to Lucette is most telling: "'she's an utterly mad and depraved gipsy nymphet, of course,' said Ada" (*A* 175). Lucette as a victim of Ada and Van's incest is presented as a sexually depraved character; this makes her the character that resembles Lolita the most, continuing the nymphet myth in *Ada* in the process. This myth was created in an attempt to

avoid, embellish and mystify the taboo of an attraction to immature female bodies and paedophilia.

In *Ada*, the creative process is taken even further by the creation of a new language which is drawn from the three languages Nabokov spoke fluently – namely Russian, French and English. Yet again, the attempt to avoid taboo subjects is a creative force to invent words, but this time it is accomplished by merging together various foreign languages. Loison-Charles refers to this creation as a hybrid language which mixes Nabokov's irreconcilable linguistic worlds into one (2016 102). She contends that:

> The hybrid language in this novel can be explained by Antiterra's very particular geography, which is the result of the fusion of different territories the reader is familiar with. […] In this way, "Amerussia" merges our America and our Russia. These territories often have their own local slang which is associated to them, and it is systematically highlighted in parentheses when a word in these dialects appears on the page. This has the effect of marking Nabokovian creation in the text[16] (102).

Therefore, the fact that we have a hybrid world which blends familiar continents with distinct languages to create an uncanny setting, encourages linguistic experimentation. The characters in this world master the three languages Nabokov spoke, and their use seems inherently natural to them in that setting. Yet, the strangeness of the created word or of a foreign word is usually emphasized by the use of italics or quotation marks, which makes it stand out in its unfamiliarity and draws our attention towards its sound and physicality. We thus have a mixture of familiarity and unfamiliarity with the use of codeswitching and most importantly the invention of a new language. When Van invents a word to deal with his relations with prostitutes, he evades taboo through the use of an unfamiliar, yet familiar word: "'I've remained absolutely true to you because those were only "obmanipulations" (sham, insignificant strokings by unremembered cold hands)'" (*A* 150). The invented word "obmanipulations" is comprised of the Russian word "obman" which means deceit and the English word "manipulation" (Loison-Charles 2016 104). Loison-Charles refers to these terms as portmanteau words (102). The Russian word "obman," while appearing strange to a monoglot English speaker or simply someone who does not understand Russian, is not written in the Cyrillic alphabet, making it only slightly jarring, as it is westernized for the audience. The familiar sound and meaning of the English word "manipulation," but the added obscure meaning of "obman," create a latency in understanding,

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[16] My translation of the following quote: « Le langage hybride dans ce roman s'explique par la géographie bien particulière d'Antiterra, qui est le résultat de la fusion des différents territoires que le lecteur connait […]. Ainsi, 'l'Amérussia' fait s'amalgamer notre Amérique et notre Russie. Ces territoires ont souvent des argots locaux qui leur sont associés, et ceux-ci sont systématiquement signalés comme tels entre parenthèses quand un mot de ces dialectes apparaît sur la page, ce qui balise la création nabokovienne dans le texte. »

which can only be settled by the comment in the parenthesis. The focus before the arrival of these parentheses is thus put on the sound and physicality of the word rather than the meaning; it literalises the process of euphemism, since its chief goal is to appear and sound pleasant while concealing the denoted subject. The parenthesis gives an official meaning for the created word; this definition reinforces the euphemism, as it remains quite vague on the action in question. However, the meaning that is attributed to the term adds a more specific meaning than the blended term suggests, limiting its scope to the taboo of prostitution. In English, manipulation does refer to the use of one's hands to perform a task, but also to deceive through skill. The second meaning would thus reinforce the Russian word "obman," meaning deceit, and further invalidate Van's first statement that he "remained absolutely true" to Ada. While focusing on unfamiliar linguistic substance and an oddly specific meaning (referring to the taboo of prostitution and sexual acts), Van draws Ada and the readers away from the subject at hand, that is, his unfaithfulness to Ada. The unfamiliarity of the term makes the readers rely on any definition the narrator can give them. Using the avoidance of one taboo – prostitution – by exploiting an unfamiliar term to evade another taboo – unfaithfulness – is quite an ingenuous manipulation of the part of Van, which makes the creation of the word "obmanipulation" quite fitting in this context: within the word itself, we have a doubling of deception. Not only does Nabokov create new signifiers with his knowledge of various languages, but new and hidden meanings, which are to be uncovered.

B/ Euphemistic Metaphors

Similarly, metaphors are a creative device used to be artful while dealing with taboos. To cope with sensitive subjects, conceptual metaphors are used: these allow one to be inventive with such subjects while keeping them at arm's length. Eliecer Crespo Fernandez argues that the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, developed by Lakoff and Johnson, can be used as a euphemistic device (96). A conceptual metaphor is a device that maps between a source domain (the original concept one wants to elucidate) and a target domain. A metaphor is thus a displacement device *par excellence*. This is the frame we will be using to look at how Humbert and Van refer to taboos figuratively. Conceptual metaphors in everyday language help with dealing with complex and abstract notions thanks to a tangible frame[17]. In the case of taboos

[17] For instance, to understand "love," an intangible feeling, the use of "journey" as a frame helps understand it better. The metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY is a lexicalized and common metaphor in everyday speech. For example, a common expression to say "having troubles in a relationship" is "a couple is going through *bumps in the road*."

and metaphors, the element that is referred to is not necessarily complex or abstract, but rather something that is difficult to refer to directly. Using conceptual metaphors is thus a way to displace the taboo to another frame. Crespo Fernandez focuses his study of conceptual metaphor dealing with sexual intercourse as a euphemistic device (96). He contends that:

> Given that metaphorization stands out as the most prolific linguistic device of lexical creativity, it is hardly surprising that speakers turn to figurative language as a means of coping with the realm of sex. Clearly, metaphor plays a crucial role in the manipulation of the taboo referent insofar as it is at the user's disposal to model the distasteful concept and present it without its pejorative overtones […] (96).

Metaphors and figurative language motivated by taboos are thus creative devices which make the tangible intangible by transferring one realm to another to make them appear more pleasant. Thus, in the masturbation scene in *Lolita* which we analysed a few pages earlier, the tangible act of masturbation is transferred to the intangible theme of magic and tricks. This particular metaphor that runs throughout the scene is not lexicalized and showcases Nabokov's ability to take a taboo subject and refer to it creatively. The author and his narrators mostly use semi-lexicalized metaphors to refer to the taboo of sexual intercourse. Crespo Fernandez points out that there are three types of euphemistic and dysphemistic metaphors:

> The euphemistic or dysphemistic conceptual categorization of sexual taboos is greatly influenced by the degree of lexicalization of the linguistic substitute, that is, the extent to which the tabooed conceptual traits have become associated with the euphemistic or dysphemistic metaphorical alternative. In this respect, Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito […] distinguish three types of euphemisms and dysphemisms according to their degree of lexicalization: lexicalized (those in which the figurative meaning is regarded as the normal or literal meaning); semi-lexicalized (the substitute is associated with the taboo because of its inclusion in a conceptual domain traditionally tied to the forbidden concept); and creative (the euphemistic or dysphemistic item is the result of a novel association with the taboo, only accessible in its phraseological context) (98).

That a conceptual metaphor is lexicalized or semi-lexicalized does not preclude its creative scope; if one takes an already established conceptual frame, such as SEX IS A JOURNEY, one can still be creative by using the idea and new words to refer to the idea rather than set expressions and words.

In both *Ada* and *Lolita*, the conceptual metaphors which are used to allude to sexual intercourse tie into the themes of the novels seamlessly. This creates an aesthetic of displacement within the two novels. In the second part of *Lolita*, the metaphor SEX IS WORK is used profusely: "How sweet it was to bring that coffee to her, and then deny it until she had done her morning duty" (*L* 164-165). The word "duty" is used as a metaphorical substitute for copulation. Through this process, obligation and work are unambiguously associated to sexual intercourse. The choice of drink is also telling, as coffee is usually consumed in professional

settings or at least its consumption usually precedes work. Furthermore, their sexual relations are assimilated to an exchange of goods, as the coffee becomes a product which has to be paid for. In other words, Humbert uses it as a product to control Lolita and extort sexual acts from her. The exchange goes even further as the plot progresses and Lolita essentially becomes Humbert's prostitute, as she is paid for the sexual acts she performs on him: "Her weekly allowance, paid to her under the condition she fulfill her basic obligations, was twenty-one cents at the start of the Beardsley era—and went up to one dollar five before its end" (184). As sexual intercourse between Humbert and Lolita, or even in this case rape as she is coerced into performing sexual acts on her step-father, becomes a monetary exchange, the act itself (here included in the expression "fulfill her basic obligation") is associated to a chore, a burden, or work. This is in stark contrast with Humbert's metaphor that links masturbation to a magic trick, which is mystical and entertaining. This metaphor of SEX IS WORK is thus closely linked to the theme of Lolita's prostitution in the second part of the novel. Humbert tries to defuse the atrocity of this development by creating an absurd image which he believes will make his fictional reader laugh: "O Reader! Laugh not, as you imagine me, on the very rack of joy noisily emitting dimes and quarters, and great silver dollars like some sonorous, jingly and wholly demented machine vomiting riches" (184). Even though he orders his reader not to laugh, it is strongly implied he finds the image amusing and that he expects his readers to laugh. The reference to the reader and to humour is a way to use comic relief to dedramatize the tense scene which is being described. The fictional reader is not only invited to imagine the visual scene, but to hear it as well, as the emphasis is put on the absurd sound that comes from Humbert. It is most noticeably in the juxtaposition of "some," "sonorous," and "jingly" that we have a mimicry of the sound the machine would make: the alliteration of the 's' sound mimics whistling, while the plosive 'g,' the fricative 'j' and the assonance of 'i,' reproduces the grating sound of the metal. Humbert, who is on the point of climax, is thus displaced to the image and sound of a machine, which gives out change, through this comparison. The choice of the word "vomit," however, jeopardizes the amusing imagery he is trying to construct, as it refers to a striking and repulsive action. Regarding the conceptual metaphor SEX IS WORK, Crespo Fernandez argues that:

> Nonetheless, to resort to a more neutral conceptual metaphor which refers to a nonviolent source domain like work […] no doubt facilitates the mitigation of the taboo and the possibility of using it safely in public discourse. In this conceptualization, the connotations of such items as work […] are far from the violent overtones of the metaphorical alternatives included in the sex-as-war conceptual network, which clearly favours their use to target the sexual issue euphemistically. Despite its mitigating force, Murphy considers that the metaphor SEX IS WORK implicitly degrades the sexual act itself on the basis that

> “men view their relationships with women through the lens of control, discipline, regulation and commodity. Men’s reduction of their sexuality to work, business, and an economic exchange embraces their relations to women as part of the male economy” (2001: 41). Indeed, the connection between sex and work reduces sex to an exchange devoid of intimacy and affection and contributes to portraying women as inferior (104).

Just as in everyday speech, this particular conceptual metaphor denotes in *Lolita* a lack of intimacy between the two protagonists, to which is added the idea of obligation. While this is a euphemism as it allows Humbert to avoid referring to the act itself directly, it hardly embellishes the situation. On the contrary, it completely worsens the image of Humbert and Lolita’s relationship. This is in keeping with the change of tone between the first and the second parts of the novel, as the latter is much more violent and disturbing than the first.

Another euphemistic metaphor that is often used to refer to the sexual act in *Lolita* is that of “possession.” This metaphor is lexicalised and used in literary and formal contexts to refer to the act of penetration. While this is lexicalized, its normality should not be overlooked, as it implies that a sexual act is one of control and ownership of the other sexual partner. The fact that Lolita is often referred to as “my Lolita” by Humbert is a sure sign that his will is to claim ownership of her mind and body. This euphemistic metaphor which is used to relate to a sexual act thus ties into one of the central themes in *Lolita*, that of the possession of the female body both sexually and artistically. The avoidance of the taboo of sex through conceptual metaphors, whether they be lexicalized, semi-lexicalized, or creative, are thus a tool to reflect the darker themes of *Lolita*, whilst displacing the tangible act itself to more negative connotations.

Conversely, in *Ada*, the metaphors used to refer to sexual intercourse are much more light-hearted. This light-heartedness reflects the kind of partnership that Ada and Van share, which is fundamentally different to Lolita and Humbert’s relationship. In keeping with the theme of young love, sexual intercourse is alluded to as child’s play: “This, Ada affirmed, would achieve two ends – assuage the pubescent child’s jealousy and act as an alibi in case she caught them in the middle of a *more ambiguous romp*” (*A* 163, my emphasis). This is taken in the first part of the novel, which explores the childhood romantic relationship between the protagonists. During this period in the diegesis, part of the game is deceiving and avoiding Lucette while they enjoy each other’s company. Prior to this scene, avoiding discovery by their cousin is represented as a strategic game which brings Van and Ada even closer while exiling her. The use of the word “romp” is quite fitting to describe Van and Ada’s relationship since it denotes witty play. One of the characteristics of their relationship is that it is not only romantic but also intellectual. This can be seen in the style adopted to explain Ada’s reasoning: the laying

out of two ideas is a common technique to construct arguments. The word "ambiguous" is the one that hints at something that is more than just play; however, this idea is only suggested. The vagueness of the euphemism keeps the relationship as innocent as two children playing. The fact it is described as such denotes carefreeness, and minimizes the taboo at hand, that is, two siblings partaking in sexual intercourse. The reader is also kept in the dark concerning the details of their 'play.' It is also mimetic of their attempt to hide their lovemaking from their cousin. This particular taboo leads the narrator and the author to an aesthetics of suggestion and avoidance and results in creative ways to deal with taboos. The fact that these conceptual metaphors tie into the themes of the novels underlines that taboos are part and parcel of the aesthetics of these two works.

II/ Language Games

A/ Displacing the Focus onto Language

Taboos are not the subject *per se* of the novels, but the object; the subject is transposed to language. Nabokov's interest in taboos is purely linguistic. This idea is put forward by Raguet-Bouvart:

> What Humbert calls "the stark act" (L, 212) is the pretext and not the subject; [The most scabrous passages] draw strength from the abundance of marginal, almost parasitical, information in the digressions and the comments. Their structural complexity and their narrative richness are so strong that the reader cannot focus their attention on the only licentious element, since they are distracted by the other elements[18] (2000 90).

While this argument focuses on *Lolita*, it can also be applied to *Ada*. Indeed, sex, paedophilia, and incest are not the subjects of these novels, but a pretext to play with language in digressions, euphemisms, word play, in other words, various avoidance strategies. The focus is not laid on taboos themselves but on how they are to be evaded or played with through language. To this, Loison-Charles adds that:

> Nabokov thus linked linguistics with sexual prohibition, in the same way as an anthropologist, which is revealed in the following expressions: "In those times, in this country" or "human evolution." Incidentally, when Nabokov was asked about his position on incest, he denied being interested in that issue but emphasized his linguistic interest for

[18] My translation of the following quote: « Ce que Humbert Humbert appelle 'l'acte sexuel' (L, 212) en est le prétexte et non le sujet ; [Les passages les plus scabreux] puisent leur force dans l'abondance d'informations annexes, voire parasites, dans les digressions et les commentaires. Leur complexité structurelle et leur richesse narrative sont telles que le lecteur ne peut fixer son attention sur le seul élément licencieux, étant sollicité de toutes parts. »

> this theme: "Actually I don't give a damn for incest one way or another. I merely like the 'bl' sound in siblings, bloom, blue, bliss, sable"[19] (198).

If we are to take Nabokov at his word, what is most important is not the social implication of incest, as the spotlight is put on particular sounds in words with a complete disregard for their meaning. This can be seen in *Ada* through the play on words that involve the very signifier "incest." The latter is usually constructed out of anagrams: "He was omniscient. Better say, omni-incest" (*A* 307). The taboo word in this case is not avoided but actively built out of another. The word "omniscient" usually pertains to the description of literature, showcasing an awareness that one is playing with literary convention. The narrator of the novel pretends to be an omniscient third-person narrator, but it is actually Van in disguise; it appears that the admission he is omniscient is a blunder, and that the reference to taboo is a distraction from this *faux-pas*. The new word is presented as a commentary, a correction, but without comment on its meaning nor the link between the two. The created word, which draws attention to itself by mentioning the taboo term directly, refers to what is happening in the diegesis, namely the fact that Van has both Ada and Lucette in his flat and has entered an incestuous love-triangle. It is interesting to see that the correction is trying to draw away from a reflection on Van's narrative style under the guise of a play on words. Another instance in which the word "incest" is reconstructed with a game of anagrams can be found in the following quote:

> Lying on his stomach, leaning his cheek on his hand, Van looked at his love's inclined neck as she played anagrams with Grace, who had innocently suggested "insect."
> "Scient," said Ada, writing it down.
> "Oh no!" objected Grace.
> "Oh yes! I'm sure it exists. He is a great scient. Dr Entsic was scient in insects."
> Grace meditated, tapping her puckered brow with the eraser end of the pencil, and came up with:
> "Nicest!"
> "Incest," said Ada instantly.
> "I give up," said Grace. "We need a dictionary to check your little inventions" (64-65).

Grace's lack of knowledge regarding language is a way for the meaning to be denied and the focus to be drawn on the words themselves. The initial word "insect," which denotes both Ada's and Nabokov's passion for butterflies, is linguistically linked to incest through anagrams. Their meanings have no correlation, but the letters and their sounds do. Since the alphabet is limited, in other words highly constrained, it enables this kind of play on words. The fact that the taboo word incest is said tit for tat implies another blunder. The suddenness and directness of the

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[19]« Nabokov liait donc linguistique et interdit sexuel, à la manière d'un anthropologue, comme le révèlent les expressions 'In those times, in this country' ou 'human evolution.' D'ailleurs, quand on l'interrogeait sur l'inceste, Nabokov niait être intéressé par cette question mais soulignait son intérêt linguistique pour ce thème : 'Actually I don't give a damn for incest one way or another. I merely like the 'bl' sound in siblings, bloom, blue, bliss, sable.'» (My translation)

appearance of the taboo word puts an end to the conversation, yet not for its meaning but its lack thereof and its incongruity for the innocent Grace. The word itself is presented as though it were a creation. Either way, its appearance in the text is the result of a game, the outcome of linguistic play. The theme of incest is even further interwoven into the language of the text in the passage that reveals the doubling up of incest within the family:

> Was there some additional spice? Marina, with perverse vainglory, used to affirm in bed that Demon's senses must have been influenced by a queer sort of "incestuous" (whatever that word means) pleasure (in the sense of French *plaisir*, which works up a lot of supplementary spinal vibrato), when he fondled, and savoured, and delicately parted and defiled, in unmentionable but fascinating ways, flesh (*une chair*) that was both that of his wife and that of his mistress, the blended and brightened charms of twin peris, an Aquamarina both single and double, a mirage in an emirate, a germinate gem, an orgy of epithelial alliterations (14).

Van and Ada are not the first of their family to partake in inbreeding as Marina, Aqua, Demon, and Dan are cousins. To reinforce the link between them, both are sets of twins born on the same day but a different year. We thus have a doubling, even a quadrupling of incest in the family. In the above quote, this doubling of incest is masterfully reflected in the sounds used. Initially, we have a doubling of sounds with the French translations of the words "pleasure" and "flesh," for the French commentary prolongs the words and their sounds. The doubling is continued by the coupling of "blended" and "brightened," "mirage" and "emirate," and "germinate" and "gem." The last two couplings of words are partial anagrams, since they all contain most of the letters of their partner words: this makes the visual and sonorous association all the more striking. With the mention of an "orgy of alliterations," we have the text commenting upon its own stylistic devices, to make sure the reader does not miss this. The text in the process almost becomes a body, relishing its own sounds in a myriad of self-commentary. The twins which have doubled up merge into one with the blending of Aqua and Marina in "Aquamarina." Not only is the family intimately linked through incest, but also through the doubling up of sounds. Once again, the word incest, or here a derivative "incestuous," is denied meaning and focused on solely as a physical word with sounds: the emphasis is put on the signifier rather than the signified through the use of quotation marks. This sentiment is propelled throughout the quote with the coupling of consonants. Clearly the theme of incest is used as a pretext to play with language. The subject matter becomes object, as language turns into the subject rather than a simple tool.

Within these two novels, the physicality of words is often emphasized, laying the focus on sound, which either reinforces meaning or eclipses it. The stress that is put on sound can be most readily observed in the importance given to the pronunciation of the characters' names.

The famous incipit of *Lolita* is a testimony to this fact: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (*L* 9). The first sentence is wrought with alliterations with the repetition of 'l,' 't,' and 'f' sounds, all soft and caressing, mimicking the obsessional love Humbert harbours for Lolita. Her name is meticulously described in the way it should be pronounced, inviting the reader to do so, and to relish its sound alongside Humbert. In this pronunciation master class, we are invited to pronounce it the way Humbert does, since an English speaker would pronounce a "t" by placing their tongue on their alveolar ridge, not on their front teeth. The name Lolita is thus foreignized in the process and would require practice for an English speaker to pronounce it the way Humbert intends them to. Manolescu in her comments on the passage argues that:

> The incipit of the novel articulates the tongue's journey inside the mouth, which can be assimilated to an invitation to travel in the space of the English language. […] This excursion within language as an organ is also a linguistic excursion, a journey to which the English language itself, whose sounds move under Humbert Humbert's penmanship, is invited. The character's multiple geographical movements, as well as his sexual deviance, is reflected in the movements of an eccentric language. This linguistic trip is deeply sensual, because what is at the heart of *Lolita* is to enunciate delight, but also to take delight in enunciating, in the sensuality of obsessive speech which is in love with itself[20] (70-71).

The idea of the "trip" of the tongue within the mouth thus mimics the travel that is central in the diegesis. This passage is, in other words, the articulatory reflection of the characters' road-trip around the United States as well as Humbert's obsession with Lolita, which, incidentally, is the name that only he uses to call her. The focus is laid on the beauty of the words themselves and true delight is taken in the process of pronouncing these words, displacing the obsessional love Humbert has for Lolita to an obsessional love of her linguistic representation. Readers are constantly invited to read the text with their bodies because of the strong presence of sound effects and the emphasis put on pronunciation. This stress links writing and reading together because, as Roland Barthes points out, our relationship to writing is inseparable from the body (64). It seems obvious that when we read and write we use our bodies, but this is often forgotten as we give more importance to the mental process rather than the physical one[21]. Humbert is

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[20] My translation of: « L'*incipit* du roman articule un voyage de la langue à l'intérieur de la bouche que l'on peut assimiler à une invitation au voyage dans l'espace de la langue anglaise. […] Cette excursion de la langue en tant qu'organe est aussi une excursion langagière, un voyage auquel est conviée la langue anglaise elle-même, dont les sonorités et les sens se déplacent sous la plume de Humbert Humbert. Les multiples déplacements géographiques du personnage, tout comme sa déviance sexuelle, trouvent leur reflet dans les déplacements d'une langue excentrique. Ce voyage langagier est profondément sensuel, car dans *Lolita* il est question de dire la volupté, mais aussi de la volupté du dire, de la sensualité d'une parole obsessionnelle, amoureuse d'elle-même. »

[21] Giving the text an almost physical form to be relished with the body will be more thoroughly discussed in the third part of this thesis, in the section "The Pleasure of the Text."

not the only one to go to great lengths to describe the way in which Lolita's name should be pronounced; Nabokov also does so in his interviews:

> For my nymphet, I needed a diminutive with a lyrical lilt to it. One of the most limpid and luminous letters is "L". The suffix 'ita' has a lot of Latin tenderness, and this I required too. Hence: Lolita. However, it should not be pronounced as you and most Americans pronounce it: Low-lee-ta, with a heavy clammy "L" and a long "o". No, the first syllable should be as in "lollipop", the "L" liquid and delicate, the "lee" not too sharp. Spaniards and Italians pronounce it, of course, with exactly the necessary knot of archness and caress[22] (*SO* 25).

The sound of the letter 'l' has strong meaning to Nabokov, who associates it to limpidity and light. The idea of transparency found in the choice of the word "limpid" is quite contradictory, as Lolita's identity and inner workings are presented as elusive. The foreign pronunciation is yet again stressed, which makes the word uncanny for an English speaker: the name is familiar to the English language, but unfamiliar because of the peculiar pronunciation Humbert and Nabokov dictate it should have. His use of the word "caress" emphasizes his deliberate attempt at giving Lolita's name flesh: it has to be caressed when it is pronounced. This draws us further away from Lolita as a character: she is intrinsically a linguistic being.

Similarly, there are also instructions built in the text as to how Ada's name should be pronounced: "'You can see the Tarn from the library window,' said Marina. 'Presently Ada will show you all the rooms in the house. Ada?' (She pronounced it the Russian way with two deep, dark 'a's, making it sound rather like 'ardor')" (*A* 30). While this remark on Marina's pronunciation of Ada's name is just a side commentary, unlike the pronunciation of "Lolita" which is in the spotlight from the outset of the novel, the fact that it ties into the pun of the title shows that this comment is deceivingly insignificant. The Veen family's Russian and Irish backgrounds and the hybridity of the world around them make this pronunciation of this name not only possible but normal. The pun of the title only makes sense if this pronunciation, which is yet again foreign to English speakers, is taken on. Ada is assimilated both through sound and semantically to the word "ardor," or passion, linking her name to one of the central themes of the novel. The sonority of Ada's and Lolita's names is an integral part of their identity. The importance that is attributed to the sounds and connotations of the characters' names in Nabokov's two novels points towards the characters only having a linguistic identity. While

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[22] Aside from an analysis of the way the name "Lolita" should be pronounced, what is interesting to comment on is the use of the word "diminutive." While, of course, this word refers to a type of suffix which changes the meaning of a word slightly, diminutive also could be assimilated to Humbert's desire to control Lolita by minimizing her. He is the one that attributes this nickname to Dolores. As Manolescu points out, this act of denomination is a form of possession, and her suffering which can be found in her Christian name "Dolores" is minimized through a diminutive you would use to name a doll (72).

any character in any novel is purely a fictional and linguistic being, this fact is constantly stressed within the novels. When Humbert calls upon the reader to "[i]magine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me" (*L* 129), the fact that he is made of words and cannot exist outside of another's understanding of these words is put forward. Not only are Nabokov's character's solely linguistic beings, they are almost defined by the suggestive nature of their names. Patricia Waugh argues: "Characters in fiction are, of course, literally signs on a page before they are anything else. The implications of this provide a fairly simple creative starting point for much metafictional play" (56). The fact that Nabokov's characters are linguistic beings is a source for creativity and word play. The focus is solely on the power and playfulness of language and the substance of words rather than the subject matter. While sounds are usually put in the spotlight as a means to draw away from meaning, they can also, paradoxically, link the two together poignantly.

B/ Masking Meaning through Codeswitching

Foreign words and expressions are often used in *Lolita* and especially *Ada* as euphemisms which mask meaning. Codeswitching is another way to soften vulgarity through linguistic disorientation (Godin 147). The meaning of words or expressions in French or Russian is challenging to access for monoglot English speakers reading either novel. Humbert Humbert, for example, uses French to describe the money that he gives to a prostitute: "As usual, she asked at once for her *petit cadeau*, and as usual I asked her name (Monique) and her age (eighteen)" (*L* 22). The term "*cadeau*" which is qualified by "*petit*" makes things appear innocent and pleasant, as the money is compared to an endearing present[23]. The effect of the euphemism is twofold: by choosing this specific expression, the narrator embellishes the situation while obscuring meaning for English speakers through a language that is foreign to them. Loison-Charles consequently defines Nabokov's texts as the writing of desire since codeswitching creates a semantic desire which mimics the forbidden desire of the author's characters (2016 193-194). That the French language is used as a euphemism is quite fitting as it is largely considered to be a beautiful language internationally. Furthermore, the author most certainly chose France deliberately, as stereotypically, it is considered to be the country of love.

[23] The expression "*petit cadeau*" is used a final time to refer to the money H.H. gives Lolita at the end of the novel, when she has become Dolly Schiller: "Gingerly, uncertainly, she received *mon petit cadeau*; and then her forehead became a beautiful pink. 'You mean,' she said, with agonized emphasis, 'you are giving us *four thousand bucks*?'" (*L* 279) Prior to this, Dolly mistakes her father's request to run away with him as payment in exchange for sexual favours. This parallel between Monique and Lolita reinforces the motif of Lolita's prostitution to Humbert, a theme which I discussed earlier.

Yannicke Chupin argues that in *Lolita*, French, as opposed to American English, is equated with length; it is a language which takes time to articulate itself (2008 55). The fact that French takes its time is a sign that it relishes its own sounds, and syntax, without thought for meaning. In order to refer to incest between cousins, we have the following euphemism in French in *Ada*:

> "Van, dear, I wish to say something to you, because I know I shall never have to repeat it again. Belle, with her usual flair for the right phrase, has cited to me the *cousinage-dangereux-voisinage adage* – I mean 'adage,' I always fluff that word – and complained *qu'on s'embrassait dans tous les coins*" (177).

This euphemism is doubly encrypted: not only is it in French, which phases out English speakers, but it also requires some reconstruction from French speakers, as it assembles uncommon words in a peculiar order. The use of the suffix "-age" in "cousinage" and "voisinage" makes these words much more general, which erases the personal and points towards an embarrassment on the part of the character who created the euphemism. The comment that Belle has "a flair for the right phrase" seems all but ironic in this context. The word "adage," while meaning a saying or a proverb, is clearly a pun which makes a reference to Ada. The fact that it is included pokes fun at both Belle and Marina for not noticing it is Ada and not Lucette Van is having a romantic relationship with. Once again, emphasis is laid on the sound of the word rather than the meaning as Marina corrects herself on her pronunciation. In the notes on *Ada* written by Vivian Darkbloom found at the end of the novel, the expression is commented thus: "*cousinage*: cousinhood is dangerous neighborhood" (470). These notes are in fact the author's comments on his own text, since Vivian Darkbloom is an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov which has been previously used in his texts to enable him to feature as a cameo. In other words, they are notes from the author who is fictionalizing himself. Nabokov's note hardly enlightens the expression used, most probably in an attempt to trap a gullible reader and obscure the expression further. The invented expression "cousinage-dangereux-voisinage adage" requires reconstruction and analysis to be understood, but even after doing so, one may not be sure of its real meaning. The only element one can rely on is the sound of the words and what they suggest. Codeswitching used as a euphemistic device to conceal taboos not only encrypts meaning but embellishes taboo by focusing solely on the sonority and physicality of words or expressions.

The mixing of various foreign languages within the texts can also be seen as a game in which language is dislocated. The rules of language are completely changed at the expense of monoglot readers. The fact that Nabokov fluently spoke three languages widened the scope of the language field he could use to play and create. In this vein, Manolescu argues: "Languages are constructed and deconstructed before our eyes to please the ear because a fixed structure,

clichés, and grammatical and semantic rules do not exist. The very notion of law is called into question by Humbert who breaks both human and language laws”[24] (74). This idea of breaking the human and linguistic laws for the sake of creation is also an argument put forward by Chupin (2008 58). In *Lolita*, the language plane is extended mostly to French, but *Ada*’s scope is even greater with the addition of Russian. Extending the language plane to other languages creates an immense game which Nabokov and his narrators can explore for endless possibilities. Both Humbert and Van can create without restriction, or at least only with the restriction of three languages as opposed to one; this is a way for them to reinvent language by not being limited to the vocabulary of one language. Language is not a simple tool, it is a playing ground which results in the creation of an original language (Manolescu 75). Avoiding a taboo by using foreign words is not solely a way of masking meaning, but also a pretext to draw from other languages in order to play with monoglot readers, who have to reconstruct sense either on their own or thanks to a dictionary. Not only that, but translation was seen by Nabokov as an exercise in style which plays on the dislocation of language (Raguet-Bouvart 2000 69). Van, for instance is playing with language rather than obscuring the meaning in the following passage: “‘Well, I’ll tell you,’ drawled dreamy Van. ‘I’ll tell you why. From a humble but reliable sauce, I mean source, excuse my accent, I have just learned *qu’on vous culbute* behind every hedge […]’” (*A* 229). Van’s anger at discovering Ada was unfaithful to him is transposed to a fierce use of puns and strong language. Although it remains euphemistic for an English speaker who may not know what the French expression signifies, the meaning can however be reconstructed with the fragment “behind every hedge.” The meaning is thus not completely obscure, but requires effort be put into discovering it. This is similar to the effort one puts into an intellectual game. In French, “culbuter” is a vulgar, or dysphemistic way to refer to sexual intercourse; this further emphasizes Van’s anger towards Ada. His ire is displaced to an ingenious use of language which shows a great deal of restraint, but is still quite revealing. “Well, I’ll tell” has a succession of very similar sounds, which are prolonged by the use of the speech reporting verb “drawl.” The latter is used by the narrator Van, who is ninety years old and far removed from the action. The alliteration in “drawled dreamy” shows a deliberate exercise in style performed by Van the narrator, who can further the language games thanks to hindsight. The blunder between the words “sauce” and “source” is another pun that surfaces from his anger. While in General American these words have two different pronunciations, in Received Pronunciation they are

[24] My translation of: « Les langues se font et se défont sous nos yeux, pour nos oreilles, car il n’existe pas de structure figée, de cliché, de règle grammaticale ou lexicale. La notion même de loi est remise en question par Humbert, qui enfreint les lois humaines et les lois du langage. »

homophones, which would point towards a typographical pun, since orally, it would make no sense to repeat the exact same pronunciation, for albeit different words. The fact that they are pronounced the same in Received Pronunciation shows it is a written pun rather than an oral pun, which is quite contradictory because it is to be found in direct speech. While the characters are in a land that merges America and Russia, and thus must have a mixture of an American and Russian accent, prior to this moment Van studied in Chose, the equivalent of Cambridge in Antiterra, and must have been aware of the differences between these accents. If this logic is to be taken into account, we have another deliberate pun on the part of a furious Van, or arguably, Van, the narrator. The passage mixes both verbal and written puns, which makes the credibility of direct speech waver as these puns seem too artificial and deliberate, considering the fact that they are created by an irate character. Taboo is taken as a pretext to be playful with language, with the focus taken away from the subject at hand and transposed to language. Codeswitching is used as a device to be creative with taboo and poses a challenge to monoglot readers. Language is, however, not the only aspect the narrators and Nabokov play with to muddle up meaning: on a larger scale, taboos are used as an excuse to play with literary convention.

III/ A Formal Game

A/ An Exercise in Narratology

Both texts claim that they strive to be objective, but the narrational inconsistencies disprove this claim. Humbert maintains that he is concerned with the verisimilitude of the depiction of his and Lolita's story. This strategy is used most often in his defence strategy before the imagined jury: for instance, when he produces the journal he kept in 1947, he makes a reference to the weather which he tells the jury to check so that it is proven that he is telling the truth. In this way, Humbert eclipses the fact that the journal is reconstructed by a faulty memory by proving that he knows facts about the outside world. What he attempts to pass off as an uncorrupted text, in the sense that it is presented as a pure account from the narrated Humbert, is in fact tainted by Humbert the narrator. Either way, any autobiographical endeavour is subjective. Chupin points out one of the reasons why that is: "The objectivity of any autobiographical enterprise is always compromised by the distance that separates the narrating-I and the narrated-I"[25] (2009 173). Humbert deceivingly tries to eliminate this distance by

[25] « L'objectivité de toute entreprise autobiographique est toujours mise à mal par la distance qui sépare le je-narrant du je-narré. » (My translation)

presenting a first-person journal which he claims is transcribed from a near perfect memory. He thus tries to make his evidence seem objective, while separating his past self from his present one. His faulty logic however makes his claims impossible to believe. These inconsistencies are scrupulously inserted by the author:

> It is Nabokov who controls the rhetorical effects in *Lolita*, and he does it most subtly and skilfully. He allows the narrator's blandishments to affect us just as much as is needed for the novel's total effect. Far from losing hold of the narrator (as Booth's discussion suggests), the author is always there, behind the scene, pulling the strings. He ensures that Humbert's arguments are not airtight and that enough incriminating information leaks out (Tamir-Ghez 18).

Even though Humbert's narration and arguments may be convincing, most of the time some elements are inserted by the author to cast doubt on his statements. Humbert is the epitome of the unreliable character.

While Humbert's unreliability is presupposed by his autobiographic enterprise and the first-person narration, the unreliability of Van's narrative is much more difficult to discern. The novel begins with an omniscient third-person narrator, which is the epitome, in literary convention, of narrational objectivity. Van and Ada are referred to as external characters for the majority of the novel's narration. However, Nomi Tamir-Ghez's contention can be applied to *Ada*, as Nabokov does break the third-person narration to show Van's unreliability. At times, the narrator uses the first person to refer to himself as opposed to the third-person: a break, for instance occurs in part two, where chapter four is written solely in the first-person. In this chapter, Van writes about his experience with dreams over the ninety years of his life. This is a break from the retelling of his past, which he attempts to keep in a semblance of objectivity. Part four of the novel, that is Van's essay *The Texture of Time*, mixes first and third person narration as he oscillates between a novel and essay style. The confusion of pronouns is what points towards Van being an unreliable narrator, who feigns to be an omniscient one. Not only is the narrator shown to be unreliable, but the very convention is questioned. Third-person narration is used to relate his past with Ada, and she sometimes breaks this narration through her notes to him, bringing us back to the present moment. Van thus refers to himself in the third-person much more systematically than Humbert to distance himself from his past actions and to give an impression of objectivity; the breaks in the narration, however, compromise this illusion. Upon first reading, these inconsistencies are hard to make sense of until the very end:

> I, Van Veen, salute you, life, Ada Veen, Dr Lagosse, Stephan Nootkin, Violet Knox, Ronald Oranger. Today is my ninety-seventh birthday, and I hear from my wonderful new Everyrest chair a spade scrape and footsteps in the snow-sparkling garden, and my old Russian valet, who is deafer than he thinks, pull out and push in nose-ringed drawers in the

> dressing room. This Part Five is not meant as an epilogue; it is the true introduction of my ninety-seven percent true, and three percent likely, *Ada or Ardor, a family chronicle* (445).

The first element stems as a clear admission that the ninety-seven-year-old Van is behind the omniscient narrator of the novel. The fact that Part Five is meant as an introduction but placed at the end constitutes an invitation to read the novel a second time to better understand the narrational inconsistencies. There is a complete denial of falsity with the use of percentages; however, the coincidence between his age and the number of the percentage points toward an ironic use of maths as an objective device. Following this paragraph, Van returns to using third person narration to refer to the last chapters of their life, creating a confusion of voices and shedding uncertainty on the narration of the entire novel. The false objectivity is thus fully exposed in this single moment. With the interchangeability of the first and third-person narration, and the separation from their past and present selves, Van and Humbert both play with different modes of narration to distance themselves from their transgressive actions.

In order to avoid facing their tabooed relationships with Lolita and Ada directly, Humbert and Van also use multiple literary modes as strategies to detach themselves from their actions. Both texts are written in hindsight, with Humbert writing his confession in a prison cell after the fact, and Van composing his chronicle in his nineties when his tumultuous relationship with his sister has become peaceful. Not only do these narrators have critical distance, and thus the ability to manipulate their experiences, but they are also gifted rhetorically. With this distance we have a doubling up of these characters, and often a confusion between the two; we have the narrated-I and the narrating-I in the case of *Lolita* (Chupin 2009 172), while Van, on the other hand, hides behind an omniscient narrator's mask to write his chronicle. Furthermore, these narrators are both capable of playing with different literary modes, such as poetry, the epistolary novel, and theatre. Humbert, for instance, prior to the scene on the divan with Lolita, changes from a novelistic style to a theatrical one: "Main character: Humbert the Hummer. Time: Sunday morning in June. Place: sunlit living room. Props: old, candy-striped davenport, magazines, photograph, Mexican knickknacks […]" (*L* 57). In so doing, he detaches himself from his actions by fictionalizing himself further. He portrays himself as an external character who is playing before our eyes, rather than an agent, since he uses the third person rather than the first to refer to himself. Not only that, but he pretends to be an actor playing the role of Humbert; this implies that, as an actor, he is not Humbert: he is only portraying him. In so doing he further distances himself from his actions. In this imitation of stage directions, the focus is put on the setting and the props rather than the character himself. With the pun "Humbert the

Hummer," there is a sense of casualness which deflates the gravity of the taboo scene which is about to unfold. In the same vein, Van uses the word narrator as though it were a character:

> (Narrator: on that summer day soon after they had entered the kissing phase if their much too premature and in many ways fatal romance, Van and Ada were on their way to the Gun Pavilion *alias* Shooting Gallery, where they had located, on its upper stage, a tiny Oriental-style room with bleary glass cases that had once lodged pistols and daggers – judging by the shape of dark imprints on the faded velvet – a pretty and melancholy recess, rather musty, with a cushioned window seat and a stuffed Parluggian Owl on a side shelf, next to an empty beer bottle left by some dead old gardener, the year of the obsolete brand being 1842) (*A* 113).

This passage mixes both theatrical and novelistic elements: the word "narrator" which is followed by a colon takes on the role of a character in a play, similar to the chorus. On the other hand, the lengthy description of the setting after the presentation of the situation reminds one of a conventional description found in novels. The use of the expression "upper stage" however, is redolent of a stage direction, as this is a reference to a placement on stage. This small extract thus contains elements pertaining to two very distinct literary modes. Van, who is the narrator of the chronicle, dissociates from his role by attributing it to a nameless and impersonal entity. Considering what is being described, that is the beginning of their incestuous relationship, it is no surprise he would want to distance himself through a different style to appear more neutral. The relational aspect is also quickly brushed aside to focus on the description of their surroundings to draw attention away from the first element. Different literary modes are thus used to distract from the taboo at hand, while playing with it in the process.

B/ Playing with Literary Genres

In *Lolita*, Humbert plays with various literary modes and genres so as to make the sense of his text much vaguer and more elusive. First of all, the actual status of the text can be put into question as it resembles different types of texts, namely a novel, a play and a poem. The prevalent mode is the novel, but sometimes, as we have seen, the text is written in a way that is similar to other types of texts, making the textual status of *Lolita* much more complicated than it would seem. On another level, the generic status of the text is blurry as it comprises elements from various genres. Jacqueline Hamrit, in a succession of unanswered and unanswerable questions, points out this issue: "Yet, the question remains. What is *Lolita*'s generic status? Is it a confession? A memoir? A self-defence? A plea in court? A detective story? A clinical

document? A fairy tale? A travel story? A picaresque novel? A love story? A work of art?"[26] (48); and the list could go on. A partial answer to these questions could be that *Lolita* is all of the above, but none of them at the same time. It is a parody of these elements, and a testimony to the history and traditions of art. Linda Hutcheon for instance argues that "overtly imitating art more than life, parody self-consciously and self-critically points us to its own nature" (69). Parody is thus a reflector of artistic trends and inscribes itself within art's history.

The foreword to *Lolita* alone introduces a few possibilities as to what the status of the text is: the text is said by John Ray Jr to be a confession, a manuscript, and a clinical text. From the start, the text is inscribed into the tradition of confessional literature, which creates expectation: that the manuscript should be written in first person narration and should have a confession as a central theme (Hamrit 47). To a certain extent the reader's anticipation is fulfilled, as Humbert does write his text in the first person and he promises to disclose his deeds to the jury and the reader as soon as the first chapter; but quickly the text turns to self-justification mingled with guilt. The narrational style of confessional literature is thus at times mimicked. The fact that the text is presented as a manuscript establishes *Lolita* as part of the genre of the found object, along with *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James (47). The foreword is however a misleading first interpretation of the text as it is in fact a parody of the preface to *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe, a text which pertains to the picaresque novel. Various ideas are taken from this Preface and turned to ridicule. This includes the will to show real people and to take a moral lesson out of this 'real' story. Compare for example these two passages: "The World is so taken up of late with Novels and Romances, that it will be hard for a private History to be taken for Genuine, where the Names and other Circumstances of the Person are concealed […]"[27], from *Moll Flanders*, and:

> For the benefit of old-fashioned readers who wish to follow the destinies of "real" people beyond the "true" story, a few details may be given as received from Mr. "Windmuller," of "Ramsdale," who desires his identity suppressed so that "the long shadow of this sorry and sordid business" should not reach the community to which he is proud to belong (*L* 4).

The first quote is to be taken in the context of the beginnings of the novel as a genre, and a will on Defoe's part to make his story pass for a real one. By pointing out that the text distinguishes itself from "romances" or fictions, a semblance of reality is created. As fiction was seen as a lie in the eighteenth century, this was necessary for the book to be well received. Nabokov makes

[26] My translation of: « Pourtant la question résiste. Quel est le statut générique de *Lolita* ? Est-ce une confession ? Un mémoire ? Une auto-défense ? Un plaidoyer pour un procès ? Une histoire policière ? Un document clinique ? Un conte de fées ? Un récit de voyage ? Un roman picaresque ? Une histoire d'amour ? Une œuvre d'art ? »
[27] DEFOE, Daniel. *Moll Flanders* (1722). New York: Norton & Company, Inc, p. 3 (1973).

fun of this tradition when he feigns interest in this convention by referring to "old-fashioned readers." The use of quotation marks on the words "real" and "true" also mocks the concealment of identities in a story that is already fiction. The words' validity is questioned through distance. The foreword by John Ray also imitates the moralistic tone of the original preface: what is necessary is the lesson that should be taken from the most licentious parts of the two novels: these parts are necessary for the greater good. What we have here is a parody of the themes of the preface of *Moll Flanders*, rather than its style. The parodic element of the foreword creates distance and stresses its unreliability as a piece that defines *Lolita*'s generic status. The novel is also inscribed into the picaresque tradition through parody. The picaresque novel is defined in this way by Bouchet: "[It] is a first-person narrative which tells the meanderings of its protagonist, usually a type of rascal, some parodic opposite to the ideals of chivalry who aims at confessing his past condemnable deeds" (27). This definition could in part be applied to Humbert's text, insofar as what is also inseparable from the picaresque novel is the element of the journey (Alladaye 99). The narrator is indeed a rascal who is divulging his immoral deeds to his fictional readers in a confession. *Lolita* thus takes some elements of the picaresque novel as a source for inspiration; the text both inscribes itself into this tradition, and parodies some of its themes in the process.

Another literary genre that is parodied within the text is that of the detective novel; the pattern is reversed from a whodunnit, as the author of the crime is known but neither the victim nor the motive have been identified (Bouchet 27). Hutcheon defines parody along these lines: "Parody […] is a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text" (6). The narrator and the author both imitate and reverse the structure of the detective novel to subvert the genre's conventions while using them to their advantage. The detective novel is used as a source for Humbert to lay false clues for his readers to fall into; first by making them think Charlotte is the victim. In so doing, he draws attention away from himself and his infringement of taboos by creating suspense and instilling curiosity in his readers. This genre is thus not necessarily ridiculed, but used to supplement Humbert's manipulation. By the end of the novel, all the literary genres which have been listed by Hamrit have been mixed together, and the last paragraph gives the impression that this was all done to create an ultimate work of art; this is the last idea Humbert concludes with: "I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita" (*L* 309). In so doing, Humbert inscribes himself in the history of art, by referencing painting and literature. In his use of various genres throughout the novel, he cements *Lolita* in an artistic lineage. The hodgepodge of various

literary genres thus culminates, for Humbert, in the creation of a singular work of art. The same can be said about the author; as Thomas Frosch argues:

> In this it is finally more accurate to say that [Nabokov] uses parody to evade the accusation of triteness and to elude the literary past in the hope of achieving singularity. Nabokov's parodism is an attempt to control literary relations, a way of telling his jury that he already knows how his book is related to prior work. More than that, it is a way of taking possession of the literary past, of internalizing it (50).

The effect of wanting to achieve singularity within an artistic past, however, is that the novel bursts with so many contradictory meanings that it cannot be pinned down. The definition of the status of the text becomes more important than the subject itself. This is the way in which Humbert and Nabokov draw attention away from the taboo, by making *Lolita* an impossible quest for meaning.

Ada's generic status is similarly fragmented as the text oscillates between different genres. It is unclear whether the novel is a family chronicle, a fairy tale, an epistolary novel, a memoir, or even an auto-biography. Just as in *Lolita*, the first definition that the text gives of itself is that of the family chronicle, found in the title itself, and for the most part *Ada* abides by the conventions of that genre. As Chupin points out, the novel does depict the relationship between two family members which spans over decades as would be expected of a family chronicle (2009 166). However, Raguet-Bouvart argues that the novel distinguishes itself from the traditional chronicle by not announcing a future generation, since Van and Ada never produce any children (2000 98). In this process, Nabokov removes the materialization of the taboo of incest by not abiding by one of the conventions of this specific genre (98). The title and subtitle of the novel – *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* – although they constitute an indication towards its generic status, are in many means ironic. The first element, the name of the loved one, echoes the tradition of the eighteenth century psychological novels such as *Roxana* by Daniel Defoe, *Pamela* and *Clarissa* by Samuel Richardson, or even their parodic counterparts, *Shamela* and *Amelia* by Henry Fielding, or *Emma* by Jane Austen (Chupin 2009 164). Keeping in mind the parody of *Moll Flander*'s preface in *Lolita* which we discussed above, it is more than likely that this is a parodic jab at this tradition on the part of Nabokov. The ironic dimension of the title lies in the association of "Ada," "ardor," and "family chronicle":

> But the triple title, considered as a whole, does not stop raising questions: if "ardor" is an element that sheds light on the first title "Ada," "family chronicle" is logically a binding factor between the two previous titles. The title thus raises an astonishing contradiction: the "ardor," which is associated to the novel's female figure, Ada, implies an extra-familial frame. The informed reader will thus see the foreshadowing of unconventional morals in the title. The story does depict the relationship between Van and Ada throughout the years,

> and is in that sense a chronicle. Finally, the two protagonists are brother and sister, so the chronicle is a family one. To this must be added the fact that Lucette is not only the heroine's little sister, but also an integral part of the Veen love triangle. What could be more ardent and familial than this novel?[28] (166-167)

The expectation when one sees this title is that the passionate relationship would be outside of the family unit and would cause disruption within it. Expectations are subverted when the relationship is in fact within the family itself. It thus redefines what a family chronicle is, by keeping the relationships exclusive to the family, while in the process making *Ada* intrinsically a family chronicle as the Veens keep everything within the family. The incestuous element to this chronicle is thus at the crux of the parody of this tradition.

Within this parodic chronicle, we have various genres that mix together. With the inclusion of letters, which are used to mark the separation of Ada and Van, the novel dabbles in the conventions of the epistolary novel. Furthermore, during the scene depicting their first separation, the style moves from their ordinary setting to a chivalric novel:

> Stumbling on melons, fiercely beheading the tall arrogant fennels with his riding crop, Van returned to the Forest Fork. Morio, his favourite black horse, stood waiting for him, held by young Moore. He thanked the groom with a handful of stellas and galloped off, his gloves wet with tears (*A* 122).

Prior to this description and within the same chapter, Van is being driven in a car by Bouteillan. The car thus transforms into a black horse to suit the needs of the new style. As Van "fiercely behead[s]" and "gallop[s] off," he changes into a knight producing epic and heroic gestures. The dramatic and violent gestures thus contrast with the ordinariness and inanimateness of the "fennels" and the "melons," which points to a parodic use of the style. This is the first and last time Moore and Morio will be mentioned, as they appear and disappear for the necessity of the effect. They stress literary creation for the sake of style. This rhetoric introduces the theme of courtly love within the novel and emphasizes a tragic element to their relationship, that of separation due to the forces of life and society. In her comments on this scene, Chupin writes: "Ardis, as Van describes it to us about eighty years after having discovered it, looks like a literary reconstruction which mixes nineteenth century Russian sagas, French romanticism,

[28] « Mais le triple titre, considéré dans son ensemble, n'en finit pas de susciter des interrogations : si « Ardeur » vient identifier et éclairer le premier titre 'Ada,' 'Chronique familiale' est logiquement un facteur commun aux deux précédents. Le titre soulève donc une contradiction étonnante : l''ardeur,' qui est associée ici à la figure féminine du roman, Ada, connote plutôt un cadre extra-familial. Le lecteur averti verra donc dans ce titre une annonce proleptique de mœurs peu conventionnelles. L'histoire est bien celle de la liaison de Van et Ada à travers les années, et constitue bien une chronique. Enfin, les deux protagonistes sont frère et sœur, donc la chronique est familiale. A cela il faut ajouter que Lucette n'est pas seulement la petite sœur de l'héroïne, mais aussi un sommet du triangle amoureux des Veen. Quoi de plus familial et d'ardent alors que ce roman ? » (My translation)

bucolic English poems, and postmodern twentieth century constructions together"[29] (2009 280). The place of Van and Ada's childhood is thus reconstructed in a multitude of literary genres. This is kept within the larger trend within the novel: Van takes artistic liberty over the representation of his past by changing the style according to the necessity of a particular scene. The generic status, as a consequence, is just as hard to grasp as that of *Lolita*, but it is done not to confuse the reader or to draw attention away from the subject of the text, but, paradoxically to reinforce ideas, and to play with different styles in the process. This marks an evolution of the author's writing about taboo: it is taken as a source for literary play for its own sake more so in *Ada* than in *Lolita*.

Using taboos as a pretext for an exercise in style and literary modes makes the texts of *Ada* and *Lolita* themselves taboo. In order to avoid taboos, Humbert and Van, and of course behind them Nabokov, play with different literary genres in an attempt to muddle up the meanings of these texts, but also as pretext for an exercise in style. The use of a variety of literary genres circles around the meaning of the texts themselves, in the same way evading taboos circles around the taboos themselves. To better understand genres and what they entail, I will use Hamrit's synthesis of various theories on genres, which includes thoughts from Gérard Genette, Jacques Derrida, and Antoine Compagnon amongst others. Derrida argues that literary genres are prescriptive; in other words, they have set rules and conventions which create order (Hamrit 44). Thanks to this, genres convey meaning, but if they are multiplied within a text, meaning explodes into fragments (46). This is why the multiplication of genres is so crucial to the writing of taboo in *Lolita* and *Ada*: the meaning of the texts becomes elusive, which is paramount to evading taboos. That the texts have a multiplicity of senses prevents one from putting them into one clear category with an unambiguous meaning. Within a genre, such as the detective novel, there can be various subgenres that multiply sense by introducing subtle differences (43-44). For instance, the fact that *Lolita* parodies the detective novel adds a complicated layer to this as it partially belongs to this genre by using some of its tropes, but pertains to it ironically. It is both part of this particular genre, but the ironic distance, in a way, separates the text from it. With the use of parody and irony the genres are not fully part of the texts. In addition, there is a desire within literary convention to keep literary genres pure, implying that mixing them together corrupts texts: "They are thus linked to norm, and this norm can be transgressed, in the same way that what is prohibited is transgressed. Yet Derrida had

[29] « L'espace d'Ardis tel que Van nous le décrit quelque huit décennies après l'avoir découvert ressemble à une reconstruction littéraire mêlant sagas russes du XIXe siècle, romantiques français, poèmes bucoliques anglais et constructions postmodernes du XXe siècle. » (My translation)

specified at the beginning of his essay that one should not 'mix genres together.' Indeed, a desire to keep genres pure exists"[30] (44). Thus, *Ada* and *Lolita*, by mixing different literary genres as a game to evade taboos by muddling up meaning, lead to the transgression of an interdiction and the impurity of texts. The texts themselves become taboo through their lack of purity, but, paradoxically they have been put in this position because they attempted to avoid taboos. Furthermore, the fact that this is done in a playful way rather than in an attempt to appease social mores makes these texts even more taboo, since it is not done out of fear but for entertainment. Generic impurity, which is a deliberate game, thus makes these two texts intrinsically taboo.

C/ The Creative Dimension of Parody

The parody of different genres is a way for Nabokov to create new texts that pertain to the history of art while emancipating them from it. Parody has created new art forms in the past, which is the case of *Don Quijote*, for instance:

> But, for the decoder of parody, this creative function for an individual artist is less important than the realization that, for whatever reason, the artist's parodic incorporation and ironic "trans-contextualization" or inversion has brought about something new in its bitextual synthesis. Perhaps parodists only hurry up what is a natural procedure: the changing of aesthetic forms through time. Out of the union of chivalric romance and a new literary concern for everyday realism came *Don Quijote* and the novel as we know it today. Parodic works like this one – works that actually manage to free themselves from the backgrounded text enough to create a new and autonomous form – suggest that the dialectic synthesis that is parody might be a prototype of the pivotal stage in that gradual process of development of literary forms (Hutcheon 35).

Parody of various art forms is thus a creative force that hastens the development and renewal of art. *Lolita* and *Ada*, which parody many genres and mix together various literary modes, create new texts which do not yet have an official status. This partially clarifies Nabokov's claim that: "one of the functions of all my novels is to prove that the novel in general does not exist" (*SO* 115). His goal in writing his fiction is to emancipate himself from the art form of the novel and to create something new, a hybrid form of art which mixes and matches traditional forms. This quote is however paradoxical, as he uses the term "novel" to define his texts while denying its existence. This contradiction ties into Hutcheon's argument that parody is authorized transgression: it may subvert the traditional form, but it still belongs to it. Even by imitating with difference, parody reinforces the source it uses (26). Nabokov's parody of the

[30] My translation of : « Il [le genre] est donc en partie liée avec la norme, et cette norme peut être transgressée, comme on transgresse un interdit. Pourtant, Derrida avait précisé au tout début de son essai qu'il ne fallait pas 'mêler les genres.' Il existe, en effet, un désir de pureté du genre […] »

pornographic novel through an imitation and subversion of its structure, both emancipates *Lolita* from that art form but cements it into it. Thus, by using the conventions of this form even in an attempt to mock it, Nabokov guarantees the continuation of its existence (75). The essential conundrum in parody is that: "the search for novelty in twentieth-century art has often – ironically – been firmly based in the search for tradition" (29). This is not to say that parody automatically means a failure to create anything new, but it does so thanks to a source. Nabokov's texts do not only parody one source, but a multitude of them, mixing and matching elements that have never been put together. In so doing, he inscribes both his texts in the tradition of art while partaking in its advancement.

The creative force of parody is also doubly so when the reader's role is taken into account: the realization of the full potential of the text's parodic intent depends on the reader's recognition that the text is a parody. The reader thus becomes the decoder of parody attempting to elucidate what the encoder of parody has intended (27). This gives an active role to the reader who partakes in a game with the author. If the text is not identified as a parody as such, the text does not reach its full scope; its intent is neutralized and it loses its double structure (27). This leads Hutcheon to the conclusion that:

> Readers are active co-creators of the parodic text in a more explicit and perhaps more complex way than reader-response critics argue that they are in the reading of all texts. While all artistic communication can take place only by virtue of tacit contractual agreements between encoder and decoder, it is part of the particular strategy of both parody and irony that their acts of communication cannot be considered completed unless the precise encoding intention is realized in the recognition of the receiver (93).

Readers thus partake in the creation of parody, as it is a game that requires at least two players to be fulfilled. Therefore, when one reads a novel by Nabokov, one participates in a game with him, creating the text alongside the author. To partake in the game, however, requires knowledge of the history of art; parody is often accused of being an elitist form of discourse, as a consequence (95). The full meaning of the text thus depends on the reader's advanced knowledge, which closes the text's intent, and excludes some readers from the textual game Nabokov has created. Just as with the encrypting of taboo through euphemism in language, taboo is used to make the texts a mystery to elucidate by encouraging readers to carefully decrypt them.

IV/ Nabokov's Texts as Riddles

A/ A Game between Author and Reader

Nabokov's novels constitute an intellectual game between himself and his readers. They are a game for which only the author knows the rules. They are, in other words, problems and riddles to be solved by the reader. What is to be found at the end of the game is the hidden meaning of the texts. The taboo subjects are thus the most obvious and glaring element, or the decoy which is used to distract the readers by provoking outrage, embarrassment, or amusement. According to the author, art is tantamount to deception:

> *You say that reality is an intensely subjective matter, but in your books it seems to me that you seem to take an almost perverse delight in literary deception.*
> The fake move in a chess problem, the illusion of a solution or the conjuror's magic: I used to be a little conjuror when I was a boy. I loved doing simple tricks – turning water into wine, that kind of things; but I think I'm in good company because all art is deception and so is nature; all is deception in that good cheat, from the insect that mimics a leaf to the popular enticements of procreation. […] But poetry had been born – the tall story had been born in the tall grass (*SO* 11).

For him, deception is part of nature, and as art is a reflection or a representation of nature, it mimics the deception of the natural world. Many elements are attributed to this idea of illusion and deception, namely magic, nature, chess, and art. A deceptive trick is only part of the game. With his novels being akin to a chess problem, it is only normal that there would be traps laid within his fiction. In *Lolita*, for instance, the reader is put in the same position as a detective, who is to find any clue and rule out any false information (Delage-Toriel 50-51). This game may only begin on the second reading however, as there are many red-herrings, and very few real clues. Once one is no longer enmeshed in the discovery of the full story, one can focus on the small details interwoven throughout the novel. An innocuous clue is placed towards the beginning of the novel: "Quine the Swine. Guilty of killing Quilty. Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!" (*L* 32). This clue is camouflaged by the attention which is put on the play on words and sounds. It appears only as one of Humbert's eccentricities rather than an important clue. These pieces of information that help to solve the case are few and far between, which pushes the reader to pay attention to detail. This likens the novel to a puzzle to be recomposed:

> If we are to take Nabokov at his word, reading would be a reconstruction or reconstitution of the game which has been shaped by the author. If the reader manages to reassemble the puzzle, he can find, from another perspective, the initial vision, the "solution," which presided over the conception of the game. It is to be remembered that Nabokov

> encompasses his works with one look before composing them, piece by piece, like a jigsaw puzzle[31] (Delage-Toriel 47-48).

Although *Ada* is not a case to be solved, it includes small clues which point towards what is at the crux of the novel's moral dilemma: Lucette's suicide. Minute details are inserted into the text to foreshadow the solution, and help the reader solve the riddle and find the meaning of the text behind all the superfluous information and distractions (Boyd 551). Yet pleasure must be derived by the reader from the elucidation of the game, after they have overcome the traps laid by Nabokov:

> As he explained in his mimicry article and elsewhere, he detected in nature a playful deceptiveness and found nothing more exhilarating than the surprise of seeing through the deception to a new level of truth. He liked to offer the same surprises in literature, feigning falsehood when he was telling the truth or vice versa, for the sake of the reader's pleasure in penetrating the illusion (Boyd 71).

The intellectual game, by the very fact that it is challenging, is to be enjoyed. The author and the reader are both creators of meaning, since the reader is given an active role in the comprehension of the text. However, those who fail at solving the puzzle do not draw satisfaction from the text, as they feel excluded from its rules and ultimately its meaning (Raguet-Bouvart 2000 104). With the deceptive illusions, the meaning is masked, which makes the text hard to access. The solution, or the hidden meaning of the texts are treated as a taboo to be uncovered. The texts as well as their paratexts are included in this game.

B/ Nabokov's Authorial Persona

"*Do you make a point of puzzling people and playing games with readers?*
What a bore that would be!"
(Vladimir Nabokov *SO* 184)

Nabokov has created a contradictory authorial character for himself to make the game more challenging for his readers. He presents himself almost like an unreliable character himself: "What I really like about the better kind of public colloquy is the opportunity it affords me to construct in the presence of my audience the semblance of what I hope is a plausible and not altogether displeasing personality" (*SO* 158). When he presents himself in public, he is like an actor playing for an audience, and thus not himself. What is eminently interesting is his use of the word "constructed"; when he gives his opinions, he is creating a character. When reading *Strong Opinions*, it is important to reflect on its status. Although it may seem like a spontaneous

[31] « Si nous prenons Nabokov au mot, la lecture serait une épreuve de reconstitution ou de recomposition du jeu façonné par l'auteur. S'il parvient à recomposer le puzzle, le lecteur peut retrouver, en miroir, la vision initiale, la « solution », qui a présidé à la conception du jeu. On se souviendra en effet que Nabokov embrasse ses œuvres d'un seul regard avant de les composer, morceau par morceau, comme un puzzle. » (My translation)

collection of interviews, that is to say, a faithful transcription of Nabokov's oral speech, it is actually another text fashioned by the author: in the foreword, he admits to modifying the text completely:

> My files contain the results of some forty interviews in several languages. Only some of the American and British ones have been included in here. A few of those have had to be skipped because, by a kind of awful alchemy, and not merely by a good shake, my authentic response got so hopelessly mixed with the artificial color of human interest, added by the manufacturer; as to defy separation. In other cases I have had no trouble in leaving out the well-meant little touches […], thus gradually eliminating every element of spontaneity, all semblance of actual talk (XVI).

The text is thus utterly mediated, or controlled by Nabokov: interviews have been selected, blunders have been taken out, any spontaneous ideas that do not go towards the character he is creating for himself are erased. Not only that, but earlier, he admits to writing his answers beforehand and reciting them during the interview (XV). This meticulous pre-planning shows his involvement in the construction of his public image, the character he plays for an audience. Getting to know Nabokov as an author is another part of the jigsaw puzzle of his writing. In other words, reading *Strong Opinions* is part of the game. Boyd underlines this game the author plays in his interviews:

> Nabokov never liked to reveal the hidden springs of his fiction, for he wanted readers to exercize their own eyes and minds. But at the same time he liked to disclose some of the secrets of the work in question – and then feign by his patter that he had not done so at all. He placed the clue before the reader's eyes, but left it still concealed: Find What the Author Has Hidden (385).

The author thus continues his deceptive game in the works that surround his novels. What is written in *Strong Opinions* is thus to be taken with a pinch of salt, as it is not excluded from the game of his fiction: it is, in fact, part of his fiction. In the same vein, he further fictionalizes himself by inserting his anagram, Vivian Darkbloom, in his novels:

> Thus, Nabokov wishes to imitate, to play a role, to be a double, to usurp his identity all at the same time, which does have an ironic effect, but leads to a derealization of his own identity. A double, a pastiche, an extra or a figurine, Nabokov hides behind his names and pseudonyms, in real life just as in his fiction – where we often find him concealed behind his anagram Vivian Darkbloom. He disappears and reappears in an intermittency and a game of eclipses, like a conjuror to which he enjoyed comparing himself, reiterating, and multiplying his subjectivity in a series of "I"s which are real and fictional, a ghostly and almost fictionalized presence[32] (Hamrit 52).

[32] « Ainsi, imiter, jouer un rôle, être une doublure, usurper l'identité, Nabokov souhaite faire tout cela en même temps, ce qui a certes un effet ironique, mais entraîne une déréalisation de sa propre identité. Doublure, pastiche, figurant ou figurine, Nabokov se cache derrière ses noms et pseudonymes, dans la vie et dans sa fiction – où on le retrouve souvent dissimulé derrière son anagramme Vivian Darkbloom. Il disparaît et réapparaît dans une intermittence et un jeu d'éclipses, comme le prestidigitateur auquel il aimait se comparer, réitérant et démultipliant sa subjectivité en une série de 'moi' réels et fictifs, une présence fantomatique et presque fictionnalisée. » (My translation)

By mixing his fictional and real life together, Nabokov creates confusion between reality and fiction. One could almost talk about him as a character in a fictional universe he has constructed. His constructed authorial persona thus leads the reader, who is looking for answers in his opinions, astray. His *Strong Opinions* and the character he has created within this collection of interviews, is thus part of the game of his oeuvre.

Therefore, in the process of this game with the reader, Nabokov blurs the lines between reality and fiction. It is not only his authorial persona which contributes to this trend but also the structures of *Lolita* and *Ada*. The former is framed by two paratexts, one is completely fictional, and the other is supposedly not (Alladaye 100). To apply René Alladaye's terminology, the foreword is intradiegetic, while the afterword is extradiegetic (101). Nabokov's Afterword has become an integral part of the novel as it is attached to every edition ever since its publication in 1957, along with the American edition of *Lolita*. The goal of both of these paratexts is to explain how the main text was written and published, but also to direct the reception and interpretation of the text (100). Although the Afterword is clearly not fictional, the fact that it cannot be disassembled from the Foreword makes the status of the text more complicated than it would initially seem. In the introductory paragraph of the Afterword, Nabokov himself obscures the line between reality and fiction: "After doing my impersonation of suave John Ray, the character in *Lolita* who pens the Foreword, any comments coming straight from me may strike one—may strike me, in fact—as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book" (*L* 311). With the use of the word "impersonation," the idea that, in the process of writing, Nabokov acts as another character is introduced. In writing the Foreword, the author thus becomes a character for a brief moment. By applying the same word to himself, he fictionalizes himself: Vladimir Nabokov is yet another character in *Lolita* which he, the author, has to play, just as he acted John Ray's part. If this is to be taken into the context of what was discussed in the paragraph above, this is part of Nabokov's authorial persona: when he publishes his writing, he constructs his identity; he builds a public character. The Afterword is thus to be taken as part of the game, another clue in the elucidation of the novel, but not as *the* answer to the novel's meaning. In *Ada*, the notes by a certain Vivian Darkbloom are attached to the end of the novel. These notes appear to give additional information, in the same style as academic annotations. They also translate French and Russian expressions, which is something monoglot English speakers may need. Yet this is Nabokov inserting himself into the text as an ambiguous character who is in-between reality and fiction. Again, camouflaged behind academic annotations, he attempts to give clues to his readers, and to direct the interpretation of the text. The paratexts are to be taken into account in the game of

his fiction, and his contradictory statements more so. By constantly inserting himself into his fiction and fictionalizing himself outside of it, Nabokov tries to either orient the interpretation of his texts, or more accurately, make it more challenging. In the process, the author and his readers are co-creators of meaning.

Through the use of taboo as a pretext for artistic creation, Nabokov makes use of aesthetics of avoidance, suggestion, and displacement. Taboos are thus not the subject of the text but the object used as a tool, or a constraint which encourages invention. Language, in this process, becomes the subject of both *Lolita* and *Ada* because of the focus on sounds and the physicality of words. In other words, what is important is not the meat of the subject matter, but the style, the sounds, and the words themselves. Both texts strive to be highly aesthetically pleasing for the sake of being so. The very nature of taboos, that which has to be circled around, covered up, is a fantastic pretext for creation. Nabokov uses taboos as a creative outlet in various ways, namely in the invention of new words drawn from the three languages he mastered, the mixing of literary modes and genres, and the use of parody. The latter also involves the readers in the creation of meaning, but its success depends solely on the readers' recognition of the intent of parody. This creativity, which is motivated by taboo and Nabokov's attempt to play an intellectual game with his readers, has the effect of blurring meaning and the lines between reality and fiction. This game is to take place in both his novels and his paratexts.

Thus far, it has been argued that the covering of taboos is a necessary obligation to avoid censorship and a form of self-censorship, but also a source of creative inspiration. Through the avoidance of taboos focus is displaced from the subject matter to language, its sounds and its physicality, which almost gives the texts a body. The sounds are to be relished, inviting the reader to take pleasure in the texts regardless of their meanings. However, dealing with taboos in such a way, that is to say, embellishing them, making them aesthetically pleasing, can be seen as questionable on a moral level. By using taboo in the subject matter, the author has an excuse to cover meaning, and in this process, he develops an aesthetics of the veil which culminates into a writing of desire.

Part Three: An Aesthetic of the Veil

I/ The Issue of *Lolita*'s Book Covers

A/ Seductive Covers

Book jackets are part of the text's physical connection to the outside world and are not to be taken lightly. A text never comes out naked: it is always accompanied by paratexts (Zimmer 167). Covers may seem to be completely insignificant, but they are the first element that a potential reader sees before being confronted to the text itself. They conceal the text and give a first impression; in this sense, they can potentially influence the first reading of the text. This process can be either conscious or unconscious. Of course, this first impression can be checked, but under the condition of being conscious of the impact it has on the first reading of the text:

> It is said you can't judge a book by its cover, which is wrong in that we can and do judge being by seeming, inside by outside, essence by accident. We do it all the time, whether we like it or not. We check this first judgement – ideally – and afterward may find the gulf between, say, word and image, funny or frustrating, illuminating or obscuring. This is to say that first impressions bring first judgements, and books are no exception in this regard – not even exceptional books like Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (De La Durantaye 2013 161).

While book covers are significant, they are more so for a controversial novel such as *Lolita*, which depicts an aesthetic and ethical dilemma. Duncan White argues: "Accordingly, representing Lolita on the cover of the novel becomes an ethical challenge. If we give her a life of her own, we are asking that she no longer be read through Humbert. […] The way she is depicted on the cover can influence our reading – the book exerts an influence on the novel" (154). The physical book and its cover thus exercises power over the text itself, and how the designer of the jacket chooses to depict the text is of high importance. While White's contention that covers take control away from the narrator holds true for some covers, others reinforce Humbert's power over Lolita: if designers elect to put an aesthetically pleasing cover of a girl, it signals a representation of Lolita which is in keeping with what is depicted by Humbert, who aestheticizes and mythicizes her body and character. A book cover accompanied by advertisement in the form of blurbs has a specific goal which is to convince potential readers to buy not only the book but that specific edition: in order to do this, it has to be aesthetically pleasing so as to attract buyers. In the case of a complicated novel such as *Lolita*, the jacket and advertisement are used by readers as guidance to better understand it (Zimmer 167). Yet as Dieter Zimmer points out: "they are promotions that pose as information" (167). Paratexts, in the context of complicated classics, are thus deceptive: they are perceived as additional information when they are there to appeal and to embellish the text. This is not unlike

Humbert's strategy to draw away from his immorality by flourishing his style. Book covers also have a seductive dimension, as they reveal enough information to make potential readers curious, but not enough so that the reader is desirous to discover more (167). Everything is oriented to attract readers with little regard to an adequate representation of the novel's themes. The covers have to pander to the general public's expectation regarding the representation of the novel, which has been forged by decades of book jackets representing young girls (Mendelsund 33). Book jackets, which are part of the physical form of the text, are meant to attract potential readers. Not only do they need to attract, or even seduce them, but they also have an impact on the first impression and interpretation of the novel, since they have the ability to convince and impress on the mind through images. Just as the words in the texts have a strong power of suggestion, the book covers make a strong appeal to potential readers through a suggestive image, which is packed with enough information to prompt them to buy the book.

B/ Misrepresentation of *Lolita* and its Heroine

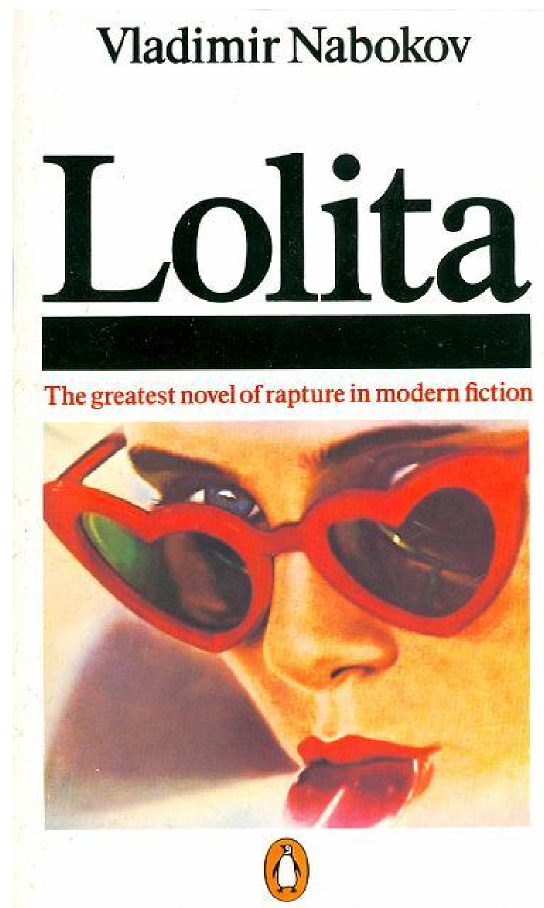

Fig. 1 Cover of the 1980 Penguin Books edition (Zimmer 2006)[33].

[33] For more covers of *Lolita*, please visit: http://www.dezimmer.net/Covering%20Lolita/LoCov.html

In an attempt to give a representation of Lolita by depicting a young girl on the cover of the book, publishers misrepresent her. An overwhelming majority of the novel's jackets have a young girl as the first image readers behold. In Nabokov's instructions to the publisher of the first American edition, Putnam & Sons, he explicitly asked that no girls be on the cover of the novel (White 155). While authors cannot exercise control over how the book is covered, especially after their death, the publishers and marketing teams who did depict young girls are in direct transgression of Nabokov's instructions. Representing a young girl is not a problem in and of itself, but it does become so when book covers sexualize the visual representation of Lolita, which is what some of them do. In this process, they partake in or are even complicit in the abuse she undergoes in Humbert's narrative (Pifer 2013 145). The most compelling example is the picture of Sue Lyon licking a lollipop and looking over heart-shaped glasses (fig. 1): this was the image that was used to promote Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation of *Lolita*. Since its creation in 1962, this image has been widely spread, has risen to an iconic status, and has almost become an intrinsic representation of the novel and its heroine (145). Since, as Gérard Genette has pointed out, a novel has a wider public than its readership, this image's mass-market spread shapes not only the novel's reading audience, but the public image of the character of Lolita (White 154-155). According to Ellen Pifer, this image is a blatant misrepresentation of her and the novel's central theme:

> However iconic it has become, this popular image of a lascivious Lolita licking a lollipop in the manner of an experienced porn star is a blatant misrepresentation of Nabokov's novel, its characters, and its themes. Not only does it betray the nature of the child featured in its pages, it disregards the way that the narrator, Humbert Humbert, comes to terms with his role in ruining her life (2013 145).

The interpretation that Humbert regrets or comes to terms with his treatment of Lolita is debatable and is not a unanimous vision of the novel within *Lolita*'s critical community; the narrator may just be feigning remorse to win over, or even seduce the reader (Tamir-Ghez 35). While this is one interpretation of *Lolita*, most accurately an ethical reading of the novel, she has a point: Lolita is clearly sexualized through this suggestive pose. The iconic image of her is nowhere to be found in either the novel or its two adaptations: it was in fact the idea, and interpretation of an advertising photographer. The two most striking elements, the lollipop and the heart-shaped sunglasses are not in the scene in which Humbert sees Lolita for the first time (Zimmer 172). The image enhances certain themes of the novel: the lollipop is a stereotypical visual representation of paedophilia, and the heart-shaped sunglasses perpetrate the theme of the love story which the novel parodies. The sunglasses attach the character to popular culture, to casualness, and to love. While these elements are to be found in the novel, they reduce the

meaningful scope of the text; the cover in its attempt to summarize the whole novel through a handful of visual representations is a part-for-whole metonymy: it attempts to describe the whole novel through one image, thus putting emphasis on a few elements. Pifer argues that the narrative which goes along the lines that Lolita is a sexually promiscuous twelve-year-old girl is not to be found in Nabokov's text (2013 145). This is yet again debatable as this idea does pertain to Humbert's line of justification: he presents her as a vulgar little girl who has already lost her virginity and who seduces him. According to Humbert and some readers, her lack of innocence and moral integrity partly justify his sexual exploitation of her[34]. The covers which sexualize Lolita do however sustain this narrative, influence this interpretation in some readers, and contribute to Humbert's manipulation and false logic. Not only that, but they summarize the novel to an image that directly points towards the taboo of sexuality and paedophilia, associating the novel in the public imagination to these taboos. They may cover the text, but they do not evade these taboos, which goes against the aesthetics of the novel.

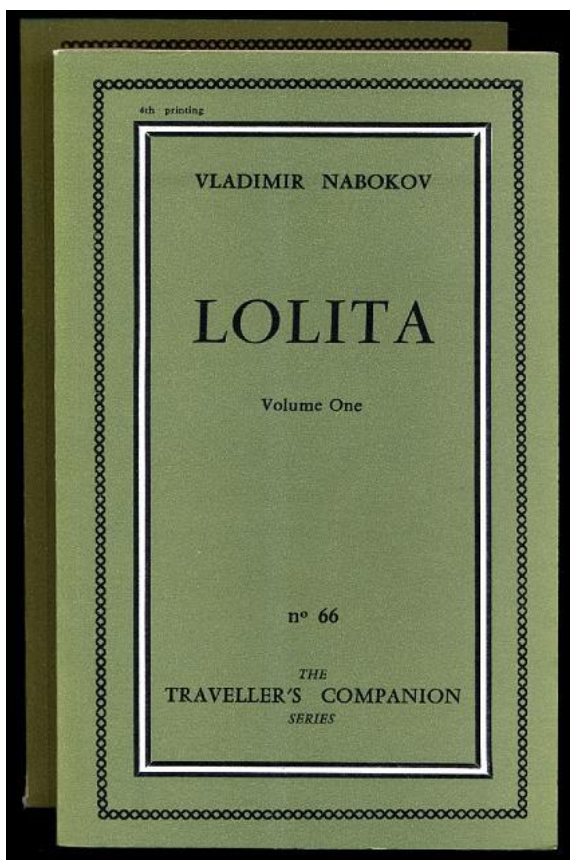

Fig. 2 Cover of the 1955 Olympia Press Edition.

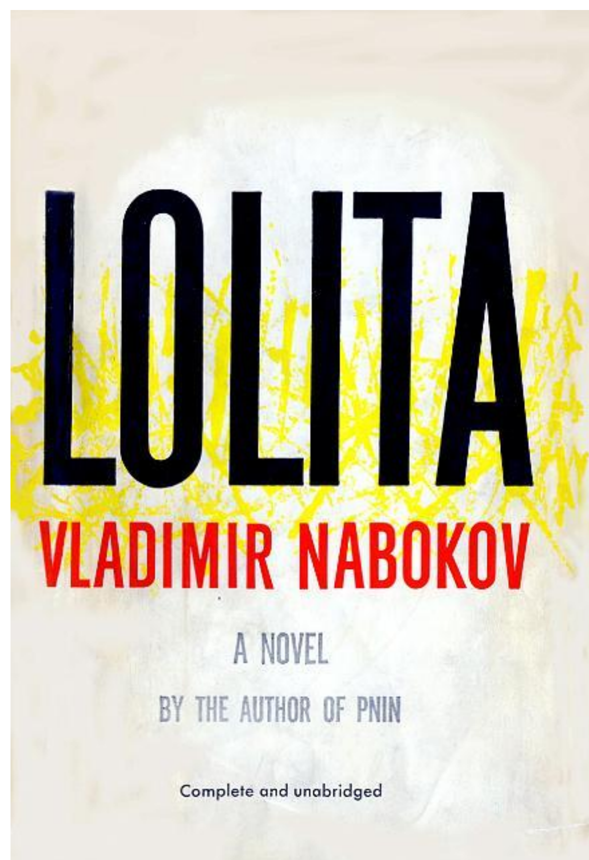

Fig. 3 Cover of the 1957 Putnam and Sons Edition (Zimmer 2006).

[34] A study of the influence of Humbert's arguments will be explored more thoroughly in the part entitled "Seductive Texts."

Considering the fact that book covers reduce the meaning of novels, they intrinsically cannot represent texts' meanings adequately. It is up to the attentive reader to get passed the first impression the jacket and advertisement provoke. Peter Mendelsund, who is a book cover designer describes his approach to choosing a design thus:

> But assuming for a moment that we've taken on the task of representing the text rather than just adorning it, must we designers determine what a book is *about* before we design a jacket for it? When I'm reading a manuscript, I find I'm constantly on the lookout for images, characters and ideas that can serve, metaphorically, as proxies for the whole (32).

Therefore, he looks for one image that is described in the book as a representation of the whole. As I explained above, it is a metonymic process. The meaning of the whole novel is thus placed into one single image: this misrepresents the book as it emphasizes one aspect and simplifies the multiplicity of meanings to one. Nabokov's idea for the first American edition's cover is quite telling in this regard:

> I want pure colors, melting clouds, accurately drawn details, a sunburst above a receding road with the light reflected in furrows and ruts, after rain. And no girls. If we cannot find that kind of artistic and virile painting, let us settle for an immaculate white jacket (rough texture paper instead of the usual glossy kind), with LOLITA in bold black lettering (White 156).

The author wanted the main image of the novel to be that of a road, one of the central themes of the novel, but not the only one. His imagined cover would reinforce the displacement that occurs during the narrative from the taboo subject to the trip around the United States, just as Humbert attempts to displace the attention from his treatment of Lolita by focusing on their road trip. This cover, which, to my knowledge, has never been produced, stems as a distraction from the other meanings of the novel. Even the author cannot suggest a completely neutral cover, especially not Nabokov, whom, as we have discussed, enjoyed treating his novels as though they were games and riddles to be solved. Putnam's did not use Nabokov's description of the road as a cover and decided to opt for the second option: a white cover with the word "Lolita" in black letters (seen in fig. 3) (156). This may seem like the most neutral book cover, but it may give the impression that the novel is an abstract text, and a construct of pure ideas, not a representation of a work that has an abundance of concrete details (Zimmer 172). No book jacket is neutral, that is why it must be called into question after many readings of the text. The first cover of *Lolita*, the olive-green cover of the Travellers Companion series in The Olympia Press (fig. 2), was not neutral either, but for a different reason: it was well known as an edition that connoted erotic and sexually explicit content (Clegg 9). The Olympia Press's cover thus created an expectation through its reputation. It is through these examples that the maxim that one should not judge a book by its cover takes on its full meaning. Leland De la Durantaye,

while discussing Nabokov's idea of the importance of images in relation to covers, concludes that:

> This leaves us with the essence of literary art, at least as it was conceived by Nabokov. For his part, the image is not only the origin of the work of art, it is also its end and essence. This is why Nabokov so stridently claimed that there was no reading, only rereading. When we reread, we begin to experience the work as though it were more seen than read; we cease to be bound by suspense, sequence, or the time it takes for the story to unfold, and we begin to experience it as we might an image, where parts and whole are equally and radiantly present. […] The true image of *Lolita* is, thus not an image, but one that we access through our reading and rereading […] (2013 164).

The image is not to be attained by the book cover but by reading the text as a whole again and again. It is important to free oneself from the book covers to attain the true meanings of the text, if such a thing even exists. Intrinsically, book covers displace the multiplicity of the meanings of the book to one single image or interpretation. A book jacket cannot, in this sense, be an adequate representation of a novel, especially not of *Lolita*. Some covers can participate in the euphemistic displacement that occurs in the text, while the obscener ones are dysphemistic in nature and go against the aesthetics of the novel.

II/ Humour as a Covering Strategy

A/ The Humorous Function of Euphemisms

Euphemisms are sometimes used in *Ada* and *Lolita* as comedic devices to be revealing and to play with taboo and vulgarity. Henri Godin argues that this is one of the most powerful, legitimate, and commendable aspects of euphemisms in literature: they become intellectual entertainment, verbal acrobatics (143-144). In this sense, Nabokov plays with taboo, or, in other words, uses it as a source for verbal play. In this process, he ridicules it, further distancing readers from it, and displaces the focus from the taboo to the way it is being played with and represented. While I have mostly argued that euphemisms and avoidance strategies mask meaning, some creations are more revealing than they conceal, which points towards a more playful and humorous approach to taboos. Allan, for instance, distinguishes three types of artful euphemisms:

> Euphemism as a work of art falls into three categories: there are the artful euphemisms, like many of those used in street language, which make a striking figure, but which are the everyday vocabulary of a particular jargon; there are the artful euphemisms which mask their original taboo denotations to such an extent that the latter are not generally recognized; and finally there are the artful euphemisms which are meant to be as revealing – and in their own way as provoking – as diaphanous lingerie (39).

In the final category, the embarrassment towards taboo is made fun of[35]. The fact that Nabokov and his characters have three languages at their disposal enables them to show a great deal of verbal play regarding taboos. This is most readily apparent in the following passage:

> Still more amusing was the "message" of a Canadian social worker, Mme de Réan-Fichini, who published her treatise, *On Contraceptive Devices*, in Kapuskan patois (to spare the blushes of Estotians and United Statians; while instructing hardier fellow-workers in her special field). "*Sole sure metoda*," she wrote, "*por decevor natura, est por un strong-guy de contino-contino-contino jusque le plesir brimz; et lors, a lultima instanta, svitchera a l'altra gropa* [groove]*; ma perquoi una femme ardora andor ponderosa ne se retorna kvik enof, la transita e facilitate per position torovago*" […] (*A* 103).

Nabokov thus draws from several languages, such as pig Latin, French, or English, while changing the spelling to describe a contraceptive technique. He uses the pretext of a dialect to create a complete distortion of language (Loison-Charles 2016 109). The dialect is used as a mockery of euphemism for the purpose of avoiding embarrassment, as can be seen in the small jab to the blushing "Estotians and United Statians." It is clear that this invented language is used ironically. The focus is displaced to the sounds, as the spelling used attempts to mark how the original word is pronounced. The phonetic spelling "kvik enof" mocks foreign pronunciations of "quick enough." The passage is highly suggestive, and barely hides the subject at hand. The decryption of the message and the amusement to be drawn from this, makes the passage much more striking than if it had just been written in English. Another example lies in Cordula's use of her knowledge of French to relate to abortion: "'Reckless Cordula,' observed reckless Cordula cheerfully, 'this will probably mean another abortion – *encore un petit enfantôme*, as my poor aunt's maid used to wail every time it happened to her […]'" (*A* 250). She does not use the word "enfantôme" to avoid the taboo subject, as she utters the sensitive word in the sentence, but she uses the taboo rather as a pretext to play with language. Here the strong taboo of abortion is trivialized, used as a source for entertainment and creation. This trivialization can be seen in the tone that Cordula takes on, as well as the humorous repetition of "reckless," as the narrator agrees with and echoes the assertion found in direct speech.

In the same vein, child sexual exploitation is referred to in a comedic way through euphemism in *Lolita*:

> "It is of no importance now," she said pounding a gray cushion with her fist and then lying back, belly up, on the divan. "Crazy things, filthy things. I said no, I'm just not going to [she used, in all insouciance really, a disgusting slang term which, in a literal French

[35] The partially revealing nature of these euphemisms ties into the erotic aesthetics I will be discussing in the following part.

> translation, would be *souffler*] your beastly boys, because I want only you. Well, he kicked me out" (*L* 277).

Lolita's attitude and tone are described as detached and frivolous, which emphasizes the lack of importance that is claimed in direct speech. Humbert censors the taboo term out of embarrassment, and displays his control over her discourse at the same time. The use of the direct translation of the slang term is more revealing than anything else: although an English speaker may not know the meaning, a quick search would instantly rectify the masking effect of the euphemism. The innocent French word is clearly used ironically, as it does not completely hide, but actually reinforces the term that has unsuccessfully been concealed[36]. Lolita's use of alliteration of the letter 'b,' with the succession of the words "beastly," "boys," and "because" displays her ability to verbally play with taboo. The total effect is ruined by Humbert's censorship of the dysphemism "blow." He thus stunts her creativity because of his prudishness and his will to exercise control on the entire narrative. Either way the seriousness of what is being said is minimized by Lolita's tone and verbal play, and the mocking of Humbert's embarrassment. Lolita is referring to a time in her young life in which Quilty sexually exploited her by attempting to make her participate in child pornography. Lara Delage-Toriel contends that:

> How does one react to this perversity when it disarms us through laughter? Far from being entertaining, Nabokovian humour carries with it human filth, which is far too human and from which we tend to divert our eyes. As the veil of hypocritical prudishness is taken away, what we see is our own face, our own humanity which is displayed in front of us in a grimacing mirror[37] (47).

These revealing artful euphemisms thus mock vulgarity and show us our own ugliness through grating humour. Reminding readers of their own relation to human vulgarity puts them in a taboo position when they read the texts. Not only do humorous euphemisms reveal more than they conceal, but they actively point and laugh at taboos.

B/ Humour and the Minimization of Suffering

Humour is used in both texts as comic relief to dedramatize certain taboo scenes. During the scene in the Enchanted Hunters Motel, Humbert uses comedy to defuse the tension of the

[36] By "innocent," I mean that the French verb "souffler" does not have a sexual meaning, unlike the verb "blow" in English.

[37] « Comment réagir à cette perversité lorsqu'elle nous désarme par le rire ? Loin d'être un simple divertissement, l'humour nabokovien charrie avec lui toute cette souillure humaine, trop humaine dont on a tendance à se détourner. Le voile de la pudeur hypocrite étant levé, c'est notre propre visage, notre propre humanité qu'il nous est donné de voir dans un miroir grimaçant. » (My translation)

transgressive acts that are about to take place. He invites his fictional reader to laugh so as to divert from his actions: "Let's even smile a little. After all, there is no harm in smiling. For instance (I almost wrote "frinstance"), I had no place to rest my head, and a fit of heartburn (they call those fries "French," *grand Dieu!*) was added to my discomfort" (*L* 129). In this passage, through the invitation to smile, the narrator is asking for complicity from the reader. The following remarks are an obvious attempt at making his fictional readers laugh. The reference to "heartburn" is physical or farcical humour, which instils a certain casualness to the scene. The other two attempts at humour are on the linguistic level: the focus is displaced from his actions to language and the written word. With the comment on American English, he emphasizes and makes fun of the absurdity of language. The light-hearted nature of the humour is in complete contrast with what Humbert is doing in this scene: he is hesitant to begin touching Lolita while she is asleep. This aside tries to draw the reader to his side by focusing on his point of view and on language problems so that the reader sympathises with him and thinks about the absurdity of language rather than anything else. Humbert emphasizes his discomfort and completely ignores Lolita's point of view. The reader is thus invited to enter a taboo position; that of an accomplice to a pervert. Following this, the next release of tension occurs through the description of the noises in the motel:

> When *that* stopped, a toilet immediately north of my cerebellum took over. It was a manly, energetic, deep-throated toilet, and it was used many times. Its gurgle and gush and long afterglow shook the wall behind me. Then someone in a southern direction was extravagantly sick, almost coughing out his life with his liquor, and his toilet descended like a veritable Niagara, immediately beyond our bathroom (130).

He uses toilet humour to lessen the severity of the scene by making it trivial. The noise of the motel is presented as inconvenient and over-the-top: the qualification "extravagantly sick" presupposes that the man was overacting, and that he should not have been as sick as he was so as not to bother other customers in the motel. The personification of the toilet presents the whole scene as absurd. The humorous alliteration and assonance in "gurgle" and "gush," also mark a meticulous attention to language which is meant to entertain and distract. The whole chapter alternates between elevated and lyrical passages and bawdy interludes such as these. Low humour is used to divert from the more serious transgression, that of an attempt to violate a young girl's body. Humour is never used randomly in Nabokov's texts, it has a specific aim (Delage-Toriel 46). On a less dramatic level, the first sexual encounter between Van and Ada is presented as farcical; "(I wonder, Van, *why* you are doing your best to transform our poetical and unique past into a dirty farce? […])" (*A* 90). This technique is used again as a way to deflate the transgression of incestuous relationships. Humour is thus used in certain serious scenes to

dedramatize their gravity. Usually, these humorous parentheses are quite low and farcical humour so as to induce easy laughter, and directly contrast with the gravity and implication of what is happening in the diegesis. More than dedramatizing taboos, and thus making them more acceptable, this targeted humour attempts to minimize the seriousness of rape and incestuous relationships.

It is in *Lolita* particularly that humour minimizes suffering and violence. Before analysing humour in the text, it is important to note that its realization is subjective:

> Assessing the book's inherent humour depends, of course, on one's approach to the text: in the diegetic world, abstracted from the recounting of events, many of them are morally, psychically, and sometimes physically horrific. But it is undeniable that Humbert Humbert's narrative style is, or aims to be, if not funny, at least facetious (Edmunds 61).

While not every reader would find Humbert's prose amusing, it is undeniable that the text intends to be so. The humour in the novel is black and feeds off cruelty and laughter at the expense of other characters (63). In the second part of the novel, Lolita is at times presented as a comic character so as to soften her speech and minimize her suffering (Manolescu 42). For instance, when she makes serious accusations towards Humbert, which he partially censors through indirect speech, she is described thus: "She made monstrous faces at me, inflating her cheeks and producing a diabolical plopping sound" (*L* 205). She is presented like a grimacing child who is having a tantrum as opposed to making serious claims against him. Under Humbert's penmanship and narrative control, she is not to be taken seriously, and her plight even less. This treatment is not reserved to Lolita. Grotesque scenes such as the one in which Valeria leaves Humbert for Mr Taxovich, is a prime example of the minimization of violence through humour. The way in which Taxovich is revealed to be Valeria's lover is absurd:

> I demanded her lover's name. I repeated my question but she kept up a burlesque babble, discoursing on her unhappiness with me and announcing her plans for an immediate divorce. "*Mais qui est-ce?*" I shouted at last, striking her on the knee with my fist; and she, without even wincing, stared at me as if the answer were too simple for words, then gave a quick shrug and pointed at the thick neck of the taxi driver. He pulled up at a small café and introduced himself (*L* 28).

The first half of the quote, the tension mounts as the spouses quarrel. It comes to a climax with Humbert striking Valeria on the knee. What she says is reported in indirect speech, and just as with Lolita, she is presented comically: Humbert reduces the content of her speech to "a burlesque babble," invalidating her opinion because of her irrationality. Yet again, a humorous alliteration is used to show the narrator's linguistic ingenuity. Her suffering, as in the unhappiness she feels with Humbert, is minimized in the process. Furthermore, the fact that Valeria takes the blow "without even wincing," negates pain, which is the consequence of

violence, and makes her a comically resilient character, as opposed to a woman who suffers. The hostility is deflated by the introduction of Valeria's lover, whose appearance is incongruous. Humbert chooses a random taxi and is greeted with her lover. The tone of the scene radically changes as the situation transforms itself into a grotesque encounter. His appearance is even more telling as Mr Taxovich is the only element which is preventing Humbert from beating his wife. This character is the source of comedy, since Humbert takes any moment to laugh at his expense, which defuses the underlying violence: "(Maximovich! his name suddenly taxies back to me)" (30). The narrator, under the pretext that he does not remember Maximovich's name, calls him Taxovich, according to his occupation as a taxi driver. His contempt shows through by the very fact he does not remember his name. This naming process shows the narrator's disdain and mocking position. The play on words found in the quote furthers this, as his 'real' name is introduced through his profession; his identity is never dissociated from his work. Through this pun, Humbert has fun with and ridicules Maximovich's social status. The gravity and cruelty of the scene is down-played by the introduction of this absurd character. However, the narrator's cruelty shines through because of the very humour he uses: the statements which are wrought with sarcasm are more telling of his character than that of the characters he is describing. In this vein, Jeff Edmunds contends that:

> Apart from the foreword by John Ray, Jr., everything we read in *Lolita* is related by narrator Humbert Humbert. Like Nabokov, Humbert is enamored of word-play, a fundamental sort of textual comedy; his text is rife with puns, neologisms, spoonerism, and anagrams, and especially with jocular or derisive pseudonyms. […] Not only are the monikers humorous, but they serve to reveal key aspects of Humbert's character: cynicism, erudition, wry wit (62).

Humbert's characteristics are to be drawn from his sense of humour, as it shows his world view. His humour also shows his contempt for others, his egotism, and his cruelty. There is no wholehearted laughter in the novel; it is mostly mocking or cruel (69). Within the very comedy of the novel, cruelty and violence are an under-current. Humour is used as a device to either soften and cover the underlying violence and suffering, or to amplify it, depending on a reader's interpretation and perception of humour.

The latter is a seductive force; it almost makes one complicit with the characters displaying humour. Delage-Toriel, for instance, argues that: "Humour is a formidable rhetorical weapon; this can be noticed when, more than once, we catch ourselves taking Humbert's side,

almost despite ourselves"[38] (46). The narrator uses comedy in his manuscript as a way to appear in a better light so as to "seduce the reader/ juror into leniency of judgement" (Edmunds 70). The implication of the smile or the laugh induced by Humbert is that the reader becomes complicit with him (Delage-Toriel 44). This seduction through laughter can also be applied to *Ada*, as we are invited to laugh at the expense of Lucette with Ada and Van, throughout the protagonists' childhood in Ardis:

> Lucette, the shadow, followed them from lawn to loft, from gate house to stable, from a modern shower booth near the pool to the ancient bathroom upstairs. Lucette-in-the-Box came out of a trunk. Lucette desired they take her for walks. Lucette insisted on their playing "leaptoad" with her – and Ada and Van exchanged dark looks (*A* 162).

Lucette is presented as the stereotype of the annoying little sister or cousin who keeps following their older siblings around. The anaphora of her name mimics her nagging presence, and emphasizes the annoyance that she triggers in both Van and Ada. The reader is invited to share this irritation *vis-à-vis* Lucette as we see her through the protagonists' point of view: with the passage finishing on Ada and Van exchanging dark looks, we are given their outlook on the situation rather than Lucette's. She is shown in a comedic light through the strong and entertaining image of "Lucette-in-the-Box." Edmunds argues that: "Nabokov is an eminently visual writer; like scenes from a film, Nabokov's descriptions can evoke imagery that is visually comedic, like slapstick or vaudeville shtick" (67). This toy induces fear, surprise, and finally laughter and entertainment as one realizes the object is inanimate. By assimilating Lucette to a Jack-in-the-Box toy, she is shown as both amusing and worthy of ridicule. This particular toy usually contains a clown or a jester, which are usually entities that one laughs at. Their extravagant appearance is the most striking and funny element. The audience is usually expected to laugh at their failure to perform a certain task. Through the image of the Jack-in-the-box, Lucette is presented as a comedic character, but mostly in spite of her. Her persistent and irritating presence in the protagonists' lives induces them to exclude her from their games in creative ways:

> Ada, after considering the situation for a moment, shut her book and said to Lucette, whom usually it was not hard to enchant, that she, Ada, felt she was quickly turning into a dragon, that the scales had begun to turn green, that now she *was* a dragon and that Lucette must be tied to a tree with the skipping rope so that Van might save her just in time. For some reason, Lucette balked at the notion but physical strength prevailed (*A* 109).

Ada simulates a fairy tale plot to get rid of Lucette. Language is the key factor in creating the discourse as she becomes a dragon linguistically rather than physically. While we are told by

[38] « L'humour est une arme rhétorique redoutable, comme on peut s'en apercevoir lorsque, plus d'une fois, on se surprend à prendre le parti d'Humbert, presque malgré soi. » (My translation)

the narrator that Lucette is easy to enchant and seduce, which implies both the narrator and Ada think she is not very intelligent, her resistance shows she is not persuaded by Ada's linguistic creation. The humour lies in the ironic statement "for some reason," in which the rational response to refuse to be tied to a tree is shown as ludicrous. Because Lucette is presented by the narrator as a nagging and annoying character throughout their childhood, her exclusion is shown as positive for the two protagonists, whose point of view is prevalent. However, as Dana Dragunoiu argues: "Whether tying her to a tree in imitation of a fairy-tale plot or locking her in a bath or closet, their seemingly innocent games are, from Lucette's perspective, cruel acts of deception" (312). What is amusing for Van and Ada, and some readers, is not so for Lucette, as these games and this humour are cruel towards her and mask her suffering. In the two novels, a distinction has to be made between laughing *with* and laughing *at*. Readers are invited to laugh *with* Humbert, Van, and Ada, at situations, or at the expense of other characters. Alongside Humbert, we are invited to laugh *at* Lolita and himself, while with Van and Ada we are invited to mock Lucette. Both these ridiculed characters are the characters that suffer most within the narratives, and if readers catch themselves laughing with the jeering narrators, they are almost complicit with them. Readers, in this sense, are put in a taboo position if they take merriment out of the suffering of others by contributing to the covering and minimization of the characters' pain. Not only is the suffering of some female characters hidden behind humour, but the description of their bodies plays on the erotic tension between concealment and revelation so as to make their bodies desirable, and to draw attention away from their experience.

III/ The Veiled Female Body

A/ An Object of Desire

In Nabokov's texts the female body is described through fragmentation: the description focuses on one part of the body at a time, moving along it, but never giving a whole picture. Jenefer Shute characterizes this as an inventory and cartography of desire (111-112). This particular kind of description is quite readily apparent in the passage in which Van tries to analyse the beginnings of his attraction to Ada:

> Was she really pretty, at twelve? Did he want – would he ever want to caress her, to really caress her? Her black hair cascaded over one clavicle and the gesture she made of shaking it back and the dimple on her pale cheek were revelations with an element of immediate recognition about them. Her pallor shone, her blackness blazed. The pleated skirts she liked were becomingly short. Even her bare limbs were so free from suntan that one's gaze, stroking her white shins and forearms, could follow upon them the regular slants of fine dark hairs, the silks of her girlhood. The iridal dark-brown of her serious eyes had the

> enigmatic opacity of an Oriental hypnotist's look (in a magazine's back-page advertisement) and seemed to be placed higher than usual so that between its lower rim and the moist lower lid a cradle crescent of white remained when she stared straight at you. Her long eyelashes seemed blackened, and in fact were. Her features were saved from elfin prettiness by the thickish shape of her parched lips. Her plain Irish nose was Van's in miniature. Her teeth were fairly white, but not very even (*A* 44-45).

In the first question Van asks himself, he attempts to pass his desire for Ada as an objective analysis of her physique. The blunder in the second question, which he modulates thanks to "would" divulges his strong erotic desire for her. When he uses the expression "one's gaze," he tries to detach himself from his desire and appear objective, but the synaesthesia which transforms the visual into the sensory as the gaze strokes the body, reveals his desire. With Van's gaze, we move erratically from finer details to greater details of the body and vice versa. While the description may seem chaotic, he follows the logic of the movement of her body. Not only does Van erotically describe her physical appearance, but he also aestheticizes her through colours: his eyes film a moving black and white picture, as though she were in a classical black and white movie. The body depicted is in no means perfect; her thick "parched lips" and her uneven teeth create a slightly offset image. However, the imperfections are presented as part of the charm when he says that "her features were saved from elfin prettiness." She is not presented as a passive object thanks to the reference to her eyes and her gaze. Yet, she is still the object of Van's desire as he treats her body as an object to be looked at. The remark on her skirt amplifies the erotic atmosphere of the passage, as it has a perfect balance between concealment and revelation. As Barthes argues:

> The most erotic part of the body is *where clothing is left ajar*, is it not? […] It is intermittence which is erotic, as psychoanalysis has aptly pointed out: the intermittence of the skin which twinkles between two pieces of clothing (the trousers and the jumper), between two borders (the gaping shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this twinkling which seduces, or better yet: the staging of an appearance-disappearance[39] (89).

Furthermore, what is excluded from these descriptions is what is frankly sexual (Shute 113). The sexual centre is merely displaced to another part of the body:

> The fragments are smaller, more specific, more scattered—and even less imbued with a recognizably sexual logic. Part anatomist, part artist, the male gaze roams seemingly at random from mouth to hair to scapulae to head to wrist to temple to coccyx. What is missing (again) is the body's sex—in this case, however, not absent but merely displaced. By a kind of metaphoric migration, the sex absent from the fragmented body recurs elsewhere in the image […] (118).

[39] « L'endroit le plus érotique du corps n'est-il pas *là où le vêtement bâille* ? […] c'est l'intermittence, comme l'a bien dit la psychanalyse, qui est érotique : celle de la peau qui scintille entre deux pièces (le pantalon et le tricot), entre deux bords (la chemise entrouverte, le gant et la manche) ; c'est ce scintillement même qui séduit, ou encore : la mise en scène d'une apparition-disparition. » (My translation)

The description of the veiled female body thus ties into the aesthetics of the writing of the texts: what is pleasurable in *Lolita* and *Ada* is the veiling of meaning and the importance of suggestion. Through the way Ada is described, the answer to Van's initial two questions becomes distinctly clear.

Lolita is reserved a similar description to Ada when Humbert sees her for the first time, in the sense that her body is dissected into little details[40]. However, the narrator's gaze and involvement in the scene are not hidden behind objectivity:

> It was the same child—the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair. A polka-dotted black kerchief tied around her chest hid from my aging ape eyes, but not from the gaze of young memory, the juvenile breasts I had fondled one immortal day. And, as if I were the fairy-tale nurse of some little princess (lost, kidnaped, discovered in gipsy rags through which her nakedness smiled at the king and his hounds), I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side. With awe and delight (the king crying for joy, the trumpets blaring, the nurse drunk) I saw again her lovely in-drawn abdomen where my southbound mouth had briefly paused; and those puerile hips on which I had kissed the crenulated imprint left by the band of her shorts—that last mad immortal day behind the "Roches Roses." The twenty-five years I had lived since then, tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished (*L* 39).

The vision of Lolita is tinted by memory, as Humbert reincarnates Annabel into her. Unlike Van's description of Ada, the logic of the direction of the gaze is much more apparent:

> Beginning at the shoulders and working downward from hair to back to breasts to abdomen to hips, the sequence imitates the "southbound" logic of sexual desire, increasing the verbal excitation ("the king crying for joy, the trumpets blaring") until both language and desire reach their climactic "vanishing point" (Shute 116).

The direction of Humbert's gaze therefore mimics the erotic and even sexual pleasure he is taking from the scene, whereas Van actively attempts to hide his pleasure. The narrator presents himself, without shame, as a *voyeur*, as clothes prove, yet again, to be ineffective hiding garments, which can be seen through the use of the words "kerchief," and "rags." Not only is Humbert's gaze invasive, but through his memories of Annabel, he partially consumes Lolita's body. While the time divide is marked by the alternation from the preterit to the pluperfect, the bodies and the past merge seamlessly together as the pronouns mix together, making the line between Annabel and Lolita blurry. Both of them are referenced to with the possessive

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[40] The fragmentation of Lolita's body is also mimetic of that of her identity: since Lolita's body is fragmented, her body cannot be seen as a whole. This is also the case of her identity, it cannot be whole, because of its fragmentation and multiplicity: "She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita" (*L* 9). The fact that she has multiple names, hence identities, makes her a fragmented being who is impossible to discern. Readers know next to nothing about the real Lolita, despite her overpowering presence through the narrator's obsession. If her identity were explicit, there would be no interest in reading and re-reading the novel; her mysteriousness draws readers in. The mystery surrounding her identity, this quest to see her as a whole, is an impossible goal to attain. It is nevertheless a seductive force.

determiner “her,” as opposed to “their,” which indicates that the two characters have become one. The importance of male gaze and voyeurism, implicit in *Ada* but not in *Lolita*, can be explained by the fact that the female body is an immature one: sexuality has not yet articulated itself in these bodies, and the latter are to be constructed as objects of desire by the male *voyeur* (112). Not only does the immature female body have to be viewed to be made into an object of desire, but the reader is invited to partake in the voyeuristic vision of the narrators. Through the lengthy and extremely visual descriptions of Lolita’s and Ada’s young bodies, the readers are invited to imagine them vividly. As Bouchet points out, this poses an aesthetic and ethical problem: “Because of this paradox of the double reading contract, *Lolita* forces ethical and aesthetic questions on the reader, as it compels us to take a stance and resist the ensnarement in Humbert’s wonderful prose, his witty jokes, and his perverse play with our voyeuristic impulses” (68). Readers thus have to fight the delicate position they have been put in when they are invited to be *voyeurs* and to partake in the erotic pleasure of the narrators.

B/ An Object of Art

The immature female body is not only transformed into an object of desire, as we have seen above, but into an object of art, which is to be viewed at great length; the prose used to describe their bodies lingers on every detail of their body. As Shute argues, the description of the female body is not neutral or innocent; it participates in prior artistic codes such as the nude, the portrait, the inventory, or the striptease (114). Both texts thus pertain to the long tradition in art in which the female body is used as a source for inspiration. It is elevated to a work of art to be admired, and out of which aesthetic pleasure is to be taken. The description of Ada cited above, thus uses the codes of silent black and white films, foreshadowing her career as an actress, to aestheticize her. On a larger scale, Van’s writing of the family chronicle is an attempt to transform her and their relationship into a work of art by cementing them into artistic tradition. Similarly, Humbert uses his artistic knowledge to turn Lolita into a work of art. Philipp Schweighauser employs the term “aestheticization” to describe this process (256). Indeed, Humbert’s goal is to aestheticize Lolita through his comparisons between her and other artistic fictional characters such as Edgar Allan Poe’s Annabel Lee and Prosper Mérimée’s Carmen (261). In addition to literary references, Humbert also cements her into pictorial tradition through a comparison between Lolita and a Botticelli painting: “I regretted keenly her mistake about my private aesthetics, for I simply love that tinge of Botticellian pink, that raw rose about the lips, those wet, matted eyelashes […]” (*L* 64-65). The fine details are yet again

emphasized, showing that the fragmentation of the body is clearly part of an artistic tradition. Turning Lolita into a work of art is a way to beautify her, to embellish her. Writing a whole tribute to Lolita is another way for Humbert to turn her into a work of art. Through this process, she is fixed in time, a time in which she was attractive and aesthetically pleasing, which thereby fulfils Humbert's fantasy as a paedophile for nymphets to never grow old. Turning Lolita's and Ada's bodies into objects of art is not to be dissociated from the description of their bodies: "The eroticism, which has been redefined by Humbert, is to be detached from the body to elevate it to the domain of art, whilst incessantly nourishing it with the representation of the body"[41] (Manolescu 58). The aestheticization of the female form thus finds its source from their bodies. Both female protagonists are cemented into the body of the text and are part of the erotic and aesthetic pleasure to be taken out of the texts themselves.

VI/ Seductive Texts

A/ Enchanting Hunters

The beauty of both texts is a seductive force meant to enthral and enchant readers. Humbert and Van, as I have shown in part two of this thesis, are skilled rhetoricians who master language. They thus know how to use it to their advantage to win over readers. Their profuse use of the substance of words helps beautify the text and encourages readers to take aesthetic pleasure out of the texts themselves. This capacity enables the narrators to embellish the situation and hide the suffering of Lolita and Lucette at their hands. Both of them attempt to conceal their involvement in these characters' plight by hiding behind the enchantment of the "love story," and aesthetically pleasing language. As Manolescu points out: "Any orator who is worthy of the name is an enchanter, and incidentally, *Lolita* finds its origins in the novella which *is* entitled *The Enchanter*, in which the enchanter is Humbert's ancestor"[42] (35). Humbert and Van are thus two enchanters who use aesthetically pleasing prose, and add a lyrical dimension to their narrative, which they are trying to pass as a love story. Boyd argues about *Ada*:

> But Nabokov does not point out the flaws in Van and Ada's conduct from the beginning. In telling their story, Van and Ada celebrate their love in scenes like the breakfast on the balcony whose charm few can resist. Nabokov lets this charm inveigle us into dismissing

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[41] « L'érotisme redéfini par Humbert se détache du corps pour s'élever vers le domaine de l'art, tout en se nourrissant sans cesse de la représentation du corps. » (My translation)

[42] « Tout orateur digne de ce nom est un enchanteur, et d'ailleurs la nouvelle qui est à l'origine de *Lolita* s'intitule précisément *The Enchanter*, où l'enchanteur est l'ancêtre de Humbert. » (My translation)

> Lucette, until it is too late, as no more than an amusing impediment to Van and Ada's resplendent love. He grants them such romantic verve, he makes us eager for their next radiant reunion, that we can easily overlook the way they behave toward others (554).

The theme of the love story in *Ada*, and to a lesser extent in *Lolita*, is used to dazzle and distract readers. Humbert over-emphasizes his love for Lolita, masking her disgust and his abuse of her, while Van and Ada are in a consensual and loving relationship, which partly conceals their treatment of their cousin, and the incestuous dimension of their relationship.

Furthermore, Daniel Thomières contends that *Lolita* is an invitation to reflect on power and seduction which is at its service, and not love, or passion. Readers are thus invited to think about the implication of reading a text written by a narrator who physically seduces Lolita, and a text which attempts to intellectually seduce them (84). The texts are taboo because they hold power over readers, who, if they let themselves be seduced by the prose, are put in an ethically challenging position. One element in which readers are seduced is when they use Humbert's nickname for Dolores Haze:

> There is a problem of denomination. The name of the young girl is Dolores Haze or – in an abridged form – Dolly. This name is used by her classmates. It is only the narrator who calls her Lolita. This means that, if we call her by that name, we become *ipso facto* accomplices with the character of Humbert Humbert[43] (85).

Lolita is the name through which the narrator claims her body and mind. By using this denomination for this little girl, the reader gives into this power dynamic in which Humbert comes out victorious. The very name shows Humbert's attempt to control her: the last syllable "ta" in the nickname was invented by the narrator to imprison the young girl through a dental stop (94). The very sonority of the name overpowers her. Readers are overpowered, on the other hand, by the lyrical introduction it is given by the narrator, as we saw in part two: the sonority of the name, which is to be relished, is meant to seduce readers. This name is incessantly used within the novel, and its seemingly insignificant nature leads readers to use the name as their main denomination for Dolores Haze.

On the other hand, Van's power over Lucette lies not in the act of denomination but through authorship. In the scene of her suicide, the narrator takes it upon himself to control and aestheticize her death through writing. As Chupin aptly points out, since Lucette does not survive, nor does she leave a note, the whole scene is invented by Van, who hides behind an omniscient mask (228). The style of the scene is mimetic of the way she is presented: just as

[43] « Il y a un problème de dénomination. Le nom de la jeune fille est Dolores Haze ou – sous une forme abrégée – Dolly. C'est le nom qu'utilisent ses camarades de classe. Il n'y a que le narrateur qui l'appelle Lolita. Cela signifie que, si nous parlons d'elle en la désignant du nom de Lolita, nous devenons *ipso facto* complices du personnage de Humbert Humbert. » (My translation)

Lucette is drugged up and her mind is disordered, the prose is hesitant and chaotic (224). While the breaks in narration betray the omniscient mask, they are voluntarily inserted to emphasize his difficulty in writing the scene (228). It is undeniable that he attempts to take control of the scene by inventing her last thoughts:

> Now I've lost my next note.
> Got it.
> The sky was also heartless and dark, and her body, her head, and particularly those damned thirsty trousers, felt clogged with Oceanus Nox, n, o, x. At every slap and splash of cold wild salt, she heaved with anise-flavored nausea and there was an increasing number, okay, or numbness in her neck and arms. As she began losing track of herself, she thought it proper to inform a series of receding Lucettes – telling them to pass it on and on in a trick-crystal regression – that what death amounted to was only a more complete assortment of the infinite fractions of solitude (*A* 387-388).

The passage is wrought with blunders, first with the loss of his notes and the confusion between "number" and "numbness." These errors are put in deliberately to show his dismay about his cousin's death, rather than showing his lack of mastery of language. By controlling Lucette's last thoughts through his narrational authority, Van mostly emphasizes his own emotional turmoil, masking that of his cousin, who was the one motivated enough to end her life. Her plight is even ridiculed as most of her actions are presented as preposterous: "But she had planned everything except that note, so she tore her blank life in two and disposed of the pieces in the W.C." (386). The fact that she did not plan a suicide note is shown as thoughtless, or even unintelligent. This is a recurrent representation of Lucette as an unintellectual character, who cannot be on the same level as her cousins, and thus cannot partake in their love story. As her life is compared to the blank sheet of paper, as seen through the use of the expression "blank life," the narrator both reveals his contempt of her suicide, but also of her life. It is almost as though the fact that she did not write, unlike him, a narrative before her death, made her life worthless. The use of the words "tear," and "dispose" further emphasize his disapproval of her actions. The fact that she throws the note in the toilet both foreshadows the method of her suicide, but also subtly compares her drowning to the flushing of a toilet, which accentuates Van's contempt of her choices. Therefore, the first quote, in which Van loses his notes can also be interpreted as lack of interest in Lucette's final dramatic gesture. His use of the casual expression "got it" underlines his boredom. By completely constructing Lucette's suicide, Van uses his rhetorical strength, hidden behind hesitancy, to retrieve a narrative for her death and make up for the absence of a suicide note. He also exercises control and power over Lucette's death while seducing the reader through a seemingly pathetic rendering of this episode in his life. Conversely, behind this mask lies an apathetic narrative which betrays Van's need for

literary control. The eloquent narrators of these two novels are in many ways enchanting hunters.

Not only is *Lolita* an enthralling text, it is also highly argumentative and attempts to be persuasive so as to intellectually seduce readers. While the novel is presented as a confession, the first chapter introduces the text as a defence to be used in court through the reference to a jury. This is the realistic motivation for the highly argumentative rhetoric he uses (Tamir-Ghez 23). The arguments that constitute his defence include:

> The sickness argument, the argument of childhood trauma (the Annabel episode), of an illustrious literary genealogy (Poe, Dante, Petrarch), of cultural relativism (some cultures accept the practice of sexual intercourse with children), of Humbert's status as an artist, and of Lolita's sexual precocity[44] (Manolescu 44).

It is through words such as "nympholepsy" or "pederosis" that Humbert claims that his perversion is a sickness. With this argument, he exonerates himself from blame, as it is implied that he cannot control his illness. In the same vein, his childhood trauma with Annabel ties into this sickness rhetoric through the argument of psychological disruption. The introductory pages go to great lengths to tie his condition to his experience with Annabel and the argument is used until he meets Lolita for the first time: the memory of Annabel at first attracts him to her. These arguments add a deterministic dimension to Humbert's paedophilia which he cannot fight or control and is an attempt to induce pity in the readers. The most prevalent argument, however, is that of his belonging to an artistic lineage. Humbert's claim of being an artistic figure grants him aesthetic and intellectual authority. As alluded to previously, Humbert considers himself to be an artist, and a poet. The fact that he considers himself to be a creature of great melancholy is a way for him to portray himself as a cursed artist (the figure of the *artiste maudit*), or even an eccentric artist; it is another way to attract a learned reader's sympathy and even complicity. Allusions to figures such as Poe suggest this inclination to a cursed artist, an artist that was widely misunderstood by his contemporaries. One of Humbert's justifications does involve an artistic lineage: "After all, Dante fell madly in love with his Beatrice when she was nine, a sparkling girleen, painted and lovely, and bejewelled, in a crimson frock, and this was in 1274, in Florence, at a private feast in the merry month of May" (*L* 19). This reference to Dante is a way for the narrator to point out the injustice of the period in which he lives and to prove that the disdain for nympholepsy is only arbitrary and conventional. Humbert is thus cursed because

[44] « L'argument de la maladie, l'argument du trauma d'enfance (l'épisode d'Annabel), l'argument d'une illustre généalogie littéraire (Poe, Dante, Pétrarque), l'argument du relativisme culturel (certaines cultures acceptent la pratique des relations sexuelles avec les enfants), l'argument de son statut d'artiste, l'argument de la sexualité précoce de Lolita. » (My translation)

he was not born in the right epoch, in the same way a cursed artist feels that he is out of place and unappreciated by his contemporaries. However, as Manolescu points out:

> The argument of the existence of an illustrious literary genealogy of “nympholepts” is at times fallacious. The passion Dante had for Beatrice, and the love Petrarch felt for Laura are given as examples, but Humbert fails to inform the reader that Dante was almost the same age as Beatrice in 1274 when the poet fell in love with her (they were nine and eight, respectively). Petrarch was twenty-three when he met Laura in 1327, but her age is unknown[45] (45).

The illustrations Humbert uses thus are to be fact-checked, and emphasize his unreliability. Humbert spins his rhetorical skill to persuade his readers. Nonetheless, all these arguments have the specific goal to create sympathy for Humbert, almost making readers complicit with the transgressor and aggressor if they let themselves be convinced by them.

To draw readers to Humbert’s side, various narrative strategies are put into action by Nabokov. Tamir-Ghez enumerates them as follows:

> *Choice of point of view* from which the narrative is told – Nabokov decided to unfold the story from the criminal's point of view. We can easily imagine how different the book would have been had it been narrated from the perspective of an uninvolved witness, or (so much the worse for Humbert) from Lolita's point of view […] *Choice of voice* - not only is the narrative told from Humbert's point of view, but he is the one who tells it, in his own words, using his own rhetoric […] Hence it is a personal (or “first-person”) narration, and as such one of the best devices to induce the reader's identification with the hero (or anti-hero, if you wish) […] *Choice of character* – in order further to secure our empathy for the criminal-speaker, Nabokov presents us with an intelligent, well-educated, middle-class man, with good manners and a sharp tongue – a man with whom the average reader can easily identify. Moreover, he is a sophisticated rhetorician, who is able to present his case in a most skilful manner […] *A decision to give Humbert full control over the discourse.* In many personal narratives the author introduces some independent speech-events in the form of letters, diaries, or reliable quotations of characters other than the main narrator. This enables the reader to check, verify and put the narrator's speech into perspective (22-23).

Readers are therefore solely confronted with Humbert’s point of view, which encourages their identification to that character. The fact that Lolita’s voice is silenced or controlled encourages readers to forget her side of the story and only to focus on Humbert’s feelings during the whole ordeal (24). Readers are incessantly connected to the narrator’s thoughts and are thus inclined to sympathize with him rather than his victim. Through this one-sided focalisation, Humbert can manipulate his readers: “Whether the Ramsdale doctor was a charlatan or a shrewd old rogue, does not, and did not, really matter. What mattered, was that I had been deceived” (*L*

[45] « L’argument de l’existence d’une illustre généalogie littéraire de ‘nympholeptes’ est parfois fallacieux. La passion de Dante pour Béatrice et l’amour de Pétrarque pour Laura sont donnés comme exemples, mais Humbert n’informe pas le lecteur du fait que Dante et Béatrice avaient presque le même âge en 1274 lorsque le poète est tombé amoureux d’elle (neuf et huit ans respectivement). Pétrarque était âgé de vingt-trois ans au moment de sa rencontre avec Laura en 1327, mais l’âge de celle-ci n’est en fait pas connu. » (My translation)

129). Readers are brought back to how Humbert perceives the situation: what he perceives as important when the drugs to sedate Lolita do not work and he cannot have his way with her without her consent is his feelings. Through this over-emphasis on his misfortune and his misery, Lolita's point of view and the main issue at hand are completely masked. The focus is displaced from the violation of her body without her consent to Humbert's distress. Lolita is not considered in the slightest: the grievance is to be taken up between him and the doctor. The qualification "really matter" implies that it does matter, but only slightly; thus, it does not completely deny the doctor's implication in Humbert's 'plight.' The use of both the present and the past in the first sentence emphasizes that this issue still affects him. The connector "and" also denies exclusion between the two and intimately connects past and present: Humbert's resentment towards the doctor can still be perceived despite his claim that it does not matter. The narrator presents himself as a victim of another man's deception while Lolita, the real victim, is completely ignored. Throughout the novel, Humbert's point of view is omnipresent, and we only get glimpses into Lolita's suffering[46].

Additionally, the narrator has a monopoly on the global discourse of the novel, and exercises control on the very few instances in which his voice may be challenged. Aside from the foreword and the afterword, the main narrative only has three instances where another character's narrative voice is represented, and each of them is corrupted by the narrator to various degrees. Two letters, written by Charlotte and Dolores respectively, are interrupted by the narrator's input and comments, which are signalled by brackets. The latter break the rhythm of the text, while corrupting it with Humbert's thoughts and editorial power. Charlotte's letter is the most telling when it comes to the narrator's corruption of other characters' voices. It is only after the letter that it is revealed to readers that it is not genuine:

> What I present here is what I remember of the letter, and what I remember of the letter I remember verbatim (including that awful French). It was at least twice longer. I have left out a lyrical passage which I more or less skipped at the time, concerning Lolita's brother who died at 2 when she was 4, and how much I would have liked him. Let me see what else can I say? Yes. There is just a chance that "the vortex of the toilet" (where the letter did go) is my own matter-of-fact contribution. She probably begged me to make a special fire to consume it (*L* 68-69).

[46] Many critics, among which Tamir-Ghez, have pointed out one of the most telling instances that hint at Lolita's suffering (25): "We had really seen nothing. 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—the moment I feigned sleep" (*L* 176). While most of the quote deals with the landscape, attributing odd adjectives to the description of a country, the last idea is poignant. This is one of the few instances in which Humbert shows Lolita's feelings about their relationship.

The fact that this announcement comes after the letter points towards Humbert's manipulative techniques: upon first reading, readers are tricked into believing the letter is Charlotte's writing, when it is actually a reconstruction of it. The first impression of the letter is thus completely erroneous and must be checked. Through his comments on Charlotte's letter, Humbert betrays his utter corruption of her text: with the repetition of "I remember," he displays his hesitation and contradicts his claim to have reproduced the letter exactly, which can be perceived through the use of the word "verbatim." When he presents his journal, Humbert asserts that he has perfect photographic memory, and, in the quote above, he attempts yet again to hide behind exactitude to manipulate his readers. Not only does he admit to censoring half of the letter, but he discloses that he is an inattentive reader, as can be seen in: "a lyrical passage which I more or less skipped at the time." This is in direct contrast with his claim to exactitude: one cannot be exact if one does not read fully and attentively. What Humbert skips is a traumatic event in Charlotte and Lolita's lives, which, yet again, minimizes suffering by reducing trauma to a seemingly trivial side comment. His boredom is displayed through the rhetorical question, and is remindful of Van's disinterest *vis-à-vis* Lucette. Finally, Humbert changes the style of the text through the change from burning the letter to flushing it down the toilet: of course, he claims there is only a slight chance that he modified the text, through the use of the expressions "just a chance" and "probably," but this is to be qualified considering all that has been deduced above. Between the image of the fire and the "vortex of the toilet," there is a shift from a lyrical and dramatic style to a derisive and farcical one, which is in accordance with Humbert's detached humour. All in all, Charlotte's letter and its style are ridiculed and corrupted by the narrator. While this is the most telling of Humbert's control on other characters' voices, the last letter of the novel is also interesting. The reading of the latter is slightly, or subtly directed: "when the other letter began talking to me in a small matter-of-fact voice" (266). Although the letter is not corrupted through brackets and is presented as a pure text, the introductory sentence influences the reading of the letter. As opposed to letting the letter's style speak for itself, the narrator feels the urge to comment on the following text. The letter's personification and the qualification "small" point towards Humbert's novelisation and fictionalisation of the letter; he is presenting it in a creative way as opposed to an objective way. Most of the letter is in fact written in a matter-of-fact style; however the last sentence strays from it slightly: "Write, please. I have gone through much sadness and hardship" (266). The sentence does go straight to the point, yet is not emotionless as would be implied by the word "matter-of-fact." Through the letter, Dolores's pain can be perceived and the letter quickly turns into a plea rather than an objective argument to obtain a loan. The narrator this time does not admit to his control; it is

only suggested. The letter comes at a moment in the narrative in which Humbert is trying to convince the reader that he regrets the suffering he has inflicted on Dolores. This can be seen as another strategy to win them over, by showing that he can display her voice without corruption. In this instance, the narrator's implication is much subtler and the manipulation much more insidious.

Not only does Humbert attempt to manipulate his readers through narrative control, he also tries to flatter and cajole them through apostrophes. In *Lolita*, there are two types of asides to a fictional audience: one is to a jury and the other is to a learned reader. Tamir-Ghez argues:

> [Humbert] thereby implies the co-existence of two different and inconsistent speech-situations: that of a defendant [sic] in court (who is also his own defense lawyer), with the jury as audience (Adl), and that of an author in prison, writing a manuscript to be published as a book and read by readers (Ad2). The real reader (us as readers-R) is encouraged to visualize at times the first situation, at other times the second, according to details mentioned by the speaker which imply the one or the other" (30).

In this sense, non-fictional readers are encouraged to carry out two different tasks: one is to judge and the other is to analyse, but also to draw entertainment out of the manuscript. These roles are meant to direct meaning, but, of course, real readers may and should emancipate themselves from these roles. Two different strategies are used by Humbert in these asides: to the jury, he attempts to defend himself and persuade them of his innocence. The goal of the apostrophe to the fictional reader is to flatter and cajole him, but also to instate complicity. "However, I shall not bore my learned reader with a detailed account of Lolita's presumptions" (*L* 133) is one of the many examples in which the reader is flattered to mask Humbert's treatment of Dolores. The very fact that the fictional reader is often described as "learned" is a way to compliment him. Tamir-Ghez points out that Humbert's strategy towards his second addressee is to address him as a friend and equal. In fact, his tone even gets "warmer and warmer" towards that particular addressee, thus creating familiarity and intimacy (32). To Humbert, only the learned reader can really understand his plight and his curse. In the apostrophe "Reader! *Bruder*!" (*L* 262), the narrator is emphasizing the complicity he wants to achieve with his implied reader. As Alfred Appel points out in the annotations, this is a direct reference to the poem "Au Lecteur" by Charles Baudelaire in which it is said: "—Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère!" Appel translates it thus: "Hypocrite reader – my fellow man – my brother" (436). With the translation of "semblable" into "fellow man," the idea of similarity is lost. This reference to similarity reinforces the closeness of kinship the line is trying to instate. Through this reference, Humbert is creating complicity with the reader with the idea of family ties and similarity. Furthermore, the narrator paints a specific picture of his implied

reader, excluding those who do not resemble the bald man he has in mind, while creating stronger ties with those who do. Some learned real readers may recognize themselves in the picture and either find the image amusing and be seduced by laughter or reject the implication of the resemblance as it implies they take on a taboo position. As Suzanne Fraysse argues: "How, for that matter, can an annotator really resist the seduction of the narrator who happens to be, like him, a specialist in literature, and who incarnates the elitist values he may also share"[47] (5). Literary critics and annotators could thus be inclined to relate to the narrator thanks to the resemblance they share with his fictional reader and the narrator himself. In this sense, the narrator's implied reader correlates with a select number of readers, and more to the point to readers who have intellectual authority and can in their turn persuade. It is in this way that Humbert, and behind him, Nabokov attempt to seduce his implied readers intellectually through the profuse use of flattering apostrophes.

Some academic critics have been partly or wholly seduced by Humbert's arguments and rhetoric. The argument that critics adhere to the most is the fact that Lolita is a promiscuous child who seduces Humbert and is in no way innocent. Thus, Couturier writes: "Lolita is a young American flirt who flaunts countless erotic signs in an attempt to make herself desirable […]" (5). What he fails to point out is how Humbert constructs this image of Lolita as a justification for the violation of her body. Couturier is not the only one to have been convinced by the narrator's argument; Lionel Trilling argued in 1958:

> Humbert is perfectly willing to say that he is a monster: no doubt he is, but we find ourselves less and less eager to say so. Perhaps his depravity is the easier to accept when we learn that he deals with a Lolita who is not innocent, and who seems to have very few emotions to be violated; and I suppose we naturally incline to be lenient towards a rapist – legally and by intention H.H. is that – who eventually feels a deathless devotion to his victim! (Clegg 20).

Not only is he persuaded by the argument that Lolita is not innocent, but by Humbert's claim that he is in love with her and feels extreme regret about his actions against her. The fact that he believes that there are few emotions in Lolita to violate also shows he was enthralled by the omnipresence of Humbert's feelings, and of his narrative voice. According to Clegg, the line of academic commentary which argues that Lolita seduces her step-father continued into the 1960s and 1970s (57). One of *Lolita*'s annotators, Alfred Appel also contended that Humbert is captive of Lolita who is a victim of "a child-centred culture of mass consumption" (58). This kind of interpretation of the novel has also made its way to popular culture, influenced by

[47] « Comment d'ailleurs un annotateur pourrait-il vraiment résister à la séduction d'un narrateur qui se trouve être, comme lui, spécialiste de littérature, et qui incarne des valeurs élitistes qu'il a des chances de partager ? » (My translation)

reviews, covers, and advertisement (Pifer 2003 84). Humbert's highly argumentative piece, though flawed, has the ability to persuade. It is the very fact that he attempts to mask his full implication in his victim's plight that leads to such interpretations of the novel.

B/ Embellishment through Change of Imagery

By using euphemistic metaphors, certain transgressive scenes are embellished by masking the most negative aspect of the taboo. As we have seen previously, Humbert uses euphemisms for paedophilia by using words such as "nympholepsy" to aestheticize his immorality. Thus, we are taken away from the crude reality, and invited to behold paedophilia in a mythical and lyrical light. Euphemistic processes often beautify what they are trying to mask:

> [I]t must not be forgotten that, together with these two pragmatic-discursive functions, and sometimes combined with both of them, the function that stands out above all is that of emphasizing or enhancing expressively a certain reality, considered socially unacceptable, with the aim of giving it prestige. […] and in which case the softening or attenuating effect characteristic of the euphemistic process combines with, or rather, is intensified by, the expressive emphasis of these corresponding creative formulae (Gomez, 53).

Not only does Humbert want to embellish his predilection, but he wants to give it prestige by assimilating it to a grand mythical lineage. In the scene in the Enchanted Hunters motel, Humbert hesitates before sexually assaulting Lolita: during the first half of the scene, Humbert's intention is to perform sexual acts on Lolita while she is unconscious, which is an unambiguous definition of rape. The reality of the scene, in this sense, is horrific; however the narrator presents it in an embellished way through the euphemistic metaphor RAPE IS A JOURNEY by suffusing the passage with references to travel and movement:

> She was again fast asleep, my nymphet, but still I did not dare to launch upon my enchanted voyage. *La Petite Dormeuse ou l'Amant Ridicule*. Tomorrow I would stuff her with those earlier pills that had so thoroughly numbed her mummy. […] Should I wait a solid hour and then creep up again? (*L* 129).

The crux of the metaphor lies in the expression "to launch upon my enchanted voyage": not only is the setting displaced, but it is embellished by the word "enchanted" which connotes wonder and magic. The whole scene is assimilated to a sea voyage, in which the enchanted hunter gets lost and tribulates. The verb "creep up" is characteristic of the scene: the narrated Humbert's movements are shown as slow and hesitant, and mark the assimilation between attempted rape and movement. Through the invention of the book title, the narrator both aestheticizes the scene and makes a self-deprecating joke to diffuse the seriousness of the situation by emphasizing its absurdity. With the use of the question, the narrator displays his

hesitancy, but it is only triggered by the fact that the pills did not work according to his plan: the modal "would" denotes his determination to sedate Lolita the following day. His uncertainty is also displayed in the slowness of his movements and the languor of the scene in general. The narrator also uses intertextuality to aestheticize the scene further by making subtle references to the *Alice* books by Lewis Carroll. Through these references, he assimilates and covers the whole scene with the ideas of the dream, wonder, and enchantment, which emphasize the lyrical aspect of his journey. The embellishment of his immoral actions through this euphemistic metaphor is a deliberate attempt to exonerate himself:

> If I dwell, at some length on the tremors and gropings of that distant night, it is because I insist on proving I am not, and never was, and never could have been, a brutal scoundrel. The gentle and dreamy regions through which I crept were the patrimonies of poets—*not* crime's prowling ground. Had I reached my goal, my ecstasy would have been all softness, a case of internal combustion of which she would hardly have felt the heat, even if she were wide awake. But I still hoped she might gradually be engulfed in a completeness of stupor that would allow me to taste more than a glimmer of her (131-132).

Slowness is emphasized through the word "dwell" but also through the lengthy and sinuous style of the passage. The bed is transformed into "gentle and dreamy regions," which insists on a grander scale created thanks to language. Through lyricism, art, and beauty, Humbert thus attempts to prove that he is incapable of immorality. For him, being an artist means you are incapable of crime. He utterly denies that he is a "brutal scoundrel" by negating the possibility in three temporalities: the present, the past, and the conditional, that is, the imagination. This is of course inconsistent with the statement in the incipit of the novel "you can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style" (9) and his actions, as he does perform criminal deeds. Within the passage he contradicts himself: he denies that he was "prowling," that is hunting for prey, but, in the next sentence, the mention of a "goal" divulges the fact that he is scouring in search of something. The failure of his hunt lies in the fact that he did not weaken his prey enough, through "stupor." The use of the verb "creep," which was used earlier in the passage, denotes stealth, which is an ideal characteristic for a hunter to have. Two distinct images are created in this passage: that of the enchanting poetical region and that of the hunting ground; we are thus far removed from the action through a lyrical veil. The first image, on which the narrator insists, embellishes the scene, while the second, which is completely denied but still prevalent, metaphorically enhances the immorality of the scene. If the first image is to be taken on, the taboo and transgressive attempted rape scene is in fact beautified. This embellished representation can be considered taboo, as it depicts an immoral act in a positive way, and the narrator clearly does this in an attempt to exonerate himself. It is thus thrust upon the attentive reader to avoid being ensnared by the embellished imagery and style of the prose.

C/ The Pleasure of the Text

Through the aesthetics of the veil and the emphasis that is put on language and its substance, the text becomes the focal point of the erotic and aesthetic pleasure. The text, in this sense, is given an almost physical form which has to be read with the body to be fully appreciated. Just as the physical covers of the book are meant to attract readers, the physical substance of words is to be relished by them. Raguet-Bouvart argues that in *Lolita*, but this can also be extended to *Ada*, there is an interrelation between the textual, the sensual, and the sexual (2000 93). Erotic scenes are reinforced by linguistic substance:

> Another time, in the bay of the library, on a thundery evening (a few hours before the barn burned), a succession of Lucette's blocks formed an amusing VANIADA, and from this she extracted the very piece of furniture she was in the act of referring to in a peevish little voice: "But I, too, perhaps, would like to sit on the divan" (*A* 172).

The passage refers us back to the scene which the narrator and the protagonists call the episode of the Burning Barn, and in which Van and Ada first make love. It is through the linguistic game of scrabble that one of the most erotic parts of the book is linked to the protagonists linguistically. The very name of the episode and its reference in the passage is an alliteration, as the two words "barn" and "burn" are the same, save for the vowel. This is another little detail readers are invited to discern and to relish. "Vaniada," which merges the names Van and Ada together, links linguistic blending to sexual merging, which explains the narrator's use of the word "amusing" to qualify the anagram. The last word, "divan" is a partial anagram of "vaniada," and is the piece of furniture on which the two lovers make love, further linking the textual, with the sensual and the sexual. The erotic and the linguistic are intrinsically linked in the novel. Couturier refers to this kind of writing as poerotic style, in which readers find it difficult to dissociate their aesthetic from their erotic pleasure (6). The uncovering of these linguistic links is supposed to induce intellectual pleasure in readers. Not only that, but the readers in both novels are sought out, and are reminded that they have bodies and are reading with them[48]. In this vein, Humbert writes: "I cannot tell my learned reader (whose eyebrows, I suspect, have by now traveled all the way to the back of his bald head), I cannot tell him how the knowledge came to me" (*L* 48). This apostrophe to the reader comes at a time when Humbert is taking erotic pleasure out of Lolita delivering a tray of food to him. To call the fictional reader out at this moment is to acknowledge his presence as a *voyeur*:

> The bald and learned reader beholds this sight with indiscretion and reacts to it with a physical reading. […] Reading *Lolita* appears to be a disturbing and risky journey for the

[48] It is important to remember that the body and writing are intrinsically linked (Barthes 64). This was mentioned in the second part of this thesis.

> reader, who can no longer find his bearings and whose body decomposes itself. […] We have here a peculiar use of the verb "to travel," which indicates a participation of the body to the reading; a transformation of the body through reading. The text not only talks about the body, but it seeks out the body of the *voyeur*, who is bothered at the same time by desire[49] (Manolescu 67).

The fictional reader is invited to read the text with the body at the same time as Humbert is taking erotic pleasure out of a non-erotic moment. Similarly, in *Ada*, there is a playful jab at the fictional reader: "For the sake of the scholars who will read *this* forbidden memoir with a secret tingle (they are human)" (*A* 168). Yet again, Van's implied readers are scholars, but this time they are not defined by a gender or a particular physique. Not only are his implied readers reminded that they have a body which can experience erotic pleasure, and is encouraged to do so, but it is actively through transgression that the pleasure is to be taken: this can be perceived through the use of the words "forbidden" and "secret." While these apostrophes are only directed at the fictional reader, the non-fictional readers are invited to take aesthetic and erotic pleasure out of the sounds and substance of words. As Fraysse points out:

> Naiman is undoubtedly right to suggest that such a reluctance to study the obscene play on words in Nabokov's fiction is due to an embarrassment towards the novel's sexual theme and to the annotators' reluctance to admit that they are not solely pure minds, but they also have a body […]. This body barely appears in the annotators' notes, except in those of Appel, in which it is possible to present oneself as a young married bearded scholar, who is the father of 7-year-old Karen, has friendly ties with Nabokov, and dares to express his point of view freely despite the paradoxical order made to the annotators to be quiet[50] (4).

Thus, analysing the play on words which are linked to the erotic and sexual themes of the novels is avoided because of the taboo status of these themes. Reminding readers that they are not solely comprised of a mind and that they also have a body puts them in an awkward position in which the very act of reading is taboo. The text itself becomes taboo in two ways during this process: on the one hand, readers are invited to take aesthetic and almost erotic pleasure out of the transgression, and on the other hand, the text reminds them that they have a body.

It is not only the use of erotic play on words but also the mixture of various languages that invite the reader to take aesthetic pleasure out of the text. As has been pointed out before,

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[49] « Le lecteur savant et chauve assiste avec indiscrétion à ce spectacle et y réagit avec sa lecture corporelle à lui. […] La lecture de *Lolita* apparaît ainsi comme un voyage dérangeant, risqué, du lecteur, qui ne retrouve plus ses repères et dont le corps se décompose. […] Nous avons là un emploi inattendu du verbe 'to travel,' qui indique une participation du corps à la lecture, une mutation du corps à travers la lecture. Le texte non seulement parle de corps, il sollicite également le corps voyeur, contrarié en même temps par le désir. » (My translation)

[50] « Naiman a sans doute raison de suggérer qu'une telle réticence à traiter des jeux de mots obscènes chez Nabokov est due à une gêne vis-à-vis du thème sexuel du roman ainsi qu'à une réticence des annotateurs à admettre qu'ils ne sont pas de purs esprits, mais qu'ils ont aussi un corps […]. Ce corps n'apparaît en effet guère chez les annotateurs, sauf chez Appel, qu'il est possible de se représenter en jeune universitaire barbu, marié, père d'une petite Karen de 7 ans, cultivant des relations d'amitié avec les Nabokov et osant exprimer librement son point de vue malgré l'injonction à se taire paradoxalement faite à l'annotateur. » (My translation)

the mixture of languages creates a writing of desire through the veiling of meaning (Loison-Charles 2016 193-194). Barthes makes a distinction between the pleasurable text and the intensely pleasurable text[51]:

> The pleasurable text is the one that satisfies, fills one with euphoria; it lays its foundations in culture and does not sever its links to it. It is tied to the *comfortable* practice of reading. The intensely pleasurable text is that of loss; it unsettles (almost creating a sense of uneasiness), shakes the historical, cultural, and psychological foundations of the reader, the consistency of their tastes, of their values, and of their memories. It rattles their relationship with language[52] (92).

In this sense, Nabokov creates intensely pleasurable texts by unsettling the monoglot reader's linguistic and cultural foundations. The monoglot reader is confronted to a loss and shortage of meaning which creates a desire to achieve said meaning. The foreign words in his texts corrupt and assault the English language, just as the characters assault the physical integrity of others and the morality of their readers (Loison-Charles 2016 194). They transgress the rules of language and play the very linguistic fibre of the texts as taboo. Loison-Charles argues that the very language of the texts is incestuous:

> However, it seems more appropriate to restrict sexual perversion to the image of incest: on the one hand, corrupting the *mother* tongue with a foreign language recalls the familial image, especially for bilinguals who have two mother tongues. On the other hand, two languages have coexisted since childhood for a bilingual child, like a brother and sister living close by, or even like two twin or Siamese languages, for the very reason that they fuse together. The incestuous language mixes and hybridises what should never come into contact: the interdiction of incest is absolute[53] (197).

Not only are the rules of language infringed, but aesthetic and intellectual pleasure is to be taken out of this linguistic transgression. In *Ada*, certain passages invite the reader to recognise literary references in different languages:

> "She also knows my revised monologue of his mad king," said Ada:
> Ce beau jardin fleurit en mai,
>   Mais en hiver

[51] "Texte de plaisir" and "Texte de jouissance": The word "jouissance" posed a translation problem. In French, *jouissance*'s meaning is twofold: it denotes both intellectual pleasure, and sexual pleasure. There does not exist one word in English that can denote this meaning, so I have chosen to qualify the word "pleasurable" with "intensely" as opposed to using the word "enjoyment" which is not strong enough.

[52] « Texte de plaisir : celui qui contente, emplit, donne de l'euphorie ; celui qui vient de la culture, ne rompt pas avec elle, est lié à une pratique *confortable* de la lecture. Texte de jouissance : celui qui met en état de perte, celui qui déconforte (peut-être jusqu'à un certain ennui), fait vaciller les assises historiques, culturelles, psychologiques, du lecteur, la consistance de ses goûts, de ses valeurs et de ses souvenirs, met en crise son rapport au langage. » (My translation)

[53] « Cependant, il semble plus approprié de restreindre la perversion sexuelle à l'image de l'inceste : d'une part, le fait de corrompre sa langue *maternelle* par une langue étrangère évoque l'image familiale, notamment dans le cas des bilingues qui ont deux langues maternelles ; d'autre part, les deux langues ont coexisté depuis l'enfance dans le bilingue comme deux frère et sœur vivant à proximité, voire comme des langues jumelles ou siamoises car fusionnelles. La langue incestueuse mélange et hybride ce qui ne devrait jamais entrer en contact : l'interdit de l'inceste est absolu » (My translation)

Jamais, jamais, jamais, jamais, jamais
N'est vert, n'est vert, n'est vert, n'est vert, n'est vert (*A* 69).

To be recognized in the French poem is a striking visual and auditive reference to a famous line from Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The substance of the words in Ada's rendition of the line echo with each other: "mai" and "jamais," and "hiver" and "n'est vert." The latter is also a humorous jab at a French pronunciation of the English word "never," intrinsically linking and even merging both languages together through sound. For an English speaker with no knowledge of French, the last line is the most telling reference: if one pronounces "n'est vert" in English, it still sounds like "never." Ada uses *King Lear* as a source for parody for the sake of a creative game which mainly focuses on the sonority and physicality of words. In this sense, it is mostly a parody of the style rather than the content of the line:

Lear: And my poor fool is hanged! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never![54]

Lear's despair at finding his daughter Cordelia dead is reflected in the style of the passage: the spondee in "no, no, no, life!" in which every single syllable is stressed gives a powerful emphasis on the negation of life. The words "no," and "life" are echoed throughout the passage through repetition, which suffuses the passage with death. The last line is a trochaic pentameter, which reverses the usual iambic pentameter and emphasizes both the character's complete loss of hope and grief, and the unsettling dimension of death. Both the content and the style denote the climactic tragic moment that characterizes the line. In its parody, the stylistic effort is transferred to the seemingly frivolous subject matter of the seasons. The passage alternates between spring, symbol of life and rebirth to winter, symbol of death and decay. While Lear's line over-emphasizes mortality, Nabokov's poem is much more optimistic through the use of oral humour and the symbol of spring. What may seem as a complete mockery of the content and impact of Lear's line is in fact an extension of its themes to rebirth, as seasons usually follow a circle of death and renewal. The French language is used as a plane for creation, as the semantic equivalent of never in French – jamais – is used as a sonorous source for the theme of the poem. The English "never" on the other hand is used as a semantic source to play with pronunciation. Both languages completely intertwine and cannot be separated in the full comprehension of this poem. Readers are invited to take intellectual pleasure in the recognition

[54] SHAKESPEARE, William, G.I. Duthie (ed.) and J. Dover Wilson (ed.). *King Lear* (1608). London: Cambridge UP, pp. 120-121 (1960).

of the learned reference, and aesthetic pleasure in the relishing of the sounds in both the French and English language. In this sense, Barthes's statement about Babel is quite fitting here:

> Yet an anti-hero exists: it is the reader of the text, while he is taking pleasure out of it. The old Biblical myth is thus reversed; the confusion of languages is no longer a punishment. The subject accesses intense pleasure through the cohabitation of languages, *which work side by side*: the pleasurable text is to be found in a joyful Babel[55] (85).

Readers thus take an active role in the enjoyment of the text through the recognition of references and the merging of languages. The pleasure to be taken out of the text is not only out of frustration due to a lack of meaning, but through unveiling of the substance of the three languages Nabokov mastered.

Furthermore, pleasure is taken from the act of writing itself. Both *Lolita* and *Ada* are manuscripts which reflect on their fictional status. They are both metafictional texts:

> *Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text (Waugh 2).

What we behold whilst reading both these texts is not only a questioning of fiction and reality, but also the indulgence in the creation of fiction. Barthes uses the word *ductus* to define this process; it is the act of producing a text, to vividly show the insertion of the body into the text (67). As Raguet-Bouvart points out: "even after the death of the narrator – *Ada* just like *Lolita*, is only published after his death – the love story between Van and Ada outlives him: [heaven] has stayed infinite thanks to the timelessness of art, born out of the consciousness of the manipulator-player"[56] (2000 102). It is as though both narrators fuse with the text, dying into it. Readers are invited to relish the production of writing with the narrators as *voyeurs*. While the writing of *Lolita* is a solitary experience reflecting the narrator's obsessional love, that of *Ada* is a collaborative process, translating their love within the writing of the text. If we compare two similar yet eminently dissimilar passages of these two novels, this should become apparent:

> This daily headache in the opaque air of this tombal jail is disturbing, but I must persevere. Have written more than a hundred pages and not got anywhere yet. My calendar is getting confused. That must have been around August 15, 1947. Don't think I can go on. Heart, head—everything. Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita. Repeat till the page is full, printer (*L* 109).

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[55] « Or ce contre-héros existe : c'est le lecteur de texte, dans le moment où il prend son plaisir. Alors le vieux mythe biblique se retourne, la confusion des langues n'est plus une punition, le sujet accède à la jouissance par la cohabitation des langages, *qui travaillent côte à côte* : le texte de plaisir, c'est Babel heureuse. » (My translation)

[56] « Même après la mort du scripteur – *Ada*, comme *Lolita*, n'est publié qu'après sa mort – l'histoire d'amour de Van et d'Ada lui survit : [le paradis] est resté éternel grâce aux vertus intemporelles de l'art né de la conscience qu'en a eue le manipulateur-joueur. » (My translation)

For Humbert, the writing process is becoming a chore; this can be seen in the ellipsis of the subject “I” before “have written.” This also emphasizes the unfinished nature of his manuscript. The end of the passage attempts to reclaim the pleasure of writing through repetition of sounds and words. Lolita’s name is used as almost an incantation to regain motivation to write again. It is also a throwback to the incipit in which her name is relished for its sonority. The instructions to an unnamed and impersonal printer emphasize the fact that the narrator is alone in his writing experience. This is in direct contrast with this passage in *Ada*:

> Hammock and honey: eighty years later he could still recall with the young pang of the original joy his falling in love with Ada. Memory met imagination halfway in the hammock of his boyhood’s dawns. At ninety-four he liked retracing that first amorous summer not as a dream he had just had but as a recapitulation of consciousness to sustain him in the small gray hours between shallow sleep and the first pill of the day. Take over, dear, for a little while. Pill, pillow, billow, billions. Go on from here, Ada, please.
> (She). Billions of boys. Take one fairly decent decade. A billion of Bills, good, gifted, tender and passionate, not only spiritually but physically well-meaning Billions, have bared the jillions of their no less tender and brilliant Jills during that decade at stations and under conditions that have to be controlled and specified by the worker, lest the entire report be choked up by the weeds of statistics and waist-high generalizations (*A* 52-53).

Both passages point out the writing process, and both narrators are shown to be getting tired of the effort. However, in *Ada*, this tiredness is the result of bliss; Van seems to be getting tired out of contentment, after having sufficiently played with the substance of language. The passage is sprinkled with sonorous association, with, for instance, the coupling of “hammock” and “honey,” or the tripling of “halfway,” “hammock” and “boyhood,” and the alliteration of the letter ‘m’ in “memory,” “met,” “imagination,” and “hammock.” The play on words comes to a climax towards the middle of the passage as Ada is invited to take over from Van: words are associated with no semantic connection in “pill, pillow, billow, billions,” and “billions of boys.” Ada takes up the initial alliterations but as her part continues, she invents new links to show her verbal virtuosity. Not only are readers invited to take pleasure in the play on words, but also to witness the merging of two writing bodies, as though the two narrators were sharing an embrace. This alternation between narrative voices is used again during the two protagonists’ first sexual encounter as a mimetic representation of the merging of their two bodies. *Ada* thus takes the corporal aspect of the reflexion on writing to a greater extent than *Lolita*. Through this emphasis on the process of writing, the content is masked as we are invited to enjoy the substance of words and the physicality of the text. There is an appeal, in this sense, to suspend moral judgement so as to enjoy the text aesthetically, implying that immorality and beauty are incompatible.

V/ The Tension between Ethics and Aesthetics

A/ An Unresolvable Tension?

Traditionally, the role of art is to depict what is morally good as beautiful, and what is wrong as ugly. In this sense, art is supposed to have a moral dimension: "Nursery rhymes, stories, plays, verbal and filmic narratives perused from early childhood have been supposed to ensure, more or less successfully, the formation of the variously conceived good person" (Eskin 574). Through the depiction of actions that are morally right as beautiful, a lesson is to be taken out of narratives and other art forms. According to this tradition, it is acceptable to depict immorality, on the condition it is represented as completely abject. Michael Eskin argues, for instance, that literature is at times more effective than ethics in teaching moral and ethical precepts (573-574). Ever since ancient Greece, ethics became a philosophical discipline in Western intellectual culture and has been deeply linked to literature, namely poetry (575). He defines ethics thus:

> Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, and Aeschylos, to name only a few, constituted a prephilosophical moral tradition which presumably provided Socrates, Plato, and their successors with the basic themes (and their paradigmatic artistic treatment) of what we have come to call ethics: how we ought to live and act so as to live a (variously conceived) good life (575).

Thoughts about ethics and its relation to literature are deeply cemented in Western intellectual considerations. While philosophical meditations have much debated on the link between ethics and literature, practice over the centuries has been in favour of a didactic and moral dimension to art (576). *Lolita* and *Ada* completely break from this tradition; what is considered immoral subjects, paedophilia and incest, is depicted in beautiful and even seductive prose. Even *Lolita*'s diegesis contains a direct transgression of this tradition, by presenting an immoral character as good-looking:

> Let me repeat with quiet force: I was, and still am, despite *mes malheurs*, an exceptionally handsome male; slow moving, tall, with soft dark hair and a gloomy but all the more seductive cast of demeanor. Exceptional virility often reflects in the subject's displayable features a sullen and congested something that pertains to what he has to conceal. And this was my case (*L* 25).

Humbert emphatically claims he is attractive: the insistence on the past and the present stipulates that his immoral actions did not change his physique, did not make him ugly, which often happens in didactic fiction. The key word of the passage is "conceal": beauty not only hides immorality, but is seductive, attracts people. His seductive body attracts Lolita within the diegesis, while the seductive text, or the body of the text, draws readers in. Aesthetically pleasing language, and beautiful bodies are no longer elements to be trusted; beauty in this

sense becomes immoral, taboo[57]. The fact that immoral actions are represented is not the main ethical issue; it is how they are represented that is at stake, and arguably makes the texts taboo.

Through Nabokov's claim that he and his novels are outside this tradition, a tension between aesthetics and ethics is created. Some of his statements seem to imply a complete rejection of morality in favour of aesthetic pleasure:

> 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, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm (*L* 313-314).

Nabokov thus asserts that his novel *Lolita*, and we can also extend this to *Ada*, do not have a moral lesson, thus thwarting the ethical tradition of literature. What is the most important is the aesthetic pleasure which is to be taken out of the style of the text. However, his definition of art contradicts his statements: the parentheses presuppose the words that are within them are characteristic of the word defined. Art is equated unequivocally to "curiosity," "tenderness," "kindness," and "ecstasy." While the latter is in accordance with the aesthetic pleasure to be taken out of the text, the other three all seem to be virtuous traits for art to have. Nabokov's idea of aesthet(h)ics is therefore much more complicated than simple rejection of morality, as art *contains* morality. The fact that the texts are aesthetically pleasing while presenting readers with ethical dilemmas, such as Lolita's and Lucette's suffering, makes the aesthetic and ethical acceptance of the texts much more challenging to achieve. The goal of the texts becomes undiscernible, unattainable:

> And yet, despite all this activity and adulation, the book [*Lolita*] has remained resolutely enigmatic. And what has remained enigmatic in it is nothing less than its nature: whether it is a sterile exercise of linguistic virtuosity or a deeply human account of love and loss, whether it is an incitement to vice or an encouragement to virtue, whether it is art for nothing but its own sake, or a work of rare moral force (De La Durantaye 2007 4).

In this quote, ethics and aesthetics oppose each other, implying that they are completely incompatible: one either has to have an aesthetic, or an ethical reading of the text. Some critics do advocate a temporary suspension of one's moral judgement to fully enjoy the style and

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[57] Nabokov is not the first author to jar the tradition that beauty must be morally right: novels such as *Wuthering Heigths* by Emily Brontë break away from this black and white depiction of morality by presenting a villainous character, Heathcliff, as a handsome and seductive man. However, narratives such as *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, or *Richard III* by William Shakespeare almost equate ugliness and deformity with a pre-determination to be evil. Victor Frankenstein's monster is presented as a hideous creature, and although he is completely innocent at the beginning of the novel, society's rejection of him because of his appearance pushes him towards immorality. In *Richard III*, Richard's first monologue implies that because of his deformity, the anti-hero is *determined*, as in predestined, to be a villain. While *Lolita* and *Wuthering Heights* challenge this simplistic, and admittedly childish outlook on villainy, it is undeniable that it is deeply cemented in our culture.

lyrical dimension of *Lolita*: these include Maurice Couturier, Lionel Trilling, and Stegner (Clegg 44; Couturier 2). However, this is only temporary, and is not a sufficient resolution of the tension between the two entities. An answer partly lies in the disinterested judgement of art forms:

> This is a categorical difficulty and in its shadow we would do well to return to the question of judgment. Kant may have signalled out "thinking from the standpoint of another" as the maxim of judgment – but it was not his maxim of aesthetic judgment. As he carefully noted, art was to be seen from another standpoint: it should be experienced and judged in purely "*disinterested*" fashion, and this most fundamental article of aesthetic belief has held sway ever since. […] As Kant's definition makes clear, what the modern spectator is expected to be is, before all else, *disinterested*. When this is not the case, the faculty of aesthetic judgment – or taste – is impaired. […] To be properly appreciated and to be properly judged in the dawning age of taste and aesthetics, art had to be seen with an eye discerning because it remained cold, and with a heart wise because kept within the bounds of reason. […] Nabokov's place in this tradition becomes clear when we look to his reading practices. In his lectures he tells his students to shun identification with fictional characters – the "worst" type of reading he knows of – and asks them instead to rely upon "impersonal imagination" (LL, 4). And what is that but *disinterested judgment*? (De La Durantaye 2007 9-10).

In order to be aesthetically and ethically appreciated, Nabokov's novels have to be read with detachment, with an analytical eye. Identifying personally with characters, although the point of view of both texts invite the reader to, is erroneous. The fact that the two narrators of his novels are charming and eloquent albeit immoral characters is a deliberate trap which readers are invited to fight against. Not only that, but art is not to be regarded as having a goal or a moral lesson, but as a means in and of itself.

While Nabokov's idea of aesthet(h)ics most resembles that of the "art for art's sake" movement, he completely rejects this slogan, making his opinions on the matter all the more difficult to comprehend. The author asserts in a contradictory fashion:

> A work of art has no importance whatever to society. It is only important to the individual, and only the individual reader is important to me. I don't give a damn for the group, the community, the masses, and so forth. Although I do not care for the slogan "art for art's sake" – because unfortunately such promoters of it as, for instance Oscar Wilde and various dainty poets, were in reality rank moralists and didacticists – there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art (*SO* 33).

As we have discussed previously, it is not unlike Nabokov to play with his interviewers and readers, and to muddle up his opinions to create a challenging game. In this quote, he both enunciates the precepts of "art for art's sake" while rejecting the slogan. However, this may be more straight-forward than it appears: in the first part he completely rejects the group, the masses. The movement "art for art's sake" comprises a group of artists that come under a rallying cry. It is thus not the ideas of the movement that he rejects, but the very fact that it comprises a group (De la Durantaye 2007 35). Indeed, the slogan is intrinsically linked to a

historical movement: De la Durantaye traces back its origins by enumerating the alleged creators of the movement: Hyppolyte Fortoul wrote the phrase in a letter in 1833, and Victor Cousin used it in his *Cours de Philosophie* in 1818, which was published in 1836 (33-34). However, he argues that the expression actually originated in Germany in 1804: while Benjamin Constant travelled there, he was inspired by Goethe, Wieland, Schiller, and Kant (34). Nabokov's second objection to this expression resides in the use of the word "unfortunately" and what follows: while the idea behind it is noble, the promoters of the slogan did not live up to its illustriousness (35). His objections laid in the author Oscar Wilde, whose writings towards the end of his life strayed from it, although his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the epitome of the movement's ideas (35-36). Wilde's contradictions thus led Nabokov to reject the slogan but not the idea at its core. Therefore, what is important to him is the essence of art and not what its social purpose is. However, as we have seen, his idea of the essence of art does not solely focus on aesthetic considerations and reject ethics in the process, but merges the two together in a complex manner.

B/ Ethical Readings

Both novels have been instilled with ethical readings by literary critics. A prevalent interpretation revolves around the notions of curiosity and solipsism. Curiosity is linked to the attention to details and to others, while solipsism is the belief that only 'I' exists. For De la Durantaye, the disinterested outlook of aesthetic judgement does not exclude understanding and empathy: others are to be kept at a safe distance but not forgotten (11). The ethical reading of both texts is masked behind explicit immoral actions: the most glaring morally worrisome elements are paedophilia and incest; however, they are not what Nabokov is trying to warn against (Fraysse 6). What is at the heart of the ethical considerations of the novels is attention to detail and seeing through the veil of obviousness (Dragunoiu 322). The fact that Lolita's and Lucette's plights are ignored, to a certain extent, by those who inflict pain onto them, is at the centre of the ethical dilemma for critics. Solipsism, that is to say masking or setting aside their suffering to focus only on themselves, is a way for the narrators to erotically enjoy their predilections.

For Humbert, ignoring Lolita completely by instilling his own fantasies onto her is the way in which he attains sexual bliss (Pifer 2003 86). It is only when Lolita is eclipsed that Humbert can enjoy himself carnally: "With the deep hot sweetness thus established and well on its way to the ultimate convulsion, I felt I could slow down in order to prolong the glow.

Lolita had been safely solipsized" (*L* 60). The word "safely" has a double meaning in this passage: on the one hand, it is in accordance with Humbert's claim that he is protecting her innocence by masking his lust. On the other hand, its association to the idea of solipsism leads one to conclude that the word "safely" applies more to Humbert than it does to Lolita: veiling the dilemma of Lolita's consciousness and existence, he can safely, as a paedophile, enjoy this sexual encounter. In the same vein, some critics find that Lolita hinders the full aesthetic enjoyment of the text:

> He [de Rougemont] is not seduced by the brilliance of form in Humbert's narrative. De Rougemont's reaction to the seductions of the text is compelling precisely because it allows us to see that it is Lolita who literally comes between the lyricism and the potential poetry of the novel. Lolita and her realism interrupt the achievement of literary bliss; the achievement that confines many of the 1960s readings. Clearly de Rougemont is not unique in observing the lack of reciprocity in Humbert's "romance." As we have seen already in the readings of both Stegner and Appel, the absolute disjunction between Humbert's desire for Lolita, and Lolita as subject to the enactment of those desires, cannot be overlooked. But it can be set aside, and it can be displaced at the point at which "reality" threatens full appreciation and valorisation of the novel as esteemed literary object (Clegg 62).

It is thus necessary for some readers to mask or ignore the suffering of Lolita in order to enjoy the poetic dimension of the text, just as Humbert needs to eclipse her to enjoy her carnally.

Similarly, in the diegesis of *Ada*, excluding Lucette from the intellectual and sexual games of Ada and Van, by constantly denying her intelligence, permits them to enjoy their relationship even more. The protagonists are almost one person and the rest of the world is unimportant to them:

> The attic scene introduces us to Van and Ada as lovers not simply unperturbed by their discovery that they are brother and sister, not cousins, but positively smug at the evidence that their closeness excludes the outside world. But this first scene also marks the exclusion of their half-sister Lucette—and her tragic involvement in Van and Ada's affairs (Boyd 550).

Lucette, as a result, is ensnared in their relationship by an ambiguous mixture of both exclusion from and inclusion into the relationship: "The idea was to have Van fool Lucette by petting her in Ada's presence, while kissing Ada at the same time, and by caressing and kissing Lucette when Ada was away in the woods […]" (*A* 163). Through this deception, in which Lucette is invited carnally into the relationship, but not intellectually, their cousin is stuck in a limbo of inclusion and exclusion. Lucette is distracted and masked so that Ada and Van can be with each other carnally without impunity. Vaniada, the merging of Van and Ada, partake in solipsism at the expense of Lucette, and this leads partially to her suicide.

While it might be attractive to ignore or temporarily set aside the plights of Lucette and Lolita to appreciate the novels aesthetically, it is precisely finding needles in haystacks that is

at the heart of Nabokov's aesthetic and ethical considerations for some critics. According to Dragunoiu:

> To focus on such moral issues as Lucette's fate in a novel almost exclusively preoccupied with Van and Ada's passionate love affair is much like the desire to extract a single sumptuous image from a mass of detail […]. Yet it is precisely this kind of attentiveness that lies at the heart of Nabokov's ethical and aesthetic vision (319-320).

Critics thus base their ethical readings on one of the words Nabokov uses to define art: curiosity. This ethical reading ties into his aesthetic ideas, but also his predilection for a thorough attention to detail. What is important is to extract small details from behind the veil of the enchanting diegesis and narration. For critics who concur with this interpretation, what lies at the heart of the ethical problems of these novels is not the most obvious societal moral interdictions, paedophilia and incest, but the suffering of Lolita and Lucette:

> *Ada*'s most curious feature rests in its relative lack of interest in the ethical dimension of Van and Ada's incestuous relationship. Instead, the novel's most heated ethical problems converge on and arise from Van and Ada's treatment of Lucette. This apparent incongruity—that is, the novel's interest in cruelty rather than the social taboo of incest—invites readers to differentiate between authentic moral transgressions and socially contingent prohibitions. The ethical model that emerges from this distinction signals the novel's concomitant investment in a radical libertarianism and a strict moral rigorism (Dragunoiu 322).

Therefore, the social transgression of incest and paedophilia is not what is important in these two novels: what is important is what is masked, that is, the mistreatment and suffering of Lolita and Lucette, as we only get glimpses of their pain. Literary critics of these two novels find details in the diegesis to imbue an ethical reading into the texts. The attention which is given to detail and curiosity leads critics to conclude that the ethical dimension of the two novels is intrinsically linked to Nabokov's idea of aesthetics.

Whether or not Nabokov's texts are inherently aesthet(h)ical is not the main issue; what is interesting is the fact that critics and readers alike almost *need* to find an ethical dimension to the texts to justify its beauty. Readers and critics cannot help finding morally redeeming qualities to these texts to justify the cruelty found within them. Based on the details of the diegesis and the author's statements about art, critics endeavour to "recover an ethical reading of *Lolita*" (Clegg 31), and *Ada* for that matter. In a way, readers do draw a moral lesson from these works, it is just not necessarily the most obvious one. Aesthetically appreciating these texts requires an ethical interpretation of the novel. If these hypotheses are rejected and the texts are regarded as a pointless exercise in form and style, they have no redeeming quality and become taboo and obscene for readers. Even though Nabokov insists on there being no moral dimension to his art and though he does contradict himself on this very subject, it is impossible

to deny the moral dimension of his books, in the sense that readers instil a moral and utilitarian dimension into them. The aesthet(h)ical challenge that the two texts pose to readers makes their conclusions all the more satisfying to obtain and compelling than a novel that simply points out right or wrong in a black and white fashion. The novels, through this ultimate ethical and aesthetic defence, are raised to an almost sacred plane, where they are untouchable.

C/ The Sacredness of Art

Through the high aestheticization of the novels by the narrators and behind them, the author, the texts become a sacred entity which cannot be touched or criticized. As it has been stipulated in the introduction, the etymology of taboo, in addition to being something that is forbidden and, thus, to be avoided, is also something that is sacred: it may come from the Proto-Polynesian *tapu* or the Proto-Oceanic *tabu* meaning "sacred, forbidden"[58]. *Lolita* and *Ada*, through their tribute to the world of art, through intertextuality, parody, highly aesthetically pleasing language wrought with play on words, and a reflection on its status as an artefact and the act of writing, attempt to enter the realm of art to obtain immortality and the protectiveness of art's status. The end of *Lolita*, as I have pointed out before, is a testimony to Humbert's attempt to elevate his work to such levels. The end of *Ada*, on the other hand, is in the similar style as a summary to be found on the back cover of a book: "Ardis Hall – the Ardors and Arbors of Ardis – this is the leitmotiv rippling through *Ada*, an ample and delightful chronicle, whose principal part is staged in a dream-bright America […]" (*A* 460). The passage is emblematic of the work on language that suffuses the novel: the sounds and visual aspects of words are linked together to create an iconographic and sometimes meaningful link between words. "Ardis," "Ardors," "Arbors," and "*Ada*" are strikingly pointed out as linguistically, and almost semantically connected. Van meets Ada in Ardis Hall, their childhood residence, and they ardently play together under arbours as opposed to the more common word 'tree': this is the linguistic and visual image Van is trying to engender in his readers. The word "staged" points towards the novel's reflection on its status as a work of fiction, as everything is intricately constructed, or "staged" by the novel's two narrators, Van and Ada. Furthermore, by emulating the style of back cover advertisements, *Ada* is presupposed by the narrator to be worthy of publication and an illustrious summary. Part way between a blurb and an extension of the linguistic motifs of the novel, the end of *Ada* is highly self-reflexive: it attempts to direct the

[58] The etymology of taboo was found on etymonline: https://www.etymonline.com/word/taboo

re-reading of the text by pointing out certain details. In this sense, it more subtly attempts to raise the novel to the realm of art than *Lolita*. Nabokov, by giving his instructions on how to appreciate his novels, either through his narrators or on his own, redefines how to read great literature: rereading, paying attention to detail, and curiosity are part of his aesthet(h)ics. He endeavours to give his novels an artistic status and to cement them into an artistic lineage through intertextuality and parody, and by profusely giving his opinions about his novels. In this sense, both the author and his narrators try to make their novels sacred, and thus taboo.

Through the novels' critical apparatus, these texts are cemented as works of art: "Literature is seen as a quality of writing (and reading) which is already there. What is then so fascinating about *Lolita* is the ways in which the contemporary reception demonstrates the very process through which a text is created as literature" (Clegg 18). The early criticism of *Lolita*, which attempted to ward off censorship by arguing that this was a serious work of art, *constructs* the novel as a highly esteemed piece of literature, and extends this seal to Nabokov's future works, namely *Ada*. In this sense, the author, through the protective status of art is allowed to deal with any subject. The same goes for the annotated versions of the novels[59]:

> The publication of annotated editions reveals the acceptance of the novel by a social group through which its value is recognized. Yet, we know, before being consecrated, and protected by annotated editions, *Lolita* almost perished a thousand times: its author considered burning it, many publishing houses rejected it, and after having been published in an editing house with a questionable reputation, it triggered impassioned responses in newspapers, and fell victim to censorship in many countries. To bestow upon such a novel a critical apparatus is to give it a "hermeneutic frame" […], that is to say a protective environment, linked to the guarantee that the text deserves attentive study. The text is escorted by a specialist, a scholar, in short, a person one would not suspect of seeking to corrupt youth. It leaves the battle ground to enter classrooms, libraries, or symposia, and is endowed with the prestige given to texts which are worthy of being annotated and transmitted, at the risk of losing its subversive force[60] (Fraysse 2).

This critical apparatus is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, the text is protected by the status of art, on the other, it loses its transgressive dimension, and is neutralized in the process. As long as it is recognized and constructed as art, this status gives the possibility to Nabokov,

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[59] Both texts have been annotated: *Lolita* has been three times by Proffer, Appel and Couturier, while *Ada* has an annotated version online by Brian Boyd. (The latter can be found here: http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz/)

[60] « La publication d'éditions annotées révèle l'acceptation d'un roman par un champ social qui reconnaît ainsi sa valeur. Or, on le sait, avant d'obtenir la consécration, et la protection, d'éditions annotées, *Lolita* a mille fois failli périr : son auteur a envisagé de brûler le roman, plusieurs maisons d'éditions l'ont refusé, et après avoir été publié par un éditeur à la réputation douteuse, il a déchaîné les passions dans les journaux et s'est retrouvé victime de la censure dans plusieurs pays. Doter un tel roman d'un appareil critique, c'est lui fournir un 'cadre herméneutique' […], c'est-à-dire un environnement protecteur, lié à la garantie que le texte mérite une étude attentive. Le texte paraît sous l'escorte d'un spécialiste, d'un universitaire, bref de quelqu'un que personne ne soupçonnera de chercher à corrompre la jeunesse. Il quitte le champ de bataille pour entrer dans la salle de classe, de bibliothèque, ou de colloque doté de tout le prestige que l'on reconnaît aux textes dignes d'être annotés et transmis, au risque de perdre sa force subversive. » (My translation)

and other artists, to deal with any subject in any way possible. Under this seal, artefacts become untouchable, almost immune to criticism and censorship, sacrosanct.

Conclusion

> As a punishment, we used to force pupils to copy sentences, conjugations; to write on a piece of paper was a chore; yet, on the other hand, some experience (experienced?) delight while writing, while making the pen slide along the page, while tracing the arabesque of words without a single thought for their meaning […][61] (Barthes 62).

While *Lolita*'s narrator clearly attempts to redeem himself from his transgression of societal taboos and interdictions through the act of writing, this is less the case of *Ada*, in which the punishment and redemption discussed in the quote above are not part of the novel's narrative. Barthes's second claim about the act of writing, however, holds true for both novels. What this thesis has endeavoured to show is how the two texts take pleasure out of the writing of taboo, or writing *around* taboo. The latter, as a constraint to avoid, is used as a pretext to play with language, with little thought for meaning. The aesthetic delight to be taken out of the texts is at the forefront, as readers are invited to partake along with the author and his narrators in the delectation of the transgression, and of the texts. Yet, this delectation cannot be fully attained because of the very fact that the texts deal with taboos. The texts, through this process become taboo in and of themselves. The reason they are inherently so is fourfold.

The embellishment and aestheticization of taboos, which, paradoxically, are made necessary by the avoidance of them, make the texts themselves problematic, as they transgress the ethical tradition of art. The fact that taboos are, at times, presented in a positive and beautiful light drives readers to find an ethical dimension to these texts to justify the beauty of the novels. If writing about taboo is perceived as only a pointless exercise in form without considering meaning, the texts are thought to be irredeemable.

In avoiding taboos as a creative pretext, Nabokov displaces the focus of the subject matter onto language, making the very linguistic fibre of the texts taboo. This is inseparable from the idea of reception and complicity: the readers, if they take pleasure in the text are almost made complicit in the transgression of taboos. Furthermore, the minute attention that is lavished on language and the veiling of meaning almost gives a body to the text which readers are invited to consume and relish aesthetically, and almost erotically. The body is the centre of many taboos in our society and reminding someone that they are not just an intellectual being is a source of

[61] « Comme punition, on obligeait autrefois les écoliers à copier des phrases, des conjugaisons ; la page d'écriture était une corvée ; mais d'un autre côté, certains éprouvent (éprouvaient ?) une volupté à écrire, à faire glisser la plume, à tracer l'arabesque des mots sans aucun égard pour ce qu'ils veulent dire […] » (My translation)

great embarrassment. The texts bring the readers back to their bodies and ultimately remind them that the act of writing and reading are indivisible from the body.

Through the creative process that is motivated by taboo, Nabokov transgresses the laws of language and literary conventions. To cover the meaning of the texts, foreign languages, literary modes and styles which should not be merged, are mixed together. Readers are invited to take aesthetic and intellectual delight out of the fusion of these languages and literary conventions. The texts, through this process, are left corrupted and create a desire for meaning.

The use of various literary modes and styles inscribe the two novels into the realm of art; the novels are subsequently made sacred. Not only that, but the texts are constructed as literature, as art, by the narrators, the author, and critics alike. As the novels are elevated to an artistic status, the texts themselves become consecrated, and thus untouchable, that is, taboo. This almost gives them license to deal with any subject in any way they see fit, even the strong taboos of paedophilia and incest. Art, as a disinterested and useless tool in regard to society, can draw anything as a source for creation. This idea becomes all the more challenging when art takes the vulgar, the immoral, and the taboo as materials, pushing the boundaries of aesthet(h)ical considerations and what is acceptable to deal with in a highly aesthetically pleasing way.

Nabokov, by elevating what is considered to be obscene, vulgar, or immoral to the realm of art, participates in the advancement and freedom of art to deal with any subject that artists see fit to address. However, the fact that *Lolita* created controversy shows, to a certain extent, that artists cannot always depict whatever they want; the audience of these works challenges an artist's freedom. Yet, this freedom can be reclaimed by constructing works as art, and persuading the audience that what is in front of them is not vulgar or obscene, but beautiful. The difficulty lies in the representation artists give of a topic and the interpretation of or reaction to that representation by the artist's audience. In this sense, there is a complex interaction between art and society, with the latter deciding what is taboo or not.

Taboo subjects are an integral part of Nabokov's oeuvre as these themes are a recurrent source of inspiration and creation: *Lolita*, its precursor *The Enchanter* and *Ada* deal extensively with the taboos of paedophilia and incest by making them the centre of the plot and of the textual exercise. Another novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*, dabbles in the treatment of taboo subjects; the latter is the last work that the author published during his lifetime, and dedicates its fourth part to another reiteration of the Nabokovian nymphet myth which appeared for the first time in *The Enchanter* and came to fruition in *Lolita*. It is apparent that taboo is a prominent

aspect of Nabokov's oeuvre and warrants additional study. Analysing these four works through the prism of taboo would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution of the treatment of these themes within his entire oeuvre.

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Abstract

This Master's Thesis studies and compares Vladimir Nabokov's novels *Lolita* and *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* through the prism of the notion of taboo. The question of whether or not works of art can deal with and aestheticize any subject will be addressed. How censorship affected these novels and their author will also be discussed. Going beyond the controversial status of these novels, particularly of *Lolita*, this thesis will focus not only on how taboos are dealt with but also how the novels themselves become taboo by electing to use taboos as a source of inspiration.

Résumé

Ce mémoire étudie et compare les œuvres *Lolita* et *Ada ou l'ardeur : Chronique familiale* de Vladimir Nabokov à travers le prisme de la notion du tabou. La question de savoir si l'art peut traiter et esthétiser n'importe quel sujet sera abordée. L'impact de la censure sur ces romans et leur auteur sera également examiné. Au-delà du statut controversé de ces romans, plus particulièrement de *Lolita*, ce mémoire focalisera sur la manière dont les tabous sont représentés, mais aussi sur la façon dont ces textes deviennent eux-mêmes tabous de par le fait que l'auteur a choisi d'utiliser des tabous comme source d'inspiration.

Key Words

Vladimir Nabokov – Taboo – Euphemism – Censorship – Avoidance Strategies – Aesthetics – Ethics