

The Talking Cure

**NABOKOV AND THE
VIENNESE WITCH DOCTOR**

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... all my books should be stamped Freudians, Keep Out.

(Introduction, *Bend Sinister*, p. xii)¹

... my books are not only blessed by a total lack of social significance, but are also myth-proof: Freudians flutter around them avidly, approach with itching oviducts, stop, sniff, and recoil.

("Foreword," *The Eye*)

No novelist has waged a more relentless campaign against the talking cure than Vladimir Nabokov. In novel after novel he has attacked the "Viennese witch doctor," as he sardonically calls Freud. Of the many types of people Nabokov satirizes, none evokes the foolishness and evil of the psychoanalyst, who embodies the qualities of sham and shaman, Satan and charlatan, simpleton and stereotyper. In his tireless battle with Freud, Nabokov has created a new art form, psychiatry baiting, and elevated the parody of the psychiatric case study to new heights in his masterpiece, *Lolita*. Tormenting and heckling Nabokov's best characters, sadistic psychotherapists (a redundancy) conjure up ludicrous Oedipal complexes and primal scenes in the cruel attempt to explain away the inconsolable suffering Adam Krug, Pnin, Humbert, and the other solitary heroes must quietly endure.

In almost every foreword to the English-language editions of his works,

Nabokov has continued his long-standing assault on Freud, an unprecedented war against psychoanalysis. The "Foreword" to *The Defense* reveals his typically sarcastic tone and the comic exaggeration of Freudian -ism:

In the Prefaces I have been writing of late for the English-language editions of my Russian novels (and there are more to come) I have made it a rule to address a few words of encouragement to the Viennese delegation. The present Foreword shall not be an exception. Analysts and analyzed will enjoy, I hope, certain details of the treatment Luzhin is subjected to after his breakdown (such as the curative insinuation that a chess player sees Mom in his Queen and Pop in his opponent's King), and the little Freudian who mistakes a Pixlok set for the key to a novel will no doubt continue to identify my characters with his comic-book notion of my parents, sweethearts and serial selves (pp. 10-11).

Nabokov's strategy is always the same. First, he belittles the little Freudians (or their paid agents in American university departments of English), then he challenges them to analyze or analyze his works, warning them, however, of the dangerous traps he has set. Thus the "Foreword" to *The Waltz Invention*: "After the dreadful frustrations Freudians have experienced with my other books, I am sure they will refrain from inflicting upon Waltz a sublimation of the push-button power-feeling such as the manipulation of an elevator, up (erection!) and down (revenge suicide!)." [no page number] And *Despair*: "The attractively shaped object or Wiener-schnitzel dream that the eager Freudian may think he distinguishes in the remoteness of my wastes will turn out to be on closer inspection a derisive mirage organized by my agents" (p. 8). The "Foreword" to *King, Queen, Knave* is different only in the

rare concession that not all his friends share his feelings toward Freud. "As usual, I wish to observe that, as usual (and as usual several sensitive people I like will look huffy), the Viennese delegation has not been invited. If, however, a resolute Freudian manages to slip in, he or she should be warned that a number of cruel traps have been set here and there in the novel" (p. x). The evocation of a departed psychoanalytic ghost appears in the "Introduction" to the uncompleted novel "Ultima Thule." "Freudians are no longer around, I understand, so I do not need to warn them not to touch my circles with their symbols" (*A Russian Beauty and Other Stories*, p. 148).

Even when Nabokov believes Freud is safely dead and buried, he cannot resist a parting shot, as he does in the "Foreword" to *Glory*. Only through overkill will the enemy vanish forever. "Nowadays, when Freudism is discredited, the author recalls with a whistle of wonder that not so long ago—say before 1959 (*i.e.*, before the publication of the first of the seven forewords to his Englished novels)—a child's personality was supposed to split automatically in sympathetic consequence of parental divorce" (p. xiii). To seal tightly the Freudian coffin, Nabokov writes a letter in 1967 to the editor of *Encounter* to welcome Freud's book on Woodrow Wilson "not only because of its comic appeal, which is great, but because that surely must be the last rusty nail in the Viennese Quack's coffin" (*Strong Opinions*, p. 215). And to make sure that naive undergraduates do not resurrect the ghost of Freud, Nabokov condemns psychoanalytic literary criticism in *Lectures on Literature*.

Rejecting the belief that *The Metamorphosis* reveals Kafka's ambivalent relationship to his father, and that the image of Gregor as an insect symbolizes the son's feelings of worthlessness to his parents, Nabokov sternly warns his students: "I am interested here in bugs, not in humbugs, and I reject this nonsense" (p. 256).

Nabokov's virulence is astonishing and unsoftened by time. The invective is bitter, mirthless, and unprecedented. It is as if Freud is the central figure in Nabokov's life, always shadowing the novelist. Freud's name appears as early as the third paragraph in the autobiographical *Speak, Memory*. In discussing his lifelong rebellion against darkness, Nabokov singles out the most sinister threat to the imagination. "I have ransacked my oldest dreams for keys and clues—and let me say at once that I reject completely the vulgar, shabby, fundamentally medieval world of Freud, with its crankish quest for sexual symbols (something like searching for Baconian acrostics in Shakespeare's works) and its bitter little embryos spying, from their natural nooks, upon the love life of their parents" (p. 20). In addition to associating Freud with antiquated medievalism, Nabokov links him to literary and political repression. At the end of *Speak, Memory*, he bids an unfond farewell to Freud, leaving him and his fellow travelers "to jog on, in their third-class carriage of thought, through the police state of sexual myth (incidentally, what a great mistake on the part of dictators to ignore psychoanalysis—a whole generation might be so easily corrupted that way!)" (pp. 300-301).

It could be argued, of course, that by insisting in his prefaces that Freudians must keep out, Nabokov is actually inviting them to enter and that, if Freud had not existed, Nabokov would have had to invent him. Indeed, one senses that Freud is Nabokov's alter ego, a hated part of the self that the novelist had to defeat again and again. To borrow Richard Curie's vivid description of Joseph Conrad's equally well-known detestation of Dostoevsky, "Fie did not despise him as one despises a nonentity, he hated him as one might hate Lucifer and the forces of darkness."²

Although critics have long recognized Nabokov's animosity, few have been disturbed by it. In fact, most of Nabokov's critics have appeared to share his assumption that Freudians adhere to monolithic dogma, that psychoanalysis has never developed beyond the stage of id psychology, and that Freud never revised his theories nor admitted to intellectual skepticism. "Nabokov appears to object to Freudianism as a kind of internal Marxism proceeding upon the assumption that the common is of greater import than the individual," Andrew Field notes, adding that "in the late 1960's one can already clearly see that the corner has been turned regarding Freudianism in literature, and there are fewer and fewer important writers and critics who slavishly accept and practice the Freudian prescription. . . ."³ At no time have important writers and critics "slavishly" accepted the Freudian "prescription." Even when Field tries to be more dispassionate than Nabokov, his language gives him away. Alfred Appel, Jr., the editor of the indispensable

The Annotated Lolita, does not try to be impartial. He accepts all of Nabokov's judgments of psychoanalysis, including disdain of the "clinical-minded." Arguing that the analyst's reductive interpretation of *Lolita* justifies Nabokov's parody (not surprisingly, there have been very few psychoanalytic studies of the novel), Appel assumes there can be only one Freudian approach—unenlightened. "By creating a surface that is rich in 'psychological' clues, but which finally resists and then openly mocks the interpretations of depth psychology, Nabokov is able to dispatch any Freudians who choose to 'play' in the blitzkrieg game that is the novel's first sixty-or-so pages."⁴

A more thoughtful discussion of Nabokov's quarrel with Freud comes from Page Stegner in *The Portable Nabokov*. "Psychotherapy is constantly under attack in Nabokov's fiction, and it becomes a kind of outstanding symbol for the clinical, sterile, stereotyping mind that perceives its surroundings in hackneyed and rigid terms."⁵ Yet, in *Escape into Aesthetics*, Stegner concludes his discussion of Nabokov's anti-Freudianism with a statement that is more generous than the truth allows. ". . . his satire of depth psychology, intended or not, emerges really as criticism of the debasement of Freud's work by a passively adaptive, unimaginative, leisured society—most emphatically, though not exclusively, American."⁶ It is not the debasement of Freud's work but Freud's debasing vision that Nabokov continually returns to in his writings. Freud is, quite simply, evil incarnate to him. There are bad artists in Nabokov's world but no good psychotherapists.

In his interviews, Nabokov has given many reasons for his rejection of the talking cure. He objects both to the absurdity of Freudian theory' and to the gullibility of people who succumb to therapy. Psychoanalysis strikes him as farcical, especially the Oedipus complex. "Let the credulous and the vulgar continue to believe that all mental woes can be cured by a daily application of old Greek myths to their private parts" (*Strong Opinions*, p. 66). A more serious objection to psychoanalysis is the threat it poses to morality and individual freedom. Like Lessing, Nabokov believes that society is moving toward what one critic has called a "psychiatrocracy," a "state in which psychiatry has expanded to fill the roles of police, judges, educators, social workers, and eventually politicians."⁷ In Nabokov's words, "The Freudian faith leads to dangerous ethical consequences, such as when a filthy murderer with the brain of a tapeworm is given a lighter sentence because his mother spanked him too much or too little—it works both ways" (*Strong Opinions*, p. 116). Yet, unlike Lessing, he rejects the social or utilitarian view of art, and he would dismiss the idea that his novels are intended directly or indirectly to illuminate the dangers of totalitarianism or the therapeutic state. He has also dismissed the possibility that his contempt for psychoanalysis arises from personal experience with therapy. When asked by an interviewer whether he has ever been in analysis, he expresses horror, indignant at the idea. "Bookish familiarity only," he dryly answers. He ritualistically proceeds to bury his adversary. "The ordeal itself is much too silly and disgusting to be

contemplated even as a joke. Freudism and all it has tainted with its grotesque implications and methods appears to me to be one of the vilest deceits practiced by people on themselves and on others. I reject it utterly, along with a few other medieval items still adored by the ignorant, the conventional, or the very sick" (*Strong Opinions*, pp. 23-24). In another interview in *Strong Opinions* he expands upon his aversion to psychiatry, revealing the extent to which Freud occupies his everyday life:

I cannot conceive how anybody in his right mind should go to a psychoanalyst, but of course if one's mind is deranged one might try anything; after all, quacks and cranks, shamans and holy men, kings and hypnotists have cured people—especially hysterical people. Our grandsons no doubt will regard today's psychoanalysts with the same amused contempt as we do astrology and phrenology. One of the greatest pieces of charlatanic, and satanic, nonsense imposed on a gullible public is the Freudian interpretation of dreams. I take gleeful pleasure every morning in refuting the Viennese quack by recalling and explaining the details of my dreams without using one single reference to sexual symbols or mythical complexes. I urge my potential patients to do likewise (p. 47).

Freud's name is likely to appear anywhere in Nabokov's universe, sometimes in the least flattering places. In *Bend Sinister*, Adam Krug, who lives in a repressive Marxist kind of state, gazes down into the bottom of a toilet bowl. What does he see? "At the bottom of the bowl a safety razor blade envelope with Dr. S. Freud's face and signature floated" (p. 85). The image is appropriately anal. In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov recalls how underneath the windows of his Biarritz apartment a "huge custard-colored balloon was being

inflated by Sigismond Lejoyeux, a local aeronaut" (p. 156). (Freud's name in German means "joy.") In *Ada*, there is a "Dr. Sig Heiler" and a "Dr. Froid . . . who may have been an emigre brother with a passport-changed name of the Dr. Froit of Signy-Mon-dieu-Mondieu" (p. 27). Although Van is a psychiatrist, he comes to realize that the "mistake—the lewd, ludicrous and vulgar mistake of the Signy-Mondieu analysts consists in their regarding a real object, a pompon, say, or a pumpkin (actually seen in a dream by the patient) as a significant abstraction of the real object, as a bumpkin's bonbon or one-half of the bust . . . (p. 363). Often, Nabokov does not mention Freud by name, referring to him instead by the city in which he resided: "Viennese quack," "Viennese witch doctor," "Viennese wizard."

Nabokov's quarrel with Freud dates back to the beginning of his career as a writer. His earliest parody of Freud appears in a 1931 Paris weekly. Entitled "What Everybody Must Know," the article—written under the pseudonym Sirin—contains a naive first-person narrator, obviously a convert to the Freudian faith, who delivers a sales pitch for his newly patented product Freudism for All.⁸ Nabokov employs his favorite weapon against psychoanalysis, *reductio ad absurdum*, to undermine the Freudian stages of psychosexual development. There is the "Tantalus complex," the "penal servitude complex," the "happy marriage complex." Freudism for All contains all the familiar psychoanalytic themes Nabokov satirizes for the remaining 4\$ years of his writing career: the Oedipus complex, unconscious motivation,

dream interpretation, biological drives. Nabokov's antipsychiatry predates Lessing's, though it lacks her introspective analysis in *The Golden Notebook*. Long before most writers began warning of the therapeutic state, Nabokov was ridiculing the cult of psychotherapy and progressive education. The gentle Pnin is embarrassed by the "psi-hooslinie ('psycho-asinine')" interests of his former wife, a psychiatrist. Her husband, also a psychiatrist, evolves the ingenious idea of applying the theories of group therapy to marriage counseling. The procedure involves a "tension-releasing" circle modeled along the lines of a quilting bee, where young women share "with absolute frankness" their marital problems with each other. Later the husbands are similarly interviewed by doctors, and cigars as well as "anatomic charts" are passed around. Nabokov condemns the goal of tension reduction in group psychotherapy because it represents to him a contemptible effort to eliminate the inevitable suffering every sensitive person must endure. Pnin affirms his creator's views when he calls psychotherapy "nothing but a kind of microcosmos of communism—all that psychiatry. . . . Why not leave their private sorrows to people? Is sorrow not, one asks, the only thing in the world people really possess?" (p. 52).

Implicit in Nabokov's rejection of Freud is the link between psychoanalysis and Marxism. Viewing "cure" as a form of manipulation, mind-control, and enslavement, Nabokov cannot imagine therapy that is not collusive and conspiratorial. *Bend Sinister* (1947), Nabokov's first novel in

English, is a parable of the therapeutic state in which psychiatry promotes adaptation to an insane political system. Professor Adam Krug, a philosopher, refuses to submit to the party line of Paduk, dictator (and Krug's former classmate) of the young Soviet type of state. Pervading the country is the Marxist-sounding ideology of Ekwilism, a "violent and virulent political doctrine." Allied to Ekwilism is the grim Institute for Abnormal Children where, through a mix-up of identities characteristic of the collectivist state, Krug's young son David is sent. Operating according to the tension-reduction principle of group psychotherapy as practiced in *Pnin*, the Institute serves as a euphemistic "release instrument" for hardened criminals. The psychological theory combines cathartic release with orgiastic violence: ". . . if once a week the really difficult patients could enjoy the possibility of venting in full their repressed yearnings (the exaggerated urge to hurt, destroy, etc.) upon some little human creature of no value to the community, then, by degrees, the evil in them would be allowed to escape, would be, so to say, 'effundated,' and eventually they would become good citizens" (p. 218). Mistaken for one of these unfortunate victims, David is fatally beaten up in one of the most gruesome scenes found anywhere in Nabokov's blood-bespattered universe. Invoking the language of the psychotherapist and sociologist, Nabokov mimics the detached objectivity of the social scientist. The brutes at first keep their distance from the little person, but then a transformation begins as the "community spirit (positive) was conquering the individual whims

(negative)." They become "*organized*." The female psychiatrist Doktor Amalia von Wytwyl refers to the "wonderful moment" in which, to use her technical language, " 'the ego,' he goes 'ouf' (out) and the pure 'egg' (common extract of egos) 'remains'" (p. 219). Less clinically, the helpless victim is literally torn apart by the blood-thirsty group.

Why does Nabokov place psychoanalysis among the ranks of communism, fascism, and other forms of totalitarian control? One critic has argued that "Ultimately, we have to understand Nabokov's anti-Freudian -ism in the context of a hatred for allegory and symbolism in general."⁹ It is certainly true that he disapproved of allegory and symbolism, believing they impinged upon the artist's freedom, but this hardly seems sufficient to explain the virulence of his attack against Freud. It seems more probable that biographical reasons still unknown to us influenced his thinking. Nabokov's contempt for Freud was part of a larger reaction against despised elements of Russian and German autocracy, which he blamed for the destruction of his family and his exile to Europe and the United States. Most of his fictional psychiatrists have German names: Doktor Fräü Amalia von Wytwyl née Bachofen and Dr. Hammecke in *Bend Sinister*; Dr. Eric Wind (a German) and his Russian psychiatrist wife Liza Bogolepov Wind in *Pnin*; Dr. Blanche Schwartzmann and Melanie Weiss in *Lolita*, whose names mean "White Blackman" and "Black White," respectively (because, as Appel notes in *The Annotated Lolita*, "to Nabokov, Freudians figuratively see no colors other than

black and white" [p. 326]]; Dr. Sig Heiler and Dr. Froit of Signy-Mondieu-Mondieu in *Ada*; and so on. These psychiatrists conform to the stereotype of the vicious German. There are, it is true, non-German psychiatrists. There is an Italian named Dr. Bonomini in "Ultima Thule" and the Anglo-Saxon clinical psychologist John Ray in *Lolita*, both of whom are typically inane but not malevolent. Hovering over all these therapists is their spiritual father, the "Viennese witch doctor," whose German background always remains felt. As Douglas Fowler has observed, "Germany is always a part of the Nabokovian code for evil, and psychiatrists are its high priests."¹⁰

Yet why does Nabokov endorse these ugly stereotypes, especially when the object of his scorn was also victimized by the same forces the novelist detested? If anything, one might expect Nabokov to feel a degree of sympathy for Freud. Nowhere among Nabokov's savage criticisms of Freud is there the recognition that the psychoanalyst was a member of a minority group that remained outside of German and Viennese society. The Nazis' persecution of the Freud family was as severe as the Bolsheviks' persecution of the Nabokov family. Nabokov's brother died in a German concentration camp in 1945, and his father was shot and killed at a political meeting in 1922 while shielding a speaker from two Russian assassins.¹¹ Although Freud and his immediate family were allowed to flee Vienna, his four elderly sisters were less fortunate; they perished in a German concentration camp. Freud cherished freedom of expression and thought as much as Nabokov did. Both men were

repelled by the brutality they witnessed and did everything they could to oppose cruelty and injustice.

Moreover, in viewing Freud as a German victimizer instead of as a Jewish victim, Nabokov contradicts the impassioned discussion of racial prejudice that appears in *Pale Fire*. Kinbote tells us that more than anything on earth John Shade loathed vulgarity and brutality, particularly when they were united in racial prejudice. As a man of letters, Shade "could not help preferring 'is a Jew' to 'is Jewish' and 'is a Negro' to 'is colored'; but immediately added that this way of alluding to two kinds of bias in one breath was a good example of careless, or demagogic, lumping (much exploited by Left-Wingers) since it erased the distinction between two historical hells: diabolical persecution and the barbarous traditions of slavery" (p. 217). Nabokov married a Jewish woman, and he was always sensitive to anti-Semitism.¹² Yet, in rendering Freudianism into Nazism, he seems guilty of his own diabolical persecution.

Nabokov's blind spot to psychoanalysis, then, amounts to an obsession, as a few critics have acknowledged.¹³ At what point does a master parodist begin unconsciously to parody himself? Jack Cockerell's heartless impersonations of the eccentric hero of *Pnin* compel the narrator to observe that "the whole thing grew to be such a bore that I fell wondering if by some poetical vengeance this Pnin business had not become with Cockerell the kind

of fatal obsession which substitutes its own victim for that of the initial ridicule" (p. 189). Has Nabokov similarly fallen victim to a fatal obsession? Since there is no evidence that Nabokov suffered from psychological illness or entered psychotherapy, his aversion to Freud becomes more mysterious.¹⁴ Indeed, we know very little about Nabokov the man and, as Phyllis A. Roth has concluded in a recent essay, many questions about Nabokov the artist will remain unanswered "until we constitute Nabokov the man behind the mystification."¹⁵

Until then, we can try to demystify his curious attitude towards Freud from the scattered clues in his fiction and his references to historical psychoanalysts. We may be surprised, in fact, by the degree to which Nabokov's writings reflect psychological theory, apart from the numerous traps he sets to ambush the Freudian critic. Despite his contempt for psychology as a discipline, Nabokov was a psychological novelist, whether or not he was parodying the subject. And he was well acquainted with books on abnormal psychology and case-study material. Andrew Field points out that the library of Nabokov's father contained such titles as *The Sexual Instinct and Its Morbid Manifestations* and a good collection of the works of Havelock Ellis.¹⁶ We also know that Nabokov's fictional characters have been reading actual psychoanalytic studies. In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote recalls how he once tried to read certain tidbits from a learned book on psychoanalysis he had filched from a classroom, a book widely used in American colleges. (Professors of

English in American universities, he says, are soaked in Freudian fancies.) Kinbote cites two psychoanalytic texts and gives appropriate quotations from each book. He also helpfully provides us with precise bibliographical information to locate both books:

By picking the nose in spite of all commands to the contrary, or when a youth is all the time sticking his finger through his buttonhole . . . the analytic teacher knows that the appetite of the lustful one knows no limit in his phantasies.

(Quoted by Prof. C. from Dr. Oskar Pfister,
The Psychoanalytical Method, 1917, N. Y., p. 79)

The little cap of red velvet in the German version of Little Red Riding Hood is a symbol of menstruation.

(Quoted by Prof. C. from Erich Fromm,
The Forgotten Language, 1951, N. Y., p. 240)

Kinbote allows the quotations to speak for themselves, though he cannot resist one caustic rhetorical question: "Do these clowns really *believe* what they teach?" (*Pale Fire*, p. 271).¹⁷

Kinbote has no difficulty in demolishing Prof. C.'s Freudian approach to literature, and few critics, literary or psychoanalytic, would probably care to defend the quoted passages. Alfred Appel, for example, endorses Kinbote's attack, agreeing that "no parodist could improve on" Fromm's realization or Pfister's "felicitously expressed thought" (*The Annotated Lolita*, p. 327). If one

takes the trouble to read *The Psychoanalytic Method* and *The Forgotten Language*, however, the quoted passages appear less ludicrous.¹⁸ Pfister, for instance, who was a pastor and seminary teacher in Zurich, discusses the dynamics of symptomatology in the quoted passage. In the cited case study, he shows how an apparently meaningless gesture may reveal a complicated symbolism. He talks about a 15-year-old pupil who was accustomed to make a peculiar and offensive grimace with his nose and finger. The analyst traces back the obsession to an internal conflict involving the youth's ambivalence toward masturbation, which both attracted and repelled him. Since symptoms are always overdetermined, there may be additional meanings to the teenager's compulsive act that Pfister perhaps missed. However, his interpretation is at least plausible. And his major thesis is essentially sound: "He who engages for a long time in the analysis of apparently meaningless gestures, which constantly recur, gradually becomes able to read intimate secrets with certainty from these stereotyped habits" (*The Psychoanalytic Method*, p. 78). Incidentally, one of Nabokov's most celebrated characters, lost in his own masturbatory reverie, would agree with the "analytic teacher" that "the appetite of the lustful one knows no limit in his phantasies."

Kinbote's allusion to Erich Fromm's *The Forgotten Language* also has interest to Nabokov's readers. Fromm's interpretation of Little Red Riding Hood (more precisely, Little Red-Cap, the Brothers Grimm version of the story) offers several insights into the famous children's fairy tale and, as we

shall see, a famous twentieth-century novel that is in its own way a supreme fairy tale. In his discussion of the tale, Fromm makes the sound observation that the command not to stray into the menacing forest hints at a warning against the loss of innocence. The little girl is approaching womanhood and is now confronted with the problem of sex. There is nothing outlandish about Fromm's interpretation of the color red as suggestive of passion and menstruation. Indeed, Nabokov is notorious for his complete rejection of symbolism, sexual and otherwise. The wolf in the fairy tale symbolizes a ruthless and cunning man eager to devour the little girl, an act filled with sexual implications. Fromm argues that the wolfs attempt to usurp the grandmother's role becomes an ironic commentary on the male's inability to bear children, an interpretation that is only slightly more difficult to accept. At the end of the story the wolf, who has swallowed the little girl, is made ridiculous by the attempt to play the role of a pregnant woman with a living being in his belly. The girl puts stones into his stomach and he dies. "His deed, according to the primitive law of retaliation, is punished according to his crime: he is killed by the stones, the symbol of sterility, which mock his usurpation of the pregnant woman's role." In Fromm's view, the fairy tale dramatizes the male-female conflict. "It is a story of triumph by man-hating women, ending with their victor}', exactly the opposite of the Oedipus myth, which lets the male emerge victorious from this battle."¹⁹ Paradoxically, Little Red Riding Hood's rites of passage experience has intriguing relevance to

Nabokov's parodic masterpiece, the novel about a poetical wolf man who, in ravishing the little girl, grows heavy with child and eventually gives birth to one of the great literary creations of the century.



With its false scents, clever ambushes, and multi-edged ironies, *Lolita* (1955) is the supreme parody of the psychiatric case study. The novel brilliantly puts into practice the strategy Nabokov uses in the forewords to his other stories: It lures in the unsuspecting Freudian and then springs the trap upon him. *Lolita* mocks the psychopathological approach to literature and taunts the reader to solve the mystery of Humbert's obsession with his nymphet. As Elizabeth Phillips remarks, "Nabokov's ironic version of the 'psychopathological' case history ridicules both the method and the content of the formula by which the inspiration of art has been Freudianized."²⁰ The intensity of the novel's attack on the talking cure is unrivaled in literature. Calling himself "King Sigmund the Second," Hubert belittles Freud at every opportunity, daring anyone to tell him something about himself he does not already know. At times it seems that Freud, not Quilty, is the secret antagonist in *Lolita*. In this novel, the Viennese witch doctor is revealed for what he really is, less a mad doctor than Nabokov's white whale, a shadowy symbol of satanic proportions who must be killed again and again lest the universe go

awry. Nothing less than the purity of literature and the survival of the imagination are at stake in *Lolita* and, if both Humbert and his maker become monomaniacal in their pursuit of evil, that is incidental to the outcome. The battle lines are drawn.

The irony begins with the mock "Foreword" to *Lolita* by John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., whose training in clinical psychology qualifies him as a Fraudian. In his role as editor of Humbert's confessional manuscript, Ray confirms Nabokov's belief that the difference between the rapist and therapist is but a matter of spacing. Ray's introduction to Humbert's story lends the appearance of clinical authenticity, which is precisely what Nabokov parodies. Ray asserts that literature should elevate and inculcate, that human nature can be improved, that art functions as a warning of the dangers of abnormalcy and perversion. ". . . for in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac—these are not only vivid characters in a unique story: they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils" (*The Annotated Lolita*, pp. 78). Ray assumes, furthermore, that Humbert is a pervert, that his case study should alert us to future Humberts lusting for our daughters, that the chief value of literature lies not in aesthetic beauty but in social and ethical import, and that psychopathology menaces us to the same extent that communism does. (His language at the end of the introduction evokes the breathless rhetoric of McCarthyism.)

The irony, then, is that Ray is editing a story whose literary meaning remains beyond his understanding. Nabokov introduces the novel to us through an unreliable narrator and then proceeds to wrest *Lolita* out of Ray's clinical grasp. Oddly enough, Ray is not without a degree of insight into Humbert's story. He wisely refrains from editing or altering the manuscript apart from the correction of "obvious solecisms." He preserves the anonymity of the author by telling us that "its author's bizarre cognomen is his own invention." The psychologist surprisingly rejects the charge of pornography, arguing that what is "offensive" in a story is frequently a synonym for "unusual." A great work of art, he realizes, is always original and shocking. Although he remains horrified by the author, he can appreciate the power of the manuscript. "But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!" (Which author is Ray referring to here—Humbert or Nabokov? If the latter, then Nabokov is poking fun at Ray even as the psychologist is disparaging the novelist!) Ray also concedes a point that Nabokov's other therapists would have missed: "that had our demented diarist gone, in the fatal summer of 1947, to a competent psycho-pathologist, there would have been no disaster; but then, neither would there have been this book" (p. 7). In short, there is a ray of truth in the psychologist's introduction, although Nabokov would remind us that a "competent psychopathologist" is a contradiction in terms.

One must wonder, however, whether Dr. Ray is aware of Humbert's sadistic delight in foiling his psychiatrists. Given Nabokov's delight in deception, Humbert maintains a poker face in analyzing his "symptomatology" and bouts of insanity. In his contempt of Freud, Humbert is Nabokov's faithful son. "At first, I planned to take a degree in psychiatry as many *manqué* talents do; but I was even more *manqué* than that. . ." (p. 17). Wooed by psychoanalysts with their "pseudo liberations of pseudo libidos," Humbert claims to have suffered several major psychological breakdowns which have caused him to be hospitalized in expensive sanatoriums where he perfects his maker's art: psychiatry-baiting:

I discovered there was an endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists: cunningly leading them on; never letting them see that you know all the tricks of the trade; inventing for them elaborate dreams, pure classics in style (which make *them*, the dream-extortionists, dream and wake up shrieking); teasing them with fake "primal scenes"; and never allowing them the slightest glimpse of one's real sexual predicament. By bribing a nurse I won access to some files and discovered, with glee, cards calling me "potentially homosexual" and "totally impotent." The sport was so excellent, its results—in *my* case—so ruddy that I stayed on for a whole month after I was quite well (sleeping admirably and eating like a schoolgirl). And then I added another week just for the pleasure of taking on a powerful newcomer, a displaced (and, surely, deranged) celebrity, known for his knack of making patients believe they had witnessed their own conception (pp. 36-37).

Not for a moment does Nabokov consider Humbert's anti-Freudian -ism an example of clinical resistance to therapy. Questions of transference and countertransference seem as alien to Nabokov as they would to B. F. Skinner.

Humbert's criticisms of psychoanalysis coincide exactly with Nabokov's position, and both use the identical parodic attack to demolish the foe. The reader cannot take seriously Humbert's declarations of past insanity, and there is nothing that ever threatens his lucidity or verbal power. The psychiatrists fail to uncover his deception. "I love to fool doctors," he confides merrily. In his role of "Jean-Jacques Humbert," he fabricates the most histrionic confession. He can play the role of analyst or patient. "The child therapist in me (a fake, as most of them are—but no matter) regurgitated Neo-Freudian hash and conjured up a dreaming and exaggerating Dolly in the 'latency' period of girlhood" (p. 126). Never deviating from his anti-Freudianism, he expects the reader to share his point of view. "Mid-twentieth century ideas concerning child-parent relationship have been considerably tainted by the scholastic rigmarole and standardized symbols of the psychoanalytic racket, but I hope I am addressing myself to unbiased readers" (p. 287).

How much psychoanalytic theory does Humbert—and Nabokov—actually know? The question is difficult to answer, if only because the novelist may be assimilating more Freudian theory than he cares to parody. Humbert's mocking allusion to the "dream-extortionists," and Van's equally contemptuous reference in *Ada* to "Sig's epoch-making confession," suggest that *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) forms the cornerstone of Nabokov's understanding or misunderstanding of psychoanalytic theory. Nearly all of

the parodist's comments focus on id psychology, which represents historically the beginning of psychoanalysis, the emphasis upon biological drives. Nabokov strongly objects to the Biologizing of psychology, especially the Oedipus complex. He also attacks the "theatrical" side of psychoanalysis: the primal scene, the death wish, the birth trauma. Nabokov's fictional psychiatrists undertake the most preposterous research, with predictable conclusions. In "Ultima Thule," Dr. Bonomini is studying the "dynamics of the psyche," seeking to demonstrate that "all psychic disorders could be explained by subliminal memories of calamities that befell the patient's forbears . . ." (*A Russian Beauty and Other Stories*, p. 161). If a patient were suffering from megalomania, for example, it would be necessary to determine which of his great-grandfathers was a power-hungry failure. In *Pale Fire*, an old psychiatrist warns the Prince of Zembla that his vices had subconsciously killed his mother and would continue to kill the mother in him until he renounced sodomy. Otto Rank's theory of birth trauma also comes under attack. The narrator of *Pnin* refers to a "phenomenon of suffocation that a veteran psychoanalyst, whose name escapes me, has explained as being the subconsciously evoked shock of one's baptism which causes an explosion of intervening recollections between the first immersion and the last" (p. 21). *Pnin* refers disapprovingly to Dr. Halp's "theory of birth being an act of suicide on the part of the infant."

A list of the books written by Nabokov's psychiatric researchers reveals

a world gone mad over the mind-curing industry. Psychiatry, progressive education, the self-help business, how-to books, and psychobabble are exposed as the shams of shamans. Once again, Nabokov attacks the biologizing of psychology and the comic nature of psychoanalytic theory. Betty Bliss, one of Pnin's former graduate students, writes a paper on "Dostoevsky and Gestalt Psychology," which nicely expresses Nabokov's deprecation of his nineteenth-century Russian predecessor. Before her marriage to Eric Wind, Liza Bogolepov works at the Meudon sanatorium directed by a destructive psychiatrist called Dr. Rosetta Stone. Psychotherapy, implies Nabokov, generates arcane hieroglyphics. The Winds' delightful son Victor proves to be a "problem" child because of his disturbing lack of pathology. The boy contradicts his parents' deeply held belief that "every male child had an ardent desire to castrate his father and a nostalgic urge to re-enter his mother's body." The father is so alarmed by his son's normalcy that he has him tested by the leading prognosticators of psychological health: the Gudunov Drawing-of-an-Animal Test, the Fairview Adult Test, the Kent-Rosanoff Absolutely Free Association Test, and the Augusta Angst Abstract Test. Unfortunately, Victor's interpretation of Rorschach ink blots proves of little interest to the psychologists, and the poor boy is finally left to struggle through life on his own. His parents, though, remain committed to their professional training and collaborate to write an essay on "Group Psychotherapy Applied to Marriage Counseling" for a psychiatric journal. In

"Ultima Thule," Dr. Bonomini writes a book called *The Heroics of Insanity*. In *Lolita*, John Ray receives the Poling Prize for a modest work entitled "Do the Senses Make Sense?" in which certain morbid states and perversions are discussed. Nabokov has the last word, however, to this proliferating psychological literature. Near the end of *Ada*, Van grows disgusted with the "Sig" school of psychiatry and writes a paper entitled *The Farce of Group Therapy in Sexual Maladjustment*. The epigraph to the study contains a passage from Sig's epoch-making confession: "In my student days I became a deflowerer because I failed to pass my botany examination" (p. 577). This is a reference to a letter Freud wrote to Wilhelm Fliess in 1899.²¹ Van's paper proves to be devastating to the psychiatric establishment. "The Union of Marital Counselors and Catharticians at first wanted to sue but then preferred to detumify."

Nabokov demonstrates that he can out-psychologize the most orthodox Freudian, and Humbert is less interested in proving the psychoanalyst incorrect than in casting him into Hell. Both novelist and narrator ransack the psychoanalytic canon and then load their own cannon or torpedoes with enough explosives to sink the deepest depth reading. Humbert would have us believe that his tragic passion for *Lolita* springs from an unhappy love affair with Annabel Leigh, a lovely child of 13 who is only a few months younger than he. Humbert falls madly in love with her, and they meet surreptitiously to carry on their youthful romance. Fate intervenes and within a few months

she dies of typhus, their love unconsummated. Humbert remains convinced that "in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel." The physical similarities between the two girl-children seem to support his statement. He emphasizes the Poesque quality of the doomed love, and he is highly conscious—self-conscious—of the parallels between Annabel Leigh and Poe's Annabel Lee. Humbert marries Charlotte Haze to be near her daughter, just as Poe marries his child-cousin to be near his beloved aunt. But the parallel to Poe is misleading, as Andrew Field points out. "The historian of literature knows, however, that Poe married his child bride primarily to tighten his rather strange and neurotic ties to her guardian aunt. If *Lolita* were indeed modeled on the life of Poe (as at least one article has tried to maintain), Humbert would marry Lolita in order to be closer to her mother Charlotte!"²² The possibility that Humbert's love for Lolita is a repetition of his thwarted love for another nymphet, Annabel Leigh, thus turns out to be a dead end.

Another psychiatric dead end is the "Daddy's Girl" theme. Just as Humbert never tires of referring to Lolita as his daughter, so does Nabokov exploit all the ironies implicit in the apparently incestuous relationship. "Be a father to my little girl" (p. 70) Charlotte writes to Humbert, and he proceeds to carry out her wish. He marries the detestable mother only to be near her desirable daughter whom he is happy to help raise. "Lolita, with an incestuous thrill, I had grown to regard as *my* child" (p. 82), he adds parenthetically. After

Charlotte's death, he informs Lolita that "For all practical purposes I am your father" (p. 121). This is the relationship he announces to others, particularly to motel owners. His lecture on the history of incest is truly impressive: No one can question his devotion to research. When he finally catches up with Quilty, he introduces himself as Lolita's father and insists that the playwright stole his child. Quilty denies the kidnapping and maintains that he rescued the girl from a "beastly pervert."²³ The reader's response to this Oedipal play is that Humbert protests too much. There are simply too many Freudian "clues" for us to take seriously and, like Roth's Portnoy, Humbert is too comfortable in his posture of lying on the analytic couch. It is possible, of course, that there are Oedipal implications of Humbert's relationship to Lolita, but not the interpretation he deceptively offers.

Similarly, Nabokov parodies the subjects of homosexuality and impotence. Humbert refers gleefully to the psychiatrist's diagnosis of him as "potentially homosexual" and "totally impotent." He recalls a dream that seems to be culled from *The Interpretation of Dreams*. "Sometimes I attempt to kill in my dreams. But do you know what happens? For instance I hold a gun. For instance I aim at a bland, quietly interested enemy. Oh, I press the trigger all right, but one bullet after another feebly drops on the floor from the sheepish muzzle. In those dreams, my only thought is to conceal the fiasco from my foe, who is slowly growing annoyed" (p. 49). The limpness of the unmanly bullets foreshadows the comic killing of Claire Quilty, Humbert's

"evil double." Lest we miss the deep symbolism of the shooting, Humbert pointedly tells us that "we must remember that a pistol is the Freudian symbol of the Ur-father's central forelimb" (p. 218). Fingering his gun in the presence of the man who has married Lolita, Dick Schiller, Humbert imagines shooting his sexual rival. But one wonders whether murder or detumescence is Humbert's goal. He conjures up a scene in which he "pulled the pistol's foreskin back, and then enjoyed the orgasm of the crushed trigger: I was always a good little follower of the Viennese medicine man" (p. 276). On another occasion, Humbert psychoanalyzes the symbolism of the fountain pen, the anatomical relative of the pistol. The fact that Quilty does not use a fountain pen clearly indicates, "as any psychoanalyst will tell you," that the patient was a "repressed undinist" (p. 252). Quilty obligingly admits that he had 110 fun with Dolly because he is "practically impotent," and he then implores Humbert to postpone the killing so that he can nurse his impotence. The actual shooting of Quilty parodies the ineffectuality of Humbert's bullets and the incomplete sexual gratification of the act. As the phallic bullets penetrate Quilty, his face twitches in an absurd clownish manner and he emits a "feminine 'ah!'" as if the bullets were tickling him.

Nabokov parodies the Daddy's Girl theme in *Lolita* and the impotence motif, but he remains more serious about traumatic loss. In the beginning, Humbert discloses cryptically that his mother died in a freak accident—"picnic, lightning"—when he was three years old. He returns to the theme

of maternal loss near the end of the story, telling us that "in retrospect no yearnings of the accepted kind could I ever graft upon any moment of my youth, no matter how savagely psychotherapists heckled me in my later periods of depression" (p. 289). Apart from the question why sadistic therapists would want to heckle him, Humbert fears a similarly tragic death awaiting Lolita. Nabokov teases us with the names of Quilty's plays, such as *The Lady Who Loved Lightning*. Lolita dies not from lightning but during childbirth, as does Humbert's first wife, Valeria. Is there a link between pregnancy and death? Is there a significance in the premature deaths of Humbert's women: his mother, Annabel Leigh, Valeria, Lolita? Is Nabokov parodying the theme of traumatic loss, or is he using parody to conceal the overwhelming pain of death?

In other words, to what extent does Nabokov's use of parody invalidate a psychological interpretation of *Lolita*? If parody is viewed as a protective shield, against what is the novelist defending? No writer poses a greater threat or challenge to psychoanalytic criticism than Nabokov, who is not only the most virulently anti-Freudian artist of the century but one of the greatest literary figures of our time, unquestionably a genius—and a genius at deception. His duplicity, James R. Rambeau has observed, places his readers in a defensive position: "they must first prove they understand what Nabokov is *doing* before they can judge the final effects of his fiction."²⁴ Most readers have concluded that Nabokov's fiction is psychoanalytically impenetrable.

Curiously, Nabokov's condemnation of psychoanalysis derives from his belief that it perpetrates a cruel hoax or deception on an unsuspecting public. "Freudism and all it has tainted with its grotesque implications and methods appears to me to be one of the vilest deceits practiced by people on themselves and on others" (*Strong Opinions*, pp. 2324). One would assume that Nabokov is irrevocably opposed to deception and that everything deceptive is evil. Not true. He consistently affirms the quality of deception within art and nature. "I discovered in nature the non-utilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception" (*Speak, Memory*, p. 125). And in *Strong Opinions* he reveals that "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" (p. 11). How, then, does the deception of the psychoanalyst differ from the artist's duplicity? Cannot the analyst be a good cheat, as the insect and artist are, inventing strategies that unlock hidden truths?

Obviously not, for Nabokov. He praises the artist as an encoder of fictional reality, while he condemns the analyst as a false decoder of psychic reality. The issue for Nabokov is not the question of deep reality—his novels are as multilayered as onions and as difficult to peel—but the principle of freedom and control. Anything that impinges upon the artist's ability to create a self-enclosed and self-determined world becomes a threat to his autonomy. And the major threat lies in the Freudian assertion that man is neither fully

aware nor in control of his fears and desires. Nabokov's reality is generated and sustained by the artist, not the reality unlocked by the analyst. Nothing could be further from Nabokov's assumptions than a world in which dreams follow psychic, as opposed to artistic, laws and which contain meanings discoverable through the tools of psychoanalysis. Nabokov insists that only the artist can create magical reality; only the artist can lie truthfully. In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote mentions that " 'reality' is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average 'reality' perceived by the communal eye" (p. 130). The artist's deceptions lead to freedom and independence; the psychoanalyst's deceptions lead to slavery. For Nabokov, the artist is married to creation, the analyst wedded to destruction.

Behind Nabokov's explicit rejection of psychology lies an implicit psychology of art: the belief that art and psychoanalysis exist at opposite poles of the imagination; the conviction that art, not analysis, is the last defense against suffering and injustice; the affirmation of the artist's autonomy amidst deterministic forces. Art and psychoanalysis represent good and evil, respectively, in Nabokov's world. Thus, Humbert begins his story in a psychopathic ward and drives his doctors crazy. One of Nabokov's earliest and most perceptive critics, Vladislav Khodasevich, wrote in 1937 that the basic theme to which the novelist returns is the "life of the artist and the life of a device in the consciousness of the artist." The artist or writer is

never shown directly, however, but always behind a mask.²⁵ Art becomes a refuge or sanctuary, with the artist, not the therapist, as the real healer.

Contrary to Humbert's assertions, there is an implicit psychology underlying *Lolita*, and it involves Humbert, a lyrical writer, whose theme is the creation and preservation of his beloved nymphet as a delicately wrought object of art. Critics have noted the two Lolitas in the novel: the real Dolores Haze, whose coarse mannerisms and speech betray a satirical and often unflattering portrait of innocence and experience; and the symbolic or mythic Lolita, the creation of Humbert's imagination. There is an almost Platonic need to subordinate the real Dolly Haze to the alluring manmade fantasy of Lolita, to transmute fleshy reality into artistic purity. "What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own" (p. 64). Humbert loves the gum-chewing, comic-book-reading, hardened bobbysoxer, juvenile clichés and all; but he is more enchanted with his own autoerotic creation, the product of his febrile imagination. He cannot help rendering her into an object of art, a fictional love object in his own image. His imagination animates Lolita; without him, she cannot exist. Insofar as Lolita is created by Humbert, a diarist whose heroic faith in the power of language endows her with immortality, he becomes, like his own creator—Vladimir Nabokov—a rescuer and redeemer of beauty and truth.

It is Humbert's imagination, not his phallus, that is the vital energizing spirit behind his artistic creativity. "It is not the artistic aptitudes that are secondary sexual characters as some shams and shamans have said; it is the other way around: sex is but the ancilla of art" (p. 261). Yet, whichever theory of creativity one accepts, the psychoanalyst's or novelist's, Humbert's devotion to Lolita resides less in her body or sex than in his imaginative recreation of her. "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 for all the perilous magic of nymphets" (p. 136). Whether or not we take seriously his self-proclaimed nympholepsy, his fascination for girl-children arises from a paradoxical union of "tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity," a fusion of chaste and profane love. For all its eroticism, *Lolita* remains curiously suspicious of the biological components of sexuality. Like Pygmalion, Humbert demonstrates that the artist can rival God as the creator of life; but unlike the Greek sculptor, Humbert remains more infatuated with the inner artistic vision, the ravished bride of stillness whose flight and pursuit are forever frozen into marble immobility. Humbert inevitably loses Lolita, as all people must lose their loved ones; but through the creation of the manuscript, the writer preserves a merged relationship with her, a union that will never dissolve, not even after the deaths of Dolly Haze and Humbert Humbert. Artistic creation unites artist and subject in an ecstatic oneness suggestive of the mother-child relationship. Humbert's

devotion to art may be seen as an attempt to master the inevitability of death and to recreate a new reality that will defy the ravages of time. The artist thus pursues a rescue fantasy in which the nymphet's unformed beauty is given shape and preserved from change.

At the risk of succumbing to clinical black magic, we may invoke briefly the voodooism of the Viennese witch doctor to explain Humbert's rescue fantasy. In "A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men" (1910), part of Freud's contributions to the psychology of love, the analyst discusses the phenomenon of rescue fantasies and the family romance. He lists four necessary preconditions for this type of object choice. First, there must be an injured third party, such as a husband, finance, or friend, who claims possession of the girl or woman in question. Second, the woman's fidelity or reliability must be open to question—either the faint hint of scandal attached to a married woman or the implication of an openly promiscuous way of life. This is often termed "love for a prostitute." This precondition is necessary, Freud says, because the man experiences jealousy toward the third party. "What is strange is that it is not the lawful possessor of the loved one who becomes the target for this jealousy, but strangers, making their appearance for the first time, in relation to whom the loved one can be brought under suspicion."²⁶ Third, instead of the woman's value being measured by her sexual integrity' and correspondingly reduced by promiscuous behavior, as it is in "normal" love, the situation is reversed. A woman becomes more

desirable as she approaches the behavior of a prostitute. The final precondition is that a man of this type expresses the need to rescue the woman he desires from ruin. "The man is convinced that she is in need of him, that without him she would lose all moral control and rapidly sink to a lamentable level" (p. 168).

The psychical origins of this type of love derive from the infantile fixation of tender feelings on the mother, Freud claims, and represent a consequence of that fixation. The love objects usually turn out to be mother surrogates, and the object from which he is rescuing the mother surrogate usually is the father. "It is at once clear that for the child who is growing up in the family circle the fact of the mother belonging to the father becomes an inseparable part of the mother's essence, and that the injured third party is none other than the father himself" (p. 169). To defend himself against the realization of incestuous attachment to the mother, the son divorces spiritual from sensual love. The split reveals the antithetical image of woman: the Madonna and the prostitute. Freud links the rescue motif to the Oedipus complex (he uses the term for the first time in this essay) and relates it to the idea of the family romance he had discussed in the preface to Otto Rank's well-known book, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*. In the family romance the son exalts one or both of his parents in an effort to recreate the happy, vanished days of his childhood when his parents seemed to be the noblest and dearest of all people. In one of his most daring imaginative leaps in "A

Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men," Freud asserts that the son's need to rescue his mother acquires the significance of giving her a child in his own image:

His mother gave him a life—his own life—and in exchange he gives her another life, that of a child which has the greatest resemblance to himself. The son shows his gratitude by wishing to have by his mother a son who is like himself: in other words, in the rescue-phantasy he is completely identifying himself with his father. All his instincts, those of tenderness, gratitude, lustfulness, defiance and independence, find satisfaction in the single wish *to be his own father*. Even the element of danger has not been lost in the change of meaning; for the act of birth itself is the danger from which he was saved by his mother's efforts (p. 173).

Without presuming to illuminate the mystery of *Lolita*, we may suggest that Humbert's rescue fantasy affirms the refuge of art, the only immortality he can bequeath upon his beloved Dolly. Just as the rescue fantasy implies a splitting of the mother image into the sacred and profane, so does Humbert see Lolita and all nymphets as a paradoxical fusion of tender dreamy childishness and eerie vulgarity. From a legal point of view, he kidnaps and corrupts an innocent adolescent; yet from the novelist's point of view, he attempts to rescue her from sordid reality and to worship her to the point of Mariolatry. There are several ironies surrounding Lolita's identity and Humbert's treatment of her. The innocent girl turns out to be far more sexually experienced than Humbert ever imagined, and it is she who seduces him. Although Humbert does not know this in advance, her desirability to him only increases when she is stolen by Quilty, the "injured third party" and the

object of Humbert's rage. Humbert is less guilty of sexually violating Lolita than of attempting to control omnipotently her life and smothering her independence. Gladys M. Clifton is certainly correct when she argues that readers have tended to overvalue Humbert's perspective and to undervalue Lolita's.²⁷

Ironically, although Humbert brutally thwarts Lolita's natural wishes for separation and independence, thus depriving her not only of her childhood but her right to choose her own adult life, he also unconsciously attempts to save her from the life experiences, particularly marriage and motherhood, that will eventually destroy her. The world of reality proves deadly to the doomed Lolita, not because Humbert is trying to extinguish her autonomy, but because the novel insists upon her premature crucifixion by time and the biological trap. Risking life and liberty for the pursuit of a cruel mistress, Humbert is the classic unrequited lover, betrayed by a woman who is unaware of his heroic sacrifice. This too is one of the preconditions Freud talks about in his analysis of the rescue fantasy. "By her propensity to be fickle and unfaithful the loved one brings herself into dangerous situations, and thus it is understandable that the lover should be at pains to protect her from these dangers by watching over her virtue and counteracting her bad inclinations" (p. 172). This is what Humbert does: He is an all-controlling father.

The little we learn about his own father is inconclusive evidence on which to speculate Humbert's relationship to the family romance. Besides, Nabokov is probably setting another trap for the psychoanalytic reader who is seeking a connection between the father and son. Humbert insists he adored his father, a strong, virile man. It may be that Humbert's attraction to the tomboyish quality of nymphets contains a bisexual element related to his identification with the father. "The specific psychological character of Humbert's perversion is very close to homosexuality," Andrew Field writes, emphasizing, however, that Humbert is not in fact homosexual.²⁸ By contrast, Quilty is homosexual and represents Humbert's perverse alter ego. Nabokov's parody of the double has been extensively explored.²⁹ Psychoanalytically, the phenomenon of the double affirms the ability to split off part of die self to maintain a cohesive identity. Quilty may be interpreted in several ways: a narcissistic extension of the self, a mirror image of Humbert's bad self, the human tendency toward duplication. Otto Rank's conclusion in his pioneering study, *The Double*, has interesting relevance to the Humbert-Quilty relationship. "So it happens that the double, who personifies narcissistic self-love, becomes an unequivocal rival in sexual love; or else, originally created as a wish-defense against a dreaded eternal destruction, he reappears in superstition as the messenger of death."³⁰ Compared to perverted Quilty, Humbert seems wondrously normal. Humbert refers to him as his brother, but he may also be the bad father in his unloving treatment of Lolita. Hence

Humbert's need to murder him. Both men are artists, one an enormously prolific playwright, the other a lyrical-confessional novelist. Significantly, neither Quilty nor Humbert is procreative.

Lolita is a novel of passion but not procreation. The distinction is worth pursuing. The link among love, pregnancy, and death identifies the novel with fatal passion, destructive to the childbearing mother and aborted offspring. Lolita's death seems to be a punishment for her illicit love, illicit not from society's point of view but from Humbert's, the brokenhearted lover. The deaths of his first wife, Valeria, and eternal wife, Lolita, reveal a sterility associated with reality that sharply contrasts the fecundity of the artist's imagination. Lolita's creativity turns out to be literally a figment of Humbert's imagination. Feeling her warm weight in his lap, he remarks that he was "always 'with Lolita,' as a woman is 'with child' " (p. 109). As man and artist, Humbert embodies all the roles in the Freudian family romance. He is the loyal son devoted to the muse of invention; the mature lover or enchanted hunter in quest of his Mission Dolores; the spiritual father hovering over his child in an effort to protect her from inartistic lovers and from the mortal enemy of the nymphet, time; and the mother creator, always pregnant with Lolita, begetting and immortalizing her through the novelist's act of labor, the creation of art.

The Freudian interpretation of Humbert's rescue fantasy suggests an

underlying Oedipal level of meaning, but, in light of more recent psychoanalytic research in the areas of ego psychology, identity formation, and separation and individuation, other meanings emerge from *Lolita*. Although, in his attack on psychoanalysis, Nabokov does not seem to be aware of ego psychology, the shift in emphasis away from instinctual drives to the defensive and adaptive functions of the autonomous ego, Humbert's commitment to art reveals an attempt to master fears of death and to preserve forever Lolita's beauty. This agrees with Phyllis Roth's conclusion that "despite his asseverations to the contrary, Nabokov, like others, employed his art to master fears, anxieties, and unacceptable desires, transforming them into a transcendent fiction which is acceptably 'aesthetic.'"³¹ Paradoxically, the fear of death leads to the strongest affirmation of immortality, thus demonstrating Nabokov's triumphant assertion of individuality and free will. One of the mysteries of the novel is how Humbert can continue to idealize Lolita even after she repeatedly rejects him. But Nabokov also shows how the creative process resolves the dualistic tension between unity and separation. Before Humbert writes the manuscript, he is separated from Lolita; yet he fuses with her during the creative act to achieve a new union. And insofar as his story is intended for others to read and participate in, Nabokov affirms once again the paradox of separation and oneness that defines all interactions. Humbert's merging with a higher ideal that will outlive him has an undeniably therapeutic effect on him. "I see

nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art" (p. 285). Humbert is the only therapist Nabokov celebrates, the creative artist, who rescues life from death, form from chaos, triumph from defeat.

Lolita also has interesting implications for Kohut's emerging self-psychology. Although Humbert sees Lolita with painful clarity, he also idealizes her and mirrors her self-love.³² The act of writing resembles the mirroring and idealizing transference relationship that Kohut speaks about in the treatment of narcissistic personality disorders, though it is not necessary to label Humbert in pathological terms. Kohut's psychology, in fact, can be extended to normal personality development.³³ Viewed from this perspective, the creation of the manuscript allows Humbert to restore his damaged self by transmuting the object (or in Kohutian terms the self-object) of his autoerotic love, Lolita, into new internalizations. Through art he achieves a restoration of the self.

Lolita, then, is not exempt from its own unique subterranean mythic system and psychology. Curiously, Nabokov's story is a reversal of the fairy tale of the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood that Kinbote dismisses in *Pale Fire*. Fromm's interpretation, we recall, suggests that the wolf is made ridiculous in the attempt to imitate a pregnant woman by having a living being in its belly. Humbert does not eat Lolita, though he would like to. "My only grudge against

nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys" (p. 167). Humbert first incorporates her into his imagination and then into the body of his art. Interestingly, in Nabokov's fairy tale the roles of the huntsman and wolf are reversed. Instead of rescuing the innocent teenager, the huntsman marries her, impregnates her, and fills her belly with the living thing that will eventually destroy her. As lover and husband, Dick Schiller is the unenchanted hunter. Life without art is sterile and meaningless. By contrast, the poetical wolf is the good father in his attempt to rescue his beloved daughter from Quilty's maltreatment and Schiller's artificial insemination. Despite the wolf's tyrannical control over her, neither his voracious appetite nor his deceptive identity has harmed the little girl. Fromm's interpretation of the classic fairy tale emphasizes the man's defeat in the Oedipal battle, but in Nabokov's transformation the wolf has the last word. He has swallowed the delicious girl and then given birth to a new Lolita who will outlive all the participants in the magical drama.

Given their differences over sex, love, psychoanalysis, and art, it is impossible to believe that Freud and Nabokov could ever agree on anything; yet, in the final analysis, there are surprising similarities between the two. The voodooism or black magic of the Viennese witch doctor parallels the marvelous spells and wiles of the novelist, who remains a trickster. In Nabokov's view, Freud is more of an artist (albeit a bad one) than a social

scientist, and the Russian is always attempting to prove that his magic is more potent than the Viennese's. Indeed, Nabokov's sorcery may be viewed as an elaborate "disappearing act" to cast the psychoanalyst into the void, yet in a curious way he needed to keep Freud alive, if only to make him appear upon command in his forewords and fictions. Nabokov's criticisms of Freud may also be turned against the novelist. Rejecting Freud's labyrinthine symbolism and mythology ("something like searching for Baconian acrostics in Shakespeare's works"), Nabokov himself became, next to Joyce, the supreme fabulous artificer of twentieth-century literature. He has devised a fictional system of Baconian acrostics that has confounded a generation of literary critics eager to decipher hidden patterns and wicked word puzzles in his writings. Moreover, both men adapted their obsessional personalities to creative purposes. Freud's quest for knowledge and faith in his intellectual powers were matched by Nabokov's complete mastery and omnipotent control of his fictional universe. Freud's case studies probably contain no greater assortment of mad and eccentric characters than those found in Nabokov's stories, which present a dazzling array of psychopaths, sadists, perverts, paranoids, and suicides. Freud wrote like a novelist (when his name was mentioned for the Nobel Prize, it was more often for literature than for medicine), and Nabokov had the insight of a shrewd clinician. Both geniuses changed their professions in ways we are only beginning to understand. Each was fascinated by the other's field but also deeply ambivalent toward it.

Although Freud's admiration for the artist is well known, he also disparaged him, reducing the man of letters to a neurotic³⁴ or a narcissist³⁵ and claiming that unlike the scientist, which he considered himself to be, the artist is incapable of abstinence³⁶ or renunciation.³⁷ Nabokov reciprocated these feelings with a vengeance.

Finally, both men had strong prejudices and, in affirming the autonomy of their separate disciplines, erred in ways that are not dissimilar. Not only does Freud equate art with the pleasure principle and science with the reality principle, he makes the astonishing statement that "We may lay it down that a happy person never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one."³⁸ The psychoanalyst can be guilty of the most outrageous pronouncements: "The 'creative' imagination, indeed, is quite incapable of *inventing* anything; it can only combine components that are strange to one another."³⁹ The assertion is no less startling than Nabokov's insistence that the artist's fictional universe remains fiercely independent of reality. "Literature was born not the day when a boy crying wolf, wolf came running out of the Neanderthal valley with a big gray wolf at his heels: literature was born on the day when a boy came crying wolf, wolf and there was no wolf behind him" (*Lectures on Literature*, p. 5). Future scholars will no doubt explore the extent to which Nabokov's celebrated Wolf Man, Humbert Humbert, echoes the unheard cries of the young artist. Nor should this distress Nabokov's faithful readers. It is inconceivable that biographical knowledge will diminish the greatness of his

achievement or the mystery of his art. As Freud prudently wrote, "Before the problem of the creative artist analysis must, alas, lay down its arms"—a truth and truce not even Nabokov would fail to heed.⁴⁰

Notes

¹ The following editions by Nabokov are cited in the text. All references are to these editions. *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969); Alfred Appel, Jr., ed., *The Annotated Lolita* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970); *Bend Sinister*, 1947 (New York: McGraw-Hill, paperback ed., 1974); *The Defense*, 1930 English translation by Nabokov and Michael Scammell (New York: Putnam, 1964); *Despair*, 1936 English translation by Nabokov (New York: Putnam, 1966); *The Eye*, 1938 English translation (New York: Phaedra, 1965), *Glory*, 1932 English translation by Dimitri Nabokov and Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971); *King, Queen, Knave*, 1928 English translation by Dimitri Nabokov and Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968); Fredson Bowers, ed., *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980); *Pale Fire* (New York: Putnam, 1962); *Pnin* (New York: Doubleday, 1957); Page Stegner, ed., *The Portable Nabokov* (New York: Viking, 1973); *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, 1941 (New York: New Directions, 1959); *A Russian Beauty and Other Stories* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973); *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, rev. ed. (New York: Putnam, 1966); *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973); *The Waltz Invention* 1938 English translation (New York: Phaedra, 1966).

² Richard Curie, *The Last Twelve Tears of Joseph Conrad* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1928), p. 26.

³ Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), P-264.

⁴ Appel, ed., *The Annotated Lolita*, op. cit., p. lxi-lxii.

⁵ Page Stegner, *The Portable Nabokov*, op. cit., p. xxi.

⁶ Page Stegner, *Escape into Aesthetics* (New York: The Dial Press, 1966), p. 43.

⁷ James Robitscher, *The Powers of Psychiatry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), P-473-

[8](#) Quoted by Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, op. cit., p. 263.

[9](#) Thomas R. Frosch, "Parody and Authenticity in *Lolita*," in J. E. Rivers and Charles Nicol, eds., *Nabokov's Fifth Arc* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), p. 175.

[10](#) Douglas Fowler, *Reading Nabokov* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 196.

[11](#) Alfred Appel, Jr., 'Nabokov: A Portrait,' in J. E. Rivers and Charles Nicol, eds., op. cit., *The Fifth Arc*, p. 5. For Nabokov's attitude toward his father and the details of V. D. Nabokov's murder, see Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Part* (New York: Viking, 1977), *passim*.

[12](#) Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Part*, op. cit., p. 275.

[13](#) See Page Stegner, *Escape into Aesthetics*, op. cit., pp. 35-43, and G. M. Hyde, *Vladimir Nabokov: America's Russian Novelist* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977). Hyde correctly points out that "It would be wrong to assume that Nabokov has *in fact* repudiated Freud just because of his frequent anti-Freudian quips." He also agrees with Stegner that Nabokov's objections to Freud often seem themselves obsessive (pp. 96-97, n. 24).

[14](#) Although no one has yet commented upon this, *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, Simon Karlinsky, ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1979) contains a veiled reference to Nabokov's "nervous exhaustion" in June 1946, shortly after completing *Bend Sinister*. Nabokov writes in a letter to Wilson:

With the feeling I had 1. some serious heart trouble, 2. ulcers, 3. cancer in the gullet and 4. stones everywhere, I had myself thoroughly examined at a good hospital. The doctor (a Prof. Siegfried Tannhäuser) found that I was constitutionally in fine shape but was suffering from acute nervous exhaustion due to the entomology-Wellesley-novel combination, and suggested my taking a two months' vacation (p. 170).

In the next letter to Wilson, July 18, 1946, Nabokov adds: "I am 'recuperating' (from what was practically a 'nervous breakdown') in New Hampshire." Nabokov's use of quotation marks in the second letter suggests a greater degree of ironic self-detachment than in the first letter where the tone, apart from the contrived Wagnerian name of the doctor, is more serious. If he was indeed approaching a mental breakdown, it seems unlikely that

he would have consulted a much-hated psychotherapist. Andrew Field makes no mention of this in *Nabokov: His Life in Part*, though he does say that "throughout his life Nabokov has suffered from recurrent headaches, which no pills have helped enough" (p. 251).

[15](#) Phyllis A. Roth, "Toward the Man Behind the Mystification," J. E. Rivers and Charles Nicol, eds., *The Fifth Arc*, op. cit., p. 58.

[16](#) Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Part*, op. cit., p. 96.

[17](#) Kinbote errs slightly in the spelling of Pfister's book, which is *The Psychoanalytic Method*, Charles Rockwell Payne, trans. (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1917). All references are to this edition.

[18](#) It is obvious from Appel's misspelling that he has not read Pfister's book.

[19](#) Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1951), p. 241. All references are to this edition. A contemporary psychoanalytic interpretation of Little Red Riding Hood may be seen in Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

[20](#) Elizabeth Phillips, "The Hocus-Pocus of *Lolita*," *Literature and Psychology*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Autumn 1960), p. 101. Phillips argues that in *Lolita* Nabokov is satirizing Marie Bonaparte's psychoanalytic study of Edgar Allan Poe.

[21](#) Van is referring to Freud's letter to Wilhelm Fliess, 19 February 1899, in which he alludes to an individual with a fantasy of being a "deflowerer" of every person he comes across. See Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1954), p. 278. After returning home from a trip to the Rockies, Nabokov wrote a letter to Edmund Wilson in August 1956 in which in a bemused tone he quotes from Freud's correspondence. "Incidentally, in one of his letters to Fliess the Viennese Sage mentions a young patient who masturbated in the w. c. of an Interlaken hotel in a special contracted position so as to be able to glimpse (now comes the Viennese Sage's curative explanation) the Jungfrau" (Karlinsky, ed., *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, p. 300). Karlinsky misdates Freud's letter to Fliess to which Nabokov alludes. Interestingly, in *Lolita* there is a three-page account of Humbert's ecstatic masturbation in the presence of his "Jungfrau," the maiden Dolly Haze.

[22](#) Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, op. cit., p. 338.

[23](#) See L. R. Hiatt, "Nabokov's *Lolita*: A 'Freudian' Cryptic Crossword," *American Imago*, Vol. 24 (1967), pp. 360-370. Hiatt argues that despite Nabokov's antipathy to psychoanalysis, he endows Humbert with the classic symptoms of an Oedipus complex. "Nabokov has given him an Oedipus complex; he has also given him a set of defenses against self-understanding. He has, in addition, thrown up a smoke-screen to hide his hero's secret from public gaze. It is a strange game for an author to play. If he wins, the reader loses the point of the book" (p. 370).

[24](#) James R. Rambeau, "Nabokov's Critical Strategy," J. E. Rivers and Charles Nicol, eds., *The Fifth Arc*, op. cit., p. 30.

[25](#) Vladislav Khodasevich, "On Sirin," in Alfred Appel, Jr. and Charles Newman, eds., *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations, and Tributes* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 100.

[26](#) Sigmund Freud, "A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men" (1910), *Standard Edition* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), Vol. XI, p. 167. All references are to this edition.

[27](#) Gladys M. Clifton, "Humbert Humbert and the Limits of Artistic License," J. E. Rivers and Charles Nicol, eds., *The Fifth Arc*, op. cit., p. 164.

[28](#) Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, op. cit., p. 339. It is appropriate to mention here, as Field does in *Nabokov: His Life in Part*, the "remarkable gallery of homosexual characters in Nabokov's writing" (p. 63). Psychoanalytic biographers may wish to explore the relationship between Nabokov's artistic preoccupation with homosexuality and his keen distress over his brother Sergei's homosexuality. Nabokov's maternal uncle, Vasily Ivanovich, was also homosexual. Field records Nabokov's inordinate difficulty in speaking about his brother's homosexuality despite the fact, as the biographer observes, that "I know well and with no possibility of error that Sergei's homosexuality was a subject about which his brother himself spoke with the greatest frankness and naturalness, even to his sisters and his mother" (*Nabokov: His Life in Part*, p. 13). Nabokov's father was an expert on the legal and social ramifications of homosexuality. According to Field, Vladimir Nabokov shared his father's belief that homosexuality was an illness transmitted by heredity. By contrast, a contemporary view would suggest that gender identity arises from psychological and interpersonal factors. In *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, Karlinsky

mentions that Sergei died in a German concentration camp as a consequence of Hitler's campaign to exterminate homosexuals (p. 157, n. 4).

Nabokov's interest in homosexuality almost certainly derives from autobiographical concerns and, given his fascination with identical twins as well as his physical resemblance to Sergei (as suggested by a photograph of the two brothers in *Nabokov: His Life in Part*), it may be that his parody of the homosexual theme in the Humbert-Quilty *Doppelgänger* relationship and elsewhere is a defense against submerged bisexual drives and an effort to transform fears and anxieties into art.

[29](#) To cite but a few works: Claire Rosenfeld, "The Shadow Within: The Conscious and Unconscious Use of the Double," *Daedalus*, Vol. 92 (1963), pp. 326-344; Robert Rogers, *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970); Phyllis A. Roth, "The Psychology of the Double in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," *Essays in Literature*, Vol. 2 (1975), pp. 209-229.

[30](#) Otto Rank, *The Double*, Harry Tucker, Jr., ed. and trans. New York: Meridian, 1979), p. 86. For an excellent study of Rank's importance as an unacknowledged forerunner of ego psychology and modern developmental theory, see Esther Menaker, *Otto Rank: A Rediscovered Legacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

[31](#) Phyllis A. Roth, *The Fifth Arc*, J. E. Rivers and Charles Nicol, eds., op. cit., p. 44.

[32](#) Clifton points out in *The Fifth Arc*, J. E. Rivers and Charles Nicol, eds., op. cit., that the most convincingly erotic passage in the novel "is not one in which Humbert actually possesses Lolita but one which involves masturbation" (p. 167).

[33](#) See, for example, Robert D. Stolorow and Frank M. Lachman, *Psychoanalysis of Developmental Arrests* (New York: International Universities Press, 1980) and Arnold Goldberg, ed., *Advances in Self Psychology* (New York: International Universities Press, 1980).

[34](#) Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Part III (1916-1917), *Standard Edition* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1963), Vol. XVI, pp. 375-376.

[35](#) Stanley A. Leavy, trans., *The Freud Journal of Lou Andreas-Salome* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), p. 109.

- [36](#) Sigmund Freud, " 'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness"(1908), *Standard Edition* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1959), Vol. IX, p. 197.
- [37](#) Sigmund Freud, "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning" (1911), *Standard Edition* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), Vol. XII, p. 224.
- [38](#) Sigmund Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (1908), (London: The Hogarth Press, 1959), *Standard Edition*, Vol. IX, p. 146.
- [39](#) Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Part II (1915-1916), *Standard Edition* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), Vol. XV, p. 172.
- [40](#) Sigmund Freud, "Dostoevsky and Parricide," (1928), *Standard Edition* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), Vol. XXI, p. 177.

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