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# Faust in Lolita: Composing sins, souls, and rhetorical redemption

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*Faust in Lolita:*

Composing Sins, Souls, and Rhetorical Redemption

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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ABSTRACT

Goethe's *Faust* and Nabokov's *Humbert* both are erudite, middle-aged European scholars who, experiencing a convergence of academic and existential ennui, set eyes upon a young girl and instantly are consumed with lust. In both works the girls' widowed mothers die as a result of the protagonists' lustful intentions; a cross-country flight ensues; the once-respected scholars are wanted for murder; and Gretchen and Lolita each suffer from their sexual and emotional objectification. But the connections between Goethe's play and Nabokov's novel extend far beyond plot points, or even their decidedly different receptions in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany versus mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America. Each incorporates thematic elements of temptation, sin, moral versus societal law, and perhaps, most important, damnation versus possible redemption. Combined, these striking thematic and textual similarities raise the compelling argument that Nabokov consciously and deliberately was reworking the Faust legend for a modern American audience. Moreover, this hidden compositional structure to a novel that many have called one of the greatest works of twentieth century American literature was one of Nabokov's most jealously guarded secrets, one he took deliberate measures to ensure never would be uncovered. And until now, that has been the case.

Part of the reason may lie in Nabokov's often kaleidoscopic use of Goethe's famous play. In Goethe's version of the legend, for instance, the wager for Faust's soul between the Lord and Mephisto is rendered explicitly in the "Prologue in Heaven" scene. In *Lolita*, however, this soul-battle is rendered implicitly. Humbert makes repeated references to the dual forces of "God" or "winged gentlemen of the jury," for example, or else to the demonic element personified by what he calls "McFate." At any moment, he fears one or the other may steal from him his life's deepest hunger: to possess a nymphet.

Through an examination of both primary and secondary texts, this dissertation connects and illustrates the hidden structure of Goethe's *Faust* in Nabokov's *Lolita*. Furthermore, it is argued that this structure allowed Nabokov to rhetorically address issues of deepest concern to him, most notably the future immortality of the human soul.

## Introduction

One day in 1950, Vladimir Nabokov carried the first few chapters of *Lolita* into the backyard of his Ithaca, New York home and headed resolutely toward the garden incinerator. The manuscript, he later would recall with supreme understatement, was “beset with technical difficulties,” and Nabokov had such “doubts” about it that he was on the verge of transforming his stack of pages into ashes. The only reason *Lolita* did not burn to a crisp and float heavenward, he said, was that his wife Vera stopped him and urged to think it over again. (SO 105)

Nabokov does not tell us what month this occurred, or provide even a hint of it—whether the sky was cobalt blue or gun-metal gray, for example, or whether certain leaves on the trees had changed color—but no doubt it was a bleak day, as any writer who has ever come up against a compositional gauntlet can attest. To reach such a point of total destruction (compared to, say, crumpling sheets and tossing them into the wastebasket, where perchance they might be retrieved later), a writer must feel much more than just “doubts”; he or she must have the inner conviction that every thread has now become a tangled, knotted skein, that separating or even attempting to loosen any of those threads either would be hopeless or useless.

Evidence suggests, however, that as far as *Lolita* was concerned, this was a point Nabokov had reached more than once. As early as 1948, Vera was horrified to discover her

husband outside their home feeding pages of the manuscript into the blazing incinerator. After salvaging the few pages she could and stomping on them to put out the flames, she responded to her husband's protestations by screaming at him to "get away from there!" (Schiff 166-67) Clearly, Vera believed that her husband did not appreciate the worthiness of what he had written.

On the surface, Nabokov's literary bonfires may not appear to carry much import. After all, every writer struggles at some point with a text, and many decide, as Nabokov must have done, that an approach is not working as they had hoped. Several well known early drafts, too, actually met the same fate Nabokov intended for *Lolita*, among them Stevenson's *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Gogol's *Dead Souls*. (Schiff 167) In the case of Nabokov, however, the book burning incidents take on particular meaning. In them we not only can narrow the timeframe in which Nabokov actively was struggling to discover an element he clearly viewed as deficient in the novel—a deficiency that, by some reckoning, had lasted nearly fifteen years—but also something even more crucial: the point at which his so-called "technical difficulties" were overcome.

By definition, technical problems require technical resolutions, and so uncovering Nabokov's "solution" to his own riddle very possibly would reveal to scholars an elegant structure to the novel that Nabokov had grappled with for years. It is my view that Nabokov's breakthrough was inspired by another text written more than a century earlier: Goethe's *Faust*. As this dissertation will explore, by using key scenes as well as textual and thematic elements from *Faust*, Nabokov finally found a structure upon which to hang the novel that had stymied him for so many years.

In contrast to a missing structural element, however, the theme of *Lolita* appears to have been firmly set almost from its inception. The idea of an older man marrying a woman in order to gain access to her prepubescent daughter was one that Nabokov had entertained as early as the mid-1930s. Indeed, the theme appears as a character's musing about a future book in a paragraph of *The Gift*, an almost novel-length satirical biography first published in serial form in Russian émigré newspapers while Nabokov lived in Berlin:

Ah, if only I had a tick or two, what a novel I'd whip off! From real life. Imagine this kind of thing: an old dog—but still in his prime, fiery, thirsty for happiness—gets to know a widow, and she has a daughter, still quite a little girl—you know what I mean—when nothing is formed yet but already she has a way of walking that drives you out of your mind—A slip of a girl, very fair, pale, with blue under the eyes—and of course she doesn't even look at the old goat. What to do? Well, not long thinking, he ups and marries the widow. Here you can go on indefinitely—the temptation, the eternal torment, the itch, the mad hopes... (Nabokov, qtd. in Appel Annotated 166-67)

Four years later, Nabokov transformed that paragraph into a novella called *The Enchanter*, written sometime between 1935 and 1937.

Narrated in third-person, its pedophilic protagonist is an outwardly respectable and well-spoken man who marries a sickly widow in order to get access to her young daughter. As will be seen in *Lolita*, the protagonist takes the girl to a hotel, but when the girl begins to scream and his incestuous intent is discovered by others, he ends up throwing himself in front of a truck, a fate that Nabokov later bestows upon Charlotte Haze. In *The Enchanter*,



the illicit freedom the protagonist desired so intensely thus becomes his prison, and for him the only escape is death.

Also discernable within *The Enchanter*, however, are the protagonist's attempts at self-justification, another theme that likewise will find its way into *Lolita*:

Knowing, rationally, that the Euphrates apricot is harmful only in canned form; that sin is inseparable from civic custom; that all hygienes have their hyena; knowing, moreover, that this self-same rationality is not averse to vulgarizing that to which it is otherwise denied access... ( 4)

The idea of sin being “inseparable from civic custom,” of course, is an idea that fully flowers in *Lolita*, as Humbert repeatedly seeks to justify his obsession with nymphets by pointing out the seeming arbitrariness of various state laws about the so-called “age of consent,” as well as by providing culturally and historically conflicting examples of what is age-appropriate or not, such as with Dante and Beatrice. The “Euphrates apricot,” which a footnote tells us was thought by some to “have been the true identity of the Biblical apple,” likewise will reappear in *Lolita* as an “Eden red apple” that Lo tosses into the air.

Nabokov touches upon additional themes and images in *The Enchanter* that later will become major motifs in *Lolita*, including repeated references to angels, demons, fate, and, particularly, the soul. The little girl he espies has “a soul that seemed submerged, but in radiant moistness” and a “wisp of a soul” (18); she takes off her roller skates and “then, returning to earth among the rest of us, she stood up with an instantaneous sensation of heavenly barefootedness...” (9) and “she straightened, stretching up like an angel” (64). The protagonist begins “to suffer from the ceaseless vacillation of his soul” (43).

But even more noteworthy, perhaps, are two references, which will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter, to Goethe's *Faust*. In the following passage, the protagonist's thoughts are put in quotation marks as Nabokov, in an uncharacteristically clumsy manner, constructs a method for allowing the reader inside the main character's thoughts within an otherwise third-person narrative:

Here I invoke the law of degrees that I repudiated where I found it insulting: often I have tried to catch myself in the transition from one kind of tenderness to the other, from the simple to the special, and would very much like to know whether they are mutually exclusive, whether they must, after all, be assigned to different genera, or whether one is a rare flowering of the other on the Walpurgis night of my murky soul...(Enchanter 5)

Walpurgis night is a key scene in *Faust*, and is practically synonymous with the concept of sin and orgiastic debauchery. But still another "hint" at Goethe exists within this text. After the protagonist marries the girl's mother, and the mother then dies of her disease, he is "consoled" by his dead wife's friend:

Feigning total shock—which was simplest of all, as murderers know too—he sat like a benumbed widower, his larger-than-life hands lowered, scarcely moving his lips in reply to her advice that he relieve the constipation of grief with tears, and watched with a turbid gaze as she blew her nose (all three were united by the cold—that was better). (50)

The word "turbid," of course, is unusual enough. Meaning murky, muddy or cloudy, in English it generally is conjoined with water quality. But paired with the word "gaze," it is

even more unusual. But exactly these two words present themselves within the first two lines of the translated “Dedication” poem that Goethe wrote for *Faust*:

Once more you near me, wavering apparitions  
That early showed before the turbid gaze. (1)

It is possible, of course, that Nabokov had come across this term elsewhere; it appears, for example, in one work by Henry James. But Appel provides another tantalizing possibility when he explains in his footnotes that “during his émigré period in Germany in the twenties and early thirties, Nabokov published Russian translations of many of the writers alluded to by H.H. [Humbert],” including Goethe (Annotated 359).

What is particularly noteworthy in reference to both “Walpurgis night” and “turbid gaze” is that it almost appears as if, on some innermost or intuitive level, Nabokov had, from the very start, consciously or unconsciously appropriated elements from *Faust* for his own theme of an older man obsessed with a young girl, as if Goethe’s *Faust* had lodged itself within him as a trope for the price of lust and debauchery.

Published posthumously in 1986, *The Enchanter’s* back jacket quite rightfully proclaims it to be “the Ur-*Lolita*, the precursor to Nabokov’s classic novel.” Indeed, even Nabokov, in 1959, referred to it as “a kind of pre-*Lolita*” (Enchanter xx). Still, Nabokov clearly had mixed feelings about the work, which might explain why it was not published in his lifetime. In an interview with Alfred Appel, for example, Nabokov claimed that the reason he chose not to publish the story was that the little girl in the story—a girl, it should be noted, who is never even named—possessed “little semblance of reality” (Appel, Annotated xxxviii). That view is shared by Nabokov biographer Brian Boyd, who cites additional key problems with the text:

In “The Enchanter” in 1939, Nabokov had attempted with only partial success to portray the consuming passion of a young man for young girls...One of its most unsavory and unsatisfying parts was the mother of the young girl, who barely existed apart from her diseased and moribund condition. Her successor, on the other hand, is among the undoubted triumphs of *Lolita*: Charlotte Haze, “one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality, but never her soul” (American 116).

This assessment, however, is gentler than another description Boyd offers in the first volume of his exhaustive and stunningly written biography of Nabokov:

Even if *Lolita* had never been written, “The Enchanter” would still have to be judged a failure. No matter how intelligent, the story’s style cannot by itself vivify its unrealized world. Nevertheless we should be grateful for this failed experiment. It reminds us that even after his bold choice of subject for *Lolita*, Nabokov still had to find the characters, psychology, plot, setting, narrative voice, and tone to suit. “The Enchanter” testifies to the sheer difficulty of the task he undertook in *Lolita*, no matter how easy, how harmonious, how perfect he made it all look on his second try. (Russian 514)

His comments to Appel notwithstanding, however, Nabokov appears at some point to have had a change of heart about his *Lolita* precursor. In a 1959 letter to the president of G.P. Putnam’s Sons, for example, Nabokov proposed publishing the novella, acknowledging that he had once thought of it as “a dead scrap during my work on *Lolita*,” but that he had reconsidered it. Now that he had broken his “creative connection” with *Lolita* and reread it, he said, he found the novella to be “a beautiful piece of Russian prose, precise and lucid...”

Interestingly, although Putnam's expressed interest in seeing the work, Nabokov, for unknown reasons, apparently never sent it (Enchanter xix-xx).

Whatever the reasons for *The Enchanter* remaining unpublished until his son, Dmitri, translated it after Nabokov's death, it was a work that clearly continued to haunt him. By 1946 Nabokov had begun to transform the novella into a novel (Boyd, American 169). To be sure, Nabokov's work on it was intermittent and interspersed with academic responsibilities as well as other projects. Nevertheless, by 1950, he told the Russian historian Marc Szeftel that he was "at work on an American version of that manuscript [*The Enchanter*]" (Schiff 168), work that would remain frustrated for several more years. It was only when Nabokov found the answer to whatever compositional problems had plagued him, only when he had broken through barriers that had haunted him as far back as 1939, that he was able to finally write what many consider, along with James Joyce's *Ulysses*, to be the greatest English language novel of the twentieth century.

This is where the incinerator anecdote plays a role. To understand the significance of Nabokov's gravitation toward the can of fire—and most importantly, how anomalous that gravitation was for him—one first needs a bit of background about his typical writing methodology, if such a term can be used about a creative process. Nabokov himself was loathe to discuss the specific elements involved in the germination of any book ("No fetus should undergo an exploratory operation"), but he did, on occasion, discuss what might be called his general or typical approach to writing. (SO 29)

Normally, as he explained in a 1962 BBC interview, Nabokov's compositional style very often was akin to piecing together a jigsaw puzzle. First he would have the entire picture of the short story or novel clear in his mind, and only then would he sit down to

write by “picking out a piece here and a piece there and filling out part of the sky and part of the landscape and part of the—I don’t know, the carousing hunters.” As if lifting up his linguistic palette to a paint-by-numbers canvas of his own creation, this approach freed him, he said, from having to write “consecutively from the beginning to the next chapter and so on to the end” (SO 16-17).

In another interview, conducted in 1964 with *Playboy* magazine, Nabokov expanded upon his hopscotch compositional style, describing it as one that permitted him to follow any creative instinct he had about his future work:

All I know is that at a very early stage of the novel’s development I get this urge to garner bits of straw and fluff, and eat pebbles...I am inclined to assume that what I call, for want of a better term, inspiration, had been already at work, mutely pointing at this or that, having me accumulate the known materials for an unknown structure. After the first shock of recognition—the sudden sense of ‘*this* is what I’m going to write’—the novel starts to breed by itself; the process goes on solely in the mind, not on paper; and to be aware of the stage it has reached at any given moment, I do not have to be conscious of every exact phrase. (SO 31)

Nabokov’s reference to “known materials for an unknown structure” highly suggests that this initial stage was both instinctual as well as grounded in certainty, much like a magpie that furiously gathers glinting objects to line a future nest.

Only after Nabokov had finished with his garnering together of “straw and fluff and pebbles”—in other words, his inspired thoughts, perceptions, research notes, and data—did the actual shape of the work reveal itself to him. This, Nabokov said, was the critical point at which he felt a sense of inner certainty that he could begin writing:

There comes a moment when I am informed from within that the entire structure is finished. All I have to do know is take it down in pencil or pen. Since this entire structure, dimly illuminated in one's mind, can be compared to a painting, and since you do not have to work gradually from left to right for its proper perception, I may direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing. I do not begin my novel at the beginning. I do not reach chapter three before I reach chapter four, I do not go dutifully from one page to the next, in consecutive order; no, I pick out a bit here and a bit there, till I have filled all the gaps on paper. (SO 31-32)

This description of his approach to writing is, to be sure, a bit like having been handed a penlight to explore the Grand Canyon at midnight; it only illumines a small streak in one of the vastest talents of the twentieth century. What is more, any writer who hopes by it to glean more insight into Nabokov's compositional methodology most likely will respond to his technique of filling "all the gaps on paper" the way one of Michelangelo's students might have done if told that the Italian master's secret was to first have a clear mental picture of the statue, and then to simply chip away at everything that did not look like David.

Nevertheless, what it does tell us is that Nabokov's mental "picture" first had to be complete before he began the actual composing process. Nabokov, in fact, refers to this on several occasions. In 1947, for example, he responded to Katherine White's request for material for the *New Yorker* magazine by saying, "I do have a story for you—but it is still in my head; quite complete however; ready to emerge; the pattern showing through the wingcases of the pupa." Boyd observes that when Nabokov "did set on paper what had

been so fully formed in his head for years, he produced one of the greatest short stories ever written, ‘Signs and Symbols,’ a triumph of economy and force, minute realism and shimmering mystery” (American 117). Another example of possessing a complete mental picture can be seen in the inspiration for *Pale Fire*, which Nabokov told a Life magazine interviewer in 1964 had come to him while sailing from New York to France in 1959. It was then, he said, that “I felt the first real pang of the novel, a rather complete vision of its structure in miniature, and jotted it down—I have it in one of my pocket diaries” (SO 55). In a 1966 interview with Appel, Nabokov cites still another example of a novel that mentally was fully formed before even one word was written:

...The design of *Pnin* was complete in my mind when I composed the first chapter which, I believe, in this case was actually the first of seven I physically set down on paper. Alas, there was to be an additional chapter, between Four (in which, incidentally, the boy at St. Mark’s and Pnin both dream of a passage from my drafts of *Pale Fire*, the revolution in Zembla and the escape of the king—that is telepathy for you!) and Five (where Pnin drives a car). In that still unlinked chapter, which was beautifully clear in my mind down to the last curve, Pnin recovering in the hospital from a sprained back teaches himself to drive a car in bed studying a 1935 manual of automobilism found in the hospital library...A combination of chance circumstances in 1956 prevented me from actually writing that chapter, then other events intervened, and it is only a mummy now. (SO 84-85)

What is striking in each of these recollections is that Nabokov almost seems to be describing a compositional process akin to taking down dictation; the mental picture forms, crystallizes, and then, *voilà*, he apparently simply writes down what already exists,



although it is, as of yet, wordless. But from his above description of the compositional approach to *Pnin*, one also might arrive at another conclusion: namely, that Nabokov always knew the order of events that would take place in his novels, as well as precisely how he would present the bits of “straw and fluff” and eaten “pebbles” that were, in essence, all part of his inspired research. Although this might have been true of later novels, in the compositional process of *Lolita*, this simply was simply not the case.

Even though he clearly had an inner confidence that everything he was pursuing in relation to his manuscript would somehow, at some future point, find its proper room in the novelistic home he mentally was building, Nabokov nevertheless began using a new compositional technique during his research and early drafts of *Lolita*; and it was one that, by his own account, he would continue to employ with future works. Index cards now became Nabokov’s favored medium for composing, particularly because they permitted him to explore topics as they came to him, instead of having to be bound to what, for him, was an unnatural approach through chronological order.

Only later, when he was ready to type his final draft—or rather, to have Vera type the draft—did he then number the index cards in the order he desired. As Boyd notes, “Since he always pictured a whole novel complete in his mind before beginning to set any of it down in words, he could write in any order as he shifted his mental spotlight from one point of the picture to another. For that reason, and because he had grown used to index cards for his lepidopterological research notes, he now began to compose directly on index cards rather than paper, writing out any section he liked—still using a pen, however—and then placing the new cards, in the sequence he had foreseen, among the stack already written” (American 169).

Another aspect of this compositional strategy also is noteworthy, particularly as it relates to Goethe's *Faust* as a hidden structure within *Lolita*. By using index cards, Nabokov hypothetically could have taken any scene or any lines from *Faust*, copied them onto index cards, and then composed his own version of that scene or passage onto the cards. If the entire structure of his novel was, in fact, already formed in his mind, Nabokov thus would have been freed in terms of narrative from chronological constraints, which he clearly abhorred. In other words, by using a lepidopterologically inspired compositional approach, Nabokov very possibly could have proceeded through the text of *Faust* line by line, scene by scene and, as Boyd notes, written corresponding lines and scenes "in any order as he shifted his mental spotlight from one point of the picture to another." Afterward, as Nabokov described of doing during the composition of later novels, he likewise could have taken each card and numbered it, and essentially inserted each one into the text of *Lolita* wherever he desired.

What makes this theory particularly compelling is that, if we imagine those index cards becoming jumbled—that is, the original text from *Faust* is transferred to a corresponding index card, and that index card, now transformed into "Humbertish," in turn becomes inserted within the text of *Lolita* based purely on the artistic inclinations of Nabokov—the end result would be one of those elegant riddles Nabokov adored. The final text would be what only could be described as a *Faust* so fragmented, so out of sequence and skewed, that the original source would be no more recognizable or identifiable than a once grandiose mirror that had been splintered and then strewn into shards at the base of the Grand Canyon. Even if the owner of that one grandiose mirror, by chance, did claim to recognize some fragment, some particular carving particular to that old mirror's frame,

who, after all, would believe him? For Nabokov, as we will see later, the same would have held true of anyone who recognized any aspect of *Faust* within *Lolita*.

But even if we set aside, for the time being, the notion of index cards as a compositional strategy, what is particularly worth underscoring is that Nabokov makes clear that he did not begin writing until the mental picture for the work first had revealed itself to him, until he had become “informed from within that the entire structure is finished.” And while it is true that Nabokov is quite possibly unequalled when it came to giving conflicting accounts (to Appel, as just one example, it was Vera who prevented him from incinerating *Lolita*; but in his essay, *On a Book Entitled Lolita*, Nabokov says “I was stopped by the thought that the ghost of the destroyed book would haunt my files for the rest of my life”), about this there is, as a detective might say, the ring of truth. If we accept this described methodology as accurate, it is difficult to imagine, then, that Nabokov did not believe—even in the midst of his “technical difficulties”—that he likewise had seen the “wingcases of the pupa” with *Lolita*. If not, why else would he have felt prepared to actually begin writing the novel?

This assumption of Nabokov’s already-formed mental picture for *Lolita* also might partially explain why Appel describes Nabokov’s compositional approach to the novel, as well as its relation to its predecessor, *The Enchanter*, in such unproblematic terms:

In 1949, after moving from Wellesley to Cornell, he became involved in a “new treatment of the theme, this time in English.” Although *Lolita* “developed slowly,” taking five years to complete, Nabokov had everything in mind quite early. As was customary with him, however, he did not write it in exact chronological sequence. Humbert’s confessional diary was composed at the outset of this ‘new treatment,’

followed by Humbert and Lolita's first journey westward, and the climactic scene in which Quilty is killed ("His death had to be clear in my mind in order to control his earlier appearances," says Nabokov). Nabokov next filled in the gaps of Humbert's early life, and then proceeded ahead with the rest of the action, more or less in chronological order. (Annotated xxxviii-xxxix)

Appel uses quotation marks to clearly denote that it was Nabokov who described the novel as having developed "slowly." The fact that this clearly was an understatement, however, seems to have been either lost or ignored. Indeed, presented in these terms, it would not be surprising if many aspiring writers had the impression that *Lolita* emerged from the novelist like Adam from the hand of God, and that on the seventh day, of course, Nabokov rested.

There is, perhaps, nothing more discouraging to creativity than the sense that other writers who have produced great works have subsisted upon nothing else, and nothing more potentially destructive than the sense that if one's own work does not flow forth as easily as Eve from Adam's extra rib, something inherently worthless exists within it. Just as modern-day television advertisements seek to underscore that having tried to quit smoking one time actually may increase a person's chances of success in the future, so too one of the most useful aspects of Nabokov's struggle during the composition of *Lolita* is how many times he attempted, and failed. In many respects, this is reminiscent of Thomas Edison's repeated experiments with the light bulb, as well as one reporter's observation that he had "failed" in his experiments at least one hundred times. No, Edison was said to have replied, he had not failed all those times; he had just used each one of those opportunities to rule out various possibilities.

Appel's reference to Humbert's confessional diary, however, gives rise to another intriguing detail: the possibility of art imitating life, instead of vice versa. Readers of *Lolita* never actually read Humbert's actual diary; instead, we are told by Humbert that it was destroyed and then recreated from memory—which, in reality, it actually may have been. In the following passage, one cannot help envisioning Vera screaming at her husband to get away from the incinerator as, quite possibly, the early draft of Humbert's diary went up in flames:

Exhibit number two is a pocket diary bound in black imitation leather, with a golden year, 1947 *en escalier*, in its upper left-hand corner. I speak of this neat product of the Blank Blank Co., Blankton, Mass., as if it were really before me. Actually, it was destroyed five years ago and what we examine now (by courtesy of a photographic memory) is but its brief materialization, a puny unfledged phoenix.

(40)

The phoenix, of course, was a mythical bird said to rise out of the ashes; and if Nabokov did recreate this diary “verbatim” as Humbert says at one point, or “almost verbatim” as Humbert says at another point, the fictional diary very possibly had a very real antecedent in a diary Vera was unable to save from the fire.

The above passage, however, also underscores something else: Nabokov apparently did not want to reveal, to Appel or anyone else, how long he had been struggling with *Lolita*. Indeed, at numerous points—even where it is now clear that he was having “technical” problems—he infers that he has not yet begun the novel. This has led, as we can see, to numerous discrepancies in accounts of how long he was working on the text.

In one letter to the *New Yorker's* Katherine White, for example, Nabokov intimates that time constraints are what separate him from his future book. "Feel most anxious to write a novel that is beautifully clear in my mind," he wrote in July 1950, "but I would need a year untroubled by academic duties to set it in motion. I am in lowish spirits" (Boyd, *American* 170). Interestingly, Vera, as if attesting to her husband's current inability to begin work on *Lolita* because of his teaching duties at Cornell, also wrote a letter to White: "He has never had so little time for his writing. In this respect it is probably the worst year of his life" (Schiff 164).

One suspects, however, that Nabokov's "lowish" spirits were not simply due to conflicting academic demands on his time, of which, in all fairness, there were many. Despite his intimation to White that he had not yet begun the novel that was "beautifully clear" in his mind, we already know that Vera had already rescued the same manuscript—whose working title at the time was *The Kingdom by the Sea*—at least once from a fiery fate, and at least two years earlier. What is more, Boyd notes that even in early 1947, Nabokov's idea of transforming his 1939 novella, *The Enchanter*, into a novel "had been forming for months." In April of that year, Nabokov told Edmund Wilson that "I am writing two things now 1. a short novel about a man who liked little girls—and it's going to be called *The Kingdom by the Sea*—and 2. a new type of autobiography—a scientific attempt to unravel and trace back all the threads of one's personality—and the provisional title is *The Person in Question*" (*American* 117). To Appel, Nabokov apparently provided still another year—1949—for his initial work on a "new treatment of the theme" of *The Enchanter*, "this time in English." If nothing else, these conflicting dates will vindicate

every mother who ever warned that if you always tell the truth, you never have to remember anything.

By July, 1950, Nabokov had sent the final chapter of his memoir, *Conclusive Evidence*, later to be renamed *Speak, Memory*, to his publisher, thus completing the second book he had mentioned to Wilson three years earlier. (Schiff 164) But the pages about the man who liked little girls very possibly either had burn marks around their edges, or else the muddy imprints of Vera's shoe. Unlike "Signs and Symbols," which had fluttered into print out of his mental wingcase, *Lolita* was still wrapped tight inside her cocoon, stubbornly refusing to take flight.

The question that must be asked at this point is: What was "wrong" with the mental picture Nabokov had for *Lolita*? What was preventing him, as he claimed to have done with so many other stories, from moving his "flashlight" from left to right on the envisioned canvas, from filling in "all the gaps," regardless of order? What, in short, was missing from his picture?

The answer might have arrived a few months later, in just six words.

For many years, beginning at the earliest in 1947, Nabokov kept a slim pocket diary into which he recorded not only upcoming projects and lecture schedules, but also random ideas and dreams. In January 1951, however, Nabokov for the first time began writing in a page-a-day yearbook, a New Year's gift from Vera. In it he began jotting deadlines for such things as a magazine article that would deal with Soviet perceptions of America, as well as items of a more personal nature. On January 5, for example, he notes: "Continuous series of obstacles, with nails sticking out and mutual mimicry of sharp angles of boards and pointed shadows, separating me from the book I would like to write" (Boyd, American

188). This image calls to mind a landscape onto which a bomb has been dropped; whatever the “continuous series of obstacles” —and there is strong reason to believe they were of a structural rather than thematic nature—they clearly were daunting, formidable and persistent.

It was not Nabokov’s nature, however, to grind to a halt in the face of barriers. For him, obstacles were almost like a boulder placed along the path of a great flowing river; the water will simply pass around it, smooth it, until finally—whether one thinks about the boulder or not—the great stone eventually will be worn down to sand. Nabokov seemed to know instinctively that his “technical” solution would arrive eventually, as surely as a grain of sand will, although irritating its oyster host, eventually become a pearl. This inherent faith in his own creative abilities and capability of overcoming barriers can be seen in a passage from his memoir, *Speak, Memory*, which he was writing concurrently with early sections of *Lolita*. In it he compares the composition of chess problems to “the writing of one of those incredible novels where the author, in a fit of lucid madness, has set himself certain unique rules that he observes, certain nightmare obstacles that he surmounts, with the zest of a deity building a live world from the most unlikely ingredients—rocks, and carbon, and blind throbbings” (290-91).

And so, meanwhile, Nabokov worked onward, using the yearbook Vera had given him to brainstorm. Among other entries was the idea for a future short story, as well as the beginning of his invention of what Boyd calls “a fictionalized boarder, based on someone he knew in Ithaca, and day after day he tried out this character in various invented poses and imagined dialogues with himself” (American 188). But then comes another tantalizing notation in the yearbook, one so short and apparently innocuous that Boyd does not provide



a date for it, and no further information or details are provided. It reads simply: “The future of the immortal soul” (189).

The careful wording, although brief, is worth noting. If Nabokov had written instead “the immortality of the soul,” it would be tempting to conclude that his interest either was upon an already established position, one of certainty that immortality did, in fact, exist; or else just the opposite, namely his uncertainty. With the inclusion of “future,” however, a perceptible shift in focus can be discerned. The tentative wording leaves open the likelihood that Nabokov had in mind a time that may or may not exist beyond the confines of life and death, as well as a speculated connection between one’s earthly actions and a timeless hereafter. This latter view is supported by Boyd, who observes that Nabokov’s writing style in general “carries its own metaphysical implications,” and adds:

Typically he chooses to display rather than efface the power of a mind working *unspontaneously*...The energy mortal consciousness can have when it vaults over the barrier of a moment suggests more than anything else its kinship with some form of consciousness lurking beyond human limits (Russian 9).

Shortly after Nabokov’s six-word notation, just two months after he first began keeping the yearbook, his entries cease. By February 1951, Nabokov had abandoned the page-a-day gift from his wife in favor, one presumes, of either the thin pocket diaries to which he had been long accustomed, or else the index cards he began using during the composition of *Lolita* and which would prove essential to structuring his later works. Boyd ventures that Nabokov’s sudden cessation of the yearbook entries was because “the impulse wore off” (American 189), but perhaps just the opposite had occurred: perhaps a new impulse—as

well as a new rhetorical strategy for *Lolita*—had just begun to unfurl. With a mere six words, the compositional gauntlet that had stood for so many years between Nabokov and the novel he wanted to write very possibly may have been suddenly removed. Soon, Nabokov would be led—by traveling both backward and forward in time among his garnered “bits of fluff” and consumed “pebbles”—to the elegant solution he had been seeking since writing *The Enchanter*. As he would remark many years later about constructing *Lolita*: “She was like the composition of a beautiful puzzle—its composition and its solution at the same time, since one is a mirror view of the other, depending on the way you look” (Nabokov qtd. in Appel, xxxix).

Through research of both primary and secondary texts, it is the goal of this dissertation to illustrate and connect Nabokov’s focus on “the future of the immortal soul” with his use of Goethe’s *Faust*. The first chapter explores Nabokov’s life-long speculation about the human soul, as well as his motivating forces as a writer; the second explores the concept of creative anxiety in relation to Nabokov’s willingness to “take on” a titan like Goethe; the third examines modern-day Faustian reinterpretations in film, some of which Nabokov possibly would have been familiar with; and the fourth chapter presents a textual and thematic comparison of *Faust* and *Lolita*. With this structure, it is my intent to reveal how Nabokov used Goethe’s *Faust* not only as a hidden compositional structure within *Lolita*, but more importantly as a rhetorical framework by which he could explore his own—and modern America’s—notions of sins, souls and salvation.

## Chapter One—Nabokov’s Art and Persona

Contemporary biology shows that the cells of any organism are themselves immortal. What we call “the soul” is completely dependent on matter.

Consciousness itself is only lucky chance in one light, the consequence of natural selection in another. Whatever the case, all these materialist arguments are completely unconvincing. Mechnikov [a Russian physiologist] talks only of *possible* immortality. That leaves *us* neither hot nor cold. Until science resolves the question more soundly, *we* are still doomed to annihilation...The question of eternal life is an invention of human cowardice; its denial, a lie to one’s self. Whoever says “There is no soul, no immortality” secretly thinks, “but maybe?”

—From Vladimir Nabokov’s workbook, age 19 (qtd. in Boyd, Russian 154)

One hallmark of a great work of literature is that it appears seamless, effortlessly produced. The reader cannot detect the writer’s sweat in the margins, or discern such things as whether the writer was starving during its production, or fearing for his life, or, in the case of Vladimir Nabokov, working not only within a new country and new language, but also teaching full-time, simultaneously working on other projects, and struggling to feed his family. Nor does the “great” writer, it should be added, desire that such considerations

should be taken into account; to the contrary, a nearly universal characteristic of authors of enduring works is that they insist that their “offspring” stand on their own, separated from the man or woman who penned them.

And yet, at the same time, literary criticism throughout the ages shows us that a deeper understanding of an author’s life often provides illumination for a greater understanding of a work in question. This is the double-edged sword of literature and scholarship, of a writer’s art versus an artist’s persona. Moreover, it has often led to the tug-of-war many great writers have faced in their lifetimes: how to negotiate the reception and interpretations of their literary works, as opposed to the personas they consciously have created and—if they have had any sense of their own future place in history—realize they inevitably one day will leave behind. Often, it is a connection they hope to resist. As Nabokov notes in his afterword to his novel, *On a Book Entitled Lolita*:

It is childish to study a work of fiction in order to gain information about a country or about a social class or about the author. And yet one of my very few intimate friends, after reading *Lolita*, was sincerely worried that I (!) should be living “among such depressing people”—when the only discomfort I really experienced was to live in my workshop among discarded limbs and unfinished torsos.

(Annotated, 316)

For Nabokov, particularly when seen in connection to *Lolita*, there was additional importance to the creation of a literary persona—or rather, to establishing the difference between Nabokov the man versus Nabokov the creator of art. Vera, too, no doubt recognized this very clearly, particularly as she and her husband sought a publisher for the *Lolita* manuscript in 1953 and 1954. Convinced not only that it was a “great book” but also

a “time bomb” in terms of what its subject matter represented to 1950s America, Vera knew that the public’s inability to distinguish between the author’s life and Humbert Humbert, the protagonist in *Lolita*, could result in “some unpleasantness” (Schiff 200). And although Vera, at the time, considered this tendency to link author with fictional character to be “a particularly American trait,” even Nadezhda Mandelstam, the widow of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, later would declare that “in her mind, there was no doubt that the man who wrote *Lolita* could not have done so unless he had in his soul those same disagreeable feelings for little girls” (Mandelstam qtd. in Schiff 200).

Years later, Appel noted that Nabokov was “justly impatient with those who hunt for Ur-Lolitas,” particularly since, to Nabokov’s thinking, any fruitless search for a real-life precursor to *Lolita* in the form of a young Annabel-like girl from his own past would amount to a “preoccupation with specific ‘sexual morbidities’ [that] obscures the more general context in which these oddities should be seen, and his Afterword offers an urgent corrective” (Annotated xxxvi).

Of his awareness of his place in literary history, however, there can be little doubt. As early as 1952, years before *Lolita* was published, Schiff notes that Nabokov essentially declared to his Humanities II students at Cornell that “There are two great writers in English for whom English was not a native language, the first and the lesser of whom was Joseph Conrad. The second is I” (171). Such a pronouncement—comparing oneself to a writer of Conrad’s stature—might have struck some students as hubris enough. But to then characterize Conrad as the “lesser” writer no doubt struck some of these same students as less than appealing. Schiff observes that another student recalled finding it offensive that Nabokov presented *Don Quixote* in terms of how he would have written that book, and

naturally improved upon it. Other students in his Russian literature course recalled how Nabokov enjoyed teaching the works of “Sirin” —the pen name Nabokov adopted for himself during his early years of writing, first in Russia, and later in Berlin where his family fled shortly after the Revolution—but only told them late in the semester that he was “Sirin” and vice versa (171). Years later, Nabokov would reveal to one interviewer that he had chosen the pen name partially because it was “no doubt identical with the ‘siren,’ a Greek deity, transporter of souls,” another comment that reveals his early sense of supreme self-confidence.

That self-confidence, to be sure, never diminished. Indeed, in 1964, Nabokov spoke clearly of where he saw himself in literary history, even while simultaneously jesting about it. “...I have a fair inkling of my literary afterlife,” Nabokov told *Playboy* interviewer Alvin Toffler. “I have sensed certain hints. I have felt the breeze of certain promises...With the Devil’s connivance, I open a newspaper in 2063 and in some article on the books page I find: ‘Nobody reads Nabokov or Fulmerford today. Awful question: Who is this unfortunate Fulmerford?’” (SO 34)

Nabokov, to be sure, seemed to understand the “art versus persona” concept better than any other writer since Goethe, whom Harold Bloom calls, next to Freud, Johnson and Boswell, one of the “four most documented lives of genius that we possess” (Genius 166). To Bloom’s list, however, we should probably add one more; for certainly the mountain of information we have about Nabokov’s life and thought clearly places him among the most “researchable” literary figures in history. Like Goethe more than 100 years before him, Nabokov not only wrote a memoir, gave numerous interviews, and provided in-depth access to at least one hand-picked trusted researcher, but he also took an active role in

“correcting” any misconceptions or mistakes made about his life or art. Indeed, almost as far back as “Sirin” first existed, we can find traces of Nabokov’s attempts to control what was said about him, and also to shape the way he was perceived on the literary stage.

This was no less true, however, toward the end of his life. In 1970, to celebrate his seventieth birthday, Northwestern University gathered together a series of essays about Nabokov in a *festshrift*, one of those rare honors afforded a writer during his or her lifetime. Co-edited by Alfred Appel, one of Nabokov’s most ardent chroniclers, and Charles Newman, it was published without Nabokov, in his own words, having first been shown “any plum or crumb” (S0 284). The volume was all but a long valentine to him; nevertheless, Nabokov later found ample reason to respond, essay by essay, to what had been said about him:

I soon realized, however, that I might find myself discussing critical studies of my fiction, something I have always avoided doing. True, a *festschrift* is a very special and rare occasion for that kind of sport, but I did not want to create even the shadow of a precedent and therefore decided simply to publish the rough jottings I made as an objective reader anxious to eliminate slight factual errors of which such a marvelous gift must be free...(S0284)

Anyone who knows a thing about Nabokov would no more believe he would dare publish anything he considered to be “rough jottings” than entertain the idea of pigs flying in perfect V-formation over Lake Geneva. As for his claim to being an “objective reader” of what often amounted to others’ perceptions of him, one need only consider Nabokov’s response to Lucie Leon Noel’s essay about having known and worked with him many years earlier in Paris after he, Vera, and their son, Dmitri, fled Germany and the Nazis in 1939:

In her account of a dinner with James Joyce in Paris, I found it refreshing to be accused of bashfulness (after finding so frequently in the gazettes complaints of my “arrogance”); but is her impression correct? She pictures me as a timid young artist; actually I was forty, with a sufficiently lucid awareness of what I had already done for Russian letters preventing me from feeling awed in the presence of any living writer. Had Ms. Leon and I met more at parties she might have realized that I am always a disappointing guest, neither inclined nor able to shine socially. (SO 292)

Nabokov does not come right out and challenge the veracity of Noel’s perception of him in the company of Joyce; rather, he poses a rhetorical question to his long-time friend and translator, as if it is she who should examine the recollection for its preciseness, and not vice versa. Furthermore, he defends himself against the observation that he was timid—a condition from which Nabokov clearly seeks to distance himself—by pointing out that he is, by nature, reticent in the company of other people. By asserting that he was *always* a “disappointing guest” and unable to “shine socially” regardless of who was present, Nabokov clearly hopes to lessen the possible perception that it was Joyce who made him fall silent and become tongue-tied, or the idea that the presence of another great writer—seated, no less, at the same dining table with him—had made Nabokov feel “bashful.”

But here, in typical Nabokovian fashion, he goes even further in the shaping of his persona, calling to mind Nietzsche’s observation of Goethe that “he *created* himself” (Bloom, *Anxiety* 52). Not only was Nabokov not bashful or timid, he asserts, *but he could not have been*, since he already had gained a strong enough sense of his own place in Russian literature that this success, alone, would have immunized him to Joyce’s literary shadow falling over him, *or any other writer’s*. In this respect, as will be discussed in more



detail, Nabokov's response also can be seen as relating directly to an early-established, fully-developed sense of his own gifts as a writer.

### **The Author as Interview Subject**

That does not mean, however, that Nabokov always exhibited such strong self-confidence. When it came to giving interviews or discussing his writing, for instance, Nabokov exerted rigid and perhaps unrivaled control over what was written about him. Nabokov, as Michael Wood notes, "never gave interviews without advance notice of the questions, or without having carefully written out and rehearsed his answers, although he did implausibly fake spontaneity now and again." Nabokov claimed his written responses were prompted by the fact that he was a poor speaker, but Wood attributes his guardedness to the artist's carefully constructed persona, calling Nabokov "too elegant, too much the literary dandy, to let us see him groping, for words or anything else" (8). Although there can be little doubt that Nabokov was as fastidious about the creation of his own persona as he was about his fictional characters, other reasons also may exist for Nabokov's reticence to speak, if you will, off the cuff.

Nabokov's refusal to relinquish control during interviews may be seen as having two important facets. The first concerns Nabokov's consciousness of present time inevitably turning into a future time—and this, as Wood correctly observes, would include awareness of how his words later might be interpreted after he no longer was present to defend them. The second, however, concerns Nabokov's near life-long speculation about an altogether different kind of time, one that tests both the nature and boundaries of consciousness. Moreover, Boyd sees Nabokov's focus on the confines of consciousness as

intricately connected to the idea that it might illuminate a shimmer of time that exists outside of human, or mortal, boundaries:

Hopeful that the void of nonexistence before birth might yield clues about the void after death, he would try as an adult to reach back to his first emergence into consciousness in early infancy...Nabokov would always suspect that although consciousness might appear to be cut off in death, it could well in fact simply undergo a metamorphosis we cannot see. This hypothesis, which he preferred to keep tentative, probably owed something to his lepidoptera. In his twenties, echoing Dante, he wrote in a poem, “We are the caterpillars of angels”; in his sixties he joked to an interviewer about his future plans: “I also intend to collect butterflies in Peru or Iran before I pupate” (Russian 71).

Indeed, this question of metamorphosis and possible immortality was one that Nabokov “confesses has always bewildered and harassed him: what lies outside the prison of human time, our entrapment within the present, and our subjection to death?” (Russian 9) This question of what happens *afterward*, of what becomes of the human soul once the confines of human time have been removed, is what animates so much of Nabokov’s work. Further evidence of his focus on what lies beyond death exists in a stunningly written passage from his memoir:

Whenever in my dreams I see the dead, they always appear silent, bothered, strangely depressed, quite unlike their dear, bright selves. I am aware of them, without any astonishment, in surroundings they never visited during their earthly existence, in the house of some friend of mine they never knew. They sit apart, frowning at the floor, as if death were a dark taint, a shameful family secret. It is

certainly not then—not in dreams—but when one is wide awake, at moments of robust joy and achievement, on the highest terrace of consciousness, that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits, from the mast, from the past and its castle tower. And although nothing much can be seen through the mist, there is somehow the blissful feeling that one is looking in the right direction. (Speak 50)

If ever there existed a description of what it means to be human—that is, to know that we will die one day, but also to intuit that *something*, even if we do not know what it is, exists beyond the “mist” of our own limited consciousness—this passage, I would submit, is such a description. For who among us, even the most fervent Bible-thumper, can be *absolutely certain* of the fate that awaits us after death? Even those of us who rely resolutely upon faith, and even those of us who believe that we have been guaranteed a predetermined immortal fate based on how “morally” we behave during this human lifetime, Nabokov suggests that at the bedrock of all human thought about death lies a sandy, murky unknown: We may possess a deep faith or sense of certainty about an afterlife, but at best all we can receive are hints—or else only hope. At best, he seems to be saying, all that exists during our human and earthly existence is the “blissful feeling” that somehow, if we have aligned our souls like the ancient sailor following the North Star, that we are “looking in the right direction.”

But Nabokov, to be sure, is not merely interested in exploring whatever “blissful feeling” there may be in looking in the right direction, particularly when it comes to fiction. To the contrary, it is the person who suffers from the inverse of that sensation, from a sense of being existentially lost at sea in the absence of any North Star, upon whom Nabokov turns his brightest literary searchlight. Nowhere is this more evident than within *Lolita*.

Stripped of any narcotic effect of a blind faith, and faced only with the stark reality of his life and impending death, Humbert narrates with a burning imperative, or what the fictional editor John Ray Jr. calls “a desperate honesty that throbs through his confession” (Annotated 5): If you have acted as a “pentipod monster,” as Humbert calls himself at one point, what hope exists for your immortal soul? Does any road lead to redemption or forgiveness? Does the fate of your immortal soul, particularly if it is now at the eleventh hour, lie in the persuasive argument made for a “jury” you cannot know, cannot see, cannot actually envision, Humbert seems to ask; or does it, instead, perhaps exist within the persuasive argument you are able to make for yourself, the argument you are able to convince yourself is true?

Imbedded throughout the text of *Lolita*, Nabokov presents all of these imperative questions: those of a dying man’s uncertainty, or even what might be described as a quiet sense of desperation about the fate of his immortal soul; his attempt to discern what might be required of him—if any hope exists at all—to achieve a possible “pardon” from whatever “jury” exists beyond; as well as a genuine, even if flawed, attempt to explore the reasons he clearly behaved as he did. As Humbert tells us shortly before his narrative ceases (we learn later that he died in prison of a heart attack):

When I started, fifty-five days ago, to write *Lolita*, first in the psychopathic ward for observation, and then in this well-heated, albeit tombal seclusion, I thought I would use these notes in toto at my trial, to save not my head, of course, but my soul. (Annotated 308))

“Tombal seclusion” suggests a sarcophagus; but what Humbert seems to be acknowledging here is that, even though some of his early entries might have been

influenced by his observers in the psychiatric ward, later he came to his own and genuinely personal reason for presenting a truthful narrative (at least, as truthful as he is capable of presenting it). Might confession, he seems to wonder, somehow be the key? Could an in-depth explanation or self-justification—in other words, the type of “evidence” that might be offered during an actual trial with “mitigating circumstances” at the heart of the defense—perhaps be his ticket out of hell?

Humbert clearly does not know. As a result, Humbert becomes willing to offer up anything and everything to his imagined audience—an audience, it should be noted, that shifts repeatedly throughout his narrative—in order to avoid the fate he fears awaits him. It is my view that it is not his life at the hands of an actual courtroom jury that Humbert hopes to save; regardless of *their* verdict, his life, he knows, soon will be over. Instead, Humbert’s fear is about the fate of his immortal soul, which later we will see related directly to Goethe’s *Faust*, particularly in contrast to how Faust’s fate was “resolved.”

Of course, it seems highly unlikely that Nabokov ever would have conceded any of these observations, even if he knew them full well to be true. And there are several reasons to believe this to be the case.

On the surface, revealing an intense interest in what some might call an “afterlife” or “after-existence” might appear harmless. Indeed, in today’s often religiously-themed publishing climate, such a disclosure quite possibly would be a selling-point. For Nabokov, however, such a disclosure would have been tantamount to a magician showing how an illusion was created, or worse, to having his deepest and most intricate notions—about the nature of the human soul, about love, about eternity—reduced or trivialized by a “criticule.” This term, coined by Nabokov by the apparent combination of “critic” and

“miniscule,” was used to show his disdain for what might be described as scholarly hacks, those he deemed incapable of the mental brainpower required to discern his brilliance. In 1972, for example, when asked about critics’ apparent inability to describe the theme of his latest book, *Transparent Things*, he remarks, “Neither they, nor, of course, the common criticule discerned the structural knot in the story” (SO 194). What makes Nabokov’s criticism even more stinging, of course, is the title of his work, as if the elusive structural knot to which he refers—at a minimum to critics whose so-called business was to discern such things—should have been transparent.

Nabokov’s revelry in others’ inability to “decode” his fiction likewise can be seen in a character within *Transparent Things*, Adam von Librikov, about whom Nabokov uncharacteristically reveals to one interviewer is “an anagrammatic alias that any child can decode” (SO 196). To those “criticules” who were unable to unravel on their own the anagram of “Vladimir Nabokov,” one can only assume that it would have been a bit like swallowing literary crow to have had the author’s own name pointed out to them. Nabokov, without doubt, loves this kind of wordplay—the use of anagrams and palindromes and other linguistic puzzles within his fiction—but more often than not, he does not provide us with such an easy solution. To the contrary, his greatest puzzles, as with those he described in his autobiography about his most superb chess problems, were the ones that led “would-be solvers astray” (Speak, 290).

Like a skilled tennis player returning a powerful serve, Nabokov also delighted in rejecting various interpretations of his books. We see this in the case of a 1964 interview for *Life* magazine, in which he was asked which one of his writings has pleased him the most. Nabokov answers that it is *Lolita*, “perhaps because it is the purest of all, the most

abstract and carefully contrived” (SO 47). His reference to careful contrivance, I think, is of particular import; for although Nabokov seemed to take pleasure in toying with his interviewers (he tells this same interviewer, for example, that he has often “dreamt of a long and exciting career as an obscure curator of lepidoptera in a great museum”), Nabokov also occasionally reveals as much as he deceives. Like a child who blends truth and lies so artfully that discerning which is which becomes a task for a Sherlock Holmes-like parent, Nabokov discloses truth along with his fictions, creates illusions amid the obvious and real. For example, his claim at age sixty-five, when he is a world-renowned author, that he dreams of being an “obscure curator” is laughable, but his claim to have created *Lolita* with careful contrivance has the ring of truth.

Another example of “illusion” occurs when Playboy magazine interviewer Alvin Toffler in 1964 asks him, for instance, about what he considers his “principal failing as a writer.” Nabokov answers that it is “the inability to express myself properly in any language unless I compose every damned sentence in my bath, in my mind, at my desk.” Toffler responds (in what we must recall was a carefully scripted interview), “You’re doing rather well at the moment, if we may say so.” “It’s an illusion,” replies Nabokov. (SO 34)

Nabokov believed firmly that “art at its greatest is fantastically deceitful and complex” (SO 33). Thus, admitting to how “carefully contrived” he had made the text of *Lolita* suggests even more strongly that Nabokov not only was confident that he had designed a brilliantly deceptive “structural knot,” to borrow his words about *Transparent Things*, but that he does not expect that knot ever to be discerned. As Zoran Kuzmanovich notes of Nabokov:

His interviews, prefaces, postscripts, letters to various editors, and responses to his critics always strike me as pre-emptive and corrective, at once recapitulative and predictive. They chide, they nudge, they set the story straight, and they do so not by informing but by evoking. They deepen the mystery of Nabokov's talent, while, with phrases such as "right epithet coming," they create a sense of qualification, a momentary reversal in, or rest from the inexorable forward movement while simultaneously speeding readers on their way to the always receding solution of that mystery of presence rendered throughout absence. Following the American publication of *Lolita*, this was a very successful strategy, simply because it set Nabokov's readers, usually academics, to work. (Cambridge 11)

Viewed in this light, Nabokov's control over interviews thus can be seen as protecting what was most precious to him. To speak spontaneously—where any question was on the table, where any scowl or raised eyebrow or crossed arms or "groping" for words might have been interpreted in a manner beyond Nabokov's control, would have meant the possibility of reduction. Likewise, subjecting himself to an unscripted, impromptu interview would have carried the threat of revealing (perhaps unconsciously) the true depth of his focus on judgment versus redemption, his complex concepts of heaven, hell and immortality, as well the importance of his notion of the human soul. Regarding the latter, we receive a glimpse within a letter that Nabokov wrote to Vera not long after they met, in 1924:

Have you ever thought about how strangely, how easily our lives came together?  
And this is probably that God, bored up in heaven, experienced a passion he doesn't often have. It's as if in your soul there is a prepared spot for every one of my thoughts. When Monte Cristo came to the Palace he had purchased, he saw on the



table, among other things, a lacquered box, and he said to his major domo who had arrived earlier to set everything up, “My gloves should be here.” The latter beamed and opened this otherwise unexceptional box and indeed: the gloves. (Nabokov qtd. in Schiff 11)

As Schiff notes, Nabokov “had long noted that the non-Russian could never understand ‘the lyrical plaintiveness that colors the Russian soul’” (191). If we accept this as true, Nabokov’s willingness to even begin to discuss that “plaintiveness” of the soul with any American “criticule”—even after he became enfolded and enveloped by the nomenclature of being an “American” writer—seems all but unthinkable.

In addition to what Wood describes as literary dandyism during his interviews, then, Nabokov very possibly also was protecting his most carefully cloaked and jealously guarded secrets. In the case of *Lolita*, however, they would have been secrets equivalent (at least to Nabokov’s thinking) to a modern-day version of cracking *The Da Vinci Code*: how his concern for the “immortal soul” led to a structure so well hidden that, at times, it appears within *Lolita* like a Rubik-cube placed inside a kaleidoscope.

Indeed, Vera alludes to this in a November 1953 letter, in which she attempts to interest the publisher of Nabokov’s Gogol biography in his latest work: “You will perhaps be interested to learn that he is finishing a great novel,” she wrote, “based on an idea that he believes has never been explored (at least not in the way he has done so)” (Schiff 198). By adding that final qualifier—*at least not in the way he has done so*—here we have one of the strongest indications that *Lolita*, in fact, is based on something that existed before it *in a different form*. The greatest possibility, of course, is that that “something” was a text.

This comment by Vera, as we will see, will prove to be one of the few hints we receive, other than those that exist within the text itself, that *Lolita*, in fact, was a conscious reworking of Goethe's *Faust*. Even if Nabokov had been asked about any possible connection between the two texts—and, I should add, I have been unable to uncover any indication that he ever was—there is little doubt about what his response would have been.

### **Vera, Vestiges, and Inconclusive Evidence**

This might partially explain, however, why Vera opted to bring up the subject of *Faust* herself. According to Schiff, Vera's made her comments about the play in the spring of 1958, when a Cornell professor and his wife invited the Nabokovs to their home for cocktails. Also invited was Eric Blackhall, a visiting professor of German literature and a college dean. Schiff describes the conversation between Vera and Blackhall thus:

She asked after his field. "Goethe," replied Blackhall. "I consider *Faust* one of the shallowest plays ever written," declared Vera, as much to the visitor's astonishment as to her husband's manifest delight...It is impossible to say if she had learned this gauntlet-flinging from her husband, who greeted colleagues with salvos like these... (187).

Vera, as Schiff's biography underscores, was not simply the person who typed her husband's manuscripts; to the contrary, she also was intimately involved in practically every aspect of his writing and publishing efforts.

By the early 1950s Vera's understanding of academic life, her sense of her husband's caprices were ingrained enough that—while she seems never to have

voluntarily spoken for him—she did not hesitate to edit or silence him. He depended on her for this service. (187)

Indeed, Schiff further observes that Vera also “did a fine job on his diary, stopping just short of the ink Bulgakov’s wife strategically spilled on her husband’s more compromising pages” (187). This observation is intriguing, particularly if we speculate about what type of entries Vera would have deemed “compromising.” Fiercely protective not only of her husband’s work but also of his persona, Vera very possibly could have edited his diary, particularly when it came to his ideas about *Lolita*, for references to either Goethe or *Faust*. This hypothesis is even more plausible if we recall Boyd’s description of the yearbook that Vera gave her husband in 1951 which “he filled daily for over two months”—including the notation of “the future of the immortal soul” —and then which, by Boyd’s account, he soon abandoned because “the impulse wore off” (American 188). What, however, if Vera recognized that leaving such notes in the diary would have been akin to announcing his beautiful “solution” in neon lights?

If this was, in fact, the point at which Nabokov discovered his “technical solution” and launched into exhaustive scholarship, it certainly would not be the first or last time he did so. And if references to Goethe and *Faust* were obliterated from that yearbook or his diaries, it also would not have been the only time that vestiges of the compositional process of *Lolita* were destroyed. Indeed, although Nabokov himself describes on numerous occasions how he composed *Lolita* on index cards—a technique he later adopted for all of his later novels as well—only a fraction of the *Lolita* index cards still exist. Boyd observes that Nabokov not only destroyed the manuscript of *Lolita* itself, but preserved “only a hundred of the cards containing his preparatory jottings” (American, 226-27). To put this

paltry number into some kind of perspective, Nabokov told one interviewer in 1969 that his novel *Ada* had been composed on approximately 2,500 index cards (SO 122).

Interestingly, of the remaining *Lolita* index cards that Boyd presents in his biography, all relate directly to the type of scholarly research and precise details that Nabokov, during his lectures on literature at Cornell, always stressed to his students were so crucial. Nabokov taught literature as an examination of details, without which he believed that a book was dead. This meant that, rather than focus on what he considered to be superfluous issues such as “schools of thought” or symbols or social commentary, students instead would be encouraged to see the details within literature as doorways into “little worlds about which we can and should find out more and more” (Boyd, *American* 175). As an example, Boyd points out that Nabokov, in teaching Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, would ask his students to figure out how Sir Thomas would be able to pay the postage for Fanny’s letter to her brother. (The answer: because he is a member of Parliament.) As Nabokov himself once remarked, “I believe in stressing the specific detail; the general ideas can take care of themselves” (SO 55).

That same attention to detail can be seen in the remaining *Lolita* index cards. One, for example, shows a chart with statistics on height, weight and age for young girls; another has details about a Colt revolver, apparently from a gun catalogue, along with a rough drawing of the gun; another lists names of jukebox tunes. To be sure, attempting to imagine what might have been on the remaining index cards is not unlike the archeologist who unearths an ancient marble toe and then tries to envision the rest of the Greek statue to which it belonged. We may never know why or by what method Nabokov—or Vera—destroyed the *Lolita* index cards, but it still is tantalizing to consider.

At the same time, however, it also seems safe to infer that Vera would have been entrusted with Lolita's secret structure of *Faust*, if that structure actually did exist. Further, what is striking about her comments to Blackhall at the cocktail party is that it was she, and not he, who brought up the subject of Faust, and in a manner that seemed guaranteed to shock. To opine to a scholar of German literature, and particularly a specialist on Goethe, that *Faust* is one of the "shallowest plays ever written" is a bit like telling a Shakespearean scholar that *Romeo and Juliet* is a piece of "soap-opera kitsch." Blackhall, thus, understandably was taken aback by her ravaging disparagement of the play; but even more interesting is the timing of her comments. If the cocktail party, as Schiff notes, did take place in the spring of 1958, this event was only a few months before the American publication of *Lolita* in August of that same year. (The book already had been published in France three years earlier.) Seen in this light, Vera's comments, in today's parlance, very possibly could be described as a "preemptive strike" against any connection that later might be made between Goethe's "shallow" play and the novel she told, to more than one person and on more than one occasion, was a work of "genius." As Schiff notes of the relationship Nabokov and Vera shared:

Many of the hallmarks of Nabokov's fiction—the doppelgangers, the impersonators, the Siamese twins, the mirror images, the distorted mirror images, the reflections in the windowpane, the parodies of self—manifested themselves in the routine the couple developed for dealing with the world, a routine that could leave a correspondent feeling as the books can: humbled by one knotty, magnificent inside joke. (223)

And without a doubt, it is clear that neither Nabokov nor Vera had any desire to allow anyone else in on that joke.

### **The Conjuror's Tricks**

Nabokov, to be sure, had long played a game of “cat and mouse” with critics and readers alike. Like a witness repeatedly asked to testify before a grand jury, he was acutely cognizant that every word, every turn of phrase, eventually would be scrutinized by scholars. Indeed, on numerous occasions Nabokov even predicted what would be said about him (and how critics invariably would get it wrong). As one example, Nabokov wrote to a friend about giving up his native Russian language, saying, “One day, a sagacious professor will write about my absolutely tragic situation” (Wood 3). But it is exactly this type of getting it wrong that Nabokov seemed to count on, and even promote. Scholars would get it wrong, misinterpret, ascribe meanings that Nabokov, of course, would deny were ever there; but Nabokov could ensure they got it wrong and escape detection only as long as he never let slip—or placed himself in the position where he might let slip—something that could reveal the conjurer’s hand delving into his bag of literary tricks.

This desire to “cloak” his literary tricks, it should be noted, was not simply a stance that Nabokov adopted after the American publication of *Lolita* in 1958, the novel that launched him to fame. Long before *Lolita*, Nabokov apparently found glee in escaping, undetected, within various “wrong” interpretations of his work. Indeed, setting traps and creating what he called “false scents” throughout his work seems to have been his literary *modus vivendi*.

In 1944, for example, Nabokov's biography of the famous Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol, ends with an appendage chapter in which Nabokov explains that his publisher wanted certain changes or additions, including a chronology of Gogol's life and a description of the "plot" of what many considered Gogol's masterpiece, *Dead Souls*. The typeface in this section is considerably smaller, as if to alert the careful reader that these notes were included reluctantly:

In Gogol's day you could, if you were a Russian landowner, sell peasants, buy peasants and mortgage peasants. Peasants were termed "souls" as cattle is reckoned by "heads." If you then happened to mention that you had a hundred souls, you would mean not that you were a minor poet, but that you were a small squire. The Government checked the number of your peasants, as you had to pay a poll tax for them. If any of your peasants died you would still have to go on paying until the next census. The dead "soul" was still on the list. You could no longer use the mobile physical appendages it had once, such as arms or legs, but the soul you had lost was still alive in the Elysium of official paperdom and only another census could obliterate it. The immortality of the soul lasted for a few seasons...(159-60)

After complying with his publisher's requests (or demands, as they might have been), Nabokov offers a defense of the initial choices he made in describing Gogol's life and work.

That is how the following pages got appended. This chronology is meant for the indolent reader who wants to take in Gogol's life and labors at a glance instead of wallowing through my book in search of this or that relevant passage...The deductions are my own.

Abruptly and without warning, however, Nabokov then shifts attention even more significantly to his own writing—and not just within the text we are reading—with a sentence that is apt to strike the reader as jarring, appearing as it does at the end of a work ostensibly about Gogol: “Desperate Russian critics, trying hard to find an Influence [sic] and to pigeonhole my own novels, have once or twice linked me up with Gogol, but when they looked again I had untied the knots and the box was empty” (Nabokov, Nikolai 155).

Even here, long before his “official” success with *Lolita*, we can recognize in this final sentence the suggestion of a Houdini-like escape from enquiring minds who want to know, of outwitting and outmaneuvering inquisitive opponents. Moreover, in the passage Nabokov also exemplifies what Michael Wood refers to as “Nabokov at his devious best, making and unmaking a polemical point, and orchestrating doubts just where he seems to be dismissing them” (43).

The key here, to my thinking, is Wood’s use of the word “orchestrating,” which accurately suggests Nabokov’s conscious desire to implant a “doubt” where, perhaps, formerly there might have been none at all. In other words, it is almost as if Nabokov, in *Nikolai Gogol*, as well as numerous later works, both anticipates and at the same time denies any insight we may later believe we have reached about him. Simultaneously, he also *goads* us to try to figure out how, in a literary trick worthy of Houdini, he ostensibly has escaped the literary chains of what Petr Bitsilli, in an early 1930s article, “The Revival of Allegory,” claimed to be Nabokov’s “indisputable” closeness to Gogol. (Dolinin 59)

Unlike the magician Harry Houdini—who actually did physically escape, almost magically, from boxes in which he had been chained—the only “proof” we have that Nabokov did, in fact, ultimately manage to untie his knots and leave an “empty” box that



connected him to Gogol—as well as other authors to whom interviewers occasionally attempted to connect him—is his own word for it. As for the period Nabokov refers to in *Nikolai Gogol*, however, Alexander Dolinin provides an insightful context for the literary comparison made by Bitsilli, one not mentioned by Nabokov.

During the late 1920s, Dolinin observes, “a hostile group of Paris writers” denounced Nabokov’s early novels (written under the pseudonym of Sirin) as “glib imitations of some unidentified German and French models,” and also accused Nabokov of non-Russianness and “indifference to the national heritage.” To counter these attacks, Nabokov’s friend and supporter, Gleb Struve, “admitted that Sirin’s attention to formal precision and his disdain for humanistic and religious concerns set him apart from the mainstream of Russian literature associated with Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.” But Struve went even farther in defense of his friend, a defense that invariably causes one to wonder what role Nabokov played in Struve’s comments.

Struve argued that despite his obvious distance from Dostoevsky or Tolstoy, “Sirin’s yearning for form, measure and order” actually placed him “very close to Aleksandr Pushkin” (59). Dolinin suggests that by linking Nabokov/Sirin with Pushkin, who was “an almost sacred figure in the national canon,” Struve’s attempt to legitimize Nabokov’s position as a Russian writer, despite his exile, backfired among critics. It was in the wake of this Pushkin-Sirin connection that Sirin’s stylistic similarities to Gogol came under attack, with one critic, Adamovich, going so far as to say that Sirin’s *only* Russian literary forefather was Gogol, whose “insane, sterile, cold, and inhuman traits he [Nabokov] had inherited” (59).

It is difficult to imagine which one of these observations Nabokov would have found most appalling or offensive. Anyone who reads *Nikolai Gogol*, for example, will be struck by the uncharacteristic praise Nabokov heaps upon Gogol's masterful technique and literary soul, one he undoubtedly would have viewed as being as far from "insane" as Earth is from unseen galaxies. The Nabokov who calls famous writers "not quite first-rate" or "definitely second rate" is one we will come to know very well; but the Nabokov who praises a writer by saying such things as, "I hardly know what to admire most when considering the following spurt of eloquence...the magic of its poetry—or magic of quite a different kind..." (*Nikolai* 110) is a Nabokov we do not know well at all. Indeed, using the words "sterile, cold and inhuman traits" quite possibly struck Nabokov as a greater insult to Gogol than any insinuation that he, himself, had inherited those same qualities.

So how then, hypothetically, might Nabokov have chosen to defend both Gogol as well as himself, particularly if Gogol had, in actuality, influenced him in a significant manner? One method, of course, would have been through parody, one of Nabokov's hallmarks. This, however, was a stance Nabokov seemed to reserve only for those writers, as will be discussed later, who exhibited what he called true "*poshlust*," and who thus were deserving of his literary daggers. As for the rest—the writers Nabokov deemed so lacking in talent that to engage them might falsely bestow upon them a kind of worthiness they did not deserve—what sufficed was his dismissal of their observations as clearly false and superficial, with an implication that the critic simply did not possess the wits necessary to discern more complicated issues. (Later, of course, they would get the moniker of "criticule.")

Gogol, to be sure, was not the sole writer to whom Nabokov would be linked over the course of his long career. Nor was he, however, the only writer Nabokov would deny had influenced him. At the mere suggestion, Nabokov typically rejects any textual comparisons within his works by denigrating the aforementioned author.

Although Nabokov once told his students at Cornell that “a true genius takes the work of others and bends it to his own use” (Boyd, *American* 182), this statement apparently was one from which Nabokov later would attempt to back away. In 1966, for example, Appel posed several questions to Nabokov about possible connections to other authors in his own books, citing, as one example, the observation that some readers saw a connection to Plato’s Myth of the Cave in *Pale Fire*, as well as a reference to James Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus when John Shade says, “I stand before the window and I pare my fingernails” (SO 69-70). To both observations, Nabokov rejects any connection to either author as figuring into his work, noting in the first case that “I am not particularly fond of Plato” and, in the second, that Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* “is a feeble and garrulous book.” Further, Nabokov tells Appel—even when similar passages are pointed out to him—that the quoted phrase is “an unpleasant coincidence” (70-71).

If this Nabokovian technique of denial sounds familiar, it is because it is. Using the same syllogistic technique as for his response to Lucy Leon Noel’s *festshrift* observation of him (i.e., that he could not have been “bashful” because he already was too sure of himself as a writer), Nabokov’s implied argument is that he could not have been influenced by an author’s works—including taking the work of others and “bending it to his own use”—if simultaneously he is critical of them. And yet, as any reader of Nabokov’s *Lolita* cannot escape noticing, Nabokov does exactly that, and repeatedly. Indeed, as Appel notes in his

introduction, “several of Humbert’s allusions are woven so subtly into the texture of the narrative as to elude all but the most compulsive exegetes. Many allusions, however, are direct and available, and these are most frequently to nineteenth-century writers...” (Annotated, lv).

As just one example, Appel points out that “by calling out ‘Reader! Bruder!’ (page 262), Humbert echoes *Au Lecteur*, the prefatory poem in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (‘Hypocrite reader! —My fellow man—My brother!); and indeed, the entire novel constitutes an ironic upending of Baudelaire and a good many other writers who would enlist the reader’s full participation in the work” (lvii). At another point, Appel refers to the doppelganger motif and “the parodic references to R.L. Stevenson,” which “suggest that Nabokov had in mind Henry Jekyll’s painfully earnest discovery of the ‘truth’ that ‘man is not only one, but truly two” (lxii-lxiii).

Despite these numerous, scattered allusions to other writers’ works within his own novels, however, Nabokov continued to claim to interviewers later in life (and all with scripted answers, we should recall), that he never was influenced by any writer. What is often astounding is that, *voilà*, like magic, critics acting like bloodhounds hot on scent frequently appeared to accept these statements without further questioning, putting their metaphoric tails between their legs as if heading back to their rickety porches. If we recall the last sentence of *Nikolai Gogol*, then, what is particularly striking is that it hints at this later strategy of escaping undetected—one that, clearly, will turn out to be as effective for Nabokov as tossing a false-scented rag deep into the woods and then watching, merrily, as the literary bloodhounds, howling in joy and anticipation, chase after it en masse.

*Nikolai Gogol*, of course, is not the only place we glimpse this strategy at work. The idea of outmaneuvering or outwitting his critics is raised once again in his 1951 autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, in which Nabokov compares the composition of confounding chess problems to the creation of great literature. For Nabokov, both superb chess problems and great literature are masterful games in which the one who prevails (and of course, this would be Nabokov) always, at minimum, is at least several deceptively-designed moves ahead of his opponent:

It should be understood that competition in chess problems is not really between Black and White but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world), so that a great part of a problem's value is due to the number of "tries"—delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray. (290)

Here Nabokov makes clear a philosophy that will be seen to play a crucial role in his cloaking of the hidden structure of *Lolita*, in ensuring that the beautiful "solution" he took so many years to discover and develop, would not be revealed. Indeed, for Nabokov it was not enough that great literature would simply lead the would-be solver astray; it also had to be inherently deceptive:

...Deception in chess, as in art, is only part of the game; it's part of the combination, part of the delightful possibilities, illusions, vistas of thought, which can be false vistas, perhaps. I think a good combination should always contain a certain element of deception. (SO 11-12)

Indeed, this dominating concept of constructing literature with an eye toward deception can be seen in such early short stories as “A Guide to Berlin,” written in 1925 and originally published in *Rul*, the Russian émigré newspaper his father once edited. It was not until more than four decades later, in 1976, that Nabokov gathered it and “the last batch of my Russian stories meriting to be Englished” in *Details of a Sunset and Other Stories*.

In his brief introduction to the story, Nabokov writes: “Despite its simple appearance this Guide is one of my trickiest pieces. Its translation has caused my son and me a tremendous amount of healthy trouble. Two or three scattered phrases have been added for the sake of factual clarity” (Details 90). Normally, such a seemingly innocuous introduction would hardly be worth mentioning. But, much like the last line of *Nikolai Gogol*, it alerts readers to the fact that carefully planted clues exist within the work—as well as that a puzzle exists to be solved.

Nabokov, to be sure, makes repeated references to the same kind of inherent puzzle as lurking within *Lolita*. At times, however, he almost seems to be taunting interviewers and scholars with their inability to discover it, much as he did with the less than transparent “structural knot” of his final novel, *Transparent Things*. No doubt, however, that this is an ongoing source of extraordinary glee for him, proof that the magician’s tricks have remained undetected.

## Chapter Two—Anxiety, Influence, and Invention

In any lesser writer, certainty about one's innate brilliance or inevitable literary longevity would be called wishful thinking, delusional, or else arrogant. (And, to be sure, the word "arrogant" has been applied to Nabokov by more than one critic over the years.) But for Nabokov, confidence in his own literary genius was simply a given, much in the same way that Harold Bloom notes was true of Goethe, whose "genius seem[s] always to have been there" (*Genius*, 167). As if he were describing Nabokov and not Goethe, Bloom elsewhere refers to the German writer as possessing an "appalling self-confidence" (*Anxiety*, 52), and one which contained a "strangely optimistic refusal to regard the poetical past as primarily an obstacle to fresh creation. Goethe, like Milton, absorbed precursors with a gusto evidently precluding anxiety" (*Anxiety*, 50).

It is difficult to read these descriptions of Goethe, particularly of his "appalling self-confidence" and "gusto" for absorbing other writers who had come before him, and not immediately think of Nabokov. Indeed, at times the Russian-born writer almost appears to share the same DNA with the German poet and writer that Bloom asserts "believed himself literally incapable of creative anxiety" (*Anxiety*, 51). Could not the same be said of Nabokov as well? Seen under Bloom's light, Nabokov's comments to his students—"There are two great writers in English for whom English was not a native language, the first and the lesser of whom was Joseph Conrad. The second is I"—takes on new meaning. Rather than pure hubris or arrogance, as many may have viewed Nabokov's remarks at the time,

instead we may have been given a glimpse of one of the rarest of all great writers: one for whom creative anxiety never existed.

Like Goethe, Nabokov possessed a surety about his own creative abilities, along with—to borrow from Bloom—a “gusto” for absorbing his literary precursors, which exhibited themselves even when he was a young boy. These personality facets were as undeniably a part of his makeup as his father’s name, or the stream of tutors throughout his boyhood. Unlike many other writers to whom fame comes suddenly and then later shapes their literary personas, Nabokov, on the other hand, appears almost to have been born with this acute awareness of his own authorial powers. And this, as we will see later, will prove central to Nabokov’s ability to vault past what Bloom calls “the anxiety of influence,” something that, for many other writers, is a psychologically and artistically stifling condition in which one fears that one’s own writing will forever be in the shadow of greater writers who came before.

Nabokov’s sense of his own literary powers can be seen even in his earliest works. Many were written in Berlin and published in Russian émigré newspapers, where they had limited readership and almost certainly would have faded into obscurity had the author’s later fame not culled them from oblivion. And without a doubt, it is tempting to look at those early works and hunt for traces of literary leitmotifs and thematic threads in his later works. Stegner, for example, recognizes this inclination, as well as its potential pitfalls. Unlike many other authors who develop a style and “voice” over time, Stegner observes, Nabokov had a voice and command of style from his earliest beginnings.

“Commentators are fond of talking about an author’s ‘early works’ — those experimental preludes to the later masterpiece, but with regard to Nabokov such



discussions seem rather artificial...,” he writes. “One never feels that Nabokov, even in those early works, is not completely in command of his fictional world” (Nabokov *Congeries* xxxi). Still, Stegner stresses that he is not suggesting that the reader “must take communion” before opening one of Nabokov’s early works; he is merely offering a few words of caution. One may certainly dislike what Nabokov does, “but because he is an innovator and not an imitator one should, I think, make sure one knows what he does before one dislikes it ” (xxxii).

But even at a much younger age, Nabokov was not simply a reader or judge of so-called “great” writers, but actually seemed to see himself on the same literary chessboard along with them. This was not simply a sign of “arrogance,” as some have called it; instead, it is what I view as the rare surety of a writer who seems, perhaps, to have been genetically endowed with a highly-polished armor against the novelistic gnawing rat that Bloom called the anxiety of influence. As Bloom notes, this deep-seated angst that the writer is not the creator or originator of the text, but instead that the works of a ghost-like predecessor exist before and beyond him and assume essential priority over his own writings, has haunted more than one significant author, including Thomas Mann. As Bloom notes, Mann was afflicted by this condition perhaps even more intensely—particularly as he began writing his own version of the Faust legend, *Dr. Faustus*—because of Goethe’s obvious lack of the anxiety:

Thomas Mann, a great sufferer of the anxiety of influence, and one of the great theorists of that anxiety, suffered more acutely for Goethe’s not having suffered at all, as Mann realized. Questing for some sign of such anxiety in Goethe, he came up with a single question from the *Westoestlicher Diwan*: “Does a man live when

others also live?” The question troubled Mann far more than it did Goethe. The talkative musical promoter in *Dr. Faustus*, Herr Saul Fitelberg, utters a central obsession of the novel when he observes to Leverkuehn: “You insist on the incomparableness of the personal case. You pay tribute to an arrogant personal uniqueness—maybe you have to do that. ‘Does one live when others live?’” In his book on the genesis of *Dr. Faustus*, Mann admits to his anxiety on receiving the *Glasperlenspeil* [Glass Bead Game] of Hesse while at work composing his intended late masterpiece. In his diary he wrote: “To be reminded that one is not alone in the world—always unpleasant,” and then he added: “It is another version of Goethe’s question: “Do we then live if others live?” (Anxiety 52-52)

Expanding further on what he calls this “cruel and central question” posed by Goethe in his old age, as well as its later attendant interpretations by Mann, Bloom elsewhere points out what he deems to be “two superb Goethean aphorisms that between them form a dialectic of belated creation.” One, Bloom says, quoting Goethe, is: “Only by making the riches of the others our own do we bring anything great into being.” The second: “What can we in fact call our own except the energy, the force, the will!” (Western Canon, 193-194).

Viewed another way, faced with Goethe’s rhetorical question of whether a writer can “live” if other writers also live—as well as his forceful assertion that the only way to “bring anything great into being” is by seizing upon the “riches” of other writers—one can only imagine the psychological gauntlet that might have been thrust at the feet of Thomas Mann. Unlike Nabokov, who rarely makes any reference to Goethe except to flick him off like a bug having just alit upon his jacket lapel (“an academic shibboleth,” Nabokov called Goethe in his biography of Gogol), Mann’s anxiety about Goethe was so unabashedly

pronounced when it came to writing *Dr. Faustus* that “the shadow of Goethe rarely left him” (Bloom, *Genius* 186). Furthermore, Bloom asserts, because of that overpowering shadow, “Goethe, more than his Faust, haunts Mann’s *Faustus*.”

As if to underscore this point, Bloom, in another essay, points to Mann’s “Fantasy on Goethe,” where Mann ascribes Goethe’s serenity in his elder years to “aesthetic achievement” rather than to a “natural endowment.” Almost as if he were envying Goethe his “appalling self confidence” that seemingly accompanied him all his life, Mann praises Goethe for his “splendid narcissism, a contentment with self far too serious and far too concerned to the very end with self-perfection, lightening, and distillation of personal endowment, for a petty-minded word like ‘vanity’ to be applicable” (*Western Canon* 193).

Despite Nabokov’s long-enduring disdain for Mann—and for what Nabokov probably would not have objected to calling Mann’s “Litter-ature” of Ideas—it nevertheless is difficult to read this assessment of Goethe and not think of Nabokov. Lingering over Mann’s words, might Nabokov perhaps have found some sense of camaraderie, some recognition of a soul alliance in the description of Goethe’s “splendid narcissism,” one so deeply concerned with perfection of the self, and thus also with his art, that the word “vanity” could not apply? Put another way, were Mann’s words about Goethe not ones that Nabokov very likely would have desired to have seen written about himself, words burnished forever, perhaps, within the *festschrift* dedicated to him in his later years?

Mann’s admission about his feelings to Hesse’s novel, however, reveals to my thinking still another level of the anxiety, influence and struggle for individual invention with which most great writers struggle. What Mann admits, as least in my view, is something incredibly courageous: namely, acknowledging the hovering influence of

contemporary rivals who haunted him during the construction of his own text. Not only does he openly acknowledge the overpowering shadow cast by Goethe, upon whose play, *Faust*, his own novel would be based; but he also admits to the shadow of another living writer, that of Hermann Hesse. In many respects, Mann's willingness to explore these psychological influences on his own creative and compositional process can be seen to stand in direct opposition to either Goethe or Nabokov.

Rather than shrink from writers who had come before him, Goethe, to the contrary, seemed to embrace them. And rather than distancing himself from any association or influence by them, he even seemed to exalt in incorporating those texts into his own creations. This can be discerned when Goethe talks to his biographer, Johann Peter Eckermann, about his critical observations made about *Faust* by Lord Byron. Goethe's remarks, made with a clearly sharpened rhetorical quill, are reminiscent of the same ilk that Nabokov, more than a century later, would opine about his own literary contemporaries. As Eckermann records that conversation:

“The greater part of those fine things cited by Lord Byron,” said Goethe, “I have never even read; much less did I think of them when I was writing *Faust*. But Lord Byron is only great as a poet; as soon as he reflects, he is a child. He knows not how to help himself against stupid attacks of the same kind made against him by his own countrymen. He ought to have expressed himself more strongly against them. ‘What is there is mine,’ he should have said; ‘and whether I got it from a book or from life, is of no consequence; the only point is whether I have made a right use of it.’ . . . Thus my Mephistopheles sings a song from Shakespeare, and why should he not? Why should I give myself the trouble of inventing one of my own, when this

said just what was wanted? Also, if the prologue to my *Faust* is something like the beginning of Job, that is again quite right, and I am rather to be praised than censured” (Hamlin, 412-413).

Clearly, Goethe viewed any works—either in the past or by his contemporaries—as fair game for his own creative uses. This also could be argued was the case for Nabokov as well, who weaves in so many layers of texts within *Lolita*—references to references to references—that at times the reader has the sensation of having fallen down a literary rabbit hole. What is more, however, Goethe’s language is hauntingly similar to Nabokov’s when addressing artistic impressions or so-called “insights” about his work. In the above passage, for example, Goethe refutes Byron’s observations about *Faust* by declaring, in what seems to be obvious sarcasm, that the majority of the “fine things” cited by Byron he either never even read or considered. This, of course, is a similar rhetorical strategy used by Nabokov with interviewers; one need only recall, as just one instance, Nabokov’s comment to Appel that any similar passages that connect him to James Joyce are merely an “unfortunate coincidence.”

This, however, brings up an important distinction between Goethe and Nabokov when it comes to the issue of influence and invention. Unlike Nabokov, Goethe acknowledged freely borrowing from other writers, and did so without any vestige of apology. Indeed, he even vigorously defended such uses:

Do not all the achievements of a poet’s predecessors and contemporaries rightfully belong to him? Why should he shrink from picking flowers where he finds them? Only by making the riches of others our own do we bring anything great into being.  
(Goethe qtd. in Bloom, *Anxiety* 52)

To Eckermann, Goethe's Boswell, Goethe further expands on the idea of "originality," exhibiting at the same time an innate understanding of how writers struggle with the ghosts of those who have come before, as well as the sometimes fearsome shadows that can be cast by living writers in one's own generation. In the following passage, Eckermann, a young struggling poet in addition to Goethe's biographer, has just related to Goethe his own ideas for writing a "great poem upon the seasons." Goethe advises Eckermann:

I especially warn you against great inventions of your own; for then you would try to give a view of things, and for that purpose youth is seldom ripe. Further, character and views detach themselves as sides from the poet's mind, and deprive him of the fulness [sic] requisite for future productions. And, finally, how much time is lost in invention, internal arrangement, and combination! for [sic] which nobody thanks us, even supposing our work happily accomplished. With a given material, on the other hand, all goes easier and better. Facts and characters being provided, the poet has the task of animating the whole. He preserves his own fulness [sic], for he needs to part with but little of himself; and there is much less loss of time and power, since he only has the trouble of execution. Indeed, I advise the choice of subjects that have been worked before. How many Iphigenias have been written! yet [sic] they are all different, each writer considers and arranges the subject after his own fashion. (Goethe qtd. in *Conversations* 8-9)

What is particularly striking here is that Goethe not only is advising the young poet to actively search out the work of predecessors and employ those works for his own artistic purposes, but he also is acknowledging that this conscious "borrowing" exists within his own methodology. In other words, Goethe not only does not shrink from the idea of literary

precursors, not only does not feel their shadows casting long dark rays upon his own creative process; but he also seems to embrace them with “gusto.” As Jane Brown notes:

From the first Goethe problematized the Faust material by explicit allusions to and parodies of other works. The affair between Faust and Margarete, the heart of Goethe’s original conception, is stylized in terms of a seduction plot that was still recognizably English in Goethe’s Germany, and even more in terms of the relation between Hamlet and Ophelia; the connection is marked by one of Ophelia’s songs sung by Mephistopheles. The end of the “Walpurgis Night” alludes repeatedly to *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*...to mention only the most obvious of Shakespeare’s allusions...The play is saturated with biblical allusions, from the presence of the Book of Job in the “Prologue in Heaven” to the last act of Part II...Almost as pervasive are the allusions to classical antiquity, beginning with Virgil in the earliest stages of the play; in the later stages, particularly Part II, the canon expands to include Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Herodotus, Apollonius of Rhodes, Lucan and Ovid. (88)

Brown also points out another consequence of Goethe’s rich textual allusions and parodies, particularly when it comes to religious imagery. In many respects, this will reveal itself as existing within *Lolita* as well:

The tendency toward complicated allusions to other texts runs riot: Part II consists to a large extent of what might best be called “friendly parodies,” appropriations of texts and artifacts like sphinxes and griffins that span the history of European culture from Homer to Byron. So complex is the web of irony, parody and allusion in the final scenes that there is little agreement as to whether Faust’s apotheosis is

affirmative or nihilistic. The problem, of course, is the deliberate use of cosmic religious imagery...to represent a world that is thoroughly secular and in which the principles of physical and biological development have replaced the Christian God (99-100).

Hoelzel agrees with Brown's assessment that it is unclear whether Faust's apotheosis is "affirmative" or not, and posits that this was precisely Goethe's intent. Does Faust ultimately merit his redemption, or not? Does he win his bet with Mephisto, or not? These were questions, Hoelzel asserts, which Goethe intended to be debated. "Indeed," Hoelzel says, "much evidence seems to suggest that Goethe was consciously working towards an ambiguous solution," calling *Faust* at one point "ein offenes Raethsel" —an open riddle—and at another point expressing the desire that "die Menschen fort and fort ergoetze und ihnen zu schaffen mache"—that people would have to return to the text again and again. It is this quality that Hoelzel calls "Goethe's mysterious, almost playful manner with regard to his magnum opus" and his "apparently conscious effort to make it elusive and inscrutable" (1).

Such comments by Goethe, Hoelzel notes, were not made merely once or twice, but numerous times in his personal letters "as if to emphasize his intentions." In one letter to K.F. von Reinhard, for example, Goethe writes that no "Aufschluss" (conclusion) should be expected, because "each problem in the work gives rise to new problems." Hoelzel calls it "prophetic accuracy" that Goethe predicted how numerous scholars and researchers would uncover much more in the work than he intended to show (6).

What is particularly striking about both Brown and Hoelzel's comments is how hauntingly similar they seem in relation to Nabokov. Recall, for example, Nabokov's



“prophetic” statements to interviewers about how scholars would pour over his work long after he was gone, hunting for traces and clues to his life and work. And remember, too, how Nabokov taunted his “criticules,” who were unable to discern the so-called “obvious” structural knot in his last novel, *Transparent Things*. Indeed, imagine, for a moment, that both Brown and Hoelzel had been speaking about *Lolita* and not *Faust*. It is difficult to imagine anyone disagreeing with Brown’s assessment that *Lolita* likewise contains “complicated allusions to other texts” that at times run riot, or that, moreover, Humbert’s repeated use of religious rhetoric and “cosmic religious imagery”—even if it is not as overt as in *Faust*—similarly can be seen as existing against a backdrop of a post-war American world in which consumerism, in many respects, had replaced the Christian God with the Almighty dollar. And certainly, when we recall Nabokov’s esteem for that which is a hidden and deceptive, and Goethe’s esteem for the “open riddle,” the goals of these two literary titans seem, on several fronts, solidly aligned.

What Nabokov and Goethe both present to the reader in *Lolita* and *Faust* is a riddle about the natures and fates of their protagonists, a riddle by which both writers seem to taunt the reader into believing that there is a solution. Whether there is, indeed, only one solution or many, depending on the perceptions of the readers, is left up to us to discern; but one suspects that, just like the nature of the human condition, perception will be altered by one’s experience. Does Faust deserve his redemption? Perhaps—but then again, perhaps not. Does Humbert deserve to sizzle in hell for all eternity? He was a pedophile, a murderer—but then again, didn’t he also love Lolita in his own twisted way?

*Faust* and *Lolita* thus both present enigmas that endure, despite our attempts to reach easy answers. This, of course, is what Goethe and Nabokov both intended; for when

it comes to a human being's deepest yearnings and innermost desires, judgment is not so simple a task. We know this instinctively to be true, for just like Faust and Humbert, we too have one thing deep inside our souls that we crave above all else—even, it should be noted, if we do not yet know what it is.

### **The Wind and the Weather**

Part of Goethe's unabashed borrowing may have stemmed from a sense that he was, in fact, without any real precursors or predecessors. As Bloom notes:

The exhilaration of unprecedentedness always attended him, since happily he had no strong German forerunner, and cheerfully established a senior partnership with Schiller, a decade younger than himself. Even Shakespeare had to absorb Christopher Marlowe, but the young Goethe was alone with the wind and the weather. (Genius 175-76)

Nabokov, too, seems to have possessed this sense of being alone with the wind and the weather, of having no precursor. Long before *Lolita* was published, for example, a 1948 profile of Nabokov in the Wellesley College News noted, "To Russians, Pushkin is their most treasured writer; to the English, Shakespeare. Nabokov, with both heritages at his disposal, calmly placed himself in their company" (Boyd, *American* 122). But what clearly set him apart from Shakespeare or Pushkin—or Goethe, for that matter—was that, unlike those writers, Nabokov was writing in a language other than his native tongue. Layered upon the bedrock of his own appalling self-confidence seemed to rest an additional strata of verve, one that reveals itself almost as an unspoken dare, as an inferred taunt: *Would Shakespeare or Pushkin have been so great if they had been forced to switch to German?*

*Would anyone even mention Goethe's name if he had been forced to write in English? Hold me up to those writers, look at what I have done purely on my own literary merits, but then remember where I came from, that I was once the literary star of Sirin. Then tell me: who is the greatest writer?*

We can see further evidence of this confidence in an interview with the author Herb Gold, who asked him about one critic's assertion that Nabokov's works have striking similarities and are "extremely repetitious." Nabokov answers that there may be truth in that view, but if so it is because he differs from other writers. "Derivative writers seem versatile because they imitate many others, past and present. Artistic originality," on the other hand, "has only its own self to copy" (SO 95). Here again we are presented with Nabokov's concept of himself as not only purely original, and thus unique, but also uninfluenced by any other writer.

If we recall the statement Nabokov once made to his Cornell students that "a true genius takes the work of others and bends it to his own use," (and this, it should be noted, was before *Lolita* was published and launched him into literary stardom), we can assume, however, that there apparently was a time when Nabokov seemed to share Goethe's view, at least openly, that a writer should not shrink from "picking flowers" where he finds them, or, in other words, freely borrowing from other works at will. In many respects, Nabokov was echoing the ideas expressed by Goethe to the young Eckermann, although the difference, of course, is that where Goethe openly acknowledged borrowing from other writers and even taking their themes and altering them for his own purposes, Nabokov later would deny doing any such thing.

Nabokov would, however, give occasional hints to his philosophy of how he viewed his own chessboard-like maneuvering in relation to other writers, as in the following passage:

A creative writer must study carefully the works of his rivals, including the Almighty. He must possess the inborn capacity not only of recombining but of re-creating the given world. In order to do this adequately, avoiding duplication of labor, the artist should *know* the given world. Imagination without knowledge leads no farther than the back yard of primitive art, the child's scrawl on the fence, and the crank's message in the market place. Art is never simple. (SO 32)

Nabokov's use of the word "rivals," I think, is particularly intriguing, especially since it suggests a kind of battle-ready psyche, one that is in stark contrast to the type described in Bloom's notion of "anxiety." Moreover, Nabokov's reference to "recombining" and not "duplicating labor" sounds strikingly similar to Goethe's advice to Eckermann, and is particularly important when we later compare the text of *Lolita* with Goethe's *Faust*.

What is missing from Nabokov's mention of "rivals," however, is whether they must, to his thinking, necessarily exist within his own lifetime. Does he consider deceased writers to be rivals, or only ones in his midst? As for the latter case, Nabokov told one interviewer that "seldom more than two or three really first-rate writers exist simultaneously in a given generation" (SO 57). Notice, however, that he does not make the distinction of adding "within any one country"; his worldview, as it pertains to living literary giants, thus would only seem to allow for two or three titans to exist on the planet during any one era. It seems highly likely, therefore, that for Nabokov a great achievement

for any living “titan” would be to successfully parody or mock the “great achievements” of a titanic predecessor.

It should be noted, however, that not all of Goethe’s advice to Eckermann is the kind that Nabokov would have been likely to endorse. At one point, for example, Eckermann tells Goethe that he is struggling with how to approach a certain text he has in mind, and adds that it would be “most convenient to me to treat it in prose.” Goethe counsels him against it, and tells Eckermann that the “best method” for treating the subject would be in “ten or twelve separate little poems—in rhyme” (Conversations 19-20). Goethe, to be sure, is speaking from the role as a master teacher to the young writer. Nevertheless, his comments here are particularly noteworthy when we consider the significance of that nebulous but critical issue of “treatment” in any composition. The manner by which a writer ultimately decides to structure a work is not mere decoration; to the contrary, the “method,” as Goethe calls it, both supports and constrains the text itself, functioning much like wooden framework for a house being built. Once a certain design is erected, the creative architect may add additional rooms if necessary, but he cannot change an A-frame into a Gothic spire with flying buttresses.

How to best approach any work of composition, of course, is one of any writer’s greatest challenges. Milton, for example, was uncertain whether to write *Paradise Lost* as a classical epic or baroque spectacular (Brown 90). By telling Eckermann how to proceed, Goethe is revealing what many would call an altogether different kind of hubris by presuming to have the answer for which the individual writer, by necessity, must determine on his own. Should the text be narrated in first person or third? Shall it be in past tense or present? Should the text be contained within a narrative frame, use flashbacks, unfold from

the point of view of an all-seeing narrator? These are not simply technical questions; indeed, they will, to a large degree, determine the shape and options available to the writer, something Nabokov no doubt was aware of during the numerous years in which he struggled to find the appropriate structure, or to use Goethe's word, "method," for Humbert's tale.

This, of course, raises a compelling issue. If Nabokov did, indeed, decide to use *Faust* as the structure or "method" for his novel, one can only assume that his scholarship would have been both exhaustive and thorough. Nabokov, as Boyd points out, was an intense researcher for his novels; when writing *The Gift*, for example, Nabokov "had thoroughly researched the origins of Russian radical utilitarianism and in 1933 had even proposed to teach the evolution of Russian Marxism (American, 21). Evidence of his in-depth scholarship and research also can be found within *Lolita*, as when Vera, in a letter to her sister-in-law, writes that "V. studied the law on the protection of orphans, and there is no law that would have prevented this turn of events" (Schiff 200). Indeed, Nabokov himself told one interviewer that he "never retaliates" when critics question his art, "but I do reach for my heaviest dictionary when my scholarship is questioned" (SO 146). Clearly, then, his scholarship not only was a source of pride for him, but something he defended intensely and authoritatively.

For a scholar of Nabokov's breadth and depth, then, one can only infer that his research of *Faust*—as well as of Goethe—also would have included reading Eckermann's *Conversations of Goethe*, which Nietzsche once called "the best German book there is" (Ellis, *Conversations* vii), and of which Hamlin observes:

Regarding himself as an intimate biographer (somewhat on the model of Boswell for Samuel Johnson), Eckermann offers very detailed, often word-for-word accounts of his meetings with the elder poet. Whether or not he is strictly accurate in what is reported, the work remains an invaluable source of information, especially with regard to the thought and opinions of Goethe on every conceivable subject, including *Faust*. (412)

It follows, then, that Nabokov also would have been familiar with Goethe's advice to Eckermann to choose "subjects that have been worked before," advice that most writers, considering the subject matter under discussion, might have seized upon as a metaphoric green light to go ahead and help themselves to whatever literary pickings they found desirable.

But I say "most" writers. This, to be sure, was not the case with Nabokov. If Nabokov would not even acknowledge textual similarities between his own novels and those of other writers—except for those of the most obvious, accessible and parodic types—why would anyone expect him, if he did indeed use Goethe's *Faust* for the "structural knot" of *Lolita*, ever to disclose it? If *Lolita* was, in fact, as "carefully contrived" as he once remarked, why would anyone imagine that Nabokov ever would have willingly revealed the solution?

The answers to those questions obviously are complex and beyond our grasp. We can speculate, we can theorize, but there is only one thing we can know with certainty: Nabokov was always the literary chessmaster, and we readers simply his pawns.

## **Parody and *Poshlust***

One of the most obvious ways Nabokov's sense of his own literary genius ability expresses itself—as well as his judgments about other writers—is through parody. Nabokov makes a clear distinction between parody and satire; satire, he says, “is a lesson, parody is a game” (SO 75). He further distinguishes between the familiar meaning of parody—“a grotesque imitation”—from something he refers to as a “mockingbird game.” His own type of parody, in contrast to the more commonplace meaning, Nabokov says, is “essentially lighthearted” and “delicate” (SO 76).

Whether that always was the case, however, is left for readers to judge. Boyd, for example, notes that by age 19, Nabokov not only had judged Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* to be “long-winded, terribly sentimental, and badly written,” but then followed this scathing assessment with a parodic poem about the writer (151). Around the same time, Nabokov also wrote a 430-line riposte to Blok's most celebrated poem (“Dvenadtsat”), calling what many considered to be Blok's masterpiece “dreadful, self-consciously couched in a phony ‘primitive’ tone, with a pink cardboard Jesus Christ glued on at the end” (156). To be sure, many might view such pronouncements as audacious, coming as they do from a 19-year-old young man who essentially is shredding the works of great and beloved Russian writers.

Still, what is more noteworthy, and even more valuable in terms of literary analysis, is Nabokov's use of the word “phony,” along with the evoked image of a fake or cheap representation of Jesus Christ. Both concepts relate directly to the exemplification of another animating force within Nabokov's work: the concept of “*poshlust*.” Of all the criticisms that could be hurled at any writer, *poshlust*, at least for Nabokov, seems to have



been the most expressive of his complete scorn and contempt, the “one pitiless word,” as he put it, that expresses “the idea of a widespread defect for which the other three European languages I happen to know possess no special term” (Nabokov, Nikolai 63). What this Russian word means, however—and its relation to Nabokov’s own writing—takes a bit of explaining.

Language, of course, is a construct of culture, and so we should not be surprised that numerous cultures deem certain words to be incapable of full understanding by outsiders, or that attempts to translate certain words often are viewed as pale imitations. “Kairos,” for example, was a term that James Kinneavy points out was a dominating concept in ancient Greek texts, but whose multiple meanings—from “right timing” to “due measure” and numerous other shades of distinction—were all but lost on translators throughout the ages (3). For a more contemporary example, many Germans likewise claim that the word “Weltanschauung” is not translatable, and that its English equivalent, “worldview,” comes nowhere close to capturing the word’s full meaning.

Nabokov, quite clearly, believes the same to be true of “*poshlust*.” In his biography, *Nikolai Gogol*, he devotes several pages to the word, beginning with how to pronounce it (“the first ‘o’ is as big as the plop of an elephant falling into a muddy pond”) and then proceeds to offer a few possible interpretations:

English words expressing several, although by no means all aspects of *poshlust* are for instance: “cheap, sham, common, smutty, pink-and-blue, high falutin’, in bad taste.” My little assistant, *Roget’s Thesaurus*, (which incidentally lists “rats, mice” under “Insects”—see page 21 of Revised Edition) supplies me moreover with “inferior, sorry, trashy, scurvy, tawdry, gimcrack,” and others under “cheapness.”

All these however suggest merely certain false values for the detection of which no particular shrewdness is required. In fact, they tend, these words, to supply an obvious classification of values at a given period of human history; but what Russians call *poshlust* is beautifully timeless and so cleverly painted all over with protective tints that its presence (in a book, in a soul, in an institution, in a thousand other places) often escapes detection. (64)

In Nabokov's concept of the term, then, *poshlust* is not solely comprised of cheapness or tawdriness, qualities which anyone easily could discern. Rather, in order for genuine *poshlust* to exist (an oxymoron, clearly, if ever there was one), one must possess a certain "shrewdness" to recognize and discern it, so that shrewdness, by definition, thus becomes an inherent component of the word as well. Again, Nabokov's understanding of the word reveals his esteem for that which is hidden, for that which must be deciphered, and for that which remains to most people as enigmatic. He privileges, even in this one word alone, the concept of deciphering that which is hidden but, simultaneously, exists within plain view.

But *poshlust*, as Nabokov has pointed out, also applies to a person's "soul." Just as an institution can continue to assert archaic values to a populace that views those values as imbedded or established; and just as an organization, due to its sheer longevity and reputation, may maintain respect and deference long after its core values have become anachronistic, so too a human being can drape its soul in a nut-like shell that is resistant to discernment, presenting itself as one thing while its true nature—perhaps even to itself—remains hidden deep within. It is thus that Charlotte Haze is literally surrounded by what T.S. Eliot might have called the objective correlative of *poshlusty* (to coin an American version of the word) Mexican knickknacks, and appears to us as "one of those women

whose polished words may reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality, but never her soul” (Annotated, 37). Indeed, as Appel notes, “to Nabokov [Charlotte] is the definitive artsy-craftsy-suburban lady—the culture-vulture, that travesty of Woman, Love and Sexuality. In short, she is the essence of American *poshlust*...” (Annotated xlvii).

But Nabokov, in his definition of the word, also distinguishes genuine *poshlust* from what may appear cheap or artificial or common *at a certain point in history*, and the kind of *poshlust* that is “beautifully timeless.” In contrast to ephemeral or constantly shifting notions of what is good or bad taste within any particular culture or society, for example, true *poshlust*, Nabokov suggests, is immortal. What is more, usually it is so cleverly cloaked, so permeated with what is deemed to be normal or honored or respected, that it often escapes notice or even scrutiny.

*Poshlust*, of course, is to be found everywhere, from the commercial artist who, as Nabokov notes, “wishes to depict a nice little boy” and so “will grace him with freckles”; to propaganda and advertisements. But it is literature, Nabokov says, that is “one of its best breeding places.” By speaking of “*poshlust*-literature,” Nabokov asserts that he does not mean “the kind of thing which is termed ‘pulp’ or which in England used to go under the name of ‘penny dreadfuls’ and in Russian under that of ‘yellow literature’”. Obvious trash, curiously enough, contains sometimes a wholesome ingredient, readily appreciated by children and simple souls” (SO 68). Nabokov makes clear he is not talking about something as obviously campy as America’s Superman, which, perhaps like pink flamingos in a Florida trailer park, represent *poshlust* in “such a mild, unpretentious form that it is not worth while talking about” (68).

So what kind of literary *poshlust* is worth talking about? To be sure, as far as Nabokov is concerned, it is one that is far more pernicious and insidious than any fiction by Raymond Chandler, say, or *The Adventures of Superman*. As Nabokov observes in *Nikolai Gogol*, clarifying the “ordinary” *poshlust* from the truly insidious:

*Poshlust*, it should be repeated, is especially vigorous and vicious when the sham is not obvious and when the values it mimics are considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the very highest level of art, thought or emotion. It is those books which are so *poshlustily* reviewed in the literature supplement of daily papers—the best sellers, the ‘stirring, profound novels’; it is these ‘elevated and powerful books’ that contain and distill the very essence of *poshlust* (68).

Of particular note here is that Nabokov, in this passage, does not exclude from the realm of *poshlust* those values that may “rightly” belong to the highest level of art. Indeed, as John Burt Foster notes, even while Nabokov was a student at Cambridge in 1922, a “miracle year” in which both Joyce’s *Ulysess* and T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* were published at the acme of “high modernism,” Nabokov much later would recall to an interviewer (again, no doubt a scripted reply) that his literary tastes at the time favored the Georgian poets such as Rupert Brooke and A. E. Housman. Although Nabokov said he shared Joyce’s “fascination for multilingual wordplay,” he dismissed Eliot as “not quite first-rate” and Ezra Pound as “definitely second-rate” (Nabokov qtd in Foster, 87). Connolly adds that, rejecting a mythical method that some high modernists espoused, “Nabokov favored parody and cultural multiplicity to counter any movement that would reduce the individual to the level of stereotype” (4). Foster notes, however, that Nabokov did make an “oblique tribute” to Yeats in his novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, completed in 1939, the same year that

Yeats died. One major reason, Foster asserts, may have been that “the motif of communion with the dead [and] Yeats’ strong interest in the occult...correspond to Nabokov’s more skeptical evocations of ‘the other side...’” (88). Although I disagree with Foster’s assertion that Nabokov’s concern with what may occur after death has anything to do with what might be called the “occult” or “communion with the dead,” or that his lifelong speculation about the immortality of the human soul should be characterized as “skeptical evocations of the ‘other side,’” it does seem plausible that Nabokov was offering a nod to Yeats’ passing.

Interestingly, however, Nabokov provides only a single example of literature that qualifies for what might be called his *Poshlust* award—although, to be sure, we can see it as example of one among many. The winner of this dubious honor goes to...Goethe’s

*Faust*:

Ever since Russia began to think, and up to the time that her mind went blank under the influence of the extraordinary regime she has been enduring for these last twenty-five years, educated, sensitive and free-minded Russians were acutely aware of the furtive and clammy touch of *poshlust*. Among the nations with which we came into contact, Germany had always seemed to us a country where *poshlust*, instead of being mocked, was one of the essential parts of the national spirit, traditions and general atmosphere, although at the same time well-meaning Russian intellectuals of a more romantic type readily, too readily, adopted the legend of the greatness of German philosophy and literature: for it takes a super-Russian to admit that there is a dreadful streak of *poshlust* running though Goethe’s *Faust*. (Gogol 64)

In this extraordinary paragraph, Nabokov not only is commenting on what he views to be sheep-like thinking of Russia since the Revolution, and an inherent characteristic of the German people to embrace rather than mock *poshlust*; but he also is addressing what we can only assume were his fellow Russian expatriates in Berlin during the nearly twenty years he lived there. This, it is worth noting, is not at all a small audience for his remarks.

In the early 1920s, some might have felt that Russians had actually taken over Berlin, particularly since, in just a few years, nearly half a million refugees had moved there. As Schiff notes, “There were émigré Russian everythings: Russian hairdressers, Russian grocers, Russian pawnshops, Russian antique stores, Russian foreign-exchange speculators, Russian orchestras...these were not downtrodden, frightened refugees but a sophisticated, vibrant community of professionals and aristocrats. *Rul* was one of 150 Russian language newspapers...” (9-10).

Many of those refugees also very likely anticipated that one day they would go back to Russia. Vera, who arrived in Berlin with her family in 1921, later recalled the sense of waiting out the storm raging in Russia, and hoping that the Bolshevik regime would not last. At age 18, Vera assumed that “everybody was going back in a year, or two, or ten” (Schiff 32). This might explain why so many Russians—Nabokov among them—clung to their own language, as well as their own community. Why bother to learn German, or mix with the natives, as it were, if very soon they all would be going back home again?

Still, Nabokov seems to be giving this same sophisticated community a not too gentle poke for too readily accepted the notion of “greatness” in German literature and philosophy. What is more, his reference to the “super-Russian” who is able to discern the

*poshlust* in *Faust*, a work long considered to be Goethe's masterpiece, leaves little doubt about whom he means.

Nabokov, however, adds to the above excerpted passage by acknowledging that he, himself, may be walking "dangerously close to that abyss of *poshlust*" when he begins to "exaggerate the worthlessness of a country at the awkward moment when one is at war with it." (We should recall that Nabokov was composing this in 1943, when the outcome of the war was still unknown.) Nevertheless, this, in his view, still is not enough to prevent him from doing exactly that. To further illustrate what he calls "the immortal spirit of *poshlust* pervading the German nation," he turns his attention once again to Gogol, whom he says was able to beautifully express the inherent *poshlust* of Germany with "all the vigor of his genius" (65).

Gogol, according to Nabokov, once joined a conversation that had turned to the topic of Germany, remarking that it was "impossible to imagine anything more unpleasant than a German Lothario." Gogol illustrated this observation with an anecdote about a love-spurned German man who, in order to win over the "heart of his cruel Gretchen," swam every day in the lake near her balcony while simultaneously embracing a few swans that had been "specially prepared for him for that purpose." At the end of the anecdote—"Gretchen" melted; the couple were "happily married"—Nabokov remarks that Gogol's encapsulation represents "*poshlust* in its ideal form" (65-66). In a similar manner, Nabokov likewise asserts that Gogol has achieved the same thing with *Dead Souls*. "There is something sleek and plump about *poshlust*," he writes, "and this gloss, these smooth curves, attracted the artist in Gogol" (71).

Peeling away the false veneer, then, becomes Nabokov's primary goal when addressing what he sees as most deceptively tawdry. In this respect, it might be said that Nabokov is both repelled by and attracted to *poshlust*: it is inherently deceptive and deplorable, but also begs the discerning artist to uncover and parody it. Seen in this light, *poshlust* thus becomes for Nabokov what stupid accidents are for the emergency room physician: a steady stream of opportunities.

Indeed, this might have been what Herbert Gold was referring to in a 1966 interview in which he asked Nabokov if there were "temptations for you in the sin of *poshlust*" and if "you have ever fallen" (SO 100). Nabokov, however, responded to the question as if he had been asked whether, within some innermost crevice of his soul, he actually was attracted to cat litter:

...*Poshlust* has many nuances and evidently I have not described them clearly enough in my little book on Gogol, if you think one can ask anybody if he is tempted by *poshlust*. Corny trash, vulgar clichés, Philistinism in all its phases, imitations of imitations, bogus profundities, crude, moronic and dishonest pseudo-literature—these are obvious examples. Now, if we want to pin down *poshlust* in contemporary writing we must look for it in Freudian symbolism, moth-eaten mythologies, social comment, humanistic messages, political allegories, overconcern with class or race, and the journalistic generalities we all know. *Poshlust* speaks in such concepts as "America is no better than Russia" or "We all share in Germany's guilt." The flowers of *poshlust* bloom in such phrases as "the moment of truth," "charisma," "existential" (used seriously), "dialogues" (as applied to political talks between nations), and "vocabulary" (as applied to a



dauber). Listing in one breath Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Vietnam is seditious *poshlust'*" (SO 100-101).

Nabokov continues to provide additional examples, noting that "the list is long, and everybody has his *bete noire*, his black pet, in the series." His own, he says, includes a particular airline ad, "and, of course, *Death in Venice*. You can see the range" (101). It is no mistake that he should end a comment that includes Auschwitz and Hiroshima with a jab at Thomas Mann. Nabokov singles out this author repeatedly over the years—he calls him "puffed up" "second rate" and his works "ephemeral" (SO 54)—criticism that has been described as stemming from Nabokov's distaste for "the mythical method," such as that found in Mann's novella and Joyce's *Ulysses*, and which "left Nabokov cold" (Foster 90). Foster further notes that, on the whole,

...Nabokov rejected myth as a form-giving device or modern fiction. Besides its connections with Freud and psychoanalysis...the mythical outlook tended to value free-floating generalities over concrete specificities. As a result, it threatened to replace individuals with stereotypes in a reductive manner of thought and perception utterly foreign to Nabokov. By contrast, parody in this context does not amount to a sterile take-off on previous writing that is essentially parasitic and unoriginal. Instead, it is a brilliant stylistic balancing act that succeeds in giving a fresh twist and valuable new meanings to the conventional or already expressed. In short, parody is innovative; it is modernist rather than decadent. (91)

Foster adds, however, that even though Nabokov rejects the mythical method and the "doctrine of authorial impersonality" (91), this does not mean that Nabokov always avoids or excludes mythical parallels from his fiction. Providing what he calls "a notable, though

isolated, example,” Foster points to a passage in *The Defense*, in which “his ungainly and unconventional chessmaster hero Luzhin, on deciding to propose to his future wife, meets a Cupid figure in the form of a pebble-shooting boy” (90). Clearly, however, if Nabokov did use *Faust* as a hidden structure, it could be argued that Foster’s “isolated” example of mythic parallelism was not quite as isolated as it may seem.

As far as Thomas Mann is concerned, however, what is interesting to note is that Nabokov does not address the one work that in many respects might have provided one of the biggest “targets” for Nabokov: *Doktor Faustus*, published in 1948. Nevertheless, his reference to *Death in Venice* as an example of *poshlust* is not his only disparaging reference to Mann, a writer for whom Foster notes Nabokov had a “strong antipathy” (95).

It is one thing, however, to dismiss a writer as “phony,” or “not quite first-rate,” or “definitely second rate,” and still another to engage that writer, if you will, in a literary chess match. As Nabokov himself noted, certain types of *poshlust* simply are not worth talking about, or worth the literary calories of exertion. “By inclination and intent I avoid squandering my art on the illustrated catalogues of solemn notions and serious opinions,” he told the BBC in 1969, “and I dislike their pervasive presence in the works of others” (SO 147). This will reveal itself to be a crucial component of how Nabokov finally decided upon a main structure that would allow him to address three things that, throughout his life, clearly had been driving forces for him as a writer: his notion of the soul, his notion of possible immortality, and his almost inborn penchant for “attacking” *poshlust*, often through parody, in so-called “great literature.”

As Dolinin observes, Nabokov “reveled in overthrowing a “false idol” and “ridiculing a stale cliché or trendy, device, shattering a convention” (58). To accomplish all

of those goals, Nabokov would find the perfect subject—and author—in Goethe’s *Faust*, which, as we will see, reveals itself to be a major animating force in a later book called *Lolita*.

### Chapter Three—Faustian Elements in Film

Nabokov may have believed himself to be without precursors, alone in the wind and the weather. But if he did decide to retool and re-envision the Faust legend for a modern audience, he certainly was not the first person to do so—nor would he be the last. To understand how frequently the pact-with-the-devil trope has been re-imagined and revised to fit the particular *zeitgeist*, or spirit of the times, one only need look to the silver screen. It is here that we can see some of the broadest manipulations of the Faust myth, with each filmmaker tailoring the theme to best accentuate a specific metaphoric goal. To better grasp how the twisting of the legend first began, however, perhaps a brief recap of the Faust myth is in order.

Imagine, for a moment, that the long history of the Faust legend, along with its myriad permutations, had been made into a one-hour PBS documentary, narrated, perhaps, by Ken Burns. On the screen we might first see a medieval scholar working by candlelight, leafing through 15<sup>th</sup> century tomes, and then looking heavenward in frustration at the limits of human understanding and lack of true knowledge. Then, on the wall directly behind him, would ominously appear a horned figure's silhouette. The voice-over narrator would explain that this medieval scholar, named Georg Faust, was an actual historic figure dating back to the Middle Ages, a “notorious astrologer, alchemist, physician and magician who was expelled from various south German

cities” (Brown 87), and who was rumored to have sold his soul to the devil in exchange for infinite knowledge.

This notorious professor’s pact, we also would be told, later became the subject in the late 1500s of anonymous chapbooks—collections of legends and folklore written for popular audiences—and also of Christopher Marlowe’s 1604 play, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, in which the learned doctor is damned to fiery damnation for all eternity. Renaissance audiences no doubt were intended to have been chastened by the fate of Marlowe’s Faust; magic was seen as the work of the devil, and with Protestantism’s increased emphasis on faith, “knowledge led to pride and thus jeopardized the salvation of the soul through grace” (Brown 88). In Marlowe’s drama,

Faust appears as a typical man of the Renaissance, as an explorer and adventurer, as a superman craving for extraordinary power, wealth, enjoyment, and worldly eminence...Mephistopheles is the medieval devil, harsh and grim and fierce, bent on seduction, without any comprehension of human aspirations. Helen of Troy is a she-devil, and becomes the final means of Faust’s destruction. (Franke 1910)

But audience responses to Marlowe’s play began to change. During the eighteenth century, for example, Faust’s fate was presented by traveling troupes throughout Europe in ballet and puppet plays, the latter often causing audiences to roar in laughter. And among those eighteenth century audiences, the documentary narrator would tell us, was one young boy, his last name Goethe. Perhaps he did not laugh along with the others; and years later he would ponder why the fate of the soul-selling doctor in Marlowe’s time had served as a stern warning to the masses, but now, in the “Age of Enlightenment,” was regarded as ridiculous. What, that boy might have wondered, was

so funny about a once-respected scholar—even if he appeared now in the form of a puppet—burning in eternal hell for his earthly sins? If this story no longer “resonated” with audiences, what was the reason? Could it be that modern audiences in the eighteenth century did not believe in Faust’s fate; or was it that, perhaps, that they did not believe that Faust was deserving of it?

In Marlowe’s version, Faust’s pact with the devil and his ultimate damnation both served as warnings to the faithful to hold dear to the means of Christian salvation. But Marlowe’s depiction of Faust as “a criminal who sins against the eternal laws of life” and a “rebel against holiness who ruins his better self and finally receives the merited reward of his misdeeds,” as Franke notes, could not have resonated with eighteenth-century audiences (1910). The eighteenth century was the age of Rationalism, an era that “glorified human reason and human feeling.” Goethe’s age, then, was bound to see within Faust a symbol of the human condition who “not only was a champion of truth, nature and individual freedom, but also a symbol of human striving for completeness of life” (1910).

And then would come a new scene: On the screen, a distinguished looking young man, dressed in a typical eighteenth-century waist coat, vest and buckled shoes, would be shown walking along narrow cobblestone streets of Weimar, Germany, past centuries-old buildings that instantly would be reminiscent of a Hollywood set. It was here, the narrator’s voice would tell us, that Goethe—the young man seen before us—was inspired to rework Marlowe’s version of the Faust legend, transforming it to fit the modern sensibilities of his time. As Wiegand later would note, Goethe was the “child of an age that experienced the world in terms very different from those of the age of the

Reformation,” and sensed that the theme of Doctor Faustus “harbored unlimited possibilities for expressing the altered and expanded aspirations of the human soul” (446). Where the age of the Reformation had viewed the story of Faust as a lesson and a warning,

To the age of Goethe it was natural, on the other hand, to look upon the doctor-magician as a blurred and distorted prototype of man’s ideal aspirations. This is the premise that explains Goethe’s abiding attraction to the theme. Faust appealed to Goethe as a symbol of man’s emancipation from authority.

Regardless of whether Faust’s path would eventually lead him to perdition or salvation, his courage in daring to trespass upon the realm of the forbidden makes him a heroic figure charged with positive value.... Thus, what had been branded as sin could take on the aspect of a higher glory. (447)

Later, when we examine the text of *Faust* in comparison to *Lolita*, it will be useful to keep these observations in mind, particularly concerning the question of what might have attracted Nabokov to the theme of using *Faust* as a hidden structure. Like Goethe’s flawed doctor, Humbert also dares to “trespass upon the realm of the forbidden” and free himself—or at least, conceal himself—from social and moral authority. But within *Lolita* there also most certainly exists the issue of whether Humbert’s path will “eventually lead him to perdition or salvation,” a theme that, as has been alluded to in an earlier section, and will be discussed in more depth in a later chapter, will reveal itself to be one of the overarching *leitmotifs* in *Lolita*.

In Goethe’s drama, Part I of which was published in 1808—nearly twenty years since he wrote his “Fragment” or “*Ur-Faust*”—Faust sells his soul to the devil in

exchange for infinite knowledge and experience, but along the way he also seduces a young innocent girl named Gretchen and causes four deaths as a result. Despite Faust's debauchery, however, Goethe's protagonist does not experience the same fiery fate as Marlowe's flawed doctor. At the end of Part II of the drama, completed in 1831, one year before Goethe's death, Faust is rescued, literally at the eleventh hour, and the devil is deprived his due. In contrast to Marlowe, this Faust ascends to Heaven, forgiven by the now angelic Gretchen/Margarete, who pronounces her authentic love for him regardless of the pain he caused her on Earth. And this Faust, in the years following the play's posthumous publication in 1832, becomes a heroic figure both in literature as well as among the German people.

Goethe's version of the legend built upon Marlowe's. But it also modernized it in significant ways. For one, Goethe altered "the usual trajectory of the tradition by saving Faust from final damnation," notes Thomas Cooksey (19). In Goethe's play, Cooksey also notes another essential difference: In contrast to Marlowe, the key to Faust's salvation "is mediated not by Helen, but by the figure of Gretchen/Margarete, the embodiment of the 'eternal feminine'" (19). Indeed, Faust's seduction of the young Gretchen has been critically viewed as singularly Goethe's creation and contribution to the Faust legend (although, it should be noted, some scholars have pointed out that Goethe might have "borrowed" the seduction idea). Further, in what Cooksey calls a "curious inversion" of the Faust tradition, "Gretchen takes over the role of temptress, but is seduced by Faust rather than seducing him. ...She becomes the source of his salvation rather than his damnation" (20).



For more than a century, Goethe's version would be critically viewed as "the *ne plus ultra* of German literature, if not all literature, and its hero as a paragon of humanity" (Hoelzel 2). Although that view would change dramatically after World War II, what is important to note is that in Goethe's drama we can discern the first major twist to the legend, the introduction of a new element in the form of Gretchen/Margarete. But Goethe's reinterpretation will, by no means, be the last. The Faust legend was tackled by other writers, including Lessing, and also became the subject of an opera by Gounod. But it was the new medium of film that seized upon the legend for the greatest number of new incarnations.

One of the first cinematic incarnations appeared in a 1926 German production by F.W. Murnau, which Nabokov almost certainly would have seen while he was living in Berlin. Nabokov, for instance, recalls that during that time he went every few weeks to the neighborhood cinema (SO 163), and Schiff notes that Nabokov, despite future protestations to the contrary about his mastery of that language, "was perfectly able to understand a movie in German," presumably meaning that he would have been able to understand the silent films' subtitles. Indeed, Schiff adds, "later he would say that his German was only good enough to allow him to read entomological journals, which is roughly equivalent to saying that one's English is only accomplished enough to enable one to practice medicine" (59). Even if that were not proof enough of Nabokov's ability to navigate in German, Schiff also notes that Nabokov's German "was strong enough—or something was—to enable him to rewrite the English translation of Kafka" (59).

But we should hardly be surprised that Nabokov later would deny knowing German, even when faced with evidence to the contrary. Whether his disavowals

stemmed from his uniquely high linguistic standards, or from a philosophic position—one that, Schiff suggests, sprang from his wanting “no part of this never-adopted country, which he had long disliked” (59)—Nabokov, to paraphrase Humbert, could always be counted upon to present not only a fancy prose style, but also a puzzling persona.

### **Murnau’s Faust**

As soon as filmmakers can prove their box-office muscle, very often they are given *carte blanche* to direct future projects. Just as would be the case of the young American director Steven Spielberg decades later, this same fate also fell to Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau in Germany, after what many critics called his “triumphant” releases of *Nosferatu* and *The Last Laugh* in the early 1920s. When Murnau was given the green light to adapt Goethe’s *Faust* for the silver screen, as well as the full resources of the UFA Studios, what resulted was an epic production with what then were state-of-the-art and experimental special effects.

To today’s audiences, accustomed to computer-generated visuals in a post-*Star Wars* film era, those special effects no doubt appear primitive. Nevertheless, in 1926 the sight of plague-stricken villages materializing and then disappearing in wisps of smoke, of demonic creatures soaring over rooftops, of Faust and Mephisto flying upon a cape through the heavens—all were cinematic techniques that must have struck audiences as nothing short of astonishing. That does not mean, however, that Murnau’s film, the last one he made in Germany before departing for Hollywood, was unanimously hailed as a masterpiece. To the contrary, Murnau’s “creative license” or

*carte blanche* by UFA also apparently extended to changing certain aspects of Goethe's famous play; and these changes, it turns out, would be alterations that not every Goethe aficionado received with gusto. As Gary Johnson notes:

Murnau had more in mind than just filming Goethe's classic tale. Working with screenwriter Hans Kyser, Murnau cobbled together the legend of Faust using bits of Marlowe and Gounod and German folk legends. Precisely because of this approach to *Faust*, contemporary German audiences reacted in outrage. It wasn't the *Faust* they expected. One of the great historians of German silent cinema Siegfried Kracauer said, *Faust* "misrepresented, if not ignored, all significant motives inherent in its subject matter. The metaphysical conflict between good and evil was thoroughly vulgarized." However, Lotte Eisner wrote (in *The Haunted Screen*), the film "starts with the most remarkable and poignant image the German chiaroscuro ever created. The chaotic destiny of the opening shot, the light drawing in the mist, the rays beaming through the opaque air, the visual fugue which diapasons round the heavens, are breathtaking."

Johnson deems both writers as having expressed legitimate issues, particularly since, in his view, in Murnau's film the "struggle between the devil and Faust never becomes particularly complex or profound." Nevertheless, he adds, the "truly astonishing imagery" cannot be set aside. Johnson quotes French New Wave director Eric Rohmer, who wrote a book-length study of *Faust*, where Rohmer argues that "Murnau was able to mobilize all those forces which guaranteed him complete control of the film's space. Every formal element—the faces and bodies of the actors, objects, landscape, and such natural phenomena as snow, light, fire, and clouds—have been created or recreated

with an exact knowledge of their visual effect. Never has a film left so little to chance.” Still, visual imagery and special effects clearly could not quell criticisms that major aspects of Goethe’s play either had been altered, ignored, or in Kracauer’s words, “thoroughly vulgarized.”

Perhaps one of the most troubling aspects for German audiences in the 1920s who expected a faithful adaptation of Goethe’s play would have been the terms by which Faust and Mephisto reach their soul bargain. At the beginning of Murnau’s film, Mephisto (Emil Jannings) enters into a bet with an angel, who agrees that “If thou canst destroy what is divine in Faust, the earth is thine!” This, of course, has some textual basis to Goethe’s Prologue in Heaven scene, but where it departs from Goethe is when Mephisto spreads a plague upon the earth. In Murnau’s version, Faust, toiling day and night in his laboratory for a cure, and growing more and more hopeless as villagers continue to drop dead all around him, agrees to Mephisto’s offer to halt the plague if Faust will agree to renounce God.

This, of course, is a major departure from Goethe’s presentation of the soul-bargain, where Faust agrees to hand over his eternal soul in exchange for his deepest desire for personal experience and knowledge. As Weigand notes:

The substance of the wager on which he conditions the pact is that Mephisto will never succeed in extinguishing the restless urge that makes Faust forever reach beyond the illusory satisfaction of the moment; that Mephisto will never succeed in lulling him into a sense of ease and contentment. (456)

Murnau’s version also is a far cry from the Goethean Faust who, Franke observes, became for Germans “a symbol of human striving for completeness of life.” In

Murnau's hands, the major premise of "striving" is flipped on its head: Faust's internal aching quest to "ever strive" and to transcend the limitations placed upon him is transformed into an initial act of altruism to save his village from disease and death. In essence, then, this alteration by Murnau not only negates Goethe's vision of Faust's motivating force, but it also obliterates Faust's inherent reason for entering into the wager with Mephisto in the first place. Says Weigand:

...[Faust] gives only a passing glance to the thought that riches and honors, attending the pursuit of worldly success, have passed him by. In his frustration he has taken recourse to magic as a possible shortcut to the spiritual revelation he longs for with every fiber of his being. Impatience dictates this bold and forbidden course, a fever pitch of frenzied affirmation. At this stage the spirit of negation is utterly foreign to him...Faust is a rebel only as regards the barriers of sense that keep him from communing directly with the divine spirit.

Philosophically speaking, he storms against being hemmed in by space, time, and causality. (452)

Seen in this light, Kracauer's observation that Murnau thus "misrepresented, if not ignored, all significant motives inherent in its subject matter" seems to be a legitimate criticism—but only, it should be added, if one is willing to draw a definitive line-in-the-sand delineation at Goethe's version of the Faust myth, and only if one desires or expects that the Faust legend will never mutate beyond what Goethe envisioned. And that, as future Faustian reinterpretations will reveal, is a bit like snapping a picture of what one imagines is *the greatest* wave ever to crash upon a beach, and then expecting that every wave after it will be exactly the same.

Film adaptations from either plays or books, of course, are notorious for altering original works, something Nabokov later would discover first-hand when the director Stanley Kubrick transformed *Lolita* in the 1960s into the first of what eventually would be two movie versions of his novel. But because film also is first and foremost a visual medium, it also demands that some literary elements—which, in the originals texts, may have been implicit—must be made explicit. This, to be sure, was the case with Murnau when it came to visually portraying Gretchen's suffering. Unlike Goethe's play, which leaves the young girl's agony up to the imagination of the reader (or theater patron), Murnau was almost forced, by virtue of the medium in which he was working, to represent Gretchen's plight visually. This, it should be added, he does masterfully.

When we first see Gretchen after Faust has fled the city after killing her brother Valentine (played by Wilhelm, later "William," Dieterle after he moved to America), she is going from house to house in her village with her baby in her arms, desperate for food and shelter. We then see her increasingly desolate she is shunned by every occupant behind the doors upon which she knocks, and wandering out into the snow drifts with her infant. One of the most moving and powerful aspects of the film is when Gretchen, obviously delirious, lays her and Faust's baby into what she hallucinates to be a warm cradle. Believing that she is tucking the child in for a warm night's sleep, Gretchen actually is burying it in snow.

In Goethe's version, of course, all we know is that Gretchen has been arrested and convicted of drowning her child—something we learn at the same time Faust does. When Mephisto reveals her circumstances and Faust demands to be taken to the dungeon where she awaits execution, Gretchen is clearly so hallucinatory that she even

believes their child is still alive, and gives precise instructions to Faust about how to save their baby:

Quick, run!  
Save your little one.  
Quick, follow the trail  
Up the river dale,  
Cross on the trunk  
Into the copse,  
Left, where the planking stops  
Into the lake.  
Snatch it, for God's sake.  
It hasn't sunk,  
It's kicking still!  
Save it, save! (115)

In Goethe's play, there is no doubt that Gretchen is haunted by what she has done by killing her baby. But Goethe problematizes her infanticide further by creating a moral question mark: Did she realize what she was doing at the moment she submerged her baby in the lake? Was she aware that she was killing her child as she placed it in the water near the "cross on the trunk," or was she, as Murnau seems to suggest, so desperate and beaten down by her social circumstances that she truly did not know what she was doing?

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, scholars note, Gretchen's predicament was not particularly unusual. Single mothers in many German cities, for example, comprised as

much as thirty percent of the population (Barton 636). Although Barton notes that the laws against fornication and premarital pregnancy by then had fallen “into desuetude, or [had been] nullified through disuse” —and thus other options would have existed for a historical Gretchen—the death penalty, nonetheless, still was mandatory for cases of infanticide (636). Indeed, as most scholars of the Gretchen tragedy are aware, Goethe personally became involved in such a case in 1783, when Goethe, a lawyer by training and at the time a privy councillor, recommended the death penalty for a young woman, Anna Catharina Hohn, who had killed her baby. As Barton notes, “whereas Goethe’s unforgiving attitude towards some cases of infanticide in the real world is quite indisputable, the factual guilt of the fictional Gretchen/Margarete is not” (635).

Factually guilty or not, however, Gretchen does not defend herself; she makes no excuses for what she has done. But neither, it should be noted, does Lolita. Infanticide, to be sure is a far cry from premarital sexual relations; nonetheless, in both 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany and 20<sup>th</sup> century America, social norms very likely would have made Gretchen and Lolita’s sexual behavior appear scandalous. But when Humbert comes to visit the now married Dolly Schiller, Lolita carries no visible guilt or shame; the “muck” of what happened between them seems firmly relegated to her past. As Humbert notes:

She considered me as if grasping all at once the incredible—and somehow tedious, confusing and unnecessary—fact that the distant, elegant, slender, forty-year-old valetudinarian in velvet coat sitting beside her had known and adored every pore and follicle of her pubescent body. In her washed-out gray eyes, strangely bespectacled, our poor romance was for a moment reflected,



pondered upon, and dismissed like a dull party, like a rainy picnic to which only the dullest bores had come, like a humdrum exercise, like a bit of dry mud caking her childhood (272).

But the issue of Lolita's guilt is not so cut and dry; it does not end with whether or not she has a sense of it. As in *Faust*, the question of Lolita's actual guilt also finds expression in Nabokov's text, particularly in terms of how readers judged Lolita's complicity in the events Humbert describes. Was Lolita a fully aware participant, or was she Humbert's victim? Was Lolita guilty of sexually bewitching Humbert and thus bringing her own fate down upon her, or did her social circumstances, accentuated by Humbert's repeated threats to send her to a reform school, terrorize her to the point where she felt she had no other options?

Just as with Goethe, who was aware of the social and legal status facing his fictional Gretchen, so too was Nabokov aware of the social and legal circumstances that would have surrounded his fictional nymphet. Nabokov had researched the law on orphans and reformatories; he knew what her fate would have been had their relationship become known. These issues, as Schiff observes, were central for Vera Nabokov, particularly in terms of how readers later perceived the young girl at the heart of the novel:

Vera's one gripe with Lolita's reception was something a New York Post critic had noted early on: "Lolita was attacked as a fearsome moppet, a little monster, a shallow, corrupt, libidinous and singularly unattractive brat." Where the novel's reviewers inclined toward pitying Humbert, she [Vera] fixed instead on

Lolita's vulnerability, stressing that she had been left alone without a single close relative in the world. (235).

If Vera had mentioned these qualms in any place other than her diary, Schiff observes, her comments very well could have been construed as a "calculated defense of a difficult to defend book" (235-236). This, Schiff avers, simply was not the case. As the following diary entry reveals, Vera clearly was distressed by how Lolita, the child and the novel, were perceived:

Lolita discussed by the papers from every possible point of view except one: that of its beauty and pathos. Critics prefer to look for moral symbols, justification, condemnation, or explanation of HH's predicament...I wish, though, somebody would notice the tender description of the child's helplessness, her pathetic dependence on monstrous HH, and her heartrending courage all along culminating in that squalid but essentially pure and healthy marriage, and her letter, and her dog. ...They all miss the fact that the "horrid little brat" Lolita is essentially very good indeed—or she would not have straightened out after being crushed so terribly, and found a decent life with poor Dick more to her liking than the other kind. (236)

Vera, in other words, was a staunch defender of Lolita—of not just the novel, but also of the girl. She recoiled at the thought that readers would pity Humbert but condemn the orphaned child, who had no other options. Long before the word "Lolita" entered the American lexicon and became synonymous with a young sexual siren, Vera seemed to sense that readers and critics had missed—indeed, that they had completely misread—a major aspect of her husband's novel by vilifying Lolita.

Such vilification, however, is unlikely to have been expressed by audiences of Murnau's *Faust*. Audiences who watched Gretchen—who, like *Lolita*, similarly had been left alone without a single close relative, and similarly was left totally vulnerable—almost certainly would have been moved with compassion as she awaited execution in the dungeon. The same, no doubt, was also true of Goethe's play, despite the fact that Gretchen's earlier suffering never was made explicit by Goethe. Indeed, it was this omission of what Gretchen went through, and Goethe's decision to allow audiences to assume what kind of hell she must have experienced after she became pregnant and Faust disappeared, that very likely had the effect of focusing Part I of the drama on the character of Faust, rather than upon Gretchen. Indeed, as Wiegand observes of the dungeon scene in Goethe's play:

The personality of the wretched girl in the prison cell is completely shattered, but every fractured piece suggests the one-time perfection now irretrievably destroyed. In the wandering of her unhinged mind she bears a striking resemblance to Shakespeare's Ophelia, but with this difference: Ophelia, innocent victim of cruel fate, evokes a mood of pure pathos, while Gretchen, involved despite herself in fearful guilt, is a truly tragic victim. (461).

Wiegand, to my thinking, correctly uses the word "suggests" when referring to this scene. In Goethe's play, Gretchen's suffering prior to killing her baby is only "suggested" when we see her, unhinged and delusional, in prison. Whatever she went through after Faust essentially abandoned her, and whatever desperation led her to place her baby in the lake, is only "suggested" by Goethe. And this, as we will see later in *Lolita*, was something Nabokov very likely reacted against.

Unlike Goethe, Nabokov would not merely “suggest” Lolita’s suffering or leave it for the reader to imagine. To the contrary, even if it is revealed through the egocentric, jaundiced lens of Humbert’s narrative, even if it is presented through Humbert’s kaleidoscopic, repeated attempts at self-justification, Lolita’s very real suffering is smashed into the face of the reader. It is only Humbert, it seems, who has not recognized her agony early on. When Humbert tells us near the end of his narrative that “there were times when I knew how you felt, and it was hell to know it, my little one” (285), or that “it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita’s states of mind while comforting my own base self” (287), we are given a genuine “suggestion” of a human being slowly coming to terms with the costs of his actions, of a man who is beginning to comprehend the price others pay in the course of reaching, as Wiegand notes of Faust, beyond “the illusory satisfaction of the moment.”

It is impossible to know definitively, of course, whether or not Nabokov ever saw Murnau’s film. Interestingly, however, in one interview Appel asked him about the types of films he liked while living in Berlin, and Appel even mentioned to Nabokov, “If only F.W. Murnau, who died in 1931, could have directed *The Defense* (1930), with Emil Jannings as Luzhin!” (SO 163). Nabokov did not respond to Appel’s statement, choosing instead to discuss a few movies he had enjoyed during that time—ones with Laurel and Hardy and the Marx Brothers, for example—but making no mention of a single German film.

Nevertheless, if Nabokov did see Murnau’s Faust, very possibly it left an indelible impression. Even though the film, as many critics later noted, bogs down in the middle where it portrays Faust’s love affair with Gretchen, what Murnau managed

to do was focus the actual “tragedy,” as Goethe had called his play, more upon Gretchen than upon Faust. As Nabokov later would remark to Appel,

The verbal part of the cinema is such a hodgepodge of contributions, beginning with the script, that it really has no style of its own. On the other hand, the viewer of a silent film has the opportunity of adding a good deal of his own inner verbal treasure to the silence of the picture (SO 165).

Very possibly, if Nabokov did watch this film, his own inner verbal treasure, like jewels stored in a pirate’s buried chest, later would be dug up for use in *Lolita*.

### **Recasting the American Faust**

German audiences may have been offended at the liberty taken by Murnau in depicting the nature of the soul-bargain, but in Hollywood that twist would be only the starting point, the first of many. American film not only has had a long fascination with the Faust fable, but it also has found nearly as many methods and genres to reinterpret the devil-made-me-do-it theme as there are corruptible souls. From the all-black musical *Cabin in the Sky* (1941) with Lena Horne as the demonic seductress, to the 1967 Dudley Moore-Peter Cook comedy *Bedazzled* (remade in 2000 with Brendan Frazier and Elizabeth Hurley), to the Disney production of *The Devil and Max Devlin* (1981), to *To Sleep With Anger* (1990) and the Keanu Reeves-Al Pacino drama *The Devil’s Advocate* (1997), the story of a man tempted by the prince of darkness has long been popular film fodder.

Two films, however, stand out as classic American versions of the Faust legend, adding—much in the same way that Goethe’s version departed from Marlowe’s—still

another layer to the fable. *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (1941) and *Damn Yankees* (1958) both introduce a decidedly American variation to the legend. In contrast to many other Faust-themed Hollywood films—in which a man is lured into sin, often by the promise of riches and success, or else by a she-devil seductress—these two films both make explicit a key component many others lack: the willingly-entered deal with the devil. Although both films are worlds apart in terms of setting and genre (one is a black-and-white drama set in 1840's New Hampshire, the other a color musical set in 1950s baseball-loving America), strong connections exist nonetheless.

Both films structurally use the Faust legend, cobbling together bits and pieces from Marlowe and Goethe. But they then both place upon the story a distinctively American stamp, one discernable in three key elements. In both films the Faustian character is married. Second, (and perhaps reflecting a budding awareness of our impending litigious society) both key characters are able to find a contractual loophole to help them avoid eternal hell. Third, both men are what might be called everyday Joes, in contrast to the traditional Faust who represented “the fall of a great man, usually thanks to some single moral flaw” (Jackson 2). These three elements are radical departures from both Marlowe and Goethe's versions, where “from its origins, an important and recurrent theme in the tradition is that Faust is unmarried, and indeed, that this lack of a bride is a token of his damnation” (Cooksey 18), as well as that the contract with the devil “is inviolable once signed” (20).

In his essay, “Talk not of a wife,” Cooksey argues that American popular culture and film appropriated the Faust tradition and domesticated it, transforming Faust from a tormented, alienated character into a family man and neighbor who gets

sucked into sin. In another twist, Goethe's Gretchen figure—who represents “*das ewige Weibliche*” (or eternal feminine)—morphs, in Hollywood's hands, into the virtuous and long-suffering wife: “In a sense,” Cooksey says, “it is an attempt to let Faust have it both ways, to allow him to stray, but with a lifeline held by his wife” (19). American film also has transformed the temptress figure, originally Helen of Troy, into the “other woman,” who often is portrayed in demonic terms, as a she-devil home-wrecker (20). During the 1940s, this element will become full-blown in film noir, when “demonic women wreak their vengeance on men” (Belton 229).

But Hollywood, in turns out, is more forgiving of its Faust than either Marlowe or Goethe. Not only do both characters in *The Devil and Daniel Webster* and *Damn Yankees* escape the fiery pits of hell as stated in their legal contracts, but they also both end up better off as a result. In Hollywood's versions, “Faust's quest is translated into a male fantasy of wish fulfillment, in which he hits the jackpot, gets rich, has the girl, wins the big game, but still goes to Heaven” (Cooksey 28).

Another element connects these two films. The Faust legend often has reflected the time in which it was written, altering the story to suit the spirit of the times. In Marlowe's era, for example, the brilliant scholar's sinful desire and ultimate damnation needed to serve a warning to all those who might similarly stray. In the Age of Reason, on the other hand, Goethe no doubt recognized that audiences would have laughed raucously at Faust's fate, prompting him to extol, instead, the virtue of “*streben*,” or striving. But just as Marlowe and Goethe had done centuries before, American filmmakers also altered the legend to reflect the particular age. Likewise, within both

these two films we can see a hand-held cultural mirror, one that reflects societal mores and the *zeitgeist* in which each interpretation was created.

Within the moralistic *The Devil and Daniel Webster*, for example, one can discern the lingering effects of the Depression as well as America's imminent involvement in World War II. Within *Damn Yankees*, based on a successful 1955 Broadway play, we are presented with an altogether different image: a seemingly vapid America, one immersed in a type of let-the-good-times-roll sensibility, a culture determined to put World War II—and any troubling existentialist questions about the nature of good and evil—as far behind it as possible. The message of this latter Faust tale seems to be: Flip the channel, don't talk about anything important; baseball is on.

### **The Devil and Daniel Webster**

William Dieterle, who played the role of Valentine in Murnau's *Faust*, directed this black-and-white film version of Stephen Vincent Benet's 1937 short story, and Benet's later screenplay. The story is set outside a New Hampshire village called Cross Corners in 1840. Originally released by Janus Films under the title "All That Money Can Buy," the film concerns a young farmer named Jabez Stone, his wife Mary, and the famed New England orator and senator, Daniel Webster, upon whose shoulders Jabez's fate ultimately will rest.

The film opens with a long shot of the Jabez Stone farm and the couple's small, simple home. A fenced-in area with pigs, a lean horse and plain buggy, and a dilapidated barn all of create the sense of poverty. For 1941 audiences this would have evoked the lingering effects of the Depression. The camera zooms in on a branch and



opening buds, and then cuts to Jabez and his wife side-stepping mud puddles. These elements suggest it is a spring morning, traditionally a time associated with hope and spiritual renewal. Jabez, a fit-looking farmer in his late 20s, begins hitching his horse to the buggy. In the distance we hear church bells ringing from nearby Cross Corners, telling us it is a Sunday. One event after another, however, prevents Jabez, his wife and his devout mother-in-law from attending the church service; ultimately, they are forced to remain home. Already, a hint exists that not attending church will lead to trouble.

Jabez is portrayed as an essentially good, simple man having a streak of bad luck. Jabez, however, isn't alone in his troubles. Several neighbors come by his house to discuss their dire farming situations, as well as how Daniel Webster, the Massachusetts senator, is proposing to help farmers with bankruptcy legislation. In this scene, Webster is made out to be an American folk hero, an orator as persuasive as Cicero: "They say," says one neighbor, "that when he goes out to fish, the trout jump out of the stream and right into his pockets, because they know it's no use arguing." Says another: "Why, they say that when he speaks, stars and stripes come right out in the sky."

This scene dissolves into Webster's nighttime study. The senator sits at a plain desk, upon which is only a piece of paper, his inkbottle and a small table lamp, all of which serve to create a sense of austerity and deep concentration. Webster's face is lit only by a table lamp, the rest of the room in darkness, which serves to establish that Webster is working into the wee hours of the night. And then comes the sudden appearance of the devil's shadow, which becomes larger and longer on the wall behind Webster. We then hear the devil's voice-over counsel: "*Why worry about the people*

*and their problems? Start thinking of your own. You want to be president of this country, don't you ...and you ought to be...*”

Clearly, the devil is onto something here; he obviously is aware of how tempted Webster must be to just go to bed and leave the people’s problems for another day, and also quite possibly how Webster’s deepest desire might be to become president. But Webster suddenly pounds his fist down on the desk in a clearly resounding rejection of the devil’s temptation to sin in exchange for personal desire.

This scene, alone, is noteworthy. Although Jabez Stone is this film’s Faustian figure, this scene nevertheless appears to have been taken directly from Part I of Goethe’s drama, which opens with Faust in his dimly-lit study and calling forth the Earth Spirit. By placing Webster within the study, the film creates a visual overlay: Webster is superimposed upon Faust, and vice versa, and thus the two can be seen in stark juxtaposition. Unlike Goethe’s German professor, who succumbs to Mephisto’s temptations, the American senator remains incorruptible. Thus, the scene promotes the idea that the German gave in to sin, but the American would not.

In those dark days of the war, this possibly represents an indirect commentary on the Nazis and the war raging at the time in Europe, what might be viewed as “the temper of an age and nation” (Belton 23). In a 1942 essay titled “The Function of English in Wartime: A Symposium,” for example, authors Dudley Miles and Ann Ward Orr discuss the role of literature in the wartime English classroom, focusing particular attention on the text of “The Devil and Daniel Webster” as representative of all that is good and truly American. The essay begins:

What effect should America's entry into World War II have on our English classrooms? One of the first effects will doubtless be for the English teacher to focus attention more narrowly on the American way of living as it is recorded in literature...The aim every English teacher will keep before him is to leave on the developing minds of his students a more conscious awareness of what it means to be an American...To reach this goal the content of the literature course will have to be carefully selected. Presentation of typical figures and situations should fill the growing minds with warmly human images of American character. To give but one example, Stephen Vincent Benet's *The Devil and Daniel Webster* dramatizes indigenous types with a vividness that will clear up several hazy notions about true Americans. It does not codify concepts. It nowhere describes government. It merely pictures human beings at a crisis... (Miles/Orr 227).

In the film, the scene in Webster's study crosscuts back to the Stone farm, where Jabez learns that his land will be repossessed by the local loan shark unless he immediately comes up with payment. His only option includes selling the next season's precious seed—but as he tosses the seed bag onto the ground, its contents spill into the mud.

“That's enough to make a man sell his soul to the devil!” Jabez says in total frustration. “And I would, too, for about two cents!” Here the dialogue represents a de facto calling forth of the devil—similar to Goethe's Faust evoking the Earth Spirit—and Jabez appears to realize it. He stops, with a startled expression, as he pulls out of his

pants pocket two shiny new pennies. It is then that the devil, “Mr. Scratch” (Walter Huston), suddenly appears behind Jabez.

It is not so much Scratch’s costume (tight fitting jacket, turned up cap) that tells us who he is, but his “chin whiskers, suggesting a satanic parody of Uncle Sam” (Cooksey 20). Scratch leads Jabez into a small barn, where Scratch kicks at a pile of hay, which reveals a pot of gold filled with bright oversize coins. Seven years of good fortune, Scratch tells Jabez, can be his in exchange for signing his name in blood to a soul-selling contract. There is no haggling over terms, no talk of extending the seven years to, say, ten; Jabez pricks his finger and, *voila*, the deed is done.

One of the most significant aspects of this scene, particularly when viewed in contrast to the long history of the Faust legend, is the essentially superficial nature of the American version of the soul-bargain. In contrast to Marlowe or Goethe’s Faustus, both of whom knowingly and willingly barter their eternal souls in exchange for the manifestation of their deepest desires, Jabez enters into the bargain for expediency, for a few years of good luck. This trivialization of the moral significance of the soul later will find full expression in *Damn Yankees*, as well as in *Lolita*. Nabokov, for example, parodies this flippant American attitude about the human soul, such as when Humbert says at one point, “This, to use an American term, in which discovery, retribution, torture, death, eternity appear in the shape of a singularly repulsive nutshell, was IT” (235).

A central theme here, however, also is Jabez’s transformation into a greedy capitalist, in contrast to his god-fearing wife’s lack of interest in riches. Mary remains in the couple’s tiny house with their young son and her mother, and continues to wear

the same simple clothes and go to church each Sunday. Jabez, in contrast, moves to a mansion, filled with gilded furniture, grand mirrors and marble floors, where his house-mate, to put it delicately, is a she-devil femme fatale named Belle, who was sent by Scratch to corrupt him. As Cooksey notes, the film “explores the course of Stone’s moral decline when he lets his new success and materialism pervert his inherent goodness. Thus, he is torn between the polarities defined by Webster and Scratch and by the good angel Mary and the bad angel Belle” (20).

It is only when Mary contacts Daniel Webster—and Jabez realizes that he actually is on the verge of burning in hell for all eternity—that Webster agrees to represent Jabez at a “trial” arranged by Scratch. In this scene, set in Jabez’s barn, we see Cooksey’s theory of legal loopholes coming into play. It is here too that we receive the first glimpse of how Hollywood introduces the legal “escape clause” into the ongoing, changeable Faust legend.

In the film’s climatic trial scene, Daniel Webster, dressed in a dark jacket, presents a powerful appeal about patriotism to the ghostly jury (comprised of shamed, historical American figures, including Benedict Arnold). He reminds each member of his original notion of American freedom, as well as why each jury member strayed from the good and moral path. The barn is dimly lit and shadowy, contributing to the ghostly sense of the proceedings, and the camera pans across the jury’s faces. In his closing argument, Webster pleads to these shamed, dead, eternally damned men: “Don’t let this country go to the devil!” This oratory, worthy of acclaim by Cicero, results in Scratch’s legal defeat and Jabez’s release from the satanic contract’s terms.

Here, of course, is another turning point in the Faust legend. It is a kaleidoscopic spin, one as noteworthy as Goethe's decision to allow Faust to escape hell because of the angelic Gretchen/Margarete's ultimate forgiveness and declaration of love for him. While technically accurate that Webster's speech "nowhere describes government," as the English classroom essay noted above asserts, Webster's oratory nonetheless is in a perfect position to promote American values, particularly those that ostensibly were designed to transmit "vividness that will clear up several hazy notions about true Americans" (Miles/Orr 227). In many respects, however, it also could be seen as propagandist, as attempting to bolster the will and resolve of a nation about to go into war.

In the film's final scene, Scratch is sitting on a wood fence outside the village and flipping through a small book. He is carefully considering the names on his list, running his finger down the page and wondering aloud who will be next. Suddenly he turns and looks directly into the camera, as if staring directly into the souls of the audience. "Maybe," Scratch says, it will be you." This final, almost Brechtian cinematic effect clearly is meant to jolt audiences out of an objective view point; and it is not difficult to imagine how audiences in 1941 might have sat uncomfortably in their seats as the devil cocked his head and peered inquisitively at them before the film faded to black.

But one also can only imagine what Nabokov would have thought if he, too, had been among that audience. Most likely he would have summed it up with one simple word: *poshlust*.

## **Damn Yankees**

Jump cut, now, to the year 1958.

World War II has been over for more than a decade, and Americans are well-entrenched in enjoying the good life. All the deprivations of the Depression and the Second World War are far behind them. It also is age of acquisition of new goods like dishwashers, washing machines and sleek Frigidaires—and, of course, televisions. By the end of the 1950s, ninety percent of American homes had a television set (Belton 305), and there existed “a postwar spending boom, during which many Americans both literally and figuratively bought their way into a new world” (Belton 307).

It also is the blossoming age of June Cleaver-ish stay at home wives. Rosie the Riveter, of course, was fired long ago when her husband returned from the European theater, and now Rosie, like millions of other American women, has effectively been banished to her home after her husband reclaimed his throne as breadwinner and head-of-household. But Rosie, it turns out, now secretly misses the sense of purpose she briefly tasted during the war years; and her husband, although no doubt grateful to be alive and home again, conversely has realized that going to the office each day, and supporting his now-idle wife and kids in suburbia, isn't quite as idyllic as he once might have imagined inside a German foxhole. In fact, coming up with all that money for all those consumer goods placed upon men in the 1950s a heavy burden, as well as “onerous rules” (Hewlett 306).

Warner Brothers' *Damn Yankees*, written and directed by George Abbott, and based on the hugely-popular Broadway musical, in many respects reflects some of this internal discontent, although it is carefully masked. As Belton notes, by nature “the

musical creates a utopian space in which the problems we regularly encounter in our lived experience in the world no longer exist...work-related exhaustion is replaced by limitless energy; the dreariness of everyday routine is exchanged for excitement and intensity” (166).

In this American Faust story, not unlike the later singing and dancing SS officers in Mel Brooks’ *The Producers*, evil is transformed into entertainment. The Faustian figure here may sin; he may be lured to sell his soul for something that, on the surface appeals superficial; but a 1958 audience, particularly men, very well may have recognized within him their own desire to escape the burdens at home. This film thus presents still another portal into which we can examine the Faust legend, one told within another era and *zeitgeist*.

In *Damn Yankees*, choreographed by Bob Fosse, the pact with the devil surrounds the unfulfilled yearnings of a middle-aged real estate salesman named Joe Boyd, who is frustrated that his favorite baseball team, the Washington Senators, once again is losing to the Yankees. The opening scene inside Joe’s home suggests, however, that Joe’s frustration may spring from something far deeper, namely, the trappings of his surroundings. The camera pans across the house, revealing a spotless living room with a new sofa, lamps and frilled curtains, and then stops at Joe, who sits in front of a television. We hear the roar of a crowd and then see baseball players on the diamond, and then see Joe’s wife repeatedly and unsuccessfully trying to get his attention. By cutting back and forth between Joe and his wife, a sense of emptiness is created; this, in turn, allows Joe’s wife to seamlessly break into song about how she becomes a sports widow each year during baseball season.



Like Jabez Stone, Boyd also makes an off-hand remark about being willing to sell his soul to see his team win. The devil in this film appears in the nattily-dressed form of Mr. Applegate (Ray Walston), who persuades Joe to swap his soul in exchange for pulling his favorite team out of its slump. This reflects still another twist: the soul-swap is not for personal fulfillment or glory (although Joe ends up briefly achieving it), but rather for the good of the team. Joe's deal with the devil—much like Murnau's version, where Faust tries to save his village from the plague—thus appears almost altruistic and selfless. Similarly, just as in Goethe's (and Murnau's) Faust, who ingests a magical potion that restores his youth and vitality, Joe Boyd likewise is transformed into a young man, a 21-year-old Babe Ruth-like baseball player named Joe Hardy (Tab Hunter), who ends up capturing the nation's attention.

In Goethe's version, of course, Faust ingests the magic potion and, with his youth and sexual vigor restored, immediately begins wooing Gretchen. Joe Boyd, on the other hand, does almost exactly the opposite. In order to fulfill his dream of saving his beloved baseball team, Joe must leave his devoted and long-suffering wife, Meg (a nod to Goethe's Margarete) and sneak away during the night. This, however, he clearly does not want to do. Lit by porch light, Joe looks upward. The camera cuts to an upstairs bedroom window where his middle-aged wife is sleeping, and then cuts back to Joe as he sings "Good-bye Old Girl" while Applegate waits impatiently nearby.

But another difference also exists in this film. In contrast to Jabez Stone, who blithely enters into a seven-year contract, Joe Boyd demands an escape clause, transforming the soul-bargain into something that more resembles a mortgage contract (Cooksey 21). Joe insists on this, he tells Applegate, because he has "responsibilities,"

the implication being that, regardless of his own personal desires, he cannot simply walk away from his “real” life. Indeed, throughout the film Joe remains intent on returning to his wife. At one point, for example, the young baseball player, now unrecognizable to his wife, even goes back and rents a room from her.

Applegate, of course, does not want Joe to return to his wife, which would be an exercise of his escape clause. To prevent this, the devil thus calls upon the demonic wiles of a femme fatale named Lola (Gwen Verdon) to lead Joe astray. In one particularly memorable scene, young Joe Hardy sits in the Senators’ locker room as Lola enters. Musicals, of course, are filled with songs and dancing, and here Lola breaks into “What Lola Wants,” slinking around Joe as she attempts, unsuccessfully, to seduce him. Ironically, although Joe already has “leased” his soul to the devil, he remains resolutely incorruptible, apparently not even tempted for an instant, much as was the case with Daniel Webster.

Joe’s failure to slide into debauchery represents still another twist on the Faust legend, but it will not be the last in this film. After Joe is prevented from exercising his escape clause and sinks into despair, Lola takes pity on him, touched by his devotion to his wife. Lola’s response, and her decision to help him, is “much as the jury of the damned is moved by Daniel Webster’s eloquence to acquit Jabez” (Cooksey 21). Thus, Lola functions as Goethe’s Margarete, ultimately becoming “the indirect cause of his salvation” (Cooksey 21).

Jabez Stone and Joe Boyd/Hardy certainly are not the traditional Faustian figures we know from Marlowe or Goethe, where the “basic drive of Faust’s psyche is to expand” (Browning 463). Neither one of them lusts after power, is insatiable, or

expresses ennui with the world. What these two American versions do present, however, is a kind of naiveté, with each one temporarily succumbing to his particular fixation. It is perhaps because of this that “each is finally able to relent and turn his back on his particular obsession, where the traditional Faustus are by definition insatiable, trapped in an eternal cycle of quest and disappointment” (Cooksey 26).

For both Jabez Stone and Joe Boyd, then, personal salvation means going back to their wives, unfettered by any troubling existentialist questions about sin or temptation, good or evil, damnation or redemption. And in classic Hollywood resolutions, for both of these Faustian figures, home—along with all of the creature comforts that come with it—now begins to look very much like Heaven.

## Chapter Four—Sins and Souls: A Rhetorical Construction

An erudite, cultured, middle-aged European scholar meets a prepubescent girl and instantly is consumed with lust. The possible price to his life—and indeed, even to what may occur afterward—becomes negligible. Soon, the girl’s widowed mother is dead; the protagonist has sexually and emotionally exploited the young girl; a cross-country flight ensues; and the protagonist, apparently insensible to his role in the young girl’s suffering, is wanted for murder.

These plot points are from Nabokov’s masterpiece of modern American literature, *Lolita*, the novel that so frightened American literary houses that the book first had to be published in France, in 1955, before it found a U.S publisher three years later. What many readers may not have recognized, however, is that these same plot points all appeared almost exactly 150 years earlier in a work decidedly less controversial: Goethe’s *Faust*. Like Humbert, Faust also was a scholar who seduced a young girl and ruined her life, descending in the process into depravity and moral turpitude. And, just like Humbert, Faust also was indirectly responsible for the death of the girl’s widowed mother and also murdered the girl’s so-called “rescuer.”

But audiences clearly assessed Faust and Humbert in vastly different ways. Faust became revered, Humbert reviled. Faust attained heroic proportions, while Humbert became a symbol of pedophilia and lechery. Interestingly, even the two girls in both works,

Gretchen and Lolita, were judged differently: Gretchen became viewed as a tragic figure, whereas Lolita became synonymous with a young, sexually promiscuous siren. (Even those unfamiliar with Nabokov's novel, for example, have probably heard of Amy Fisher, the teenager who shot her married lover's wife, dubbed the "Long Island Lolita.")

These disparities raise compelling questions. What might account for such a variance in views of two men who, in strikingly similar thematic and often textual ways, essentially commit the same crimes? If the two texts are compared side by side, along with their respective receptions, is a modern-day reader to conclude that eighteenth-century Germany was more accepting of sexual exploitation and murder than was mid-twentieth century America? And perhaps more importantly, if we accept the premise that both texts are inherently existentialist, how might Faust's innermost desire for knowledge and experience, versus Humbert's innermost desire to possess a nymphet, inform the reader's notion of "the human condition" as a social construct?

Whether there is evidence that Nabokov considered these issues is uncertain. What is certain, however, is that Nabokov undoubtedly was cognizant of how Humbert's graphically-depicted sexual relationship with a teenage girl would be received by modern American audiences in the 1950s. Before we read even one word of Humbert's text, the novel's fictional editor, John Ray Jr., Ph.D., tells readers in his forward that Humbert "is horrible, he is abject, he is a shining example of moral leprosy...A desperate honesty that throbs through his confession does not absolve him from sins of diabolical cunning" (Annotated 5). As if anticipating the repugnance of Humbert's manuscript—and very likely to Nabokov's manuscript as well—John Ray, Jr. tells readers that they can be "entranced with the book while abhorring its author" (5).

No such abhorrence occurred with the character of Faust, or Goethe. To the contrary, as Walter Kaufmann points out in his introduction to one edition of the drama, Faust was immediately embraced by the German people as an ideal prototype, as the “incarnation of the German character” (Goethe’s *Faust* 22). The overarching theme of Faust’s “striving”—his goal to acquire infinite knowledge and infinite experience, even if it meant selling his soul to the devil in the process—apparently struck such a deep cultural or psychic nerve that it overshadowed any moral “lapse” committed along the way. The fact that Faust never truly “knew” Gretchen at all (just as Humbert eventually comes to recognize the same thing), and the fact that Faust was responsible for four deaths by the end of Part I of the drama—all apparently became viewed by the German people as a mere tollbooth fee on the highway to “striving.” True, Faust became what John Ray, Jr. Ph.D. could have called a “shining example of moral leprosy.” And true again, Faust’s sins, like Humbert’s, accurately could have been described as compelling examples of “diabolical cunning.” But hey, folks, at least Faust *tried*. Really he did. And isn’t that what forgiveness is all about?

But many Germans clearly took that forgiveness even further. After the publication of Part I of *Faust* in 1808, Kaufmann notes, “millions of young men decided they were like Faust, and some found the German destiny in boundless, ruthless, Faustian striving” (22). To place this observation into some type of cultural, historic, or moral perspective, consider, for a moment, reading that same passage with “Humbert” exchanged for “Faust.” What would it have said about American culture if millions of Americans had decided that they, too, were like Humbert? If millions had recognized their “destiny” in the “boundless, ruthless” striving for a nymphet? What would it have said about the American psyche—

indeed, about American society in general—if Humbert had resonated so deeply that he was perceived as “an incarnation” of the American character?

By raising these questions I realize that, to a certain degree, I am obligated on at least two separate fronts. The first concerns Kaufmann’s claim that “millions of young men decided they were like Faust...” Kaufmann offers no empirical evidence for this statement, and in the absence of an eighteenth-century version of the Gallup poll, one is forced to ask how this conclusion was drawn. The second element, intrinsically tied to the first, concerns the manner by which the embracing of Faustian “striving” would have made itself manifest. How, in other words, would this have expressed itself? These questions are not simply academic. Indeed, in the years directly following World War II, scholars gave renewed attention to the Faustian concept of “striving” and the traditional view of a “heroic” Faust. Moreover, many drew direct connections between the so-called “incarnation of the German character” with that of the Nazis. As Alfred Hoelzel notes, “Perhaps nothing gave this issue wider exposure than did Thomas Mann’s profound portrait of the Faust-Nazi link in his *Doktor Faustus*” (3), published originally in German in 1947, in which the Faustian theme is transferred to the fictional biography of a German composer.

The last paragraph of Mann’s novel, which refers to events in the last months of 1940, makes explicit that Faust-Nazi link:

Germany, the hectic on her cheek, was reeling then at the height of her dissolute triumphs, about to gain the whole world by virtue of the one pact she was minded to keep, which she had signed with her blood. Today, clung round by demons, a hand over one eye, with the other staring into horrors, down she flings from despair to

despair. When will she reach the bottom of the abyss? When, out of uttermost hopelessness—a miracle beyond the power of belief—will the light of hope dawn? A lonely man folds his hands and speaks: “God be merciful to thy poor soul, my friend, my Fatherland!” (510)

Nabokov’s disdain for Mann, as well as the concept of *poshlust*, already is well documented. Thus, one can only assume what Nabokov’s response would have been to this last paragraph, if not the entire novel. One can easily imagine him discussing with Vera, as he did with an interviewer on one occasion, the “topical trash or what some call the Literature of Ideas, which very often is topical trash coming in huge blocks of plaster that are carefully transmitted from age to age until somebody comes along with a hammer and takes a good crack at Balzac, at Gorki, at Mann” (Annotated 315). Mann’s notion of sin and salvation very possibly would have struck Nabokov not only as resembling one huge block of plaster, but also one that deserved a “good crack” on his own part. The question no doubt would have been: How?

For Nabokov, relegating temptation and sin to a purely “German” issue, especially amid the rampant anti-German sentiment following World War II, would have been too easy a literary route to take. Despite the fact that Nabokov had personally witnessed the rise of the Third Reich and also experienced first-hand how Nazi “ideas” had been translated into actual deeds—his brother Sergei, for example, perished in a Nazi concentration camp (Speak 258); and his wife Vera, a Jew, grew increasingly at risk the longer the Nabokovs remained in Germany—Nabokov knew that the Germans, by no means, were the only ones capable of selling their souls. This, too, Nabokov had witnessed first-hand.



As a Russian émigré in Berlin from 1923-37, Nabokov and his fellow Russian expatriates often discussed the “monstrously un-Russian and subhuman” literary behavior of writers who had remained behind. As Nabokov writes in his 1947 autobiography, “what the Tsars had never been able to achieve, namely the complete curbing of minds to the government’s will, was achieved by the Bolsheviks in no time after the main contingent of the intellectuals had escaped abroad or had been destroyed” (Speak 280). What seemed to horrify Nabokov was what he called the “servile” literary response by remaining Russian writers; the “art of prostration,” Nabokov writes, “was growing there in exact ratio to first Lenin’s, then Stalin’s political police, and the successful Soviet writer was the one whose fine ear caught the soft whisper of an official suggestion long before it had become a blare” (282). By submitting their minds and their art to the government’s will, Nabokov suggests, those writers also were giving the government their souls.

Nabokov and many of his fellow expatriates in Berlin, it should be noted, were barely surviving financially by writing alone, their literary options severely limited. Most were forced to take “menial” jobs on the side (Nabokov, for example, taught English to German businessmen and also gave tennis lessons to their daughters). Frequently, Nabokov says, they asked themselves “if the sense of enjoying absolute mental freedom was not due to working in an absolute void” (280). Still, particularly in the early 1930s “when the national precipice was only faintly perceived,” Nabokov and his fellow Russian émigrés shared a similar goal. Despite their dire financial situations, the idea of attaining “success” by trading what was most dear to them was unthinkable. “Soul-saving,” Nabokov said, “came first” (284). The notion of saving versus selling one’s soul, then, was not simply an abstraction for Nabokov: the idea that within each of us exists the potential willingness and

capacity to betray any moral tenet, to sink to any depth in exchange for temporary rewards—country of origin notwithstanding—was one that had touched him both personally and profoundly.

Still, one must consider the issue of degrees, if indeed such a term may be used in connection with “soul-selling.” Can one sell off just a “piece” of one’s soul? Or does any soul-deal necessarily imply lock, stock and barrel? Put another way, would a morally-minded man who steals a loaf of bread to feed his family be just as guilty of selling his soul as, say, a struggling female film director who was guaranteed fame and fortune if she agreed to work as Hitler’s propagandist? Such distinctions matter, particularly if one is attempting to discern the meaning of temptation within any artistic portrayal of the human condition. How else could temptation be placed into any meaningful rhetorical context—and not simply into a historic or culturally-specific one—if there also were not a corresponding consideration of a human being’s innermost desire, of the one thing he or she craved for existential meaning above all else?

These issues very possibly were part of the literary enigma Nabokov grappled with in regard to Goethe’s *Faust*, in addition to the work’s long-enduring critical reception in the German canon and its revised reception following World War II. Finding a literary frame to recast the Faust story anew—especially after the publication of Mann’s critically acclaimed version—very likely presented itself to Nabokov like one of his initially baffling chess problems, in which clues must be carefully selected to lead would-be solvers astray. And to be sure, numerous elements within *Lolita* were meant to do just that.

Just as with Goethe’s expressed desire in a letter to a friend to create in *Faust* an “open riddle,” Nabokov likewise intentionally weaves into *Lolita* a vast array of “delusive

opening moves” and “false scents” that lead readers into what initially might be seen as a major artery, but which later branch out into a series of ancillary veins or capillaries. In other literary works we might use the term “red herring” to describe this narrative technique—for example, Humbert’s numerous murder-mystery allusions—but in a text as complex and richly allusive as *Lolita*, this term does not suffice. There is too of sure a hand behind the design of *Lolita*, too confident a driver of the vehicle that we, as readers, occupy from the back seat. But how, then, do we uncover those Faustian clues scattered throughout *Lolita*? How do we begin piecing together what once was a huge Faustian mirror, and which later, under Nabokov’s steady hand, was shattered, its shards surreptitiously sprinkled throughout the text?

To begin, we first must be willing to proceed in a non-linear fashion throughout the text of *Lolita*, just as Nabokov would have done while composing the novel. We must, in other words, be willing to suspend any expectation of a strict corresponding chronology between *Faust* and *Lolita*—which, of course, Nabokov already has described as a compositional technique he eschewed. After this, as Humbert might have said of Nabokov: *Imagine him; he shall not exist if you do not imagine him!*

We must imagine Nabokov with his stack of index cards (which later were relegated to an incinerator-like fate), and then visualize how he might have proceeded: by writing down a line or scene out of *Faust*, and then composing upon a corresponding index card the scene or dialogue that later would appear in *Lolita*. And then, after we have imagined all of that, there still is one more task for us. We then must envisage Nabokov taking all of those index cards—all of his reinventions, all of his recreated Faustian images, which often appear inverted, as if viewed through an old-fashioned Brownie camera—and

then picture him shuffling those cards as deftly as a Las Vegas blackjack dealer before placing them—face-up, face-down, sometimes sideways—throughout the text.

Only then can we hope to discern some of the conjurer's tricks, which Nabokov has so "lovingly prepared" to lead us astray. As Appel so correctly observes,

This is how Nabokov seems to envision the game of life and the effect of his novels: each time a "scrambled picture" has been discerned "the reader cannot unsee" it; consciousness has been expanded or created. (Annotated xx-xxi).

Let us begin, then, by "unscrambling" fragments of *Faust* within *Lolita* wherever we find them—and then attempt a rhetorical reconstruction.

### **The Dedication**

Goethe's *Faust*, as we read it today, begins with a 32-line "Dedication to Faust." When he composed this in 1797, more than two decades had passed since Goethe had written the first draft of the play in 1775. Many scholars interpret Goethe's dedication poem as a reflection of his emotional state in revisiting the text of *Faust* after more than twenty years had passed since, directly following the publication of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Goethe had first put his rough sketch down on paper. During that long lapse, friends had died. Loves had been lost. But Nicholas Boyle, in his biography of Goethe, also notes the "strange title" of the dedication, "as if life were here being dedicated to art, rather than the reverse, yet dealing not with the contents of the work to which it was to be prefixed but with the effect on him of writing it and with the audience for which it was intended" (507). Cyrus Hamlin similarly observes that when Goethe returned to the text after such a long time at the urging of his younger friend Friedrich Schiller, "the characters

of the drama haunt him like spirits half-realized from his past, and this calls to mind the days of his youth and the departed friends who were close to him when he was first writing the play” (309).

We can see evidence of those haunting “spirits” in just the first few lines, in which Goethe evokes the sense of being compelled by the memory of them:

Once more you near me, wavering apparitions  
That early showed before the turbid gaze.  
Will I now seek to grant you definition,  
My heart essay again in the former daze?  
You press me! Well, I yield to your petition,  
As all around, you rise from mist and haze;  
What wafts around your train with magic glamor  
Is quickening my breast to youthful tremor. [lines 1-8]

Goethe does not tell us—nor should we expect him to—in whose guise these “apparitions” appear to him. He does, however, allude to the loss of a “first love” that revives in him a feeling of grief:

First love’s and friendship’s echoes are replayed;  
Old grief revives, a mournful plaint retraces  
Life’s labyrinthine and erratic gait,  
And names the dear ones who, by fortune cheated  
Of blissful hours, before me have retreated.” [lines 12-16]

Two elements of the dedication seem particularly relevant to *Lolita*. At the beginning of the novel, Humbert also recalls days of his youth. He describes how, as a boy, he fell in love

with Annabel, whom he lusted after, and like Goethe he might be said to have been “by fortune cheated of blissful hours.” Indeed, Humbert makes a point of describing how he and Annabel were constantly thwarted from such bliss:

All at once we were madly, clumsily, shamelessly, agonizingly in love with each other; hopelessly, I should add, because that frenzy of mutual possession might have been assuaged only by our actually imbibing and assimilating every particle of each other’s soul and flesh; but there we were, unable to mate even as slum children would have so easily found an opportunity to do so. (12).

And then, Humbert tells us, Annabel dies four months later of typhus. Thus, Nabokov, like Goethe, not only has begun his story with a “wavering apparition” that exists for him in the form of Annabel; but Nabokov also has addressed his “first love” and “old grief” that caused his “mournful plaint” to “retrace” what was lost.

In *Lolita*, Nabokov appropriates Goethe’s dedication early in the novel. But in contrast to Goethe’s vague and unnamed apparitions, Humbert recreates the “old grief” and the echo of “first love” that is “replayed” in his memory with precise detail. And this—as Nabokov will reveal throughout the novel—will prove to inform all of Humbert’s actions, all of Humbert’s rationales for his actions, all of Humbert’s rhetoric about desire and fate. Indeed, Humbert becomes convinced that Lolita is a reincarnation of his lost Annabel, that fate, in essence, has offered him another chance. The little girl “with her seaside limbs and ardent tongue haunted me ever since—until at last, twenty-four years later, I broke her spell by incarnating her in another,” he tells us. Indeed, he says he is convinced “that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel” (13-14).

Is it then mere coincidence that, like Goethe's first lines of the dedication, the next object of Humbert's lust would also refer to "haze" (line 6), namely in the form of Dolores Haze? Within the first 15 lines of the dedication, Goethe evokes ghosts from his past that are rising up and says that he is "seized by a long-unwonted yearning" (line 25). The same, as we will see, becomes true when Humbert meets Lolita.

### **Humbert and Heinrich**

Faust and Humbert's backgrounds are similar in many respects, including their professions, their dissatisfaction with their lives as scholars, as well as their emotional states. Each also reveals a singular obsession, as well as the methods by which past attempts to fulfill those obsessions have been unsuccessful. Goethe and Nabokov, however, present the "back story" of their protagonists in decidedly different ways.

When we first meet Goethe's Faust in his study, we learn immediately that he is profoundly depressed about his academic life, and also that he is longing for some kind of deeper meaning and a sense of purpose. He wonders aloud:

How does the mind sustain some hope and pleasure  
That's stuck forever to the same old terms  
With greedy fingers grubbing after treasure  
And gratified to dig up worms! [lines 601-605]

Initially, then, we are led to believe that what Faust most hungers for revolves around his life as a scholar, and that until now he has been rewarded only with a few "worms" instead of his hoped-for academic gold mine, or what would lend genuine meaning to his life. No doubt, doctoral students everywhere, in any era, can relate.

But as R.M. Browning notes of Goethe's *Urfaust*, an early sketch of the drama written in 1775, "the basic drive of Faust's psyche is a compulsive urge to expand; further ...his subjective concept of that toward which he expands—the spirit world—is tragically at variance with its objective manifestation (the Quixote situation)" (463). Browning also adds a rhetorical analysis of Faust's language, seeing it in sexual terms: "The underlying rhythm of the first 168 lines—Faust's rhythm—is that of up and down, organically related of course to inhibited expansion. Metaphors expressive of Faust's longing are predominantly erotic in nature and are characterized by the figures of hovering, bathing, thirsting, quenching, violent out-flowing and of course their frustrating opposites" (463-64). In common parlance, as Humbert might have put it, Faust needs a date.

Unlike Faust, Humbert does not require 168 lines to express essentially the same erotic elements. In *Lolita*, the nature of his longing, the true object of his desire, is expressed in the first sentence of the novel: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins" (9). Interestingly, in the second line, Humbert condenses what might be viewed as the overarching theme of Goethe's drama—the willingness to commit any sin in the search of personal gratification in exchange for one's eternal soul—into just four words: "My sin, my soul" (9). The simplicity of Nabokov's distillation could almost be reduced to its most rudimentary arithmetic components: Sin equals X, Soul equals Y, and X also equals Y.

In Goethe's drama, Mephisto first appears to Faust in the guise of a poodle, which he first sees while out on a walk with Wagner. "See that black dog through seed and fallow roaming?" he asks. Something about the poodle clearly is disturbing to Faust, although he obviously does not recognize the dog's true identity:

Do you observe him near and nearer, looping



A narrowing spiral like the convolute snail?

Unless I err, there rises in his track

A swirling fiery effusion...

He seems to snare our feet with magic, weaving

Some future bondage, thread by stealthy thread. [lines 1147-1159]

Wagner, of course, convinces Faust that it is simply a dog, nothing more. “You see? A dog—there is no specter here” [line 1163]. But when the animal later comes home with Faust into his study, it begins running and growling and trying to escape. The poodle is trapped; it cannot leave because of a Druid’s claw in Faust’s study. When the poodle begins to reveal its true nature, growing “long and broad” with “fiery eyes and fearsome tooth,” Faust realizes he is at an advantage; immediately he turns to a book of magic and begins reciting insensible incantations to control the evil spirits surrounding the dog.

Here, of course, the reader knows what Faust does not: that in the previous “Prologue in Heaven” scene, the Lord and Mephisto, surrounded by angels, already have made a wager over Faust’s soul. Mephisto has expressed confidence that he will prevail, that temptation holds a far greater power than anything the Lord has to offer. And indeed, what Mephisto has to offer Faust is his deepest desire, his innermost longing for infinite knowledge and infinite experience, something for which he has hungered all his life.

In *Lolita*, Humbert refers to Mephisto’s initial appearance to Faust when he describes his marriage to Valeria. What initially attracted him to Valeria, he says, “was the imitation she gave of a little girl.”

She gave it not because she divined something about me; it was just her style—and I fell for it. Actually, she was at least in her twenties (I never established her exact

age for even her passport lied) and had mislaid her virginity under circumstances that changed with her reminiscent moods. I, on the other hand, was naïve as only a pervert can be. (25)

But reality, Humbert tells us, “soon asserted itself.” Instead of what he thought was a “pale little gutter girl,” Humbert discovers that what he actually has on his hands is “a large, puffy, short-legged, big-breasted and practically brainless *baba*” (26). Here Nabokov evokes a transformation in Valeria’s nature that is just as stunning to Humbert as the poodle’s sudden transformation into a creature with “fiery eyes and fearsome tooth” was to Faust. But this is not the only manner by which Nabokov evokes Mephisto’s initially disguised appearance: Humbert then describes walking out of an office building with her one day “when Valeria, as she waddled by my side, began to shake her poodle head vigorously without saying a word” (28).

Humbert’s attempts to fulfill his own deepest desire—to possess a nymphet—have appeared earlier in the novel, as he seeks out young prostitutes. In each instance Humbert has willed himself to believe he was encountering the real deal, as Nabokov might have put it; but in each case Humbert knows he has had only a pale imitation, a pseudo-nymphet. With Valeria, however, the allusion works on an even deeper level. Here Humbert actually has been duped, tempted by what he believed was one thing and which later turned out to be something entirely different. The reference to Valeria shaking her “poodle head” strongly suggests a textual nod to Faust, who likewise did not realize what he had brought home with him.

But the dog in *Faust*—which Goethe may have borrowed from an early chapbook in which Faustus was said to have owned a black dog with demonic powers—also makes

several other notable appearances in *Lolita*. But before Humbert's dog steps once again onto the literary stage of Nabokov's novel, however, perhaps a quick bit of background is in order.

Humbert first comes to Ramsdale, we might recall, because his uncle's former employee suggested he spend a few months "in the residence of his impoverished cousins," the McCoo family, in order to focus on his "scholarly exertions," which Humbert tells us "had begun to interest me again" (35). Such a suggestion normally would have been about as attractive to this snobbish European scholar as a gift of a black velvet Elvis portrait, except for one additional enticement: "He said they had two little daughters, one a baby, and the other a girl of twelve, and a beautiful garden, not far from a beautiful lake, and I said it sounded perfectly perfect." Humbert glosses over the mention of the twelve-year-old girl as if she were equal in appeal to the garden or the lake; and it isn't until a few lines later that he admits he envisioned "the enigmatic nymphet I would coach in French and fondle in Humbertish" (35). Sadly for Humbert, however, this envisioned opportunity does not come to pass. As he tells us:

Nobody met me at the toy station where I alighted with my new expensive bag, and nobody answered the telephone; eventually, however, a distraught McCoo in wet clothes turned up at the only hotel of green-and-pink Ramsdale with the news that his house had just burned down—possibly, owing to the synchronous conflagration that had been raging all night in my veins. (35)

Humbert's initial response to news of the fire, then, is that he equates it with—and indeed, almost attributes it to—the fire burning within his own body, presumably from the "synchronous" thought of meeting his envisioned nymphet. What initially appears to him

as bad luck, however, turns out not to be the case: From the charred ashes of the McCoo house arises another one of Nabokov's beloved phoenixes, this time in the form of another possible rental opportunity over on nearby Lawn Street (a home, it should be noted, that Humbert initially feels only socially obligated to inspect, but has no real intention of inhabiting). This, of course, turns out to be the Haze household, wherein dwells Lolita.

On the surface, such a turn of events might appear as simply another instance of Nabokov's obvious love of orchestrating what some might call "coincidences," of Nabokov the puppeteer pulling the literary strings of so-called chance and so-called sudden opportunities. Humbert's description of arriving at the train station, to be sure, contains a bit of all of these elements; but behind this passage lies still another connection to the Faust legend, one that goes back even farther than Goethe.

Goethe, we already know, was an openly unapologetic borrower of picking literary "flowers" wherever he found them. And very possibly, one of those flowers came from Gotthold Lessing, an older contemporary of Goethe's who had begun his own Faust play in 1755, twenty years before Goethe began his version in 1775. Unfortunately for scholars, only a few fragmentary sketches of Lessing's Faust remain, but those that do reveal a defense of Rationalism which later would parallel some of Goethe's own views. Lessing, for example, who some have called the "Father of the Enlightenment," asserted that we are only able to know God based on what we are able to actually observe in the natural world, because it is only in the natural world that God does not interfere (Greystonestreet). In many respects, this view of nature would correspond with Bloom's description of Goethe as a man who "from his start was a wholly secularized writer, with little use for God or Christ...His curious excursions into natural science—the metamorphoses of plants and

theory of colors—are reflections of his deep identification of himself with a nature always in the process of becoming, a non-Godhead waiting to be born” (Genius 175).

Lessing’s Faust fragments thus very likely would have held deep appeal for Goethe—and this appeal very likely made its way to Nabokov. As Franke notes:

The most important of these fragments, preserved to us in copies by some friends of Lessing’s, is the prelude, a council of devils. Satan is receiving reports from his subordinates as to what they have done to bring harm to the realm of God. The first devil who speaks has set the hut of some pious poor on fire; the second has buried a fleet of usurers in the waves. Both excite Satan’s disgust. “For,” he says, “to make the pious poor still poorer means only to chain him all the more firmly to God”; and the usurers, if, instead of being buried in the waves, they had been allowed to reach the goal of their voyage, would have wrought new evil on distant shores. Much more satisfied is Satan with the report of a third devil, who has stolen the first kiss from a young, innocent girl and thereby breathed the flame of desire into her veins; for he has worked evil in the world of spirit, and that means much more and is a much greater triumph for hell than to work evil in the world of bodies. (Lectures)

In Goethe’s play, we can detect the influence of Lessing’s references to waves and fire in the Prologue in Heaven scene, where Michael the Archangel declares:

And tempest roars, with tempest vying  
From sea to land, from land to sea,  
In their alternate furies tying  
A chain of deepest potency.  
A flash of fiery disaster

Precedes the thunder on its way. [lines 259-264]

Both Lessing and Goethe's versions become incorporated by Nabokov. Lessing's version of the first devil setting the hut of the "pious poor on fire" has been transferred to the McCoo house; and Goethe's Archangel who predicts the "flash of fiery disaster" preceding the "thunder on its way" lays the groundwork for Humbert's first response to Lolita where he declares, "I find it most difficult to express with adequate force that flash, that shiver, that impact of passionate recognition" (39). Can there be any doubt that Humbert, in essence, is describing his own version of thunder and lightning within his innermost soul?

This brings us back to the poodle in Goethe's *Faust*, as well as Nabokov's almost medieval chapbook-like references to a dog with demonic powers. In *Lolita*, it is a dog, of course, that ultimately might be said to be responsible for the "fantastic gift" that Humbert receives, namely that of possessing his nymphet. Charlotte (Nabokov's nod to the heroine in Goethe's *Werther*, or else to the historic Charlotte von Stein?) has read Humbert's hidden diary. Blinded by tears at his depiction of her and his designs on her daughter, she rushes outside to mail three damning letters. Just then, a car swerves onto the wet sidewalk, hitting Charlotte to avoid hitting a dog. Humbert considers the "intricacies of the pattern (hurrying housewife, slippery pavement, a pest of a dog, steep grade, big car, baboon at its wheel)" and "dimly" acknowledges his own role in Charlotte's dash to the mailbox. Nevertheless, he wonders again at the precise ingredients that, combined, created this fateful moment. Even if his journal had not created her blinding tears, he says, "still nothing might have happened, had not precise fate, that synchronizing phantom, mixed with its alembic the car and the dog and the sun and the shade and the wet and the weak and the strong and the stone" (103).

We have, however, seen this dog before. On the day of his arrival in Ramsdale, Humbert sees the animal from his “funereal” limousine as he is taken from the McCoo house to the Haze home: “Speaking of sharp turns: we almost ran over a meddlesome suburban dog (one of those who lie in wait for cars) as we swerved onto Lawn Street” (36). But this will not be the last reference to dogs, which—at least to Humbert’s thinking—often appear to be four-legged demonic messengers, or perhaps servants of another demon he names directly. When Humbert returns to the Enchanted Hunters hotel after Lolita has run off with Quilty, for example (“a curious urge to relive my stay there with Lolita had got hold of me”), he notices that the hotel’s stationery has changed since the last time he was there. On it he reads:

THE ENCHANTED HUNTERS

NEAR CHURCHES      NO DOGS

*All legal beverages*

Humbert wonders “if a hunter, enchanted or otherwise, would not need a pointer more than a pew, and with a spasm of pain I recalled a scene worthy of a great artist: *petit nymph accroupie*; but that silky cocker spaniel had perhaps been a baptized one” (261). By conflating Lolita with the silky cocker spaniel, Humbert exhibits what might be seen as the opposite of anthropomorphizing, with Lolita now assuming animal qualities. But here we also can observe another theme that later will prove central for Humbert: By speculating about baptism—a rite designed to ensure one’s admittance into heaven—he reveals his inclination to view Lolita as ultimately unstained by anything he did to her. We can see this in the “fatidic” date of Lolita’s death on Christmas Day—the day of Christ’s birth—as well as in the depiction of Lolita’s dog at the home she shares with her husband, a dog,

completely stripped of any demonic qualities, that now harmlessly utters a friendly “woof” before being shooed outside by Lolita. These elements later will figure prominently when Humbert speculates about the fate of his—as well as Lolita’s—immortal soul.

Still another early similarity in both works concerns the emotional stability of Faust and Humbert. In Goethe’s play, we see this in the Prologue in Heaven scene, in which Mephisto, speaking to the Lord, observes of Faust:

He serves you in a curious fashion

Not of this earth the madman’s drink or ration

He’s driven far afield by some strange leaven

He’s half aware of his demented quest

He claims the most resplendent stars from heaven. [lines 299-304]

Of particular interest is Mephisto’s comment about the “madman’s drink or ration”—as if suggesting that Faust’s emotional difficulties extend beyond his dissatisfaction with his life of a scholar and actually might involve some form of deeper emotional instability. (Indeed, before the Earth Spirit appears, Faust actually is on the brink of committing suicide by drinking a poison.) When considered in connection with *Lolita*, Mephisto’s comments take on a new shade of meaning.

Like Faust, who is called “Heinrich” by Gretchen, Humbert also is a European scholar mired in what might be called academic malaise and existential ennui. Prior to coming to Ramsdale, he tells us he arrived in New York where “I eagerly accepted the soft job fate offered me: it mainly consisted of thinking up and editing perfume ads” (32). Later, he is asked by a university to write a text on French literature for English speaking students, hardly the type of project one imagines would have lent deep purpose to his life.



Further, the oblique reference to “madman” in *Faust* is rendered explicitly in *Lolita*: “A dreadful breakdown sent me to a sanatorium for more than a year; I went back to my work—only to be hospitalized again” (33). Following a brief period in which Humbert tells us that he “felt curiously aloof from my own self” and “no temptations maddened me,” he describes still another breakdown. “The reader will regret to learn that after my return to civilization I had another bout with insanity (if to melancholia and a sense of insufferable oppression that cruel term must be applied)” (34).

But where Goethe’s *Faust* actually was on the verge of killing himself, Nabokov gleefully turns this suicidal urge on its head. After Charlotte is run over and killed, John and Jean Farlow, Charlotte’s friends, are so convinced that Humbert might harm himself that they track down someone to keep an eye on the man they believe to be a suffering widower:

That day John had to see a customer, and Jean had to feed her dogs, and so I was to be deprived temporarily of my friends’ company. The dear people were afraid I might commit suicide if left alone, and since no other friends were available (Miss Opposite was incommunicado, the McCoos were busy building a new house miles away, and the Chatfields had recently been called to Maine by some family trouble of their own), Leslie and Louise were commissioned to keep me company... (99)

Besides taking a jab at the suicidal *Faust*, Nabokov in this passage also interjects, in his own bitterly incisive style, a knife blade of social commentary: the Farlows, supposedly a concerned couple seeking to make certain that poor Mr. Humbert in his grief and despair should not do anything rash, at the same time cannot attend to him themselves because of John’s “customer” and Jean’s hungry dogs.

In Goethe's play, of course, it is the explicit soul-wager between Mephisto and Faust that propels the events and Faust's moral decline. In *Lolita*, however, there also is a soul-wager of sorts, but it is rendered implicitly. Shortly before Lolita is sent away to summer camp, Humbert writes in his journal that he hopes for some awful event to occur that will give him his nymphet:

I long for some terrific disaster. Earthquake. Spectacular explosion. Her mother is messily but instantly and permanently eliminated, along with everybody else for miles around. Lolita whimpers in my arms. A free man, I enjoy her among the ruins. (53)

Humbert does not use the word "pray" when describing this desire (as he does elsewhere in the novel), but when his envisioned scenario does occur—Charlotte is run over by a car—Humbert views Charlotte's death as an answer to his deepest longing. "I had actually seen the agent of fate," Humbert tells us, after the driver of the vehicle, a man named Beale, comes to the house to offer to pay for Charlotte's funeral. Interestingly, even Beale is described in dog-like terms, "looking like a kind of assistant executioner, with his bulldog jowls" (102). Humbert continues with a sense of awe at the events that have transpired: "I had palpitated the very flesh of fate—and its padded shoulder. A brilliant and monstrous mutation had suddenly taken place, and here was the instrument." Indeed, so powerful is this moment for Humbert, so overwhelming is his awareness of having touched the fleshy hand of fate, that he reiterates its effect on him:

Fat fate's formal handshake (as reproduced by Beale before leaving the room) brought me out of my torpor; and I wept. (103)

A “formal handshake,” of course, is what occurs between people when a deal has been concluded or an agreement reached. In Goethe’s play the soul-pact is sealed with a drop of blood; but in *Lolita* Faust’s pact with Mephisto is evoked through Beale’s handshake and Humbert’s recognition of him as “the agent of fate.” It is the same agent that Humbert has recognized earlier—whether as McFate, or perhaps one of McFate’s subagents in the guise of “opportunity” or “chance.” Anticipating the nymphet who is about to be his, Humbert decides that “the house of heaven must seem pretty bare after that” (103). Whatever a future “house of heaven” may have to offer Humbert pales in comparison to possessing Lolita here on earth, right now. As Humbert has told us earlier, it is only the earthly paradise that concerns him:

What had begun as a delicious distention of my innermost roots became a glowing tingle which now had reached that point of absolute security, confidence and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life. [...]The least pressure would suffice to set all paradise loose. I had ceased to be Humbert the Hound, the sad-eyed degenerate cur clasping the boot that would presumably kick him away. I was above the tribulations of ridicule, beyond the possibilities of retribution. (60)

Like Faust, who Weigand notes “had dismissed hell as a figment of morbid fantasy” (455), Humbert, too, believes himself beyond retribution—a word, it should be noted, that has a far different definition than “jail time.” Once Lolita actually has become “his,” Humbert operates as if he had been given the same advice presented in *Faust*:

Tomorrow’s late for what’s not done today.

There’s not a day to lose, and so,

Whatever’s possible, resolve robust

Should take it by the forelock fast. [lines 225-228]

Humbert also seizes the hanging “forelock,” an image that is synonymous with “seizing the Opportunity” and which dates back to ancient Greece. He recognizes this in the Enchanted Hunters hotel room after he has just had sex with Lolita, and an “ashen sense of awfulness” washes over him as he watches her:

Brown, naked, frail Lo, her narrow white buttocks to me, her sulky face to a door mirror, stood, arms akimbo, feet (in new slippers with pussy-fur tops) wide apart, and through a forehanging lock tritely mugged at herself in the glass. (137-138)

Humbert clearly has no intention of letting go of that forelock, but already he seems to sense that a terrible price for it lies ahead.

### **The Devil is in the Details**

Faust, of course, has Mephisto to assist him in his quests. But Humbert, too, has his own devilish ally in “McFate.” Even though McFate may be far more ethereal and silent than Faust’s mocking, sarcastic, in-the-flesh demon, McFate nevertheless is a presence to which Nabokov, like Goethe, imbues with distinctive characteristics.

“It would have been logical on the part of Aubrey McFate (as I would like to dub that devil of mine) to arrange a small treat for me on the promised beach, in the presumed forest,” Humbert says, alluding to McFate’s tendency to take pleasure in taunting and toying with him (56). At another point Humbert notes, “I want the reader not to mock me and my mental daze. It is easy for him and me to decipher now a past destiny; but a destiny in the making is, believe me, not one of those honest mystery stories where all you have to do is keep an eye on the clues.” That, he says, “is not McFate’s way” (210-211). In another

reference, Humbert does not mention McFate directly, but nevertheless alludes to a demonic influence in his daily life:

It will be seen that for all the devil's inventiveness, the scheme remained daily the same. First he would tempt me—and then thwart me, leaving me with a dull pain in the very root of my being. (55)

Other times, McFate rewards him, as when Humbert uses a pay phone to call Lolita's camp, and the inserted coins jingle out like a slot machine jackpot:

One wonders if this sudden discharge, this spasmodic refund, was not correlated somehow, in the mind of McFate, with my having invented that little expedition before ever learning of it as I did now. (107)

Elsewhere, however, it is Lolita herself—and all nymphets—who is perceived by Humbert to possess demonic qualities. In many respects, this harkens back to Marlowe's version of Faust, in which Helen of Troy was portrayed as the "she-devil":

I should have understood that Lolita had *already* proved to be something quite different from innocent Annabel, and that the nymphaean evil breathing through every pore of the fey child that I had prepared for my secret delectation, would make the secrecy impossible, and the delectation lethal. I should have known (by the signs made to me by something in Lolita—the real child Lolita or some haggard angel behind her back) that nothing but pain and horror would result from the expected rapture. Oh winged gentlemen of the jury! (125)

Humbert's she-devil portrayal of Lolita is exhibited in another passage, in which Humbert says of her, "...Every nerve in me was still anointed and ringed with the feel of her body—the body of some immortal daemon child disguised as a female child" (139).

But Lolita is not the only one besides McFate to be imbued with demonic qualities. Quilty also takes on devilish attributes. In many respects, Quilty thus acts as Humbert's "doppelganger" or alter ego, possibly a reference to Faust's remarks to Wagner about the dueling urges that possess him. Indeed, so powerful is this sense of harboring an "Other" for Faust that he articulates the presence of "two souls" within him:

You are by just a single urge possessed;

Oh may you never know the other!

Two souls, alas are dwelling in my breast,

And neither would be severed from its brother. [lines 1112-1115]

Appel observes that Nabokov's use of parody includes "not only narrative clichés and subject matter but genres and prototypes of the novel" as well. (i) The doppelganger motif, of course, was popular in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, and this Nabokov does not hesitate to engage. Quilty, as Appel notes, "is both a parody of the Double as a convention of modern fiction and a Double who formulates the horror in Humbert's life" (li). That horror, however, is not unlike the type that Faust refers to when he senses the two "souls" in his breast that pull him in opposite directions, each one incapable of being severed from the other.

It is Faust's recognition of these opposing forces, and his prayer that something will appear in his life to mediate between them, that summons forth Mephisto. (Similarly, here we can recall Humbert's longing for a "terrific disaster" to occur to Charlotte, a desire that summons forth the "pesky" neighborhood dog.) But as Brown observes, Mephisto will serve Faust only as long as Faust remains unsatisfied with anything the devil has to offer—which is anything the world alone has to offer. In this respect, then, Brown notes that

The traditional significance of the pact is subverted, since Faust must now embrace every temptation of the devil in order to be saved. More important is the specific formulation: “Werd’ ich zum Augenblick sagen:/Verveile doch! du bist so schoen!” (Should I ever say to the moment: Tarry a while, thou art so fair!...) The word *Augenblick*, “moment,” contains in it the word for “eye.” Such moments of temptation to make time stand still and lose the bet will be moments of vision, moments in which Faust somehow can “see” the ineffable Absolute in the world. The bet articulates both the instability of any knowledge of the Other and also its dependence on an insight projected from within. (96)

In order for Faust to save his soul, then, he cannot be self-reflective. He must continue to strive, continue to black out the “ineffable Absolute” in the world; he cannot possess knowledge of the “Other,” and indeed must eschew any search of it if he does not want to lose his bet for his immortal soul. As Mephisto tells him:

Cheer up! Throw over all reflection,  
And off into the world post-haste!  
Take it from me: the slave of introspection  
Is like a beast on arid waste...[lines 1828-1831]

Initially, this imperative to eschew introspection is true of Humbert as well. Once he gives into “fat fate’s formal handshake,” Humbert forces from his consciousness any notions of retribution, of any future cost or consequence. His “fantastic gift” prevents him from seeing any farther than the next motel parking lot into which he and Lolita will drive, any farther than the dim awareness that Lolita the nymphet, one day soon, no longer will be his Lolita. Until nearly the end of Humbert’s prison “memoir,” Humbert’s sense of time is measured

only by his so-called “scientific” ideas about the age at which a nymphet ceases to be a nymphet; and in this respect the only mortality he is able to perceive is that of Lolita’s nymphet-ism. Only after Lolita disappears, and Humbert has killed Quilty, does Humbert begin to hear the drumbeat of his own mortality. This is what creates the narrative shift; this is what creates an overlay for his previous lack of self-reflection. Thus, Humbert’s grand narrative, as it were, actually is transformed into one that is *all about* self-reflection and introspection—even if, in the process, Humbert either ends up deceiving himself, us, his rhetorical jury, or else all of the above. He reflects, then, about his previous lack of reflection, in what Kuzmanovich calls “something recursive and dizzying, a linguistic vertigo created when consciousness is investigated with consciousness” (20).

Unlike Faust, whose future immortal soul depends on his uninterrupted striving and lack of self-reflection, Humbert’s immortal soul will—at least to his own thinking—rest on just the opposite. Humbert needs to understand for himself, as well as for us and for his envisioned “jury,” why he did what he did, and reveal his motives in their barest and starkest terms. He must tell these details—ones that, in 1950’s America, prompted some critics to call “pornographic,” “amoral,” “immoral,” or “unwholesome,” to name but a few—because *Humbert’s truth*, even if it is a lie to himself, even if is self-delusional, even if it is full of rationalization and justification, even if it is deceitful, is all that stands between him and the cessation of mortal being that he clearly senses lurks just around the proverbial corner of his jail cell.

That certainly is not to imply that we should read Humbert’s “memoir” as a deathbed confession. To the contrary, as numerous scholars including Appel have pointed out, *Lolita* is a “burlesque” of the confessional novel, a parody of that form along with so



many others, including murder mysteries. But to leave the label at “burlesque,” to my thinking, not only involves a great oversight, but it also minimizes Nabokov’s deeply held ideas about the human soul. Modern American literature may have treated the existence of the human soul as an anachronism; but that did not mean that Nabokov felt the need to do so as well. *Lolita*, in fact, is proof of that; *Lolita*, in fact, exists in defiance of that.

The issue of immortality, of course, is one that is extremely important to Mephisto, even if it is not to Faust. In order to win the bet—and thus to win Faust’s soul—Mephisto must use all of his wiles to lull Faust into satisfaction and comfort. One of the most significant ways in which the devil attempts to do this is by taunting Faust. As Kaufmann notes, in the figure of Faust Goethe created a “poetic but unscrupulous titan who, for all his noble sentiments, becomes involved in brutal deeds—[and] is the constant butt of Mephisto’s mockery” (24).

The theme of demonic mockery, however, also appears throughout *Lolita*. One example is after Quilty “rescues” Lolita and Humbert unsuccessfully pursues clues to their cryptic trail through hotel ledgers. Humbert does not yet know the identity of Lolita’s co-conspirator; nevertheless, he attributes to him the same qualities that could describe Goethe’s Mephisto:

In one thing he succeeded: he succeeded in thoroughly enmeshing me and my thrashing anguish in his demoniacal game. With infinite skill, he swayed and staggered, and regained an impossible balance, always leaving me with the sportive hope—if I may use such a term in speaking of betrayal, fury, desolation, horror and hate—that he might give himself away next time. (249)

The more frustrated Humbert becomes, the more demonic Lolita's "rescuer" seems to grow in his mind:

He mimed me and mocked me. His allusions were definitely high brow. He was well-read. He knew French. (249)

But Humbert also becomes afraid of the caprices of his imagined demons—or else God—just as does Faust. At one point, for example, Lolita is sitting on his lap and he is reciting the jumbled, insensible words to a popular song. In modern parlance Humbert might be said to be "buying time" by his words—that is, he is attempting to hold Lolita temporarily under his spell. This scene strongly evokes Faust's insensible incantations to the poodle in his study, when Faust uses magical incantations to control the spirits around him. As Humbert relates it:

Having, in the course of my patter, hit upon something nicely mechanical, I recited, garbling them slightly, the words of a foolish song that was then popular—O my Carmen, something, something, those something nights, and the stars, and the cars, and the bars, and the barmen; I kept repeating this automatic stuff and holding her under its special spell (spell because of the garbling), and all the while I was mortally afraid that some act of God might interrupt me...(59)

This is, by no means, the only time Humbert fears that some act of God or demon will come between him and his nymphet. Almost like an ancient Greek giving equal deference to both Zeus and Hades, Humbert treats the possibility of heaven or hell, God or the devil, with the same amount of credence or possibility. Each seems to him to hold equal power; each seems to him—on the off-chance that one of them actually might turn out to be real—to deserve his equal attention.

After Charlotte's death, for example, Humbert tells us that what prevented him from seeking guardianship of Lolita "was the awful feeling that if I meddled with fate in any way and tried to rationalize her fantastic gift, that gift would be snatched away" (173). "Fate," here and in numerous other passages, becomes a catch-all for the unknown, for what either is the work of God or the devil. In another passage, Humbert, hoping to take Lolita to the seaside for "the 'gratification' of a lifetime urge, and release from the 'subconscious' obsession of an incomplete childhood romance" with Annabel (167), is thwarted. "The angels knew it," Humbert says, attributing the ensuing bad weather to an act of God, "and arranged things accordingly. A visit to the plausible cove on the Atlantic side was completely messed up by foul weather" (167).

Like Faust, Humbert also desires one thing above all else: a nymphet. And also like Faust, never before has his deepest desire been so close to his grasp. Before Lolita, Humbert says, when "the vision was out of reach, with no possibility of attainment...I would crowd all the demons of my desire against the railing of my throbbing balcony" (264). But those demons apparently begin disbanding from the balcony as soon as Lolita appears in Charlotte's garden.

Until Lolita, Humbert never has truly possessed a nymphet. It has been a near life-long obsession, to be sure, ever since he and Annabel, many years earlier, were continually thwarted. His later encounters with youngish prostitutes were at best only facsimiles of what he truly hungered for, and it is only when Lolita is "given" to him that he comes face to face with the possibility of finally obtaining his deepest yearning. And, just as with Faust and Gretchen, Humbert is indebted by this "gift" to a demonic element.

The passion I had developed for that nymphet—for the first nymphet in my life that could be reached at last by my awkward, aching, timid claws—would certainly have landed me in a sanatorium, had not the devil realized that I was to be granted some relief if he wanted to have me as a plaything for some time longer. (56)

One striking portrayal of McFate occurs when Humbert reads the roster of Lolita's classmates at the Ramsdale school (50-51). He lists all forty students—beginning with “Angel, Grace.” This is no accident, and certainly calls to mind the angels hovering in heaven above Faust while Mephisto is attempting to capture Faust's soul on earth. Indeed, this reference harkens back to the Prologue in Heaven scene, in which the Lord says to Mephisto:

Man all too easily grows law and mellow,  
He soon elects repose at any price;  
And so I like to pair him with a fellow  
To play the deuce, to stir, and to entice.  
But you, true scions of the godly race  
Rejoice you in the front of living grace! [lines 340-346]

Goethe's mention of the “godly race” is a reference to the “sons of God, the angels,” who are “represented by the Archangels in the opening hymn” (Hamlin 9). But Nabokov, an adherent of the specific detail over what he called the “Literature of Ideas,” transforms the “living grace” into an actual person, a schoolmate of Lolita's: Grace Angel. This is similar to how Humbert has envisioned his own personal “devil,” Aubrey McFate.

Further down the list of Lolita's classmates, Humbert sees the name “Haze, Dolores” (Lolita is the diminutive, just as Gretchen is the diminutive of Margarete) and

then, a few names below, is another: “McFate, Aubrey.” Humbert’s demonic ally—the one he previously told us he has chosen to “dub that devil of mine”—thus appears here as an actual student. By placing Lolita’s name between “Grace Angel” and “Aubrey McFate,” Lolita literally has been sandwiched between an angel and a devil, between heaven and hell. To Humbert, then, Lolita exists in relation to his soul as a kind of croupier—one who either collects or pays out a debt, depending on how Chance and Opportunity cooperate.

Personifying McFate as an actual student, however, very possibly is another nod to Goethe’s Mephisto, who accompanies Faust throughout the play as an in-the-flesh demon and is visible to others, even though most of them—with the exception of Gretchen—cannot discern his true character. It also, however, could refer to a comment Mephisto makes, in which he informs Faust that he is able to be everywhere simultaneously: that is, visibly by Faust’s side, for example, while at the same time watching Gretchen as she confesses her sins in church. In other words, the devil—and the accompanying threat of eternal damnation—lurks everywhere.

### **The Slippery Slope**

Although Faust’s original pact with Mephisto is for experience, knowledge and infinite answers to infinite questions, he quickly descends into depravity and debauchery. In many respects, just as in the case of Humbert, Faust can be seen as epitomizing a concept some psychologists have referred to as “the slippery slope,” in which one step over a moral line quickly leads to an abyss. To be sure, identifying precisely where that moral line exists—in either *Faust* or *Lolita*—is open to debate. But viewed in its broadest terms,

one might begin by asking the question: At what point does sin begin: with desire, or with the acting upon it?

Nabokov alludes to this inherently existential question when he describes Lolita, sitting on the sofa next to Humbert, as “holding in her hollowed hands a beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple...She tossed it up into the sun-dusted air, and caught it—it made a cupped polished *plop*. Humbert intercepted the apple” (57-58). Similarly, Faust’s “original” sin has been viewed by some scholars as having existed long before his actual seduction of Gretchen, and instead at the moment he allowed his hunger for knowledge to overshadow all other longings. In the biblical Eden, of course, it was Adam’s same desire that led to the couple’s eviction from paradise.

Even if one accepts Nabokov’s view that great literature should have no moral in tow, it still remains difficult to read either *Lolita* or *Faust* without being tempted to conjure up the *human beings* at the heart of both works, to envision the complex and often larger-than-life figures who, whether deeply or due to throw-away terms like “the Faustian bargain” or “the Long Island Lolita,” have indelibly etched themselves into our collective consciousness. But such an inclination to view either as larger than life, in my view, would be a mistake.

Much like one of Nabokov’s “false scents” in his artfully-designed chess strategies, Humbert, like Faust, is potentially just as much an “everyman” in terms of his desires as anyone else, the age of Enlightenment or Modernism notwithstanding. Experience, education and erudition aside, Faust and Humbert both personify human longing and desire for existential meaning on its deepest level. Where they part company, however, is where each perceives the cost of that desire.

It is difficult to discern any point during Part I of Goethe's drama, which ends with Gretchen's impending execution, where Faust exhibits any awareness of where his "slippery slope" moral line might have existed. Gretchen's trajectory in the drama progresses from innocence, to attraction to Faust, to surrender, and then, after she realizes her fate, to despair and finally madness. Faust, meanwhile, is unaware of Gretchen's suffering. In the Forest and Cave scene, he reveals that while he is deeply involved in self-analysis and reflection about his essential nature, his self-analysis and existential exploration are fully removed from the context of his relationship with Gretchen, with what his "striving" has caused her in terms of genuine human suffering. Although many of these observations certainly might hold true for Humbert as well, an essential difference exists between them.

Unlike Faust, Humbert is astoundingly adept at self-reflective questioning of his own moral code, promptly finding ways to break that code, and then questioning the basis by which he has broken it. Humbert, then, constantly questions what he knows and how he knows it, reinterprets that knowledge again, so that his narrative becomes like epistemological crochet. Still, there appears to exist at least one clear moral line for Humbert—even if he sees it only in retrospect. And that line is at the doorway to room 342 at the Enchanted Hunters hotel:

The key, with its numbered dangler of carved wood, became forthwith the weighty sesame to a rapturous and formidable future. It was mine, it was part of my hot hairy fist. In a few minutes—say twenty, say half-an-hour, *sicher ist sicher* as my uncle Gustav used to say—I would let myself in to that "342" and find my nymphet, my beauty and bride, emprisoned in her crystal sleep. Jurors! If my

happiness could have talked, it would have filled that genteel hotel with a deafening roar. And my only regret today is that I did not quietly deposit key “342” at the office, and leave the town, the country, the continent, the hemisphere—indeed, the globe—that very same night. (123)

But Humbert, as we know, does no such thing. He stands on the hotel’s porch where he has a brief, cryptic conversation with a man he does not yet know is Quilty (“Where the devil did you get her? “I beg your pardon? “I said: the weather is getting better.”) (127). And then he heads back inside to where Lolita is sleeping:

I again chose the stairs. 342 was near the fire escape. One could still—but the key was already in the lock and I was in the room. (127)

Humbert’s reference to the “fire escape” strongly evokes the possibility—now seen in retrospect, of course—that he could have avoided the fires of hell by not entering the room. His atypical sentence structure also reflects his conflicting thought process—“one could still—” which further leads one to believe he views this as having been his only turning-back point. That, or else it is the point at which Humbert *believes* there will be no possibility of ever attaining....dare we call it redemption?

Nabokov insisted, of course, that *Lolita* was not about redemption. To be sure, this admonition still resonates. Still, I would respectfully advance the following questions: Should Nabokov’s denial of any redemptive element in *Lolita* remain sacrosanct to the point that it serves, essentially, as a critical gauntlet to further exploration of any variant view? Is it possible, for example, that for a host of possible reasons Nabokov intentionally might have *desired* that certain thematic elements within *Lolita* would have remained



cryptic? Goethe, too, it should be recalled, on numerous occasions expressed his desire that Faust would remain an “open riddle,” and “the more cryptic, the better.”

One supportive element to this theory is provided by Nabokov himself, when he describes in his autobiography the strategies he attempted to devise for sophisticated chess solvers:

Deceit, to the point of diabolism, and originality, verging on the grotesque, were my notions of strategy; and although in matters of construction I tried to conform, whenever possible, to classical rules, such as economy of force, unity, weeding out of loose ends, I was always ready to sacrifice purity of form to the exigencies of fantastic content, causing form to bulge and burst like a sponge-bag containing a small furious devil. (289-290)

In *Lolita*, that small furious devil frequently stands in direct opposition to “godly” elements, harkening again back to *Faust* and the “Prologue in Heaven” scene. Humbert refers repeatedly to these dual worlds, to these two apparently warring forces of demons versus angels, of heaven versus hell. But he also departs from Goethe on at least one other significant point.

In *Faust*, heaven is clearly represented at one end of the spectrum, hell at the other. For Humbert, however, “heaven” and “hell” are not exclusively relegated to opposing destinations in the hereafter; both exist, side by side, often simultaneously. “I am trying to describe these things not to relive them in my present boundless misery,” he says at one point, “but to sort out the portion of hell and the portion of heaven in that strange, awful, maddening world—nymphet love” (135). Heaven and hell thus are both already known to Humbert in this world, this life. This can be discerned in another passage, when *Lolita* is

ready to turn away from him with what he calls “something akin to plain revulsion,” when he tells us that “despite her nastiness, I still dwelled deep in my elected paradise—a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames—but still a paradise” (166). Heaven and hell on earth thus exist for Humbert side by side; each one contains a tinge of the other.

But Humbert, it should be noted, does not focus solely on demons or demonic influences. He also addresses, in numerous passages, his own uncertain concepts of God. What is particularly noteworthy is that God, for Humbert, frequently is portrayed as a mental construct, as an act of will:

The afternoon drifted on and on, in ripe silence, and the sappy tall trees seemed to be in the know; and desire, even stronger than before, began to afflict me again. Let her come soon, I prayed, addressing a loan God...(62)

At numerous points in the narrative, when Humbert addresses a rhetorical jury, it also frequently contains some godly or angelic reference: “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look now at this tangle of thorns” (9). Or: “Winged gentlemen! No hereafter is acceptable if it does not produce her as she was then, in that Colorado resort...” (230)

Let us keep in mind Humbert’s use of the word “hereafter.” Throughout the text, to be sure, Humbert appeals to numerous “juries”: he addresses readers; but also, in numerous instances, he appeals to another important audience as well. But if we pass over his numerous references to “winged” jury members—if we dismiss these as purely farcical, as some scholars have suggested we should do—we lose a critical dimension of Humbert’s memoir, one that dwells within his own sense of his impending mortality. Humbert’s fictional editor, John Ray Jr. Ph.D., would have us believe that Humbert’s narrative

actually was meant to be used as notes for his upcoming trial—but John Ray Jr. is only half correct. It is not a trial in front of a jury of his “peers” that Humbert cares about; it is a jury regarding the “hereafter” that he cares about most. This is the dimension to his rhetorical appeal that will become even more evident, and urgent, when further examined in relation to Goethe’s *Faust*.

### **Gretchen and Lolita**

Any comparison of *Faust* and *Lolita*, of course, necessitates an examination of how both men respond to Gretchen and Lolita. Not only are their responses strikingly similar, but so too are the conditions under which both men encounter the girls. When Faust first sets eyes on Gretchen, for example, she is on her way home from church. Faust has just left the witch’s kitchen, where he has just drunk a Viagra-like potion to restore his youth and sexual vigor. Faust later meets Gretchen in the garden of her neighbor Marthe, a woman probably about the same age as Gretchen’s mother, and whom Mephisto pretends to woo (simultaneously revealing, in the process, his obvious distaste of the task).

Similarly, right before Humbert sets eyes on Lolita in Charlotte’s garden, he refers to a kitchen, telling us that “A colored maid let me in—and left me standing on the mat while she rushed back to the kitchen where something was burning that ought not to burn” (36). The presence of the maid stands in direct opposition to Gretchen’s pronouncement to Faust that “we have no maid” [line 3111]. As with Mephisto’s distasteful task of wooing Marthe, Humbert likewise will use this technique on the doomed Charlotte.

The moment Faust sees Gretchen he immediately commands Mephisto: “Get me that young wench.” But Mephisto—who, it should be recalled, has promised to fulfill

Faust's every desire, per their pact— balks. He tells Faust he has “no hold at all” over Gretchen since she has just come from confession. Further, Mephisto adds, she is “a right innocent lass/who brought mere nothings to confess” [lines 2624-2625]. Faust's response to this information is striking, particularly when viewed in comparison to *Lolita*. Mephisto, after all, has just revealed two important things: one, that there are certain innocent beings he cannot corrupt; and two, that his presence is ubiquitous. Without stating it outright, Mephisto has told Faust he was able to be with him in the witch's kitchen and also at the same time in the confessional with Gretchen. Faust's only reply to this information? “She's over fourteen, after all” [line 2627].

This statement is stunning on several levels, particularly if one is willing to entertain the premise that Nabokov seized upon it for use in *Lolita*. By this statement, it is clear that Gretchen's unquestionable innocence has no bearing at all upon Faust's lustful desires. He displays not a shred of moral conflict about Mephisto's information; to the contrary, he informs Mephisto that their deal will be off—the pact for his soul—unless his desire is granted. To that end, Faust and Mephisto later sneak into Gretchen's bedroom and plant jewels to win her over, or, as Mephisto puts it, “to bend/that sweet young thing to your heart's wish and end” [lines 2746-2747].

This bribery motif, too, will later appear in *Lolita* when Humbert likewise employs the use of material items, such as clothes and an “allowance,” to get what he wants. One of our first hints of it comes in the Enchanted Hunters hotel room:

She tried on the two-piece navy wool, then a sleeveless blouse with a swirly clathrate skirt, but the first was too tight and the second too ample, and when I begged her to hurry up (the situation was beginning to frighten me), Lo viciously

sent those nice presents of mine hurtling into a corner, and put on yesterday's dress. When she was ready at last, I gave her a lovely new purse of simulated calf (in which I had slipped quite a few pennies and two mint-bright dimes) and told her to buy herself a magazine in the lobby. (138)

But Faust's mention of Gretchen's age is noteworthy for other reasons as well. For one, it was no more acceptable during the eighteenth century for a fourteen-year-old girl to engage in extramarital sex than it would have been for a girl of fifteen or sixteen or seventeen. For another, Faust, until this point, has been a respected scholar, a man who most certainly would have known the fate that often befell young girls who had sexual encounters outside marriage. Certainly, too, Faust would have known what happened if those same girls became pregnant, as does Gretchen. It is not until later in the drama that we learn that Gretchen, abandoned by Faust after the death of her mother and the murder of her brother, Valentine, gives birth to Faust's child and later kills it. Gretchen is then imprisoned in a dungeon and awaits execution while Faust is off in the countryside.

Hamlin notes that the theme of seduction "was predominant in domestic, middle-class drama and a preoccupation of the age," as was the theme of infanticide, when innocent young girls "subsequently fell victim to the intolerance of eighteenth-century middle class society, usually leading to their execution, while the seducer escaped without penalty..." (Faust 318). Hamlin argues persuasively that this historical background supports the modern reader's impression that it is Gretchen—and not Faust—who actually is central to the seduction sequence in Part I of the drama, and that the real tragedy actually is Gretchen's. Faust, Hamlin says, "functions above all as the instrument of her destruction, however authentic his erotic motives may be."

In many respects, this same observation easily could apply to *Lolita*. Regardless of how “authentic” Humbert’s love for Lolita ultimately may have turned out to be (when he declares his loves for her, despite the fact that she no longer is a nymphet), Humbert nevertheless serves as the instrument of Lolita’s destruction. Likewise, despite Humbert’s claim at one point that “this book is about Lolita,” we know that the majority of his narrative is not about Lolita at all. As Michael Wood observes, “It is about ‘Lolita’, about the obsessive dream of Lolita which captures the actual child and took her away. ‘My own creation, another, fanciful Lolita,’ as Humbert claims, ‘—perhaps more real than Lolita...’ Perhaps. The ape has drawn the bars of his cage” (115).

Not only does Humbert’s self-centered narrative mirror *Faust* by largely ignoring Lolita’s suffering, but by calling his manuscript “Lolita” and not “Humbert,” Nabokov further parodies the idea that Faust, and not Gretchen, was the “tragic” figure in the drama. This notion is further supported by Nabokov’s self-described inspiration for writing *Lolita*: a newspaper report he read about an ape that drew the bars of its own cage. If we take Nabokov at his word, then, the initial creative inspiration for his novel concerned itself with suffering and imprisonment, two central themes present in *Faust*.

As if to highlight Faust’s dismissive mention of Gretchen’s age, Humbert, in contrast, goes to great lengths to justify his lust for Lolita despite her age. He ponders, for instance, other by-gone cultures where age meant little (“After all, Dante fell madly in love with his Beatrice when she was nine”), as well as the conflicts and apparent arbitrariness of various state laws. “In Massachusetts...a ‘wayward child’ is, technically, one ‘between seven and seventeen years of age...’” (19). “The median age of pubescence for girls has been found to be thirteen years and nine months in New York and Chicago” (42). “The

stipulation of the Roman law, according to which a girl may marry at twelve, was adopted by the Church, and still is preserved, rather tacitly, in some of the United States. There is nothing wrong, say both hemispheres, when a brute of forty, blessed by the local priest and bloated with drink, sheds his sweat-drenched finery and thrusts himself up to the hilt into his youthful bride” (135). Humbert’s numerous ruminations about the “age of consent” certainly reflect his awareness of and anxiety about the possible legal consequences of his actions, but they also can be viewed as an *attempt* at moral justification. Such an attempt, it seems to me, is completely absent in the character of Faust.

One of the more significant parallels between *Faust* and *Lolita* concerns the young girls’ mothers, as well as the protagonists’ treatment of them. Gretchen and Lolita’s mothers are both well-provided-for widows, and both experienced the death of a child. Gretchen tells Faust, in poignant detail, how she cared for her baby sister before she died; whereas Humbert treats the death of Lolita’s baby brother as a mere afterthought. In typical Nabokovian, kaleidoscopic fashion, it is not Lolita who shares this information with Humbert, but Charlotte. While reconstructing his “journal” that was lost and his conversation with Charlotte, Humbert says, “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” (69).

In *Faust*, we never actually see Gretchen’s mother, her presence rendered solely through Gretchen’s dialogue with Faust. Still, just as with Charlotte Haze, Gretchen’s mother clearly presents an obstacle to Faust’s lustful intentions. When Gretchen tells him she would leave her bedroom door unlatched except that “any little thing will wake my mother/ And if she found us with each other/ I would just perish at her sight!” [lines 3507-

3509] Faust has a ready solution. He gives Gretchen a sleeping potion to administer to her mother, assuring Gretchen that the substance is harmless. But it proves lethal. This plot point is revealed in Goethe's drama with a few, brilliantly rendered brushstrokes; and it is only in the next scene, when Gretchen is in front of a church, that we understand what has occurred. It is likewise left up to us to imagine Gretchen's suffering at the realization of what she has done, at her own hand in her mother's death.

Humbert, too, employs a sleeping potion on Lolita's mother, but it has a different effect on Charlotte Haze:

Throughout most of July I had been experimenting with various sleeping powders, trying them out on Charlotte, a great taker of pills. The last dose I had given her (she thought it was a tablet of mild bromides—to anoint her nerves) had knocked her out for four solid hours. I had put the radio at full blast. I had blazed in her face an olisbos-like flashlight. I had pushed her, pinched her, prodded her—and nothing had disturbed the rhythm of her calm and powerful breathing. However, when I had done such a simple thing as kiss her, she had awakened at once, as fresh and strong as an octopus (I barely escaped). (94)

Later, in the Enchanted Hunters hotel, Humbert also uses sleeping tablets for his planned seduction of Lolita. But this, likewise, proves insufficient for his purposes:

I had not dared offer her a second helping of the drug, and had not abandoned hope that the first might still consolidate her sleep. I started to move toward her, ready for any disappointment, knowing I had better wait, but incapable of waiting. (131)

In Goethe's drama, there is no question that Gretchen is "innocent" in every sense of the word, and that only with Mephisto's assistance is Faust able to seduce her. He



accomplishes this not only through planted jewels in her bedroom—designed to convince Gretchen that she is being wooed by a “noble” man with noble intentions—but also by Faust’s purported “devotion” to her. One textual passage is particularly notable, especially when compared to *Lolita*.

As Gretchen and Faust stroll in a neighbor’s garden, Gretchen presses Faust about his religion and faith. After an evasive answer, Gretchen asks him directly: “Do you believe in God?” Faust gives another long, roundabout, inconclusive answer. “So you don’t believe?” Gretchen presses. “My dear one,” answers Faust, “who may say: I believe in God?...Are not the vaulted heavens hung on high? Is not earth anchored below? And do not with kindly gaze/Eternal stars not rise aloft?” [lines 3442-3445] But Gretchen is still not entirely at ease with his answer. “Put in this way, it has a likely tone,” she ventures warily. “And yet it’s all askew to me; For you have no Christianity” [lines 3466-3468].

This scene is strikingly similar to one in which Humbert attempts to prove his purported “devotion” to Charlotte, and Charlotte likewise enquires about Humbert’s faith:

Immediately after she had become more or less my mistress...good Charlotte interviewed me about my relations with God. I could have answered on that score my mind was open; I said, instead—paying my tribute to a pious platitude—that I believed in a cosmic spirit....She said...that if she ever found out I did not believe in Our Christian God, she would commit suicide. She said it so solemnly that it gave me the creeps. It was then I knew she was a woman of principle. (75)

Nabokov borrows from Goethe’s seduction theme of Gretchen but makes it inherently more problematic, leaving it purposefully enigmatic whether it was Lolita who seduced Humbert or the other way around. Readers have only Humbert’s notoriously unreliable word for

what transpired in the Enchanted Hunters hotel room (a nod, no doubt, to the “Stag and Hound” in *Faust*):

I had thought that months, perhaps years would elapse before I dared to reveal myself to Dolores Haze; but by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something very strange; it was she who seduced me. (132)

This conscious confounding of the actual seducer, I would submit, is just as singular, significant, and original a contribution to the historic Faust legend as any made by Marlowe or Goethe. In Marlowe’s version it is Helen of Troy, the “she-devil,” who seduces Faust; in Goethe’s version it is Faust who seduces the innocent Gretchen; but Nabokov purposefully leaves open the question of Lolita’s “innocence” and who seduced whom, indeed making this point central to how Lolita will be judged by readers.

As Humbert remarks after their first sexual encounter at the Enchanted Hunters hotel: “Suffice it to say that not a trace of modesty did I perceive in this beautiful hardly formed young girl whom modern co-education, juvenile mores, the campfire racket and so forth had utterly and hopelessly depraved. She saw the stark act merely as part of a youngster’s furtive world, unknown to adults” (133). But then come two lines that confound the reader, causing us to wonder if Humbert’s perceptions of Lolita’s camp experiences are not really as extensive as he claimed earlier:

While eager to impress me with the world of tough kids, she was not quite prepared for certain discrepancies between a kid’s life and mine. Pride alone prevented her from giving up... (134)

This last line must serve as both a clue and a warning that Humbert either is self-deceived, or else attempting to deceive his readers; for if “pride alone” kept Lolita from making him stop, then we are, in essence, being told that Lolita, in fact, had never experienced this before. And this, of course, undercuts his claim that Lolita already had been “hopelessly depraved,” and thus once again makes problematic the issue of Lolita’s “innocence.”

Of all the parallels between Goethe’s drama and Nabokov’s novel, however, perhaps none is as powerful as the manner by which both men respond to the suffering of the young girls they seduce and ruin. In many respects, however, it is possible to view Faust’s awareness of the agony he has inflicted upon Gretchen as even less than Humbert’s in relation to Lolita.

Consider, for instance, the scene in which Faust, having fled the city to evade prosecution for killing Gretchen’s brother, Valentine, contemplates nature. Despite the fact that he has indirectly caused the death of Gretchen’s mother, leaving Gretchen an orphan; that he has directly killed her brother, who came to avenge Gretchen’s besmirched honor; that he has abandoned Gretchen with no concern about what her present condition might be (she is pregnant with their child); despite these facts, after Faust flees the city with Mephisto, he does not mention Gretchen’s name again once. Instead, his comments are about the beauty all around him:

How strangely in the vales it glimmers,  
As of a lurid sunrise sheen,  
And probes with summer-lightning shimmers  
The deepest clefts of the ravine. [lines 3916-3919]

Imagine, for a moment, that Humbert had uttered those same aforementioned lines. Would there—ahem—be any doubt about the impetus of his Muse? Would any modern reader seriously view this poetic rhapsody as anything other than parodic, as mocking nature as a distraction from “real” life, fully aligned with Nabokov’s impish literary style?

But those lines are not Nabokov’s; they are Goethe’s. True, Goethe’s so-called age of “Enlightenment” and “Reason”—in contrast to the industrialized and so-called “lost” generation of modern America—glorified nature, along with its attendant “sensibility” and depth of emotional response to it. And true again, any modern reader would be negligent to ignore or discard this powerful overarching historical and cultural context in any analysis of Goethe’s drama.

In many respects, however, these same issues appear—in a different guise, to be sure—in *Lolita*. Whereas Faust fails on the most profound level to examine his role in Gretchen’s destruction, in the murder of her brother, or in the death Gretchen’s mother, Humbert, in contrast, rationalizes his behavior at every turn. Faust, in other words, ignores; Humbert justifies. In both cases, however, it might be argued that the end result—moral abdication—is the same.

Still, and despite the danger of falling prey to what some literary critics have called “presentism”—the tendency to view the past through the lens of the present—one nevertheless is reminded of Franke’s observation that Faust came to be revered by the Germans as “a champion of truth, nature and individual freedom.” These same accolades, reinterpreted by Nabokov, easily can be perceived within Humbert’s own poetry, which he composes during the three years he searches for Lolita after Quilty, much like the doomed Valentine, comes to “save” her:

...Happy, happy is gnarled McFate  
Touring the States with a child wife,  
Plowing his Molly in every State  
Among the protected wild life. (256)

When Faust learns of Gretchen's fate in prison, he is appalled and distraught, accusing Mephisto of concealing this fact from him. "I am rent to the living core by this single one's suffering," Faust says, but "you pass with a carefree grin over the fate of thousands" (Faust 110). Mephisto is hardly moved. "Who was it that plunged her to ruin?" Mephisto responds. "I or you?" (111) This scene is strongly evoked when Humbert confronts Quilty, who responds to Humbert's accusations by echoing Mephisto's response: "I'm not responsible for the rapes of others. Absurd!" (298)

While Faust was striving, striving, striving for infinite knowledge and experience, he treated Gretchen, in many respects, as a mere cobblestone on his pathway to fulfillment. He was obsessed with her and needed her in his quest for ultimate experiences, but Faust had no awareness or concern for Gretchen. As Brown notes, "Gretchen, like Werther's Lotte, disappears as an individual in the plethora of emotions and ideals Faust projects onto her; her tragedy is that she does not really exist in the face of Faust's subjectivity" (92). Indeed, while Faust is in the countryside, Gretchen has born his child, killed it, and been thrown into a dungeon to await execution. There, caged and alone, she suffers in complete agony.

It can be argued that Humbert, in many respects, takes no more individual responsibility for the suffering he causes Lolita than does Faust. Indeed, Humbert's callousness and utter disregard for Lolita is striking. "There she was, sprawling and

sobbing and pinching my caressing hand,” he says at one point, “and I was laughing happily...” (169) At another point, when Lolita becomes ill, Humbert says, “She complained of a painful stiffness in the upper vertebrae—and I thought of poliomyelitis as any American parent would. Giving up all hope of intercourse, I wrapped her up in a laprobe and carried her into the car” (240).

Upon learning of Gretchen’s fate, Faust demands that Mephisto take him to Gretchen immediately. Mephisto warns him that he still is wanted for Valentine’s murder, but Faust insists. There, in the dungeon, Faust pleads with Gretchen to escape with him, to walk with him through the door. “Take heart, dear love, come, let us go, I will caress you with a thousandfold glow; Just follow—that is all I beg of you!” [lines 4499-4500]

But Gretchen is consumed with guilt for killing her mother and her baby; emotionally and mentally incapacitated, she imagines she sees blood on her hands. Faust pleads with her:

“Let what is past be past—Oh Lord, you’re killing me,” Faust tells her. “Come out from here! You can! Just want to! See, the door is open...One step—and you can leave at will!” [lines 4518-4519] But Gretchen has gone mad; she is not certain who he is, and she fears that if she walks out the dungeon door with him, she will be ambushed by townspeople. She is resigned to her fate.

This scene has been called one of the most tragic in German literature. Hamlin notes that it also represents a “turning point” for Faust, who not only has put his life at risk by going to the dungeon, but also recognizes his “love for Gretchen, which now approaches catastrophic and tragic collapse” (323).

One might ask, however: How has Faust's love been revealed within the text at all? What evidence exists to show that Faust is not simply responding to guilt? Faust's fury at Mephisto for withholding information about Gretchen's imprisonment might be seen as another form of justification, as a means to absolve himself of her suffering. Just as Faust's own hand was not the actual one that administered the fatal dose to Gretchen's mother, and just as it was Mephisto who goaded Faust to stab Valentine, the underlying theme here—and which Nabokov so fearlessly addresses in *Lolita*—is that of individual responsibility, or rather, the lack of it.

Gretchen, of course, ends up in a literal dungeon. Throughout Nabokov's novel, however, Lolita has inhabited a virtual dungeon of Humbert's creation. He accomplishes this through his words, manipulating her with language to keep her caged. After her mother's death, for example, he threatens Lolita with reform school or becoming a ward of the Public Welfare Department if anyone finds out about their relationship. "I succeeded in terrorizing Lo...who was not as intelligent a child as her I.Q. might suggest" (148). In another scene, when Lolita does not return home promptly, he says, "You have been absent 28 minutes," suggesting the type of control exerted by a jailer. Responds Lolita: "Go to hell" (225).

Elsewhere in the novel, however, Humbert makes direct reference to the "dungeon" he has created for Lolita:

I wandered through various public rooms, glory below, gloom above: for the look of lust always is gloomy; lust is never quite sure—even when the velvety victim is locked up in one's dungeon—that some rival devil or influential god may still not

abolish one's prepared triumph. In common parlance, I needed a drink; but there was no barroom in that place full of perspiring philistines and period objects. (125)

But perhaps nowhere is the dungeon scene in *Faust* more powerfully evoked in *Lolita* than after Humbert receives a letter from "Mrs. Richard Schiller." (It was the young Friedrich Schiller, of course, who urged the older Goethe to revisit his "Urfaust" and develop it into a full length play.) Upon learning of Lolita's fate, Humbert quickly rushes to see her. Lolita is now married, and also broke. She and her husband are living in a run-down hovel, barely able to scrape by. At first, Humbert is focused solely on learning the identity of the man who stole her from him. Here, Nabokov employs an inversion of the dungeon scene in *Faust*. In Goethe's drama, of course, it is Faust who tells the guilt-ridden Gretchen to "let what is past be the past." In *Lolita*, it is Dolly Schiller who utters essentially the same words to Humbert: "She asked me not to be dense. The past was the past. I had been a good father, she guessed—granting me *that*" (272).

By this point, Lolita is hugely pregnant and wearing pink glasses, perhaps signifying that, for the first time, she can clearly see Humbert for who he is. The nymphet he once lusted after is gone forever, but Humbert realizes he loves her nonetheless "...And I looked at her, and I knew as clearly as I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else" (277).

By rebuffing his pleas to come away with him, to walk out that door, Lolita confronts Humbert, just as Faust was confronted by Gretchen, with the destruction and suffering he caused her. Clearly this is a critical scene in the novel, just as it is in Goethe's drama. Not only has Humbert overcome his nymphet obsession and uncovered his genuine love for her, but he also is confronted with what must have been the depth of Lolita's



suffering because of him. Whether Humbert processes this information, this reality of what he has done to Lolita's life, is open to question; initially he appears more involved in his own suffering, and what her rejection of him has done to him. "Alas, I was unable to transcend the simple human fact that whatever spiritual solace I might find...nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted on her" (283), he says. And then Humbert adds, "To quote an old poet, 'The moral sense in mortals is the duty/We have to pay on mortal sense of beauty.'"

We, readers, do not know what "old poet" he is quoting; indeed, this seems Nabokov's own invention. Still, it echoes the themes in *Faust* of striving for beauty and knowledge and experience—and the price that is paid for that "striving." At another point, however, Humbert thinks about Lolita and acknowledges he was more aware of her suffering than he wanted to consider. "...There were times when I knew how you felt, and it was hell to know it, my little one. Lolita girl, brave Dolly Schiller" (285). Just as has been said of *Faust*, this too is a turning point for Humbert; by his awareness of his genuine love for Lolita, Humbert has transcended his lifelong obsession.

But Humbert's earlier statement that "I knew as clearly as I am to die" also provides us with additional insight into the impetus for his grand narrative, for the diary/trial notes/journal that later, in the hands of John Ray, Jr., become the "posthumous" book we now know as *Lolita*. Nabokov himself acknowledges that the last few pages of Humbert's memoir contain a shift in tone, one in which he says he wanted "to convey a constriction of the narrator's sick heart, a warning spasm causing him to abridge names and to hasten to conclude his tale before it was too late" (SO 73).

Humbert, we must recall, wrote every word of his fictional apologia during less than 60 days in his prison cell after having experienced several cardiac attacks or spasms; and thus it can be persuasively argued that Humbert knows, fully, that he is about to die—either by natural causes, or else by a murder conviction that carries with it the death penalty. If imminent death is not enough to provoke contemplation about the future fate of one's immortal soul, what is? To paraphrase an old adage, there are no atheists in foxholes.

But when Humbert implores Lolita to leave the ramshackle home she shares with her husband, Dick Schiller, and in language that is hauntingly similar to that uttered by Faust as he pleads with Gretchen in the dungeon scene, Humbert is not yet entrenched within that existential foxhole. It is only in Humbert's retrospective narrative that Lolita's refusal to leave with him becomes germane to the question of his forgiveness and redemption:

“Lolita,” I said, “this may be neither here nor there but I have to say it. Life is very short. From here to that old car you know so well there is a stretch of twenty, twenty-five paces. It's a very short walk. Make those twenty-five steps. Now. Right now.” (278)

But Lolita, just like Gretchen, cannot leave. She cannot be unkind to her husband, she says, but more importantly, she cannot leave with *him*. She tells Humbert she would almost rather go back to Quilty. Quilty! The man who never loved her, used her, who only wanted her for pornographic movies! As Humbert leaves her house, he implores her one last time. “...Someday, any day, you will not come to live with me? I will create a brand new God and thank him with piercing cries, if you give me that microscopic hope” (280).

Humbert, just like Faust, departs alone. And just like Gretchen, who shortly will be executed, Lolita too will shortly die on the fatidic Christmas Day. Says Humbert: “For she is dead and immortal if you are reading this. I mean, such is the formal agreement with the so-called authorities” (280). To what “authorities” is he referring? Just as with the passage when Humbert cites “fat fate’s formal handshake” in an implied soul bargain, the reference here to “the formal agreement” implies an understood outcome that Humbert believes is now destined. This passage likewise harkens back to the dungeon scene in *Faust* where Mephisto booms, “She is condemned!” and a “voice from above” answers with a single, contradictory word: “Redeemed!” (117)

In Goethe’s drama, Faust does not realize until the end of his life that his ultimate salvation actually rests solely on Gretchen/Margarete; it is only because of her pronouncement of her authentic love for him in Part II of the drama that he is saved from eternal damnation. Lolita, on the other hand, makes no such pronouncement of forgiveness or eternal love for Humbert (and nor does one imagine she would, even in a rhetorical afterlife). After all, Lolita has told Humbert outright that she would far prefer going back to Quilty than to ever go back to him. Nabokov appears to have taken this “redemption” theme and addressed the question of Humbert’s ultimate fate and the role Lolita plays in it—at least from Humbert’s perspective—within the poem that Humbert hands to Quilty before killing him:

Because you cheated me of my redemption  
because you took  
her at an age when lads  
play with erector sets... (300)

As if to underscore how eternally separated Humbert fears that he and Lolita will be in their immortal fates, consider the last two lines of Nabokov's novel: "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" (309).

Art can be a refuge in one's current life, Nabokov suggests, but not in the hereafter. (Nabokov's inside joke, of course, is that even as he wrote the text he seemed to know that both he and Lolita would forever be connected in literary immortality.) Even more important, however, is Humbert's use of the words "may share": he cannot be *absolutely certain* about the fate of his immortal soul, even if he fears the worst. This, of course, is where Nabokov departs from Marlowe and Goethe; Nabokov leaves Humbert's ultimate fate unknown—which, after all, is the essence of the human condition.

Boyd alludes to this when he says that Humbert

...epitomizes the insatiable hunger of the human imagination, but—and this special twist *makes* the whole novel—his attractive urge to transcend the self decays at once into nothing more than its own foul parody, into the mere promotion of the self. In writing *Lolita* Humbert expresses so splendidly his yearning for something more than life allows that at moments he seems to speak for us all—until we recoil at such complicity. We see him attempt to escape the trap of time, and hope for a moment he may have found a way out for everyone; then we shudder, look again at the bars of his cage, and sigh with relief. (American 227-228).

In many respects Boyd also is describing the fundamental issues in *Faust*, namely the human yearning to transcend the prisons of the self, the constraints of time and space, to eat of the forbidden fruit and yet remain in what Humbert might call an "elected paradise." But

where I differ from Boyd is that the bars of Humbert's cage are only holding him within his lifespan; that is, his literal prison is only temporal.

Nabokov is concerned with an altogether different kind of prison, one that lies outside of human time. Humbert does not know with certainty what his immortal fate will be, whether by his "confession" he has redeemed himself, in the eyes of the winged gentlemen of his jury, in order to join Lolita in her immortality. (He has little doubt what her fate will be.) Thus the reader, to my thinking, is not meant to "sigh with relief," as Boyd asserts; to the contrary, Humbert's uncertainty about his immortal soul is the uncertainty we all possess. That state of *not knowing* is our commonality; indeed, it is what makes us most human.

But this *not knowing*, this existential doubt, also brings us full circle to the point where Nabokov's breakthrough came while writing in the yearbook Vera had given him so many years earlier. In the last sentence of the novel—"And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita"—we are returned to the six words that I believe led Nabokov to his triumphant use of *Faust* as his hidden compositional structure: "The future of the immortal soul."

We are, all of us, tempted. But what both Goethe and Nabokov speak to is a different kind of temptation, one that touches upon our innermost souls, one that whispers in the sultriest, most seductive voice imaginable: "*You can have me. I am yours, if only you submit.*" These sirens of desire—like those heard by Odysseus, who plugged his sailors' ears and had himself strapped to the mast—are both the symbol and essence of man's existential burden. *Lolita*, then, in many respects might be viewed as a mirror that once was *Faust* and which, under Nabokov's hand, has been shattered, placed into a kaleidoscope,

and then repeatedly spun to reveal new patterns. With each turn, some familiar shard from the Faust story can be perceived, but very often it is so mixed with colored bits from other texts and other references that the original is nearly unrecognizable. But I say “nearly.” Nabokov’s use of “clues” throughout his novel is designed to deliberately turn the alert reader’s head away, much as a protective property owner, observing a pack of skilled hunting dogs whipped up by a strong scent, might divert those same animals by tossing an odor-laden cloth in the opposite direction.

And yet, at the same time, Nabokov plants clues, almost as if begging us to unravel and decipher his intricately designed riddle, one that no doubt would “amply reward” us for the “misery of the deceit,” as he notes in his autobiography, and later give us “the simple key” that would provide us with “a synthesis of poignant artistic delight” at the discovery (Speak, 292). Indeed, we can see additional *Faust* clues sprinkled throughout the text: In the “witch’s kitchen” scene with its babbling animals, versus the lab experiment involving Valeria; in the “clean little room” of Gretchen versus the messy room of Lolita; in Valentine’s almost chew-the-scenery death scene, versus Quilty’s campy death scene; in the play-within-a-play “Intermezzo,” versus Lolita’s school play; in Faust’s flight into the countryside, versus Humbert’s flight across America; in Leipzig versus Lepingville; in Auerbach Tavern versus “Ourglass Lake”...and the list goes on.

With that in mind, it is difficult to read the following sentence from *Lolita*, and not sense the literary chess strategist happily at work:

“Mr. Purdom, independent tobacco auctioneer, said that since 1925 he had been an Omen Faustum smoker” (262). The odor of *Faust*? Undoubtedly, Nabokov would have denied any such “odor” or influence, even if he had been asked about it outright. But this

does not mean that, even outside the text, Nabokov did not continue to taunt and tease interviewers about their inability to unravel the “structural knot” of *Lolita*, much as he did about his last novel, *Transparent Things*.

Take, for example, what Nabokov describes as an “exchange” in 1971, shortly before his seventy-second birthday, with Alden Whitman of the *New York Times*. Nabokov does not tell us how this interview was conducted, but it seems safe to infer from the brief responses and lack of follow-up questions that, as with many other interviewers, Alden was forced to submit written questions and then work from Nabokov’s written answers. The very last question of Alden’s interview is particularly noteworthy when viewed in relation to Goethe’s *Faust*.

“If you were writing the ‘book’ for *Lolita* as a musical comedy,” Alden asks, “what would you select as the main comic point?” (SO 180) Nabokov answers—and ends the interview—with a cryptic, one-sentence response:

“The main comic point,” he replies, “would have been my trying to do it myself.”

Goethe, we can be assured, would have been glad to have helped.

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