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10 "Obnoxious Preoccupation with Sex Organs": The Ethics and Aesthetics of Representing Sex

A number of Nabokov's readers have felt pressure to divide their emotional responses, including responses of empathy, from their aesthetic appreciation for his work. Richard Rorty-claims that Kinbote, the deranged editor of *Pale Fire*, "speaks for Nabokov when he says, 'In the temperature charts of poetry high is low, and low high,'" meaning that low emotion is equated with high poetic success, and vice versa (*PF* 162; cited in Rorty 165). Again and again, Nabokov's readers seem to be confronted by a choice between aesthetic delight in perceiving an object, and horror at its moral or emotional significance. At the end of "A Letter that Never Reached Russia," for example, the "crescent-shaped prints left by" the heels of a woman who committed suicide in a cemetery, "tiny as a child's, on the damp soil by the plinth," are described as "mysterious and enchanting" (140). In *The Gift*, there is an assumption that the aesthetic appreciation of patterning in the life of Chernyshevsky takes precedence over pity for the sorrows which make up that pattern:

> We remark also that the theme of "nearsightedness" develops, too, beginning with the fact that as a child he knew only those faces which he kissed and could see only four out of seven stars of the Great Bear. His first—copper—spectacles donned at the age of twenty. A teacher's silver spectacles bought for six roubles so as to distinguish his students in the Cadet School. (211)

The succession of spectacles in copper and silver, the visions they reveal of faces kissed, constellations, and individuals emerging into focus from a crowd, are delightful—but only if we forget the wearer, an isolated child, an adult in exile, imprisoned by his poor vision as much as by the Siberian landscape, "yearning for spectacles in a letter to his sons" (212).

The problem of divided emotional and aesthetic response is pressing enough to invite solutions. Brian Boyd detects in "A Letter that Never Reached Russia," the story with the enchanting heel prints left by a suicide, Nabokov's "secret recipe for happiness": "detach the mind from accepting a humdrum succession of moments, and everything becomes magical" (Boyd 238). The difficulty with such a solution, however, is that the prints are only "humdrum" if you forget why they were made. Detaching the mind, then, means separating the aesthetic qualities of the material world from the cruelty which helps to shape it. A cruder, less sophisticated critic than Boyd might call this "making lemonade if life gives you

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lemons," or even "making lemonade if life gives someone else lemons," and it seems hard to reconcile with aspects of the works which insist that we must be alert to others' suffering. Rorty, whose interpretation of Nabokov relies heavily on the latter idea—that reading Nabokov is a lesson in paying attention to suffering—understands the conflict between aesthetic and compassionate responses differently. For him, this unresolvable conflict lies at the very heart of Nabokov's work, where "a private mythology about a special elite" of artists who rise above cruelty is relentlessly confronted by the fact that artistic gifts, in fact, have no special connection with "pity and kindness" (168).

I am not concerned here with attempting my own resolution of this difficulty. I do want to look at one kind of description in Nabokov's prose, however, which may be inherently resistant to the moral neutralization that he applies to the prints and spectacles above. I also wish to suggest that at least some of these descriptions are more deeply structured by moral constraint than might at first be supposed. The descriptions in question are those of sexual acts and sexually arousing acts.

1

There are at least two reasons why it is hard for Nabokov to represent sexual scenes as he does a suicide's footsteps or Chernyshevsky's eyeglasses—that is, as perceptions to be appreciated aesthetically and divorced from their significance to human experience. The first reason concerns innate cultural constraints on representing sex and sexuality. For some twentieth-century critics, influenced by Freud and by early anthropology, such inhibitions arose from historically specific beliefs about sex, beliefs that such theorists themselves believed to be false (Ellis; Pease 165-194). However, there are good reasons to think that while particular constraints on representing sex might vary from one society to another, the fact of special constraints at all is a universal. The anthropologist Jack Goody has examined such constraints in a range of cultures: "The tension between the shame and the enjoyment of sex, between the desire for knowledge and the wish for privacy, is a quasi-universal phenomenon that takes different forms in different societies and in different clusters of societies" (237). In present-day European and North American societies, discussion about the permissible representation of sex is often framed in terms of liberal ideas about harm reduction. Depictions which could cause harm—perhaps by perpetrating damaging stereotypes or glamourizing abusive sexual behaviour—are the most likely candidates for constraint or prohibition. This liberal discourse is founded on the belief that representations of sex are not a special case; that they fall within the same remit of harm reduction as, say, representations of race or gender. Yet our exceptions to these constraints in the sphere of art, from Renaissance nudes to installations, recall Goody's account of constraints arising from "cognitive contradiction" (235) rather than repression, superstition, or, more recently, harm reduction:

> Those differences may also take a hierarchical form within the same society; what is forbidden down below being practiced up above [. . .] a highly

> differentiated society is marked by "luxury" as well as by literacy[. . . .] Epicureanism is accompanied by asceticism, excess by restraint. (Goody 237)

For Goody and for the historian of obscenity Allison Pease, high art and sexual transgression are more accessible to elites; the more widely a transgressive representation is likely to circulate, the more likely it is to be perceived as offensive (Goody 237; Pease 39-40).

I am not trying to suggest that we are wrong to distinguish morally between *Lolita*—or even more frankly erotic art—and child pornography. But the fact that we wish to make the distinction at all suggests that the simple harm-reduction account of constraints on representations of sex is inadequate. It is culturally acceptable to depict sex, but within a different set of constraints than those governing, say, the depiction of sofas or swimming or birthday parties.

Goody's account of the special nature of sex as an object of representation is connected to another account of its special nature as an object of observation (234). And this brings me to the second reason why it is difficult to portray sex in literature. Contemporary literary analysis is heavily dependent on the concept of invisible observation, and on the visual metaphors that go with it. Readers "focalize" the story through particular characters, they adopt "viewpoints," they experience descriptions "close up" or from a distance. None of these metaphors has an exact parallel in real life; we can rarely, if ever, really be unseen observers of our fellow human beings, or float above the countryside enjoying the panoramic view of a nineteenth-century narrator. But there is, nonetheless, some relationship between real-life observation and readerly observation, a relationship captured in the eighteenth century by Addison's *Spectator* roaming at large, reporting and commenting on what he saw without participating in it, and by his various observing heirs in the eighteenth-century novel; indeed, Helen Deutsch calls "the universal survey" one of Samuel Johnson's "favourite opening gambits" (Deutsch 32). So for eighteenth-century readers—and, I would argue, often for us, too—readerly observation at least recalls the idea of detached real-life observation. This exacerbates the problem of representing sex, since there are few, and perhaps no, acceptable settings for observing sexual acts or sexually arousing behaviour. To find oneself in such a situation is sure to lead to a range of troubling emotions, troubling in a different way from those aroused by looking at a suicide's footprints in a graveyard. Even observing private families in their houses, as when Kinbote spies on the Shades, can be accommodated within an everyday, if rather shameful, idea of our relation to others. And even then, shame is not obligatory; when Dickens takes Scrooge into the homes of Christmas past, present and future, for example, Scrooge is not ashamed that those he observes are unaware of his presence. Sexual acts are different. Repellent as Kinbote the voyeur might be, Kinbote the peeping Tom would be a great deal worse. Readers are willing to accept Scrooge as the observer of his relatives even though those relatives are talking about him at that moment, putting him in what would, outside the story, be the disreputable position of eavesdropper. But it is hard to imagine readers who would feel comfortable following Scrooge into the bedroom of his former fiancée as she retreats for the night with her husband. Narrators who describe sexual acts, therefore, are taking their readers into potentially uncomfortable contexts.

One possible solution to this problem might be to think of readers not as observing the characters, but as identifying with them. However, that solution may be equally problematic. If the reader identifies with one of the participants in the sexual act, it is possible that he or she will become aroused. This in turn has the potential to provoke in the reader the shame of arousal, in contrast to the shame of unlicensed access potentially created by the role of observer. This response immediately brings back the special problems identified by Goody—of sex as inherently private—but now the reader is in the painful position of one whose sexual arousal has been anticipated by the narrator, and thus made, if not public, then at least known.

Sexual behaviour, therefore, is potentially in a different category of objects of description when it comes to the kind of moral neutrality that Nabokov favours in the case of the suicide's footprints or the exile's spectacles. Remarkably, Nabokov almost seems to relish this problem, increasing the challenge by repeatedly choosing to depict abusive or troubled sexual relationships, in particular those involving children. This practice could be seen as his most extreme statement of aestheticism, of the supremacy of art over everyday ethics, in keeping with the elitist exceptions to representing sex discussed by Goody. But, as it turns out, the moral problems with representing sex which I have outlined above are inextricably linked to aesthetic ones. The evidence for this literary difficulty is plentiful; the combination of realist fiction and twentieth-century ideas about sexual liberation have produced what may be an unprecedented number of detailed literary descriptions of sex, which often persist, for all the authors' skill and sincerity, in making readers laugh or cringe. The *Literary Review* even bestows an annual Bad Sex award for literary fiction, won in 2010 by the novelist Rowan Somerville for this description: "The wet friction of her, tight around him, the sight of her open, stretched around him, the cleft of her body, it tore a climax out of him with a final lunge. Like a lepidopterist mounting a tough-skinned insect with a too blunt pin he screwed himself into her" (Somerville 76). Somerville is as accomplished a novelist as any of his peers; the problem here surely does not lie with the writer's basic skill, but with the object of description itself. The realist narrator is obliged to create an illusion of reality by describing the characters' private sensations. But, at the same time, he or she has to overcome the social problem of representing sex by avoiding clarity, or by putting the description into the category of high art, or both. The result is a blend of cliché (the sexual feelings are exceptionally intense), absurdity (for art's sake, the imagery must be recherché), and banality (the mechanical effect of arousal created by depicting specific triggers, such as wetness, openness, and clefts in association with female bodies). The effect may be particularly unfortunate here, but the difficulty is not of the author's making.

Nabokov, therefore, faces a cluster of problems in attempting to represent sex in a way that combines, as the description of the suicide's footsteps does, detachment from the ordinary human significance of the action, on the one hand, and the aesthetic possibilities of perceiving it, on the other. If my account of the problems involved in representing sex is correct, managing either of these approaches would be difficult, let alone both. The problem is exacerbated by Nabokov's own loathing of vulgar obscenity in the name of art, as expressed by John Ray, Jr. in the fictitious foreword to *Lolita*: "the robust philistine who is conditioned by modern conventions into accepting without qualms a lavish array of four-letter words in a banal novel, will be quite shocked by their absence here" (*AnLo* 4). Nabokov

himself is yet more "robust," deploring *Ulysses*, a book he revered, for its "obnoxious, overdone preoccupation with sex organs" and for the "sexual affairs" which heap "indecency upon indecency" (qtd. in Appel, *AnLo* liii). Yet if obscenity represents one kind of vulgarity, then polite innuendo, like the "decency code" used by the romance publisher Harlequin in the 1950s (Regis 158), represents another, one no less offensive to Nabokov. He could certainly be deftly and tactfully indirect at times, as in the account of meeting his teenaged love Tamara by night in *Speak, Memory* (232ff). But, for the most part, Nabokov's love of precision applied to descriptions of sex as much as to descriptions of everything else, as in this account of twelve- or thirteen-year-old Annabel's interaction with thirteen-year-old Humbert:

> Her legs, her lovely live legs, were not too close together and when my hand located what it sought, a dreamy and eerie expression, half-pleasure, half-pain, came over those childish features. She sat a little higher than I, and whenever in her solitary ecstasy she was led to kiss me, her head would bend with a sleepy, soft, dropping movement that was almost woeful, and her bare knees caught and compressed my wrist, and slackened again. (*AnLo* 14)

This passage is both explicit (the positions and actions of both parties are clear) and indirect ("my hand located what it sought"), and thus already goes some way toward solving the problems of representation I outline above. But when Humbert describes his sexual encounters as an adult with the child Dolores, the moral stakes are much higher. Nabokov's task is to represent precisely what occurs without either arousing the reader, which would be both vulgar and vicious, or removing all aesthetic satisfaction from the description. I believe that he accomplishes this very difficult task in *Lolita*, at least in part, thanks to his intuitions about the unconscious processes of perception itself.

2

To understand Nabokov's accomplishment, I turn away for the moment from accounts of sex to a different category of difficult description: descriptions of faces. In an article for *Poetics Today*, my co-authors and I suggest that describing faces create a special difficulty for authors. Faces are perceived and recognized in a range of ways that differ from the perception of other objects. In particular, we process faces holistically rather than one feature at a time (Jajdelska et al. 444ff). Although descriptions of faces, and description in general, might be associated with static objects, the holistic approach to face perception covers aspects of the face which involve change, such as the overall emotional expression, or other manifestations of emotion, such as blushing. In this respect, descriptions of faces are to some extent comparable with descriptions of movements such as gestures, especially movements which can be understood to a greater or lesser extent as involuntary or compulsive rather than intentional, as is the case in some descriptions of sexual acts. For the purposes of this essay, then, while I do not assume that there is no distinction between descriptions of faces and descriptions of bodily acts more generally, I suggest that there is enough in common to

support an investigation into perception of sexual actions on the same grounds as an investigation into perception of faces.

The intuitive approach to describing either a complex object or behaviour might be to provide details so that the reader can assemble as complete a picture of the object, act, or sequence of acts as possible. Yet this approach is counterproductive in the case of faces. Indeed, putting the memory of a face into words, feature by feature, actually reduces the describer's ability to recognize that same face in the future (Jajdelska et al. 442-443). In the article, we discuss the relationship between imagination, memory, and perception, and suggest that descriptions of faces which work with, rather than against, the process of memory and perception are more likely to be vivid. Holistic descriptions, and descriptions which appeal to the embodied nature of perception—for example, by including facial change or movement—are more likely to be vivid than those which catalogue a face's static features item by item.

Nabokov proves to be a rich source of descriptions which solve the potential problem of putting faces into words, either by mimicking perception or by creating vividness through indirect means:

> She had been crying after a routine row with her mother and, as had happened on former occasions, had not wished me to see her swollen eyes: she had one of those tender complexions that after a good cry get all blurred and inflamed, and morbidly alluring. I regretted keenly her mistake about my private aesthetics, for I simply love that tinge of Botticellian pink, that raw rose about the lips, those wet, matted eyelashes. (*AnLo* 64)

The first part of the description is holistic; it is a general description of her complexion as it often appeared rather than a catalogue of individual facial features. It is also likely to appeal to the embodied aspects of perception, through the description of physical change (blurring, inflammation, swelling). The second part does identify specific features ("lips" and "eyelashes") as well as general ones ("Botticellian pink"), but associates them with qualities which affect the face as a whole (rawness, rosiness, wetness). Nabokov, therefore, intuitively understands that more detail in descriptions of faces does not necessarily mean more vividness, and concentrates instead on holistic qualities and on bodily change. A hint of this intuitive knowledge may lie behind Humbert's comparison of his memories of Annabel and Dolores:

> There are two kinds of visual memory: one when you skilfully recreate an image in the laboratory of your mind, with your eyes open (and then I see Annabel in such general terms as: "honey-colored skin," "thin arms," "brown bobbed hair," "long lashes," "big bright mouth"); and the other when you instantly evoke, with shut eyes, on the dark innerside of your eyelids, the objective, absolutely optical replica of a beloved face, a little ghost in natural colors (and this is how I see Lolita). (*AnLo* 11)

The science of face perception had not been established at the time of *Lolita*'s composition, so Nabokov shows remarkable intuition here in identifying a contrast between a feature-by-feature method of describing faces and a holistic approach. Humbert's memory of Annabel consists of a list of features in "general terms" itemising different aspects of her appearance, and especially of her face: skin, hair, lashes and mouth. This unsatisfactory method is compared to a laboratory, to the attempt to create something organic by artificial reconstruction. His memory of Lolita, on the other hand, is holistic and identical with nature itself: an "absolutely optical replica," a "beloved face," a "little ghost in natural colors." The feature-by-feature method applied to Annabel is well adapted to the linear, sequential nature of language itself, but it is the holistic approach, conjuring Lolita's face as a ghost, which is better adapted to the process of face perception. Annabel exists in Humbert's memory in the same unsatisfactory way that mental images of faces produced by unsatisfactory descriptions exist in readers' minds. Lolita's face, on the other hand, is as vivid in Humbert's memory as Nabokov's own holistic descriptions of faces often are for his readers.

3

I turn now to the question of whether Nabokov had comparable intuitions about the perception of sexual acts. It is perhaps not surprising that there is less research available in this field than on the perception of faces (LeVay and Valente 250). Perceiving a face is one of the first things a human being does in life (Bruce and Young 252), whereas many, even most, of us will go through life without once observing other people have sex. But there is some research on the nature of sexual experience, rather than perception, which can help us to identify the competing elements of moral constraint and vivacity in Nabokov's descriptions in *Lolita*.

First, it is a peculiarity of sexual states that the intentional and the unintentional, the voluntary and the involuntary, can be hard to untangle. Some states of arousal are clearly involuntary, and indeed unwelcome at the wrong place and time. But other sexual bodily actions, though they may be hard to control, are clearly voluntary; in the wrong context they can, in fact, be illegal. Distinguishing intentional from unintentional motion is critical to our interpretation of the emotional states and intentions of others (Alaerts et al). But in the case of sexual behaviour, this process surely gets more complicated. The context of arousal changes the potential meaning of any of the given actions involved, so isolating each action from the overall context of sexualized behaviour or sexually aroused perception can create a misleading impression. Verbal description involves separating one action from another in the same way that descriptions of faces tend to isolate one feature from another. Turning sexualised behaviour into a sequence of actions risks making them absurd, however. To quote again from the Bad Sex award winner: "He grasped the side of her hips, pushed her away and pulled her to him with a slap" (Somerville 75). Accurately describing the context of arousal in order to avoid such absurdity almost inevitably leads to a different problem, that of creating arousal in the reader. One study suggests that male viewers of video clips grow aroused to the extent to which they recognize the actions in the clips as erotic: "the response of the mirror neuron system may not only code for the motor correlates of observed actions,

but also for autonomic correlates of these actions" (Mouras et al). The mirror neuron system is a term used to describe the way certain brain regions not only participate in the preparation for a bodily action, such as reaching for an object or smiling, but also participate in the perception and recognition of another individual making the same action (Carr et al; Gallese; Rizzolatti and Craighero; Dapretto et al). In the case of this research, the degree to which the mirror neuron system was activated was correlated with the degree to which the subject was aroused (Mouras et al 1148). So representing actions in such a way that we perceive them to be sexual may be difficult or impossible to separate from arousing the reader.

However, the mirror neuron system's ability to identify erotic behaviour and thereby cause arousal is not the only aspect of sexual experience which is relevant here. Sex belongs to a family of pleasures involving anticipation, and this may provide an indirect route for putting sex into words, one which could combine recognition of the behavio~~u~~r as sexual and, for at least one party, arousing, without arousing the reader him or herself. Anne Blood and Robert Zatorre identify the brain structures involved in "intensely pleasurable responses to music" as those "known to be active in response to other euphoria-inducing stimuli, such as food, sex, and drugs of abuse" (Blood and Zatorre). In particular, the relevant pleasures are organized around anticipation—for example, through an expectation of reward. Food, music, and drugs are not affected by the problems of representation which burden sex; there are no prizes for bad descriptions of eating, listening to music, or using drugs. But their family resemblance to sex, as pleasures structured around anticipation, offers Nabokov a mechanism to let us recognize Humbert's feelings and actions without being aroused by them.

In this passage, Humbert describes his ecstatic frustrations on the beach with Annabel, as they struggled to find privacy and consummation:

> We would sprawl all morning in a petrified paroxysm of desire, and take advantage of every blessed quirk in space and time to touch each other: her hand, half-hidden in the sand, would creep toward me, its slender brown fingers sleepwalking nearer and nearer; then, her opalescent knee would start on a long cautious journey; sometimes a chance rampart built by younger children granted us sufficient concealment to graze each other's salty lips; these incomplete contacts drove our healthy and inexperienced young bodies to such a state of exasperation that not even the cool blue water, under which we still clawed at each other, could bring relief. (*AnLo* 12)

Nabokov first identifies and then pre-empts the reader's potential for arousal, exploiting rather than evading the inherent problems with descriptions of sex. The impression of fragmented body parts, acting independently of one another in the absence of the coherent context of arousal, is exaggerated, not minimized. Annabel's hand, for example, is disconnected from her body by being half-hidden in the sand. It also has an agency independent of the whole person, creeping towards Humbert apparently of its own accord. The hand itself is further fragmented as the fingers, again endowed with agency, sleepwalk towards Humbert. The knee, again, is both detached and an agent, embarking on a journey. The children act as coherent wholes only to "graze each other's salty lips." The tactile elements of this description remind the reader not of sexual contact, but of other kinds of

exasperation satisfied by flesh meeting flesh—such as itching—as lips are grazed, bodies are cooled, and the children claw at one another in search of relief as though they were afflicted with chicken pox rather than carnal desires.

Nabokov pre-empts the alternate dangers of arousal and absurdity in this description, but it is still recognizable as an account of sexual desire in all its complexity and force. He achieves this feat by exploiting the family resemblance between pleasures founded on anticipation (Blood and Zatorre). The passage is structured around furtive, goal-directed movements across space. The children are in a "petrified paroxysm," suggesting that accomplishing the goal of crossing space is dangerous, adding to the sense of anticipating the journey's end. They take advantage of "every blessed quirk in space and time"; parts of their bodies creep, sleepwalk, or go on "a long cautious journey" before they finally graze behind ramparts and claw under water. The central metaphor is movement through space. It could be stopped at any moment, but will produce an intense pleasure if completed successfully. The description therefore combines elements which deter sexual arousal but not sexual recognition, using the anticipation associated with sex and other pleasures.

In this passage, the two participants can be seen as equally innocent (or, perhaps, guilty). That is not the case, however, in sexual descriptions where one participant (Humbert) is corrupt and the other (Dolores) is either a victim or simply unaware of his scrutiny, as in this instance:

> There my beauty lay down on her stomach, showing me, showing the thousand eyes wide open in my eyed blood, her slightly raised shoulder blades, and the bloom along the incurvation of her spine, and the swellings of her tense narrow nates clothed in black, and the seaside of her schoolgirl thighs. Silently, the seventh-grader enjoyed her green-red-blue comics. She was the loveliest nymphet green-red-blue Priap himself could think up. (*AnLo* 42)

As with the problem of arousal, Nabokov turns the issue of synchronicity— of splitting a single moment of sexual arousal into sequential segments of prose—into an advantage. He uses the fragmentation of itemized description to split Dolores into two beings. One is a schoolgirl stretched out on her stomach reading comics, oblivious to the narrative gaze. The other is the nymphet of Humbert's imagination, the demonic self he discerns in (or imposes on) the real girl. The first is "silently enjoying her comics"; the second is conjured from discrete parts of the body acting independently of her will, "showing" to the equally fragmented "thousand eyes wide open" in Humbert's "eyed blood" her shoulder blades, spine, nates, and thighs. This demonic self is monstrous and mirrors the monstrous account of his own desiring self as a "green-red-blue" Priap, whose colours mimic the colours of the comics read by the real Dolores, just as the newspaper read by the real Humbert hides movements that accompany his arousal, "rocking slightly under my newspaper." Just as Nabokov makes a virtue of the problem of synchronicity, so he exploits the potential for obscenity in an itemized description—that is, the detachment of arousing body parts from a unified person—by turning the desiring Humbert into a monster. The monstrosity arises only partially from the reference to Priap; it also comes from bodily distortion, from the

substitution of the swollen green-red-blue penis for the whole man, from the multiplication of eyes, and from the confusion of eyes with blood. The potential for obscenity in descriptions of sexual arousal becomes an asset, not a liability. It allows Nabokov's reader to recognize the arousal without sharing it, to see Dolores simultaneously as an object of erotic beauty in Humbert's eyes and as an unself-conscious child in her own.

As the passage continues, Nabokov again uses the structure of anticipatory pleasure to represent Humbert's desire without either producing the kind of unintentional absurdity celebrated by the Bad Sex Awards, or risking the arousal of his reader:

> As I looked on, through prismatic layers of light, dry-lipped, focusing my lust and rocking slightly under my newspaper, I felt that my perception of her, if properly concentrated upon, might be sufficient to have me attain a beggar's bliss immediately; but, like some predator that prefers a moving prey to a motionless one, I planned to have this pitiful attainment coincide with one of the various girlish movements she made now and then as she read, such as trying to scratch the middle of her back and revealing a stippled armpit—but fat Haze suddenly spoiled everything by turning to me and asking me for a light. (*AnLo* 42-43)

The passage about Annabel mapped sexual anticipation onto a perilous journey. Here, the structure of anticipation and reward is mapped onto a feat of concentration requiring sustained effort, vulnerable to external distractions which will frustrate its goal. Humbert suggests that his orgasm will finally happen when Dolores moves. But he also specifies that it will be a "girlish" movement, such as scratching her back in a way that reveals her armpit. The intentional part of the action—scratching her back—is separated from the unintentional and erotic part—revealing the armpit. Her action is simultaneously non-sexual from the point of view of the reader and arousing for Humbert himself. The interruption from "fat Haze" is as abrupt for the reader as it is for Humbert, but in a different way. For Humbert, the journey of arousal has been interrupted. For the reader, a description of prolonged concentration and narrative suspense has been interrupted. Humbert's experience and the reader's follow parallel lines of tension and anticipation, but where Humbert experiences arousal, the reader experiences a more generalised anticipation and then interruption.

Beyond these highly skilled and subtle maneuvers of perception, imagination, and language, it can be seen that Nabokov's preferred temperature for art was not always as "low" as he claimed. He takes care to avoid the much despised emotions of "human interest," denying his readers, for the most part, the pleasures of easy compassion for a victim, of the vicarious sense of virtue aroused by the wrong kind of pity. But there is surely compassion in the way he protects Dolores, Humbert's victim, from other kinds of degradation, such as being described in ways that could arouse desire or vulgar laughter in the reader at the movements of her body in sex, or in sexually arousing acts. Nabokov protects Dolores from our pity as well as our arousal or our mockery; he also protects us from ourselves. He does this by representing sex so that the descriptions are recognizable and aesthetically satisfying, but not arousing or obscene. In doing so, he makes it even harder for us to maintain a distinction between aesthetic and ethical responses to his work.

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