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Lolita: What We Know and What We Don't

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Nabokov plays games with our knowledge and ignorance, as Humbert does with Lolita, and with Charlotte, and with us as readers, and as Valeria, Charlotte, Lolita and Clare Quilty do in their turn with Humbert. On a first reading Nabokov places us in a position of knowing some crucial information denied to other characters, but then of not knowing other crucial information until even after the characters concerned all know. On a rereading he then allows us to discover much more, so that for instance the obscure rival becomes Clare from the first. But I suspect Nabokov has hidden still more under our noses, if we keep re-rereading. Where has he planted his clues, and where might they lead?

I. Introduction

Lolita is easily Nabokov's best-known book, and seems likely to remain so. But it also seems to me the least adequately known of his major works. I know *I* don't know it well enough, and I don't think any of us do.

One reason for this, paradoxically, is that keys were proffered and annotations were applied to the novel so early, by Carl Proffer (*Keys to Lolita*, 1968), and Alfred Appel, Jr. (the *Annotated Lolita*, 1970).¹ Their first flush of scholarly excitement uncovered much, but Nabokov interpretation had not yet probed as deeply as it would begin to do by the late 1970s. For me the real motivation to exhaustive annotation is the expectation that there will be rich interpretive payoffs, not just at the local level but also in terms of a novel's deepest design and widest implications. Proffer and Appel expected less than we do now, and pushed less hard, yet we have tended to rely on them as if they had discovered almost enough.

¹ Carl R. Proffer, *Keys to Lolita* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), Alfred Appel, Jr., ed., *The Annotated Lolita* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970).

I think there are many, many details in *Lolita* that need to be better annotated and that will lead to richer interpretations. Although much remains to be done, in terms of annotation and interpretation, I will focus on just half a page, and on two words we should have looked at more closely: Cavall and Melampus.

II. *Lolita*, Love and Knowledge

The question of what we know and what we don't in *Lolita* is there from the start. On a first reading, we discover, only twelve lines into Humbert's text, that he is a murderer, but we do not learn *whom* he murders until near the end of the novel, and only after the story has led us past an identity parade of possible victims: it's not a whodunit but a whocoppedit.²

Lolita stands apart from the rest of the Nabokov canon because of the emotional intensity of its subject matter, and the scandal, sales and acclaim that intensity still causes. But I want to argue first for the novel's similarity to the rest of his oeuvre.

Questions of knowledge are crucial to Nabokov: our knowledge of our world, our knowledge of ourselves and others, our desire to know what lies beyond human knowledge. These questions may seem to matter less in *Lolita* because we are so urgently preoccupied with Humbert's twisted love for Lolita. Yet in Nabokov questions of knowledge are often inextricable from the intensities of love. In his first novel, *Mary*, everything hinges on the fact that Ganin knows and Alfyorov does not that Alfyorov's wife was Ganin's first love. In his second, *King, Queen, Knave*, the story revolves around Dreyer's blithe blindness to his wife's infidelity, right to the end. The most poignant thing in Nabokov's heartbreaking third novel, *The Defense*, is that Luzhin's wife does not know what is going on in Luzhin's mind and cannot help him when once again chess begins to take over his imagination. His sixth novel, *Laughter in the Dark*, shows the excruciating humiliation of Albinus's failure to see the dark role in his life played by his rival, Axel Rex, which, as Maurice Couturier notes,³ prefigures Humbert's humiliation when his successful rival taunts *him*. In Nabokov's ninth and greatest Russian novel, *The Gift*, Fyodor

² Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991), 243.

³ Maurice Couturier, ed., *Lolita* (Figures mythiques) (Paris: Autrement, 1998), 25.

attempts to uncover the secrets of his father's death, and of Chernyshevsky's life, and especially of fate's pattern in his own life and love. In his next novel, his first in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, V. searches for the secrets of his half-brother's life and death, and especially the secret of his fatal last love. And so on.

Lolita's subject matter and its emotional and moral intensity make us less likely to consider it in epistemological terms. But I want to link it to the epistemological concerns of Nabokov's other work, to show how he does this *through* the novel's subject and situations, before we go on to consider some of the riddles that still remain unsolved and one little one I think I have found an answer for.

Biologists trying to account for the rise of intelligence (not just in the human line) tend to agree that the most powerful amplifier of intelligence is sociality, and the need to infer what others of one's own species want and intend so that one can react and plan accordingly.⁴ This used to be called the Machiavellian intelligence hypothesis:⁵ that we compete to know as much as we can of the desires and intentions of others who matter to us, even as we often conceal our own desires and intentions. The likelihood that we might want to conceal our desires and intentions from others is never greater than in love, especially in clashes of love, in romantic competition and sexual infidelity. In biological terms, in human terms, the stakes can hardly be higher: who our partners will be. Certainly there are few figures in fiction who keep their desires more hidden from those around them than Humbert.

In *Lolita* the combination of love and knowledge begins normally enough, with Humbert and Annabel as adolescents, trying to hide the physical intensity of their love from her parents and "the old man of the sea and his brother" on a Riviera beach. The normalcy ends as Humbert realizes his love of nymphets. He marries Valeria, screening from her his real nature, his contempt for her, his real sexual longings. Then comes the first of the many reversals that so enrage him, when

⁴ R.W. Byrne and A. Whiten, *Machiavellian Intelligence: Social Expertise and the Evolution of Intellect in Monkeys, Apes, and Humans* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988); Byrne and Whiten, eds., *Machiavellian Intelligence II: Extensions and Evaluations* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997, Frans de Waal and Peter Tyack, eds., *Animal Social Complexity: Intelligence, Culture, and Individualized Societies* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003).

⁵ Now called the Social Strategizing hypothesis.

he discovers that she has secretly fallen in love with another and plans to leave him for this other man.

In America, in Ramsdale, Humbert conceals from Charlotte Haze his reason for settling into 342 Lawn Street, and his real nature, and his feelings for Lolita, a concealment all the more shocking because he is so frank and insistent with us. But then Charlotte too overturns his plans, first by sending her daughter and half-recognized rival to summer camp, then by proposing marriage to Humbert, and finally by announcing she will send Lolita straight from camp to boarding school.

The question of knowledge becomes particularly complex in the case of Lolita herself. Humbert expects her to be innocent, and to remain so even after he has violated her drugged body; but she stages another reversal when *she* proposes to him what she has already learned to do at camp. But Humbert knows the implications of what he happily agrees to, and knows *she* does not, despite her adolescent brashness. He conceals from her the complex repercussions of the situation, and the truth about her mother's fate, and then, once he has possessed her, the rights and prospects of her position.

Much of the story from the moment of Humbert's arrival in Ramsdale to the moment of Lolita's escape in Elphinstone focuses on Humbert's need to keep first his feelings for Lolita, and then his activities with her, hidden from Ramsdale, from motel America, from Beardsley, and from the unidentified pursuer on their trip toward Elphinstone. (The only person who *does* guess his passions and his actions is the haunting figure of Clare Quilty, already present and watching at the Enchanted Hunters when Humbert makes his move.) But then at some point late in the Beardsley section, and through the renewed travels westward, another reversal has begun. This time we remain with Humbert, unsure of what Lolita knows, or what she is concealing from him about *her* relationship with, or her feelings for, the unknown pursuer, or her motives for suggesting the whole trip. She conceals from him Quilty's identity, as well as his desires, intentions, and actions: all the things we need to know about others to be able to engage successfully with them.

But finally Humbert manages to wheedle from Lolita the one crucial fact he craves, the identity of her "kidnaper," by concealing from her,

although not from us, that his motive for discovering the name is nothing short of murderous revenge.

Much of the special charge of *Lolita* comes from the gap between Humbert's successful concealment of his true nature and desires all his life, until he discloses them to Lolita herself, and his openness to us now, now that he stands confessed and accused of murder. Nabokov motivates the shift from life-long secrecy to full and frank disclosure by making Humbert so sure that he can justify his actions, not only to himself but also to others, through his love for Lolita, through its refinement (rarefied nymphet love is not to be confused with common pedophilia) and its development (lust has become love), and through his unqualified loathing of the man who took her from him.

By means of this situation, Nabokov harnesses powerful aspects of our sense of others. The evolutionary anthropologist Pascal Boyer talks of "strategic social information,"⁶ the knowledge of who's doing what to whom, of people's character, status, affiliations, beliefs, desires, intentions and actions. This is the kind of information that for scores of millennia we have particularly needed to know. Our species was able through fire, tools and agriculture to establish its ecological dominance, but what share we can obtain of all the resources that human effort makes accessible has depended on our capacity to acquire strategic social information, on our ability to make the most of our position among other humans.⁷ This is also the most volatile information we can have, and the most complex: Humbert's thoughts about Charlotte's thoughts about Lolita's thoughts about Humbert, for instance. No wonder the complexities of strategic social information have been a driver for intelligence, and no wonder we crave such information so much.

We know how important it is for social life that we be able to read others, and how troubling it can be when others make it impossible to read what we would like to know about *them*. We also know, all the

⁶ Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

⁷ David C. Geary, *The Origin of Mind: Evolution of Brain, Cognition, and General Intelligence* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2005) and Richard Alexander, "Evolution of the Human Psyche," in P. Mellars and C. Stringer, eds., *The Human Revolution: Behavioural and Biological Perspectives on the Origins of Modern Humans* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), 455-513.

same, that we treasure the privacy of our own thoughts and actions, when we *want* them to be private, so that we share some of Humbert's objections to the snoopiness of Miss East. We know that we too have sometimes concealed things from others, especially in the complications of romantic entanglement (Nabokov certainly knew *he* had done this, in his affair with Irina Guadanini), or even in social strategizing of a more innocent kind, like Charlotte's plans for Lolita, which take Humbert so much by surprise.

We therefore value the frankness of Humbert's open disclosures to us. At the same time we recoil from the creepiness of his keeping everything that matters to him so slyly secret from those he exploits and feigns to share his life with, like Valeria, Charlotte and Lolita. And we cannot help feeling complicit in knowing this humanly weighty information that he conceals from others but reveals to us.

But if Humbert manipulates Charlotte and Lolita through what he knows and does not allow *them* to know, he finds himself in the most distressing reversal of all when he senses Lolita is hiding something from *him*, when he realizes he does not know anything about the person following Lolita and him out west to Elphinstone, and then, as the crowning insult, when he finds that this unknown person has deliberately taunted him, concealing his identity but teasing Humbert with the possibility he might disclose it. Humbert sees Quilty's manipulations of knowledge and ignorance as utterly insufferable. To compensate for *his* humiliation, he places us as readers at the same sort of disadvantage as he had to endure: he hides Quilty's name from us not only throughout his account of the trip west, but even beyond the point where Lolita reveals the name to him, and taunts us with the difficulty of identifying the "culprit." We do not merely read about, we sense, we *re-experience* Humbert's exasperation at being unable to identify Quilty, his knowing what he needs to know and knows he doesn't know about someone else.

III. *Lolita* and Other Knowledge

Intelligence at the human level evolved to master the complexities of social interaction. Throughout his fiction, and nowhere more than in *Lolita*, Nabokov makes the most of this, and of the power of stories to raise the stakes. But intelligence first began to evolve to cope with other aspects of the environment, and as it expanded, through the

evolutionary arms race of social intelligence, it could also be applied to knowledge beyond the social. And Nabokov certainly investigates other kinds of knowledge.

One kind of knowledge he particularly craves is the metaphysical: answers to questions about the possibility of life beyond death and of design behind life. There is good reason to think that this may well matter in *Lolita* too. As he was writing *Lolita*, Nabokov broke off to compose “The Vane Sisters,” his most explicitly ghostly story to date, and told his *New Yorker* editor that everything he would write from now on would have this kind of hidden inner layer. John Ray Jr., in his Foreword to Humbert’s confession, lists the fates of a good many characters in the novel, and in one of his characteristic slippages of tone he adds: “The caretakers of the various cemeteries involved report that no ghosts walk”—just the sort of comment, in Nabokov, to put us on our guard. Nabokov and Humbert evoke Edgar Allan Poe repeatedly throughout the novel, in ways that do not seem sufficiently accounted for merely by Poe’s marrying his cousin when she was only thirteen, or even by Poe’s pioneer roles in the detective story, the double story, and cryptographic fiction. Nabokov makes Poe even more obtrusive, to the point of awkwardness, in the *Lolita Screenplay*. I have some hunches; but we simply have not found out deep enough answers about the presence and purpose of Poe in *Lolita*.

Just after Nabokov began writing *Lolita*, at a time when he still planned to call it, after Poe, *The Kingdom by the Sea*, he first classified the role of a writer as tripartite: as storyteller, teacher, and enchanter, the greatest of these being the enchanter.⁸ He had already written a first version of the *Lolita* situation, in the story “Volshebnik,” which he would always refer to in English as “The Enchanter.” The climax of Part 1 of *Lolita* occurs at the hotel the Enchanted Hunters, the complication of Part 2 is introduced when Lolita stars in a play called *The Enchanted Hunters*, and the climax comes when Humbert arrives at Quilty’s manor as “an enchanted and very tight hunter.” Throughout his narrative Humbert insists on the demonic quality of the nymphet, on the spell of nymphetcy. The word *spell*, like *enchant*,

⁸ *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich / Brucoli Clark, 1980), 5. For the 1947 date of Nabokov’s storyteller-teacher-enchanter formula, see Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940-1971*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Brucoli (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich / Brucoli Clark Layman, 1989), 78.

recurs again and again, sometimes in disguise, as when Humbert publishes in *The Cantrip Review*. Websters' Second International Dictionary defines the very obscure word *cantrip*, of uncertain origin, as "A charm; spell; trick, as of a witch; a piece of mischief; a playful or extravagant act," or, as an adjective, simply "magic." In the strength of his article in the *Cantrip Review*, Humbert is invited for a year to Cantrip College, and on the way there and back he stops at The Enchanted Hunters, which just happens to be situated in Briceland, the home of Merlin the Enchanter in Arthurian legend. And so on. This is annotation that seems to be pointing to interpretation, but I don't think anyone has pushed either far enough.

IV. Annotation and Local Interpretation: Hourglass Lake

Nabokov makes even a first reading of *Lolita* an experience richer than most novelists provide, but he hides much more under our noses. Today I happen to be following the theme of problems of knowledge in *Lolita*. I'm far from suggesting that is the only or the most important theme of the novel, but even in terms of this rather complicated theme, which derives much of its power from the contrast between a first reading and subsequent re-rereadings, Nabokov allows us a great deal immediately, in what Humbert hides from others and reveals to us, what Quilty does not let him find, and what Humbert hides about Quilty until he chooses to alert us to what he has hidden. Nabokov offers us riches at once but he doesn't allow their full value to be easily extracted. He senses that in life and in literature, in space and in time, we need to work hard to know the details before we can see the design, we need to study the part before we can really hope to understand the whole in any depth, and he composes his novels accordingly.

In reading Nabokov, therefore, annotation and interpretation are not an either/or but ends of a continuous spectrum. We can understand much without annotation, although not without attention to detail, but we cannot reach the deepest levels of interpretation—at least such is my experience with other Nabokov novels—without exhaustive annotation. We cannot even understand the *plot* without annotation, or at least

without paying attention to local detail and connecting it with details elsewhere.

The example I want to linger over is the most explicit, the most challenging to the first-time reader—and I think more challenging even to the re-reader than has been noticed.

When Humbert at last persuades Lolita to tell him the name of her kidnaper, he does not divulge to us what she divulges to him:

.. softly, confidentially, arching her thin eyebrows and puckering her parched lips, she emitted, a little mockingly, somewhat fastidiously, not untenderly, in a kind of muted whistle, the name that the astute reader has guessed long ago. Waterproof. Why did a flash from Hourglass Lake cross my consciousness? I, too, had known it, without knowing it, all along. There was no shock, no surprise. Quietly the fusion took place, and everything fell into order, into the pattern of branches that I have woven throughout this memoir with the express purpose of having the ripe fruit fall at the right moment; yes, with the express and perverse purpose of rendering—she was talking but I sat melting in my golden peace—of rendering that golden and monstrous peace through the satisfaction of logical recognition, which my most inimical reader should experience now.⁹

This is one of the greatest examples of Nabokov's mastery of the reader's knowledge, ignorance and curiosity. Few if any will experience that monstrous peace Humbert reports and pretends to expect in us. But with "Hourglass Lake" as a pointer, even first-time readers, if we are curious and energetic enough, can more or less quickly return to the right chapter. But when we reach "Waterproof," almost at the very end of the chapter, we are still unlikely to understand why the word has come to Humbert or whose name Lolita has divulged.

Charlotte has just escaped being drowned by Humbert, after telling him she will send Lolita straight from camp to boarding school. They emerge from the lake, she undoes her bra to soak up the sun, she hears a rustle behind her, scrambles to replace her bra, complains "Those disgusting prying kids," but finds that the noise was caused by her close friend Jean Farlow:

⁹ *The Annotated Lolita* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), pp. 273-274

Jean said she had been up there, in a place of green concealment, spying on nature (spies are generally shot), trying to finish a lakescape, but it was no good, she had no talent whatever (which was quite true)—“And have you ever tried painting, Humbert?” Charlotte, who was a little jealous of Jean, wanted to know if John was coming.

He was. He was coming home for lunch today. He had dropped her on the way to Parkington and should be picking her up any time now. It was a grand morning. She always felt a traitor to Cavall and Melampus for leaving them roped on such gorgeous days. She sat down on the white sand between Charlotte and me. She wore shorts. Her long brown legs were about as attractive to me as those of a chestnut mare. She showed her gums when she smiled. “I almost put both of you into my lake,” she said. “I even noticed something you overlooked. You (addressing Humbert) had your wrist watch on in, yes, sir, you had.” “Waterproof,” said Charlotte softly, making a fish mouth.

Jean took my wrist upon her knee and examined Charlotte’s gift, then put back Humbert’s hand on the sand, palm up. “You could see anything that way,” remarked Charlotte coquettishly.

Jean sighed. “I once saw,” she said, “two children, male and female, at sunset, right here, making love. Their shadows were giants. And I told you about Mr. Tomson at daybreak. Next time I expect to see fat old Ivor in the ivory. He is really a freak, that man. Last time he told me a completely indecent story about his nephew. It appears—”

“Hullo there,” said John’s voice.¹⁰

There the chapter ends. We are probably *still* mystified as to who “kidnaped” Lolita, and why, when Lolita names him, the word “Waterproof” flashes into Humbert’s mind.

But if, after looking back for the clue, we shake our heads in puzzlement and frustration (which may be just what Humbert wants), and return to the scene of Humbert and pregnant Lolita at Coalmont, we will find, within another page, enough evidence for us *now* to

¹⁰ *The Annotated Lolita*, pp. 90-1.

interpret “Waterproof,” as Lolita tells Humbert more about Quilty. Did he know that the “kidnaper”

had known her mother? That he was practically an old friend? That he had visited with his uncle in Ramsdale? –oh, years ago—and spoken at Mother’s club, and had tugged and pulled her, Dolly, by her bare arm onto his lap in front of everybody, and kissed her face, she was ten and furious with him? Did I know he had seen me and her at the inn where he was writing the very play she was to rehearse in Beardsley, two years later?¹¹

By now we might remember enough of the incidental Ramsdale dentist Ivor Quilty and his nephew, the apparently incidental Clare Quilty, the author of *The Enchanted Hunters*, to realize that Jean Farlow at Hourglass Lake was about to disclose, in that “completely indecent story” about Ivor Quilty’s nephew, that Clare Quilty had been in trouble with the law for his relations with some underage girl. Had Humbert heard that, he would have noticed, would have remembered, would have been warned. Now we can realize why “Waterproof” flashes into Humbert’s mind.

When we reread the novel, we can see much more still in this passage from the end of the Hourglass Lake chapter. John Farlow interrupts Jean just at the end of the chapter. But Jean had jumped to “Ivor in the ivory” and thence to his nephew Clare Quilty, by association with recalling seeing “Mr. Tomson at daybreak”: Leslie Tomson, the aide to Miss Opposite, a “Negro,” in the language of the time. Early in the Hourglass Lake chapter, Nabokov has prepared for this moment:

We had left the car in a parking area not far from the road and were making our way down a path cut through the pine forest to the lake, when Charlotte remarked that Jean Farlow, in quest of rare light effects (Jean belonged to the old school of painting), had seen Leslie taking a dip “in the ebony” (as John had quipped) at five o’clock in the morning last Sunday. “The water,” I said, “must have been quite cold.” “That is not the point,” said the logical doomed dear. “He is subnormal, you see. And,” she continued (in that carefully phrased way of hers that was beginning to tell on my health), “I have a very definite feeling our Louise is in love with that moron.”¹²

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 274-5

¹² *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 84.

John's joke about Leslie taking a dip naked, "in the ebony", will come to Jean's mind later when she explains about others she has seen in her quest for rare light effects, and will prompt her own leap from "ebony" to "ivory."

And we will note, too, the other complex internal ironies here, some visible even on a first reading. When Jean reports about seeing "two children, male and female, at sunset, right here, making love," she echoes both the image of thirteen-year-old Humbert and Annabel on the sand making love when they were interrupted by watching eyes, and the image that Humbert has recently entertained, his dream of making love to Lolita, of retrieving and consummating his past with Annabel, on the sands of Hourglass Lake. And of course Jean's observant presence is part of the larger irony, that had Humbert attempted what seemed "the perfect murder," by drowning Charlotte, long-sighted Jean (she spots even Humbert's wristwatch as he swims) would have seen him and denounced him at once.

There is more, much more. Charlotte calls Leslie Tomson a moron. There is nothing to suggest he is anything of the sort: she is just exuding the commonplace racism of her time. Jean, however, is above the conventional, unlike her husband John, whose arrival ends the Hourglass Lake chapter. At the end of another chapter (two chapters previously), John complains, as they talk about Ramsdale:

"Of course, too many of the tradespeople here are Italians, ... but on the other hand we are still spared—" "I wish," interrupted Jean with a laugh, "Dolly and Rosaline were spending the summer together."¹³

Sensitive Jean realizes that her husband is about to say "we are still spared Jews," and thinks that Humbert, with a name like his, and with his dark looks, might be Jewish. She stops her husband to spare Humbert. When John Farlow reverses the pattern by interrupting *Jean* at the end of the Hourglass Lake chapter, he cuts off her anecdote about Clare Quilty—who later will tell Humbert, who has come to kill him: "Must you talk to me? This is a Gentile's house, you know. Maybe, you'd better run along. And do stop demonstrating that gun." The end of the Hourglass Lake chapter, with John Farlow's casual interruption of what would have been his wife's crucial disclosure,

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 81

echoes her deliberate interruption of his anti-Semitic remark at the end of the earlier chapter to offer a perfect ironic reprise.

I could go on tracing the ironies that a good re-reader can see. John Farlow, despite being so staid, so apparently prim and suspicious of Humbert as stepfather with custody over Lolita, ends up himself, in a sense, going further than Humbert. After Jean dies of cancer, Farlow outdoes Humbert: he marries a “very young” “Spanish girl” in South America. Lolita, of course, has a Spanish name, and Humbert dreams of marrying her after taking her across the Mexican border. Farlow, despite his misgivings about Italians and Jews, and about Humbert and Lolita, himself marries a young Spanish girl, and does so not just across the Mexican border, which Humbert ultimately does not dare to cross, but by going all the way down to Chile.¹⁴

But to return to the end of the Hourglass Lake chapter (why does it keep sending us elsewhere?). Jean Farlow emerges to show she would have foiled the perfect murder, had Humbert not hesitated. But she mentions Leslie Tomson just a moment before she conjures up “Ivor in the ivory” and then thinks of his nephew. And when the perfect murder does occur—when Charlotte’s discovery of Humbert’s secret diary blinds her with tears and makes her rush to post her letters across the road, and she is killed in the process, so that Humbert causes the death yet cannot be held accountable—it will be none other than Leslie Tomson who telephones Humbert, at the end of another chapter, to say that “Mrs Humbert, sir, has been run over and you’d better come quick.”

Many of these kinds of connections within the novel are *not* apparent on a first reading, or even a first re-reading. They require annotation, they require flipping from page to page to note the connections. They add to our interpretation on the small scale and the large: to our sense of John Farlow’s conventionality (and yet his surprises, like the surprises that conventional Charlotte springs on Humbert); of his wife’s sensitivity; of the complacent racism of 1940s America; of the ironies of time, in the would-be perfect murder (and in much else about Hourglass Lake); and of the larger intuition everywhere woven into the novel and all Nabokov’s work, that the world of time is replete with patterns to a degree we cannot see from *within* time.

¹⁴ Snow, Champion; as distraction before Lo’s return and as preparation of Lo as married, as surprise of character.

V. Annotation and Global Interpretation: Cavall and Melampus

What I really wanted to get to, though, in the passage at the end of the Hourglass Lake chapter, what I wanted to spend most of my time on if there hadn't been so much else to notice, is the names of Jean Farlow's two dogs, Cavall and Melampus.

Cavall, as the note in Appel does not tell us, but as the notes in Zimmer's German edition and from there the note in the Russian Symposium edition *do* tell us, was King Arthur's dog.¹⁵ Melampus again yields nothing in Appel, and the German and the Russian editions unhelpfully identify Melampus as a Greek prophet who could understand the language animals. This gets us nowhere. In fact Cavall is indeed not only Arthur's favorite hound (as in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*),¹⁶ but the first of his hounds to turn the stag, in a hunting episode in *The Mabinogion*, and Melampus is the name of the first hound of Actaeon, in Ovid's telling of the story of Diana and Actaeon in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, III.¹⁷

The precision of these allusions startles: two hounds from very different literary traditions that are the first to chase or turn a stag. Like the other ironies around the word "Waterproof," the precision itself makes us want to annotate more, and to expect more. And there is more, and it will connect with central elements of *Lolita*.

Actaeon, remember, is the hunter who spies Diana, the virgin goddess of hunting, naked. Diana, enraged, turns him into a stag, and his

¹⁵ Dieter E. Zimmer, ed. *Lolita (Gesammelte Werke, VIII)*, Rheinbek: Rowohlt, 1989), 571; *Lolita, Smekh v temnote*, comm. A.M. Lyuksemburg (St. Petersburg: Symposium, 2000), 618.

¹⁶ "The Marriage of Geraint," ll. 184-86: "And while they listened for the distant hunt, / And chiefly for the baying of Cavall, / King Arthur's hound of deepest mouth..." Although the detail derives ultimately from the tale of "Geraint The Son of Erbin" in the *Mabinogion*, Nabokov may have encountered it in Thomas Bulfinch's *The Age of Chivalry* (1858) (*The Age of Chivalry and The Legends of Charlemagne, or Romance of the Middle Ages*, New York: New American Library, 1962, 229: "Now this is how Arthur hunted the stag. The men and the dogs were divided into hunting-parties, and the dogs were let loose upon the stag. And the last dog that was let loose was the favorite dog of Arthur; Cavall was his name. And he left all the other dogs behind him and turned the stag."

¹⁷ *Metamorphoses*, trans. Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1921), III.206-08.

hounds pursue him, Melampus leading, and tear him to pieces. He still feels as a man, but he can express himself only as a deer, so his own hounds and his fellow hunters cannot respond to his strangled voice pleading for them to stop tearing him apart.

I hope you can see where this is leading: the Enchanted Hunters motif that runs through the novel, and the idea of the hunter hunted, and of sex and chastity as linked with hunting and pursuit. Humbert, stalking Lolita, finds *himself* hunted by Charlotte, and “captured” in marriage. Wanting to end Charlotte’s life, but not daring to, he finds her suddenly killed, as if his hunt has met with enchanted success. Stalking Lolita at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, he finds himself ironically “hunted” by her, when she proposes they try out what she discovered at camp. But Quilty is already there at the hotel, and he witnesses Humbert and recognizes his designs on Lolita. This recognition inspires him to write the play *The Enchanted Hunters*, revolving around a character called Diana whose role Lolita is to take. The play itself turns out to be a device for Quilty’s hunting down Lolita, and then for stalking and hounding Humbert, now very much the hunted rather than the hunter, all the way across America. Just after Humbert gives up *his* hunt for Lolita’s “kidnaper,” he passes through Briceland and the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, before writing a poem about Diana and the Enchanted Hunters, and before he hears from Farlow about his marriage to a young Spanish girl and from Lolita about her marriage to a young American. Humbert resumes the hunt, but finds he is chasing the wrong prey, and when at last Lolita gives him the scent he needs, he heads straight off to hunt down the man who had hunted and hounded him.

The more we think about this, the more it pervades *Lolita*. At Hourglass Lake, Humbert muses about killing Charlotte, but would have immediately been hunted down. In fact, she dies when a dog chases after a car that swerves into her, when the Junk setter at last runs down its prey, as if it were one of Actaeon’s hounds. Ole Nyegaard, a talented young Danish graduate student, has recently written about the canine motif in *Lolita*,¹⁸ but his interpretation is often overstretched and underdeveloped because *Lolita* has been under-annotated. But let us just remember the cocker-spaniel that

¹⁸ “Uncle Gustave’s Present: The Canine Motif in *Lolita*,” *Nabokov Studies* 9 (2005), 133-55.

Lolita befriends at the Enchanted Hunters hotel, as both Humbert and Quilty watch, and the cocker spaniel pup that Quilty brings for Lolita when he takes her away from Elphinstone, and the “nondescript cur,” shaggy and muddy, that Lolita keeps at Coalmont. As Humbert leaves her, at last knowing whom he has to hunt down, the poor cur “started to lope alongside my car like a fat dolphin, but he was too heavy and old, and very soon gave up.”

There is much, much more we need to learn about *Lolita*. Cavall as King Arthur’s dog points again to the Arthurian pattern that seems to have for some reason attached itself to the *Lolita* theme from the first. Remember that in the afterword to *Lolita* Nabokov recalls that the protagonist of *The Enchanter* was called Arthur (no trace of this name survives in the text). The Enchanted Hunters Hotel is in Briceland, named after Broceliande, the forest where Merlin lived in the Arthurian tales. After escaping from rehearsals for the play *The Enchanted Hunters*, Lolita directs Humbert to another town where another Quilty play is being staged with the authors as guests. The town is Wace, the name of the first writer to recount the Arthurian legends in French. The play being staged there is co-written by Clare Quilty and Vivian Darkbloom. Vivian Darkbloom, as we know, is a woman and an anagram of “Vladimir Nabokov,” but Vivian is also the woman who in Arthurian legend and in Tennyson’s retelling is able to usurp Merlin’s magic and entrap him within his own spell. After Wace, Lolita’s next rendezvous with Quilty is at Elphinstone, which surely evokes the elfin stone out of which Arthur at last draws the sword Excalibur when no one else can, and which proves to be the place where Lolita is at last pulled out from Humbert’s clutches on Independence Day.

There is much, much more we need to learn about *Lolita*, from its very first line, ostensibly by John Ray Jr, whom Nabokov, not for nothing, named after the first great English natural historian: “Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male.” Did you know that the Black Widow spider is distinguished by a marking on its back: an hourglass? Do you remember that Humbert last spends the night with Lolita in Elphinstone, in a motel run by a Mrs Hays (H, A, Y, S), and do you know that there is a butterfly called *Elphinstonia charlonia*?

We need to get annotating, we need to get interpreting. We still don’t know *Lolita*.