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Teaching *Lolita* through Pushkin's Lens

Priscilla Meyer

If students have been introduced to Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* by Stanley Kubrick or Adrian Lyne, they are likely to focus on plot, on Lolita's captivity and abuse. It is always a challenge to steer discussion from students' identification with characters toward the author's construction of a work of art. Reading Aleksandr Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* before reading *Lolita* accentuates the specifically literary aspects of the novel. Students can readily believe that *Onegin* will be relevant when they heft Nabokov's translation and commentary and realize that his preparation of it (1950–57) overlapped with his writing of *Lolita* (1947–54).

In his foreword to *Onegin*, Nabokov identifies two distinct types of translation: the literal and the "paraphrastic." He defines paraphrastic translation as "a free version of the original with additions and omissions prompted by the exigencies of form and the conventions attributed to the consumer" (1: vii–viii). His translation of *Onegin* forgoes rhyme and meter for strict literalism; *Lolita* takes paraphrastic translation to an extreme. This juxtaposition suggests that *Lolita* can be read as a translation through space and time of a Russian literary monument of the 1820s into an American one of the 1950s, parodying the idea of adapting the original to the conventions of the consumer. Aware that he is an ideal bridge between the English-speaking world and Pushkin's, Nabokov writes the most Russian *Onegin* possible in his English translation and produces its most American paraphrase in *Lolita*; he uses both methods of translation to close the cultural gap between the producer (Pushkin) and the consumer (the American reader circa 1950). Thus Nabokov pays homage to the greatest Russian poet's masterpiece and enriches the American tradition by smuggling Pushkin's art, concerns, and frame of reference into a new Russo-American synthesis.

In *Speak, Memory,* Nabokov writes of "folding the magic carpet" in such a way as to reveal the coincidence of pattern in life, which he considers the essence of the artist's task (139 [1989]). The neat hundred-year interval between Pushkin's birth and his own (1799, 1899) is just the kind of fatidic coincidence that fascinated both Pushkin and Nabokov. In the commentary to his translation of *Onegin*, Nabokov describes the Summer Garden in Saint Petersburg, adding, "There, a hundred years later, I, too, was walked by a tutor" (2:41). Nabokov, an exiled poet, the impoverished descendant of an ancient liberal, artistic, aristocratic family, would identify strongly with Pushkin. But Nabokov, unlike Humbert, who compares himself with Vergil, Petrarch, Dante, and Edgar Allan Poe, modestly refrains from saying so explicitly. *Lolita,* however, demonstrates their shared literary aesthetics.

That *Lolita* is a parody of a free translation of *Onegin* may sound startling, but even though the novels appear to be so disparate, their plots are similar. The principal action of both novels spans a little over five years: *Onegin* begins in the winter of 1819 and ends in the spring of 1825; Humbert meets Lolita "more

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than five years before" (289) he shoots Quilty. The feelings of the parodically romantic heroes (Onegin and Humbert) for the heroines (Tatyana and Lolita) are juxtaposed to the authorial persona's relation to his muse, who is associated in both novels with the goddess Diana, the moon, and Gottfried Bürger's "Lenore" (about which Nabokov has much to say in his commentary). The heroines undergo a metamorphosis from provincial miss to experienced, inaccessible grown woman. At this point Pushkin's and Nabokov's heroes return from prolonged (two- or three-year) travels and offer their love, only to be rejected. Tatyana fails to recognize the change in Eugene, who is at last capable of genuine love; she thinks he merely wants to boast of a society conquest. Lolita likewise misunderstands Humbert's proposal that she come away with him forever: "you mean you will give us [us] that money only if I go with you to a motel" (278). Furthermore, Onegin and Humbert kill Lensky and Quilty in duels that are farcical because of the parodic purpose of the victims: first and foremost, they represent the Bad Writer—*Lensky* is Pushkin's representation of the naive Romantic pseudo-poet, and Quilty is Humbert's projection of hack writer-pornographer—versions of themselves that they want to cast off. The superficially realistic boy-loses-girl plot is a transparently metaphorical representation of the true subject of both novels: the interrelation of literary aesthetics and life.

Nabokov establishes the same elegant symmetry in *Lolita* that he charts in his commentary to *Onegin.* The "Pursuit Theme" of Onegin by "Pushkin" (2: 78) is taken up in the symmetrical East-West, West-East chase of Humbert by Quilty and Quilty by Humbert. Humbert's romance with Lolita begins with Charlotte's letter and ends with Lolita's, just as Tatyana's and Onegin's letters frame their love story. It is a lesson in narrative construction as well as in cultural translation to have students compare the two sets of manageably short letters—the author's and narrator's implicit presence in each, psychological and linguistic; their dialogic relationship to the addressee; the social context of the forwardness of the confessions; their differing uses of French.

Once having read both *Onegin* and *Lolita*, students will be amused to discover how Nabokov updates, translates, and then parodies Pushkin's characters, literary references, and cultural universe. Pushkin emphasizes the importance of critical distance for the reader and the author: Tatyana projects her reading of sentimental novels onto Onegin, Onegin plays the role of a Byronic hero, Lensky falls prey to German Romantic ideas of the ideal, while "Pushkin" disclaims any resemblance to his hero or poetic relationship to Byron. Nabokov lowers Lolita's reading to comic books and teen magazines, connects Quilty to several German sources including Bürger's poem "Lenore," and has Humbert fill his own narrative with references to Poe. Rather than Pushkin's innocent, though tragic, projections of literature onto life, Nabokov creates the far more shocking projection of Humbert's nympholepsy onto the helpless Dolores Haze, a vile parody of the poet-muse relationship.

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ers address in creating a literary tradition—the defining role of intertexts, the problem of the reader's projection of self into a fictional world, the primacy of language in defining a literary character.

Class discussion of literal translation raised by Nabokov's commentary on and controversial translation of *Onegin* heightens awareness of Nabokov's play with colliding stylistic levels, Humbert's formal European English and Lolita's American kid idiom. In his search for the basis of a truly national Russian literary language, Pushkin roamed the villages around his estate collecting peasant sayings and laments. Nabokov, when "inventing America" for *Lolita,* "traveled in school buses" to steep himself in the intonations of American schoolgirls (Gilliatt 280). His analogue to the Russian folk language that Pushkin blends into *Onegin*'s narrative is brilliant. In America, which lacks a peasantry, children represent a source of a living oral tradition uncontaminated by literacy; their speech is juicy raw material for the construction of a new national literature.

In *Lolita,* this popular speech, which includes the language of movies, radio, and ads, is contrasted with Humbert's elevated periphrastic manner ("You talk like a book, *Dad*" [114]). Nabokov juxtaposes the two extremes to highlight the discrepancy between them:

> You will dwell, my Lolita will dwell (come here, my brown flower) with thirty-nine other dopes in a dirty dormitory. (151)
>
> *Nous connûmes* (this is royal fun) the would-be enticements of their repetitious names—all those Sunset Motels, U-Beam Cottages, Hillcrest Courts. . .
>
> *Nous connûmes* the various types of motor court operators, the reformed criminal, the retired teacher and the business flop. (146)

Pushkin characterizes Tatyana by her blend of simple spoken Russian with the language of the French novels she reads and Eugene by the foreign words from English, French, and German used in his Saint Petersburg milieu. Humbert tries to address Lo in her own language, blending her popular magazine lingo with his educated language:

> "Come and kiss your old man," I would say, "and drop that moody nonsense. In former times, when I was still your dream male [the reader will notice what pains I took to speak Lo's tongue], you swooned to records of the number one throb-and-sob idol of your coevals [Lo: "Of my what? Speak English"]. (149)

And Lo, usually when being devious, occasionally speaks Humbert's language:

> "Well, speak," said Lo. "Was the corroboration satisfactory?" (204)

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> "I choose? *C'est entendu?*" She asked wobbling a little beside me. Used French only when she was a very good little girl. (209)

Humbert's periphrastic speech also serves a euphemistic purpose. He refers to his penis as "my life," mentions fellatio three times indirectly (e.g., he has Lo earn "the hard and nauseous way" permission to be in the school play, or, as he puts it, "to participate in the school's theatrical program" [187]), and has intercourse with her when she is sick but obscures this Dostoevskian grotesquery with Latin and lyricism:

> At first she "ran a temperature" in American parlance, and I could not resist the exquisite caloricity of unexpected delights—Venus febriculosa—though it was a very languid Lolita that moaned and coughed and shivered in my embrace. (198)

Thus through euphemism Humbert transforms the pervert into the "bewitched traveler" (Tamir-Ghez, "Rhetorical Manipulation" 186).

Like Pushkin, Nabokov frequently highlights his use of foreign words and the deliberate collision of stylistic levels (Weil 279) to resolve their polarization through the vivid evocation of the everyday, conventionally considered inappropriate subject matter for lyricism, in which high and low elements are combined in a poetry low on tropes and high on alliteration. Compare Pushkin's picture of Russian provincial winter with Nabokov's lyrical evocation of American suburban summer:

> A joyful crew of boys
> Loudly cut the ice with their skates
> A heavy goose with red feet, planning
> to swim on the bosom of the waters,
> Steps carefully onto the ice,
> Slips and falls. (1: 202; ch. 4, st. 42)

> In the middle distance, two little maidens in shorts and halters came out of a sun-dappled privy marked "Women." Gum-chewing Mabel (or Mabel's understudy) laboriously, absent-mindedly, straddled a bicycle, and Marion, shaking her hair because of the flies, settled behind, her legs wide apart; and, wobbling, they slowly, absently, merged with the light and shade. (84)

The two worlds represented by the stylistic poles are brought together by the vision of the poet, thereby elevating the low subject matter (gum, flies, kids, bikes, shorts) and revivifying elevated poetic diction with the simple word (note the absence of periphrase or barbarisms in these descriptions). By placing these

and several other languages in proximity, Pushkin and Nabokov create a "system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other. . . . The author . . . cannot be found at any one of the novel's language levels: he is to be found at the center of organization where all levels intersect," a principle that is obtained in the realist novel in general (Bakhtin 47–49).

Literary translation involves cultural translation—the interpretation of one culture by another. In *Lolita* America is seen through foreign eyes; the New World is presented through the filter of the Old. Like Nabokov, Humbert leaves France for America in 1940. For Nabokov, the move from Europe to America entailed changing his medium from Russian to English. Humbert's career reflects Nabokov's in this respect too: in France, Humbert writes a history of English poetry in French; in the United States, he compiles a manual of French literature for English-speaking students (16).

Humbert's view of his newly adopted country is heavily influenced by European art and by Romanticism in particular. Admiring the American countryside, he speaks of the "Chateaubriandesque trees" (145), superimposing French fictional trees on whatever elms, maples, and oaks he may be observing. Humbert describes "the average lowland North-American countryside" in terms of another object from his European past, "those painted oilcloths which were imported from America in the old days to be hung above washstands in Central-European nurseries" (152). While Humbert says that these models of natural scenes faded "the nearer I came to know them," he writes of "Claude Lorrain clouds" and "a stern El Greco horizon" (152).

Humbert's inability to see the American trees for the French Romantic forest, the distorting of his present experience by his European literary baggage, resembles the problems facing Russian culture at the time when the modern Russian novel was struggling with the assimilation of European models. The problem is central to *Eugene Onegin*, whose characters' fates are determined by their superficial assimilation of German Romantic philosophy (Lensky) or Romantic novels (Tatyana, Onegin).

Both Nabokov and Pushkin urge the reader to distinguish among hero, narrator, and author by seeming to confuse the persona with themselves: as Nabokov indicates the crucial distance between Humbert the narrator and himself, "Pushkin" lives in Pushkin's Saint Petersburg and has Pushkin's friends, but his persona cannot be equated with the actual, historical author.

Because projection is the basis for the concept of the poet's muse, as well as for plots about doubles, the Romantic poet is in constant danger of solipsism. Nabokov is particularly concerned to reveal this solipsistic potential of romanticisms of all stripes as a false variant of his own faith in the world of the imagination. If the imagination is allowed to behave purely projectively without the natural scientist's regard for the perceived object, the object is liable to any perversion. This is the motivation for the abundance of perverts in Nabokov's (allegedly perverse) work.

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Pushkin is concerned with the same problem. Discussing the process of literary creation, he contrasts his own methods with those of Onegin's friend, Lensky, who regularly rushes over to Olga with his latest impassioned madrigal:

> but I, when loving, was stupid and mute.
>
> Love passed, the Muse appeared,
> And the dark mind cleared up.
> Once free, I seek again the concord
> of magic sounds, feelings, and thoughts;
> . . . . . .
> and soon, soon the storm's trace
> will hush completely in my soul:
> *then* I shall start to write a poem
> in twenty-five cantos or so. (1: 124; ch. 1, sts. 58–59)

Pushkin's ideas about the creation of literature, which form the core of *Onegin,* are contained in this "Love passed, the Muse appeared." Nabokov's note to this part of *Onegin* is his own credo as well:

> Pushkin expresses here his concepts of the workings of the poet's mind, in four stages:
>
> 1. Direct perception of a "dear object" or event.
> 2. The hot, silent shock of irrational rapture accompanying the evocation of that impression in one's fancies or actual dreams.
> 3. The preservation of the image.
> 4. The later, cooler touch of creative art, as identified with rationally controlled inspiration, verbal transmutation, and a new harmony. (2: 211)

Humbert's attempt to cast his sexual obsession with Lolita as the relation between a poet and his muse is Nabokov's metaphor for the violation of the ideal of artistic critical distance.

Nabokov's note to chapter 1, stanza 38, on the quest for the source of Onegin's ennui contains his position paper in miniature:

> To this quest Russian critics applied themselves with tremendous zeal, accumulating in the course of a dozen decades one of the most boring masses of comments known to civilized man. Even a special term for Onegin's distemper has been invented (*Oneginstvo,* "Oneginism"); and thousands of pages have been devoted to him as a "type" of something or other (*e.g.,* of a "superfluous man" or a metaphysical "dandy," etc.). . . . Thus a character borrowed from books but brilliantly recomposed by a great poet to whom life and library were one, placed by that poet within a brilliantly

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> reconstructed environment, and played with by that poet in a succession of compositional patterns—lyrical impersonations, tomfooleries of genius, literary parodies, and so on—is treated by Russian pedants as a sociological and historical phenomenon typical of Alexander I's regime (alas, this tendency to generalize and vulgarize the unique fancy of an individual genius has also its advocates in the United States). (2: 150–51)

The student who learns to identify the difference between solipsistic and creative projections in art and life will be armed against their confusion, which creates the brilliance of and causes the tragedies in both *Onegin* and *Lolita.* To help students assimilate Pushkin's version of how you are what you read, I have them write their own parody of *Eugene Onegin* before reading *Lolita*. They are asked to translate Onegin into the United States (or their country of origin) of the current decade. This assignment gives them the experience of being the author of a parody, of seeing the characters and plot from the author's point of view, so that when they finally read *Lolita*, they experience Nabokov's novel as authors themselves and can identify his devices more readily. After we have discussed *Lolita*, I ask them to identify parallels with *Onegin*. In a seminar on Nabokov, this exercise has the added benefit of explaining the Olga-Chernyshevsky-Rudolph triangle in *The Gift* as a parody of the Olga-Onegin-Lensky one and of identifying the novel's closing *Onegin* stanza.

With Pushkin's help, students achieve a reading of *Lolita* with heightened awareness of language. For Nabokov, the novel's tragedy is both the loss of his beloved Russian language (Steiner 123–25) and the debasement of the world of the imagination. The clash between Europe and America underlying Humbert's projection of his world onto Lo's shows nymphancy to be Humbert's perverse metaphor for metamorphosis, one of Nabokov's treasured themes. *Onegin* highlights the difference between Humbert's memoir, which treats his attempt to freeze the past he has lost as a neurotic condition, and Nabokov's novel, which celebrates the possibility of incorporating what has been lost by creating a synthesis of Russia and America.

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