

## A NEW OR LITTLE-KNOWN SUBTEXT IN *LOLITA*

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How we read a novel often has as much to do with our recent readings and musings as it does with the work's actual content. Details that we light upon as significant are illuminated by our abiding concerns, both conscious and unconscious. This is not exactly the same as saying that our presuppositions guide and shape our readings, or that our theories often produce and limit our discoveries, but it is a related observation. This phenomenon is a question both of epistemology and of scientific method, and it is one of the guiding forces of Nabokov's creativity. The mind's ability to recognize some patterns and completely miss others, no less obtrusive, is a recurring theme in Nabokov's art. *The Gift's* Konstantin Godunov-Cherdyntsev warned Fyodor about the "shadow of the instrument" obscuring the truth (*Gift* 331), and throughout "Father's Butterflies" he is offered as a model practitioner of the inductive method and scientific work without theoretical bias. Nabokov wants his characters and his readers all to transcend the limits of their own predispositions and preferences when exploring the world around them and the texts they confront.

It is therefore with a sense of irony that I present a little find that was very much guided by my theoretical entrenchment. Having worked for several years now on Nabokov's relations to scientific discovery, its history and philosophy, I have become a perfect example of a scholar reading with an agenda. With the aid of this bias, I happened to be rereading, or re-remembering, Humbert's eleventh diary entry in Chapter Eleven (*Monday*), near the end of which Dolly tells him, "Don't tell Mother but I've eaten *all* your bacon" (*AnLo* 50). Only, perhaps, because I had been recently studying the overt connection of Sir Francis Bacon to "grudinka which means 'bacon' in several Slavic languages" (in *Bend Sinister*, 105), did I begin to suspect that this instance, too, must be a case of Baconian encryption, if not exactly a cryptogram. (Recall, too, that Bacon is also cited in *Pale Fire* as the intermediate source of the aphorism, "It is the glory of God to hide a thing, and the glory of man to find it.") I was encouraged in this precipitous conclusion by the fact of the entry's predominantly epistemological tone. Humbert sits in his room, attempting to establish mentally the location of Lo and the contents of the Haze Home's various rooms:

I am like one of those inflated pale spiders you see in old gardens. Sitting in the middle of a luminous web and giving little jerks to this or that strand. *My* web is spread all over the house as I listen from my chair where I sit like a wily wizard. Is Lo in her room? Gently I tug on the silk. She is not. Just heard the toilet paper cylinder make its staccato sound as it is turned; and no footfall has my outflung filament traced from the bathroom back to her room. Is she still brushing her teeth? [. . .] No. The bathroom door has just slammed so one has to feel elsewhere about the house for the beautiful warm-colored prey. Let us have a strand of silk descend the stairs. I satisfy myself by this means that she is not in the kitchen—not banging the refrigerator door or screeching at her detested mama. . . Well, let us grope and hope. Ray-like, I glide in thought to the parlor and find the radio silent. . . . So my nymphet is not in the house at all! Gone! What I thought was a

prismatic weave turns out to be an old gray cobweb, the house is empty, is dead. And then comes Lolita's soft sweet chuckle through my half-open door "Don't tell mother but I've eaten *all* your bacon." (49-50)

This scene takes place before Lolita has been "safely solipsized," and Humbert's silky threads of knowledge are, while they last, remarkable for his confidence in what they reveal about the world outside his room. Curiously, they become an old gray cobweb when "the nymphet" is not found, whereas in fact their false news and epistemological ineffectiveness is belied by Dolly's sudden appearance. Humbert's theoretical conclusions about the home's contents are disproved by the factual girl, and by the absence of his bacon.

This discovery would have remained an idle fancy had I not decided to start looking for spiders in the works of Bacon, where I soon found them. In *The Advancement of Learning*, there is a distinctly relevant passage that in some circles is so well-known that there are even articles written about it (because it too apparently has subtexts; see e.g., R. H. Bowers, "Bacon's Spider Simile," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 17, No. 1. [Jan., 1956]: 133-135. Bowers suggests that the passage is so well known as not to need quotation, but reproduces it anyway for "convenience"). Writing about the contrast between true and false learning, and between true and false scientific work, Bacon wrote:

For the wit and mind of man, if it work upon matter, which is the contemplation of the creatures of God, worketh according to the stuff, and is limited thereby; but if it work upon itself, as the spider worketh his web, then it is endless, and brings forth indeed cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no substance or profit. (Bk 1, Pt. IV, Sec. 5)

Leaving aside that the targets of Bacon's critique were the "schoolmen" (scholastics) whose "dictator" was Aristotle, it should be noted that the main contrast here is between the mind's engagement with the outside world and its tendency to get distracted by contemplation of its own ingenuity. There is "matter," or the "creatures of God" and "stuff"; and there is "the mind itself." As many readers have noted, when Humbert succeeds in solipsizing Lolita, she ceases to be "stuff" for him and becomes only his phantasm, his created image of the nubile nymphet. In this early attempt to ensnare her, Humbert's web itself represents his knowledge and its attempt to create and become his reality and "prismatic weave." But external, independent Dolly still exists as stubborn stuff, and her appearance and theft of his bacon offers an early warning of the direction in which he is heading and the falsity of his effort. The world he is building is all cobweb and no stuff.

This evocation of Bacon's insistence on empirical science reinforces the theme's beginning in the novel's first paragraph, offered in the voice of John Ray, Jr. That Humbert is "Ray-like" provides one local connection to the seventeenth-century taxonomist John Ray, another early empiricist. The younger Ray's book, "Do the Senses Make Sense?", likewise implies the question of mind's relation to "stuff." Nabokov chose to echo the very same theme when, in "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," he suggested that his novel was sparked when he read about "the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this drawing showed the bars of the poor creature's cage" (*AnLo*, 311). Now considered

apocryphal, this sad myth represents the same difficulty faced by all of Nabokov's thinking creatures, but in much starker terms. Humbert's imprisonment of Dolly becomes, in turn, his own prison, too—both in his inability to see past his phantasm to the real, empirical girl, and in his fears of loss and law (the bars of the future).

In *Bend Sinister* Bacon is evoked primarily as a token of cryptography via alleged acrostics in Shakespeare (and secondarily as a cipher for science), while in *Pale Fire* he serves, concealed, as an icon for hidden things that may be discovered by the careful and curious. There is no lack of cryptograms in *Lolita*, either, and Bacon's presence along with the "paper chase" and its Shakespearian overtones brings on a double-edged concern. On the one hand, it encourages the continued quest for concealed messages in *Lolita* and perhaps other works as well (most such quests have been successful in varying degrees); on the other, Nabokov's disparagement of Baconian acrostic-seekers in *Speak, Memory* (20) (thanks to Jansy Mello for reminding me of this passage)—they serve as his analogue of Freudian symbol-hunters!—combines with the paper chase's ultimate futility to suggest that such code-breaking may be beside the point.

There is no doubt that anagrams, cryptograms, and acrostics play a significant role in several of Nabokov's works. To the extent that all of these in some manner hark back to Bacon, they remind us of hidden secrets, of the deceptive simplicity of the visible, and the quest for true knowledge about ultimate sources. Humbert's situation is much clearer: he could, if he wanted, come to know something of the true Dolly Haze. But his obsession makes it impossible for him to do so; we readers are left to view what we can of her through the bars and cobwebs of his mind.

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