

Postscript to the Russian Edition of *Lolita*

VLADIMIR NABOKOV

TRANSLATED BY EARL D. SAMPSON

Translator's note: *Lolita* was first published in 1955 in Paris, by Olympia Press, with a preface from the publisher but without any authorial comment. The first American edition (New York: Putnam's, 1958) included an author's afterword, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," which was also included in the English edition (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1959) and in the many translations mentioned in Nabokov's text below. When Nabokov translated *Lolita* into Russian (New York: Phaedra, 1967), he included a translation of that afterword and added a "Postscript to the Russian Edition."

Nabokov's translation into Russian of "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" is scrupulous, but there are a few interesting discrepancies between the two texts. For example, "Suave John Ray" of the first sentence becomes in the Russian "John Ray, pleasant in every respect," a borrowing from *Dead Souls*, where Gogol distinguishes between two unnamed female personages as "a lady simply pleasant" and "a lady pleasant in every respect." In the fourth paragraph, Nabokov adds German blood to the Irish blood in *Lolita*'s lineage (presumably from her father's side: Nabokov has indicated that "Haze" is derived from the German *Hase*, "hare"). In the sixth paragraph, he adds the American Museum of Natural History in New York to the list of lepidopterological collections to which he has contributed specimens and comments that Humbert Humbert wrote *Lolita* thirty times faster than did Nabokov: Humbert took fifty-six days and Nabokov about four and a half years. (In this paragraph's list of localities where Nabokov hunted butterflies and worked on *Lolita*, Ashland, Oregon, is mistakenly given as "Ashton"—possibly a printer's error influenced by Afton, Wyoming, earlier in the list.) In the fourteenth paragraph, "the tinkling sounds of the valley town coming up the mountain trail (on which I caught the first known female of *Lycaeides sublivens* Nabokov)" is expanded to "the mountain trail (in Telluride [Colorado], where I caught the heretofore undiscovered

female of the blue *Lycaeides sublivens* Nabokov, which I had described myself on the basis of the male)."

Perhaps the most interesting interpolation occurs in the seventh paragraph. In the original, the paragraph begins with the two sentences "At first, on the advice of a wary old friend, I was meek enough to stipulate that the book be brought out anonymously. I doubt that I shall ever regret that soon afterwards, realizing how likely a mask was to betray my own cause, I decided to sign *Lolita*." The Russian text inserts between these two sentences the following: "The anagram of my name and surname in the name and surname of one of my characters is a memorial of that hidden authorship." The reference is to Clare Quilty's friend Vivian Darkbloom, whose role in the novel, though minor, gives every appearance of being preplanned, so the implication that she was inserted after the work's completion for the sole purpose of leaving a thumbprint should not be taken at face value (nor, on the other hand, should it be summarily dismissed). But there is another implication here: that the anagrammatical characters that occur in so many of Nabokov's Russian novels were not just the result of linguistic playfulness but also a means of insuring that Sirin's novels would be identified with Vladimir Nabokov.

There are a number of other discrepancies between the English and Russian versions, small differences in wording or phrasing, often a matter of stylistic equivalencies vs. lexical literalness. But there is at least one single-word interpolation in the Russian text that deserves further comment. It occurs in the significant, often-quoted passage on aesthetic bliss (pp. 316–17 in the American edition). The English text reads: "For me a work of fiction exists only in so far as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm." The Russian text translates exactly those four words in parentheses, but adds, between kindness and ecstasy, "harmony" (*stroynost'*), apparently another essential element of art that occurred to Nabokov after the original publication of the essay. It is interesting, in light of the accusation often leveled at Nabokov of being a "formalist," ostensibly unconcerned with the moral content of his fiction, that he at first defined art exclusively in terms of moral categories and only added a formal category as an afterthought.

Nabokov's "Postscript" to the Russian edition of *Lolita* extends and amplifies both the English and the Russian versions of his afterword. Nabokov devoted a good deal of time in his last years to mak-

ing his Russian writings available to readers of English, so it seems appropriate now to make this late Russian text, with its witty, perceptive, and touching commentary, likewise available. Here, then, is an English rendering of the Russian "Postscript." The endnotes are supplied by the translator, who wishes to record his gratitude to Véra Nabokov for reading the manuscript and proofs of the translation, making various suggestions for improvement, and ultimately approving the text and the notes.—E. D. S.

Scholarly scruples prompted me to retain the last paragraph of the American afterword in the Russian text, in spite of the fact that it can only confound the Russian reader who does not remember, or didn't understand, or never even read "V. Sirin's" books, published in Europe in the twenties and thirties. I so fervently stress to my American readers the superiority of my Russian style over my English that some Slavists might really think that my translation of *Lolita* is a hundred times better than the original, but the rattle of my rusty Russian strings only nauseates me now. The history of this translation is a history of disillusionment. Alas, that "wondrous Russian tongue" that, it seemed to me, was waiting for me somewhere, was flowering like a faithful springtime behind a tightly locked gate, whose key I had held in safekeeping for so many years, proved to be nonexistent, and there is nothing behind the gate but charred stumps and a hopeless autumnal distance, and the key in my hand is more like a skeleton key.

I console myself, first of all, with the thought that the fault for the clumsiness of the translation offered here lies not only with the translator's loss of touch with his native speech but also with the spirit of the language into which the work is being translated. In the course of a half year's labor over the Russian *Lolita*, I not only recognized the loss of a number of personal trifles and irretrievable linguistic skills and treasures but also came to certain general conclusions regarding the mutual translatability of two amazing languages.

Gestures, grimaces, landscapes, the torpor of trees, odors, rains, the melting and iridescent hues of nature, everything tenderly human (strange as it may seem!), but also everything coarse and crude, juicy and bawdy, comes out no worse in Russian than in English, perhaps better; but the subtle reticence so peculiar to English, the poetry of thought, the instantaneous resonance between the most abstract concepts, the swarming of monosyllabic epithets—all this, and also everything relating to technology, fashion, sports, the natural sciences, and the unnatural passions—in Russian become

clumsy, prolix, and often repulsive in terms of style and rhythm. This discrepancy reflects a basic historical difference between the green Russian literary language and English, ripe as a bursting fig: between a youth of genius, but not yet sufficiently well educated and at times rather tasteless, and a venerable genius who combines a motley erudition with absolute freedom of spirit. Freedom of spirit! All the breath of humanity lies in that conjunction of words. ✓

The bibliographical information cited in the afterword to the American edition (Putnam, 1958) can now be amplified. The first edition, published with copious misprints in two small volumes in Paris (Olympia Press, 1955), sold rather sluggishly to English tourists until it came to the attention of Graham Greene, who praised the book in a London newspaper. He and *Lolita* were attacked in another London newspaper by a reactionary columnist, a certain John Gordon, and it was his virtuous horror that attracted general attention to *Lolita*. As to her fate in the United States, it should be noted that she was never banned there (as she is still banned in some countries). The first copies of the Paris edition of *Lolita* that private individuals had ordered were held and read at American customs, but my unknown friend and reader in the customs service pronounced my *Lolita* legal literature, and the copies were forwarded to their addressees. This settled the doubts of the cautious American publishers, and now I could select from among them the one most suitable to me. The success of the Putnam edition (1958) exceeded, as they say, all expectations. Paradoxically, though, the first English-language edition, which had been published in Paris in 1955, now suddenly fell under a ban. I often wonder what I would have done at the time of the initial negotiations with Olympia Press if I had learned then that alongside talented, albeit immodest, literary works, the publisher gained his main income from vulgar little books that he commissioned from meretricious nonentities, books of exactly the same nature as the pictures hawked on dark corners of a nun with a St. Bernard, or a sailor with a sailor. Be that as it may, the English customs had long since, in the stern and sober fog that greets homebound vacationers, been confiscating that pornographic trash—in the same grass-green covers as my *Lolita*. And now, the English Home Secretary had asked his French colleague, as ignorant as he was obliging, to forbid the sale of the entire Olympia catalog, and for a time *Lolita* in Paris shared the fate of Olympia's obscene publications.

Meanwhile a London publisher had turned up who wanted to publish it. This coincided with the discussion of a new censorship law (1958–59), in which *Lolita* served as an argument for both liberals and conservatives. Parliament ordered a number of copies from

America, and the MP's familiarized themselves with the book. The law passed, and *Lolita* was published in London by Weidenfeld and Nicolson in 1959. Simultaneously Gallimard in Paris published it in French—and Olympia Press's ill-starred first English edition appeared again in the bookstands, dusting its lapels with a business-like and indignant air.

Since then *Lolita* has been translated into many languages: it has appeared in separate editions in the Arabic lands, Argentina, Brazil, China,² Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, Turkey, and Uruguay. Its sale has just been permitted in Australia, but it is still banned in Spain and South Africa. Nor has it appeared in the puritan countries behind the Iron Curtain. Of all these translations, I can answer, as to accuracy and completeness, only for the French one, which I checked myself prior to publication. I can imagine what the Egyptians and the Chinese did with the poor thing, and I imagine still more vividly what that "displaced lady" who had recently learned English would have done with it, if I had permitted it, or the American who had "taken" Russian at the university. But the question of for whom, in fact, I translate *Lolita* belongs to the sphere of metaphysics and humor. I find it difficult to imagine the regime in my prim homeland, whether liberal or totalitarian, under which the censorship would pass *Lolita*. I don't know, by the way, who is held in special esteem in Russia today—Hemingway, I think, that contemporary replacement for Mayne Reid,³ and the nonentities Faulkner and Sartre, those darlings of the Western bourgeoisie. Russian émigrés, on the other hand, avidly read Soviet novels, enthralled by cardboard Quiet Don Cossacks⁴ on their cardboard horses, rearing back on their cardboard tails, or by that lyrical doctor⁵ with his inclinations toward a vulgar mysticism, his philistine locutions and his charmer out of Charskaya,⁶ who brought in so much hard foreign currency for the Soviet government.

In publishing *Lolita* in Russian, I am pursuing a very simple aim: I want my best English book—or, let us say more modestly, one of my best English books—to be translated correctly into my native language. It's the whim of a bibliophile, no more. As a writer, I have grown all too accustomed to the fact that a blind spot has loomed black on the eastern horizon of my consciousness for nearly half a century now: I don't have to worry about any Soviet editions of *Lolita*! As a translator, I am not vain, I'm indifferent to the experts' corrections, and pride myself only on the iron hand with which I checked the demons who incited me to deletions and additions. As a reader, I have the ability to multiply without end and could easily

pack a huge sympathetic auditorium with my doubles, spokesmen, extras, and those stooges who without a second's hesitation go up on stage from various rows, the moment the magician invites the audience to make certain he is not cheating. But what can I say about the other, normal, readers? In my magic crystal rainbows play, my glasses are reflected obliquely, a miniature scene of festive illumination begins to take shape—but I see precious few people there: a few old friends, a group of émigrés (who on the whole prefer Leskov),⁷ a visiting poet from the land of the Soviets, the makeup man from a traveling troupe, three Polish or Serbian delegates in a mirrored café, and far at the back—the beginnings of a vague movement, signs of enthusiasm, the approaching figures of young people waving their hands . . . but they're just asking me to move aside—they're about to photograph the arrival of some president in Moscow.

Vladimir Nabokov
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Palermo

NOTES

1. "V. Sirin" (or "Vladimir Sirin") is the *nom de plume* under which Nabokov published his Russian writings in the 1920s and 1930s.
2. Nationalist China, of course. A Chinese translation (*Lo li t'ai*) was published in Formosa in 1960. Nabokov's list of translations runs from the first to the last letter of the Russian alphabet, but since no translation has yet appeared in, say, Zaire or Zambia, the list could not be made to stretch to the end of the English alphabet.
3. Captain (Thomas) Mayne Reid, an Irish-born adventure novelist whose works, with settings in America, Africa, and so forth, were extremely popular in Russia from the 1860s on into this century. All his many novels and stories were translated into Russian, and even today he is better known in Russia than in Britain or America. A six-volume selection of his works was published in the USSR as recently as 1958. Nabokov recalls his boyhood acquaintance with him in chapter 10 of *Speak, Memory*: "The Wild West fiction of Captain Mayne Reid (1818–1883), translated and simplified, was tremendously popular with Russian children at the beginning of this century, long after his American fame had faded. Knowing English, I could savor his *Headless Horseman* in the unabridged original." The 1866 novel that Nabokov mentions has seen at least two translations into Russian a century apart (1868 and 1968).
4. The reference is to the novel *The Quiet Don* (translated in two parts as *And Quiet Flows the Don* and *The Don Flows Home to the Sea*), by 1964 Nobel laureate Mikhail Sholokhov (1905–).
5. *Doctor Zhivago*, by 1958 Nobel laureate Boris Pasternak (1890–1960).
6. Lidiya Charskaya (1875–1937), children's author who enjoyed a great vogue in the early part of this century, in particular among schoolgirls.

Many of her heroines are schoolgirls. The critic Korney Chukovsky called her a "genius of vulgarity" (*geniy poshlosti*).

7. Nikolay Leskov (1831–1895), a prosaist, like Nabokov, of remarkable verbal and narrative inventiveness, but in just about every other respect very unlike Nabokov.