The anxiety articulated in the work of writers such as William Faulkner and D. H. Lawrence begins to speak to the instability of late-century white masculinity, often defined not in relation to production but to consumption. As is often noted, after the Second World War, first-world economies shifted toward postindustrial structures on one hand and toward commodity production and consumerism on the other. The commitment ideologically crucial in an earlier form of capitalism to the notion of the individual who sells his labor to the market shifts to a faith in the individual who freely consumes in a gesture of personal expression—or, more self-consciously, self-construction. Fredric Jameson argues that it is the condition of the subject under contemporary capitalism to be (even consciously) a function of consumerism: you are what you buy. The compulsory task becomes the market-driven construction of that self (in the name of self-expression). Thus, the death of the author is replaced by the birth of the consumer, and the heroic producer is superceded by the sovereign consumer: “Consumers are constituted as autonomous, self-regulating and self-actualizing individual actors seeking to maximize their ‘quality of life’—in other words, to optimize the worth of their existence to themselves—by assembling a lifestyle or lifestyles, through personalized acts of choice in the marketplace. Thus, in contemporary consumer culture, freedom and independence emanate not from civil rights but from individual choices exercised in the market” (du Gay 69). If Brian McHale is correct in arguing that what sets postmodernism apart from modernism is the shift from questions of epistemology to those of ontology, then those ontological questions he claims one asks of oneself—“[W]hat constitutes identity? How is the self constructed in and through culture?”—are framed within the context of consumerism.
If the task at hand would seem to be self-expression, then, it seems clear that the mechanism that powers a consumer world is in actuality the escalation of the commodity fetishism that inheres generally within systems based on market exchange. Celia Lury argues that it is precisely the “distinctive character of consumer culture” that amplifies the commodity’s “enigmatic’ or ‘mysterious’ quality” (41). To the extent that the consumer item must “express” the hidden depths of the self, that commodity must contain increasingly more than its physical and limited existence. Thus, appropriately contextualized by an information age, consumerism becomes conflated with a search for abstract meaning, the intangibility of which marks the socioeconomic class of the consumer, as Lury points out: “An individual who has been brought up in the abstractions of education and mental labour and who is certain of obtaining daily necessities cultivates a distance from these needs [basics of sustenance and comfort], and affects a taste based in respect and desire for the abstract, distanced and formal” (86). Nor does the perpetual irony of (inevitably educated) postmodern thought effectively undercut the aura of the commodity. In fact, to the contrary, a central—perhaps defining—feature of postmodern commodity fetishism as it is described by Slavoj Žižek is the disavowal of belief in the otherworldly promise of the commodity and yet the tenacious persistence of the kinds of behavior that silently insist that in fact the commodity is indeed so invested—no one really believes that “Coke is it,” and yet since we continue to behave as if it is somehow mysteriously “it,” this particular fetish is not only not emptied out but grows in ideological strength. Thus, “cynical reason, with all its ironic detachment, leaves untouched the fundamental level of ideological fantasy, the level on which ideology structures the social reality itself” (Sublime Object 30).

What then of masculinist fantasy in this historical period that can also be defined by its self-conscious feminism (however much we might want to challenge the depth of commitment to gender equity)? What happens to the imagined body of woman—and to the rape narrative—when the masculine subject is defined not as producer but consumer, an individual compelled to consume in a now heavily ironized quest for truth and self-expression? The texts I examine here—by John Barth, John Fowles, Vladimir Nabokov, and D. M. Thomas—all more-or-less self-consciously position the consuming subject as masculine, coded “male” in the same way that the spectator of popular film is also generally located in a seat carved out for the white, male heterosexual gaze. By the same token, the feminine stands in for the commodity that in turn does/does not promise to be “it,” compels in her veiled obscurity a desperate and in fact violent (if forever self-conscious and ironic) stripping away. Alice Jardine makes the case that the text itself in postmodern theoretical discourse depends
upon this vision of the feminine, and this assumption of the heterosexual male gaze: “The text is veiled—both open and closed, like a flower, like a woman. But it would be a mistake to think that something lies behind its veils. The text hides neither truth nor untruth, but operates an uncertainty of vision which is no longer anguished, an uncertainty as to castration and non-castration—a dissimulation that, in its effect, is female to the extent that it is affirmative (that is, not anguished)” (198). The novel of the postmodern striptease similarly speaks to the ways in which consumer culture relies heavily on the female body to create the illusion of an abstract universal essence that does/does not exist within or behind the material commodity. No longer angst ridden, steeped in irony, these texts acknowledge the desire and the violence inherent in fetishistic treatment of the body; trace the direct line from the metaphysical striptease to the rape story; acknowledge also the extent to which rape narrative effaces the victim as material body, absents her from the story. In spite of that inevitable uncertainty—or perhaps because of it—however, the rape narrative is maintained with the kind of tenacity born of desperation. What it finally articulates, as Jardine puts it, is the “uncertainty as to castration and non-castration”: it reveals that white, middle-class masculinity is a secondary function of a consumerist world and is structured uneasily upon the compulsion/inability to get to the bottom of things, to peel away the layers that conceal some larger, aestheticized truth. The violent scene that promises evidence of potent masculinity—and truth-seeking revelation—becomes a farce; the role provided to man by virtue of twentieth-century existence is old and tired, and the son cannot fill it out convincingly.

In Seduction, Jean Baudrillard makes the opaque claim that “the immense privilege of the feminine” is “having never acceded to truth or meaning, and of having remained absolute master of the realm of appearances” (8). Under Western patriarchy, in other words, “there is but one sexuality . . .—and it is masculine”; Woman is “absorbed” by the father, the Other of thought and subjectivity (6). Baudrillard’s answer, of course, is in his elaboration of the order of seduction, “which represents mastery over the symbolic universe” (8). I would argue that Baudrillard thus rehearses the ironic methodology of the postmodern—of repeating the words of the father, but with an inflection that belies them, presumably mastering their semiotic potential. Although Baudrillard is arguing in favor of a continuance of the game, the implicit message for the rest of us—which implicit message speaks more truly, I think, to the contemporary self-consciously ethical sense of things—is that the words that have been emptied out are those that have repeatedly declared that the woman is the container of the truth of God the father, but that her untrustworthy body hides that truth, or distorts its message. In “Plato’s Hystera,” Luce Irigaray describes the
woman of Western tradition in ways that Baudrillard no doubt has in mind, as the “‘receptacle’ for turning out more or less good copies of reality,” since “To see the father face to face . . . is as much as to say—die!” (300, 299). The woman thus serves as “a clean slate ready for the father’s impressions, which she forgets as they are made” (307). For Baudrillard, the repetition of this never-present Father engenders a swerve, and it is here that he locates the “alternative” to the words of patriarchy (7). But where exactly lies the departure in this addictive process of ironic repetition?

In “Menelaiad,” a short story in Lost in the Funhouse, John Barth stages a hyper-aware repetition of the figuration of woman as vessel, and he does so in a way that highlights both the impossibility of achieving the “truth or meaning” Menelaus believes that Helen of Troy is withholding, but also the compulsive quality of the search that follows from the belief that the woman is a receptacle for abstract, universal meaning. The story is a “postmodernist ‘Chinese-box’ [text],” as McHale puts it, or a frame tale that operates at seven different levels of narration (155). At the first level, a disembodied Menelaus blames Helen for his death/immortality. At the second level (with one set of quotation marks), Menelaus is still alive, speaking to Telemachus. At the third level (with two sets of quotation marks), Telemachus is told “How Menelaus First Humped Helen in the Eighth Year after the War.” At the fourth level (with three sets of quotation marks), Menelaus narrates how he trapped Proteus in order to get from him two answers: how to get back home; how to please Helen. At the fifth level (four sets of quotation marks), Menelaus tells Proteus how his (Proteus’s) daughter revealed how to capture her father. At the sixth level (five sets), Menelaus relates to Proteus’s daughter how he reclaimed Helen at the sack of Troy and asked her “why” she had married him:


“And the woman, with a bride-shy smile and hushed voice, replied: ‘Why what?’

At the seventh and final level (which uses six quotation marks when narrated and seven when someone is speaking), Menelaus attempts to address Helen’s “why what?” Eventually she answers, at the center of the text,

“Love!” (155)

As non-apocalyptic as the answer is, Menelaus nonetheless “was no more, never has been since” after she utters it (155); because he is a “mask masking less and less,” he cannot imagine that “love” would follow his “cipher
self” (156). Significantly, as James Fulmer points out, “when he asks the Oracle at Delphi who he is, the oracle’s answer is a blank space between the quotation marks” (343). For her own part, Helen claims on the journey home that she has “never been in Troy,” thus disappearing from the text in yet another way (163).

McHale rightly contends that “Menelaiaid,” unlike most instances of “narrative embedding,” does indeed finally ask the ontological—rather than epistemological—questions that he argues define postmodernism (155). More central than the question of knowing is the question of being, although certainly the former is here connected in significant ways to the latter. The answer to his question is found, amidst the confusion of language and repetition, but the answer serves only to highlight the extent to which “Menelaus” has been determined by the questions themselves. He has been positioned by forces around him (patriarchy, for example, or John Barth) to ask those very questions, and what he has thought to have been the object of his search—which imagined object and obsessive search have served to give him substance as an autonomous agent—has quietly receded from view. The central anxiety the text articulates thus concerns the status of the masculine subject set adrift in a world of symbolic repetitions. The more visible question—“How many layers to naked Helen?”—is a compulsive mechanism that both expresses and represses that anxiety (144). The postmodern striptease thus participates in the (ironic) objectification of the woman to screen (in both senses of the word) the extent to which roles of “husband, father, lord” are “mask[s] masking less and less” (156).

John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* discloses the violence hidden within the narrative of the postmodern striptease. As many have pointed out, the dynamic that controls the novel is the desire to get to the bottom of Sarah Woodruff; she explicitly embodies something more “real” and “free” than the Victorian society that shuns her, and we with Charles Smithson participate in her gradual “unveil[ing]” (Michael 228). As Magali Cornier Michael puts it, “everything points to and supports the view of Sarah as an object of mystery” (228). The maintenance of her status as “object of mystery,” however, for us and for Charles, demands that Sarah’s point of view be excluded, with the result that “Sarah remains objectified and never becomes a subject in her own right” (228). Without noting the allusions to a striptease, Thomas Foster has shown that the novel positions Charles “encounter[ing] Sarah in various degrees of shedding garments: her bonnet, her cloak, and, in the fateful scene in Endicott’s Family Hotel in Exeter, her day clothes entirely” (79). For Foster, the gradual stripping “emphasizes the eroticism connected with her and also the freedom from conventionally ‘clothed’ responses” (79).
progression also, however, reveals the ways in which Charles’s quest for something more “real” than Victorian society is mapped onto Sarah’s objectified body (as well as onto the commodity item), and it demonstrates a gradual escalation of violence as Charles struggles to strip away the very last veil and stand face to face with “truth or meaning,” to again quote Baudrillard (Seduction 8).

As in “Menelaiad,” however, the endeavor to achieve “naked Helen” is an illusion. The progress of Foster’s striptease ends on the rape scene that turns out not to be a rape scene: Sarah, it turns out, has orchestrated Charles’ passionate quest, probably in order to produce a child without him—without a father at all—and the “frantic brutality” itself, far from providing evidence of his subjective agency (although the hymen is “conquered”), leaves him instead, first, with the knowledge that his desire has been scripted and, second, without an object whose unveiling will define his newfound commitment to the real (Fowles 274). It is at this point in the novel where Sarah disappears, and the split ending reinforces the extent to which she has been, from the beginning, unattainable. Rather than being reduced to a nugget of consumable truth, she is rather diffused into the uncertainty of the multiple endings. In its unavailability, her person in a sense resists the commodification of women’s bodies that Charles bewails in another context: “[Women] are to sit, are they not, like so many articles in a shop and to let us men walk in and turn them over and point at this one or that one” (310). For Charles, however, the consequences of the loss of consumer status are akin to the effects on Menelaus of his inability to grasp some ineffable and non-reflexive “truth” at the core of “naked Helen.” Thus The French Lieutenant’s Woman accomplishes not only the loss of revelation but the splitting apart of a protagonist who is up until the non-rape relatively coherent and centered—he too is diffused amongst the multiple endings.

James Tweedie, using Barth’s term, has established that Nabokov’s Lolita is also a novel of the “striptease” (4). In ways that do not limit themselves to images on the outskirts of the text, Lolita as a whole confesses to the unanswerable desire of the narrator to strip away the veils that obscure Barth’s “naked Helen,” and the tension of the novel is itself, according to Tweedie, “contingent on the promised revelation of a secret” (4). “But who or what,” Tweedie asks, “is stripping?” (4). In what is either defiance of or parodic commitment to the romantic and/or pornographic genre, the sexual object of desire is gained too early, yet desire continues unabated. Humbert first rapes Lolita less than halfway through the novel, and from this point the violence in the novel escalates, thus registering Humbert’s inability to achieve some ineffable form of truth or closure through the abuse of her body. Thomas Frosch argues that it is precisely the unpossessability of Lolita that makes the
novel, finally, a parodied “version of the quest or hunt” structure of romance (127). The novel does indeed differ from traditional romantic form in that its central focus is very tightly held not only to the impossibility but the falseness and, in fact, violence of desire. Nor does the thrust of the novel shift Clarissa-like to the rehabilitation of the rake or to the psychological consequences for the heroine.

Rather it is Humbert’s frustration over Lolita’s increasing removal and obscurity that structures the movement of the text, an affective response doubled by the reader, a fact noted by innumerable critics from the time of the novel’s first publication. As Michael Wood puts it, “The ‘actual’ Lolita is the person we see Humbert can’t see, or can see only spasmodically. In this sense she is a product of reading, not just ‘there’ in the words, but because she is what a reading finds, and I would say needs to find, in order to see the range of what the book can do. She needs to be ‘there,’ that is, and she needs to be found” (117). The reader, like Humbert Humbert, is finally “tease[d]” by a shrouded figure who, like Quilty, seems always one step ahead and knows precisely the type of puzzles that will intrigue—“conundrums” designed finally to “ejaculate in my face” (Lolita 252). The text is itself thus draped in veils that do not ultimately reveal anything other than the desire of the white male subject. Simone de Beauvoir argued as long ago as 1972 that the “Lolita Syndrome,” which appeared in cinema following the publication of the novel, “was not in fact about sexual young girls but rather about young girls being sexualized by men [; t]he nymph’s charms lie in her essential absences” (McCracken 130). Like Sarah Woodruff, Lolita is absented from the text from the beginning.

I would like to suggest that the novel—and the novel of the postmodern striptease generally—thus speaks to commodity fetishism under late capitalism and to the ways in which consumer culture relies heavily on the female body to create the illusion of an abstract universal essence behind the material commodity. The novel that begins as “desire unfulfilled,” in the case of Lolita, becomes increasingly “insisten[t]” on the material circulations of “sex and money” as it acknowledges the violence inherent in fetishism, makes explicit that Lolita has not only been raped and victimized but has been effaced by Humbert’s narrative, absented from the story (Thomieres 170). Along with the grief for a Lolita who has always been absent from the narrative, however, the novel also offers up a final vision of masculinity as itself a secondary function of consumer identity. Humbert’s climactic murder scene falls far short of the genres that inform it—the Western, the detective—just as it disallows Humbert’s vision of himself as somehow spinning the plot of the story around him.

Moving in a direction not generally followed by critics of Lolita, Dana
Brand has argued that the novel is misunderstood if not read in terms of the explicit critique it stages of American consumer culture. Humbert is at his most trustworthy as narrator when he maligns those Americans who cross his path, and the source of his criticism is almost always based in the extent to which they “[construct] their identity and view of the world according to the images of normalcy provided by advertising, mass culture, and applied social science” (Brand 14). Humbert himself is presumably distanced from this consumerist identity by virtue of his foreignness and his aestheticism. Characters like Charlotte Haze offend this sensibility, as Brand points out, and are repellent to Humbert because they are defined by the desires and conventions produced and sold by postwar American media: “As Humbert notes and describes in detail, her behavior and view of the world are determined entirely by homemaking guides, Hollywood films, movie magazines, advertisements, psychoanalytic cliches and such ‘deadly conventionalities’ as book clubs or bridge clubs” (15). Because she is a creature apparently constructed by the late-capitalist machine, she is condemned in romantic fashion as all hollow surface, is typecast immediately as “one of those women whose polished words” fail to “reflect” a “soul”; Charlotte is a creature of “sunny cellophane” and “bedraggled magazines,” “utterly indifferent at heart” (Lolita 39). What she attempts to feed Humbert—a salad whose “recipe [she] lifted from a woman’s magazine”—is, like her offer of intimacy, the cause of “repulsion and retreat” (65, 71).

On a larger scale, Humbert’s and Lolita’s first road trip across the United States is an expose of the gross commodification of history and culture perpetuated by the U.S. tourist industry (a mechanism of desire that followed the wartime and postwar expansion of the interstate highway system). In ways that predate Don DeLillo’s most photographed barn by nearly four decades, the “long highways” they “voraciously . . . [consume]” are an explicit replication of the tour book (“in three volumes” [Lolita 154, 156]):

Collections of frontier lore. Antebellum homes with iron-trellis balconies and hand-worked stairs, the kind down which movie ladies with sun-kissed shoulders run in rich Technicolor, holding up the fronts of their flounced skirts with both little hands in that special way, and the devoted Negress shaking her head on the upper landing. . . . Hundreds of scenic drives, thousands of Bear Creeks, Soda Springs, Painted Canyons. . . . Crystal Chamber in the longest cave in the world, children under 12 free. . . . Shakespeare, a ghost town in New Mexico, where bad man Russian Bill was colorfully hanged seventy year ago. . . . Our twentieth Hell’s Canyon. Our fiftieth Gateway to something or other fide that tour book, the cover of
which had been lost by that time. . . . Indian ceremonial dances, strictly commercial. ART: American Refrigerator Transit Company. . . . A winery in California, with a church built in the shape of a wine barrel. Death Valley. Scotty’s Castle. Works of Art collected by one Rogers over a period of years. The ugly villas of handsome actresses. . . . A zoo in Indiana where a large troop of monkeys lived on concrete replica of Christopher Columbus’ flagship. . . . A motel whose ventilator pipe passed under the city sewer. Lincoln’s home, largely spurious, with parlor books and period furniture that most visitors reverently accepted as personal belongings. (158–60)

Geography is mapped and contained by a AAA catalog; art, nature, and history are alike transformed by the late-capitalist text into the “sunny cellophane” wrapper that generates consumer desire while concealing an absence (or while generating the illusion of a concealed absence). The passage calls to mind Jameson’s critique of postmodernism generally and postmodern pastiche particularly for covering over “the ingrained awareness of cultural history” available to modernism, a point that John Burt Foster explores in the more general context of Nabokov’s overall oeuvre (“Reading Nabokov with Jameson” 202). For Foster, the pastiche Nabokov employs is positively represented: “Nabokov seems to glory in the very stance that bothers Jameson—the displacement of true history by a purely aesthetic dialectic of modernist innovation” (206). Certainly there is a certain textual humor in the description of guidebook America; the tone, however, seems to stop short of taking “glory in” the scene. Nabokov was not an author to promote the flattening out of the particular, and the text seems here—regardless of Nabokov’s explicit stance regarding Marxism—almost to echo Jameson’s sense that the “postmodern force field” has involved, among other things, a commodification of the past and a “crisis in historicity” (Postmodernism 25) that has contributed to the incapacity of the contemporary subject to map himself or herself onto a larger external reality. Humbert’s self-confessed solipsism comes to mind.

If, however, a sympathetic Humbert Humbert critiques from a foreign distance a geography that “loses its depth and threatens to become a glossy skin” (Jameson, Postmodernism, 34), the text also makes him complicit in the violent processes whereby this hypothetical flattening has been accomplished, and it is this complicity that powers the affective nexus of the book: that Humbert is paradoxically both loathsome and sympathetically tragic at the same time.

At the most basic level, Humbert capitalizes on the extent to which Lolita is “the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster” (Lolita 150), and he mobilizes consumer effects to trap her. He buys her
(or promises to buy her) things throughout the novel—in hopes of keeping her or of buying her sexual acquiescence—in spending binges that approach the encyclopedic listing of tourist attractions: “In the gay town of Lepingville I bought her four books of comics, a box of candy, a box of sanitary pads, two cokes, a manicure set, a travel clock with a luminous dial, a ring with a real topaz, a tennis racket, roller skates with white high shoes, field glasses, a portable radio set, chewing gum, a transparent raincoat, sunglasses, some more garments—swooners, shorts, all kinds of summer frocks” (143–44). At another level, he early on also exploits his purported “striking . . . resemblance” to “some crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush” (71, 45). Aware that Lolita is “a modern child, an avid reader of movie magazines, an expert in dream-slow close-ups,” Humbert presents himself to her (or so he believes) in ways that give her the illusion that it is her own desiring gaze that is powering the developing plot: “while I passed by her in my adult disguise (a great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood), the vacuum of my soul managed to suck in every detail of her bright beauty” (51, 41). Humbert thus attributes to Lolita the scopophilia that has been traditionally coded as masculine. If Humbert relies on the rhetoric of, to quote Laura Mulvey, cinematic codes of movie culture to present himself to himself as having accomplished a “skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure” (2183) for Lolita, however, he does so in ways that leave him immune from being himself too deeply objectified—the “movieland manhood” is only a “disguise” he wears over a presumably more real and less vulnerable masculine self. We are to understand that the temporary reversal of gaze and spectacle is purely illusory, because in the end, as Teresa de Lauretis has pointed out, “women spectators are placed in a zero position, . . . in a negative semantic space between the ‘active’ look” the camera frames for them and the “‘passive’ image” the framing camera constructs (Alice Doesn’t 75–76). It is Humbert himself who is the “active” subject-consumer in this scene: “the vacuum of my soul managed to suck in every detail of her bright beauty” (41). Disassembled into particles—“details”—that he can figuratively consume, Lolita offers him a coherence of vision that approaches the “bright beauty” of the sublime. What she sees we do not know.

Brand and Power have both pointed out that Humbert returns self-consciously to filmic or photographic portrayal of Lolita throughout the novel: “cinematic metaphors run rampant in Humbert Humbert’s account of Lolita’s seduction and betrayal” (Power 2). In each case, the description explicitly objectifies her while it effaces her in the name of some “bright beauty” that, although beyond the grasp of the nameable and representable, is offered to the reader in a gesture not only of defense but alliance. The “scene” of his achieving orgasm with Lolita’s legs across his
lap he says he will “replay” in order that the reader may “participate.” We, too, are invited to “examine [the scene’s] every detail” with an attitude of “impartial sympathy.” As in a screenplay, we are given a “main character,” a “time,” a “place,” and “props” (59). Humbert regrets only that “no film had recorded the curious pattern, the monogrammic linkage of our simultaneous or overlapping moves” (60). After the “scene” (when Lolita has gone with friends to see, significantly enough, a movie), we are to be persuaded that there has been “absolutely no harm done.” In an oft-quoted passage, Humbert concludes, “The child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her. And nothing prevented me from repeating a performance that affected her as little as if she were a photographic image rippling upon a screen and I a humble hunchback abusing myself in the dark” (64). The alliance with the reader is accomplished through the assignment of filmic voyeurism—Humbert, too, has only sat in the darkened theater; and we, too, “participate” in the pedophilic act (which is only filmic). Together, reader and Humbert thus sanctify the innocence of the scopophilic gaze and define the hedonistic late-capitalist subject as he who consumes for pleasure the material object that is finally only a placeholder for a value that far exceeds it. Lolita herself is the “sunny cellophane wrapper” that generates consumer desire without containing the remuneration; she goes to “movieland” after the event, while Humbert proclaims, “What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own” (64). That the ditty he has sung to her throughout the masturbation scene ends in the murder of a woman—“And the gun I killed you with, O my Carmen, / The gun I am holding now” (64)—reinforces the sense that she “is little more than a replication of a photographic still,” as Linda Kauffman puts it when asking of Lolita, “Is There a Woman in the Text?” (137). She has become “safely solipsized,” consumed, “the object of his appropriation” (Nabokov 62; Kauffman 137). Significantly, and referring to the novel at large, Richard Rorty has argued that what Lolita is most centrally about is the possibility that “there can be sensitive killers, cruel aesthetes, pitiless poets—masters of imagery who are content to turn the lives of other human beings into images on a screen, while simply not noticing that these other people are suffering” (157).

Again, the filmic metaphor is used to describe the ways in which Humbert’s narrative is haunted by “the absence of [Lolita’s] voice” (310). The elision effected in part through Humbert’s use of filmic and/or photographic description helps to reveal the ways in which Lolita serves in the novel as the embodiment of the fetishized commodity under late capitalism. Commodity fetishism posits that the exchangeable thing under
capitalism not only comes to signify something abstract and universal rather than what it is in itself, its own use-value, but also hides from view the social relationship that has produced it and invested it with that surplus value (the inequitable relationship of capitalist, laborer, and consumer, for example). Slavoj Žižek summarizes the classic Marxian example of the money form: “[M]oney is in reality just an embodiment, a condensation, a materialization of a network of social relations—the fact that it functions as a universal equivalent of all commodities is conditioned by its position in the texture of social relations. But to the individuals themselves, this function of money—to be the embodiment of wealth—appears as an immediate, natural property of a thing called ‘money,’ as if money is already in itself, in its immediate material reality, the embodiment of wealth” (Sublime Object 31). The extent to which Humbert Humbert is entangled in this logic of commodity fetishism appears in his rhetorical treatment of Lolita as if her material existence is an expression of an abstract universal quality (her exchange-value under late patriarchy). In the scene discussed earlier, for example, Humbert tells us that “what I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her” (64). To the extent that she is commodified—what Humbert generally thinks of as solipsized or aestheticized—she signifies a surplus meaning that cannot in and of itself be connected to her material body but which transforms her into something (or surrounds her in a haze) of inestimable value, a “golden load” promising a “golden goal,” “gold-dusted,” with the “sun . . . on her lips” and a “sunny leg” (61, 62).3

If at the height of Humbert’s desire Lolita’s material existence fades into a gold fetish, at times of torpor she is something very different. At those times, it is worth noting, she serves to embody what Žižek argues is the imagined nature of one’s relations with fellow humans within a system of fetishized commodities: “[I]n capitalism relations between men are definitely not ‘fetishized’; what we have here are relations between ‘free’ people, each following his or her proper egoistic interest. The predominant and determining form of their interrelations is not domination and servitude but a contract between free people who are equal in the eyes of the law” (Sublime Object 25). To the extent that she is a human for Humbert, Lolita is “free,” unconstrained by a relation of dominance—not the victim of incest, pedophilia, child abuse, and rape. Humbert’s point of view moves regularly into rhetorical modes that represent her as an equal partner in sex.4 Humbert’s own “poor joy” is thus sometimes secondary to the Lolita “who seduced me” (149, 134). She is “The Frigid Queen” who can choose whether or not to “lend” him “her brown limbs,” who is “indifferent to [his] ecstasy” (168, 149, 167). Humbert is her “lover” (“not even her
first”), and it has been her choice to “[enter his] world, umber and black Humberland, with rash curiosity; she surveyed it with a shrug of amused distaste” (137, 168). As her body is elided at some points, overtaken by the golden aura of abstract value, so, too, then at other points is the predatory abusiveness of the relationship obscured, transformed into an apparently persuasive image of free market self-interest and democracy. It is unsurprising, then, that Lolita learns to trade sex for money, herself determining the fairness of the price. And acknowledging not only their equality “in the eyes of the law” but her complicity in their “contract,” Lolita, claims Humbert, “was even more scared of the law than I” (173).

The fetishism Humbert applies to Lolita, like the sexual abuse, is thus partly camouflaged by that other half of capitalist ideology—that individuals are free agents. To the extent that Lolita is guided by self-interest, however, she complicates the already difficult leap from material body to (solipsized) abstract essence. The dual logic of commodity fetishism risks tearing itself apart, and it is in part in desperate recognition of this fact that Humbert’s desire and violence escalate over the course of the novel as the golden light of Lolita’s transformation seems to recede further and further from his grasp. The narrative striptease is performed amidst increasing frustration on the part of Humbert, who is obsessed with possessing the “perilous magic” imagined to be underneath the “animality” of the visible (136). Thus, twenty-three pages after their first intercourse at The Enchanted Hunters, Humbert “suck[s] till I was gorged on her spicy blood” (158). Nine pages later, Humbert fantasizes Hannibal Lector–like of “turn[ing] my Lolita inside out and apply[ing] voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys” (167). Seventy pages after The Enchanted Hunters, enraged by the “exasperating impenetrable order” of her “grubby fingers,” “unwashed face,” “wenchy smell,” “freshly made-up lips,” and “contemptuous nostrils,” Humbert physically restrains her and drags her up the stairs: “I held her quite hard and in fact hurt her rather badly . . . , and once or twice she jerked her arm so violently that I feared her wrist might snap” (206–7). Ten pages later he rapes her violently, “wildly,” pursuing “the shadow of her infidelity” (217). Just before he loses her, and ninety-three pages after The Enchanted Hunters, Humbert punches her in the face, “deliver[ing] a tremendous backhand cut that caught her smack on her hot hard little cheekbone” (229).

At one level, the escalation of violence—and the extent to which it is increasingly realistically narrated—underscores the extent to which Lolita’s has been “evacuated” at the semiotic level, “turn[ed . . . ] into a projective site for [Humbert’s] neuroses and his narrative (Kauffman 147). The novel’s “cruelty” could thus be argued to follow so closely as to distill
a long Western tradition of romantic narrative, “from myths of courtly love to Wagnerian surges and spasms,” as Eric Rothstein points out (39). At the same time, the sequencing of violent events also speaks eloquently to what Jiwei Ci argues is the parasitic mechanism of advanced consumer capitalism, whereby “pleasure as such . . . is not the point”; rather, the market “exploit[s . . . ] human hedonistic potential for potential profit-maximization”: “There is virtually no enlargement of hedonism, or reduction of asceticism, that has not been turned into a commodity whose consumption bears the compulsive character and the class features of commodity fetishism” (305–6). The “compulsive character” that Ci argues powers consumer growth works to explain not only the structure of Lolita’s atypical plot, the fact that the novel continues far longer than the placement of the climactic first sex would seem to warrant, but also the extent to which economic figurations depend upon particular constructions of gender. The desire for “the divine apocalyptic word” reveals in its compulsive excesses the violence imposed on feminized materiality/objectified femininity in the struggle to achieve abstract universality. The heavily aestheticized, academic flavor of Humbert Humbert’s obsession locates what is finally a late-capitalist consumerist ethic well within the traditions of white, Western, privilege.

A noteworthy feature of Humbert’s compulsive behavior is the extent of his self-consciousness. Humbert’s moments of regret acknowledge the fetishism and the abusiveness (and the obfuscation of that abusiveness) that define his relationship with Lolita. After The Enchanted Hunters, for example, he imagines that he is “sitting with the small ghost of somebody I had just killed.” He castigates himself, to his readers, on the grounds that “This was an orphan. This was a lone child, an absolute waif, with whom a heavy-limbed, foul-smelling adult had had strenuous intercourse three times that very morning” (142). Like the violence, and like the rhetoric that makes of Lolita more and more an equal (if not more powerful than equal) partner in their relationship, the self-mortification of Humbert’s repentance becomes more intense and expansive as the novel progresses: “She groped for words. I supplied them mentally (‘He broke my heart. You merely broke my life’)” (281). Humbert’s confessional mode has all the zeal of the wretch-like-me-mea-culpa grandiloquence of traditional Christianity; it is extreme enough to compel Levine to ask “whether Humbert deliberately damns himself” (42). Thus, located well within the rhetoric of Christianity, it is a vocabulary associated not only with bedrock truth telling (naked Helen revealed at last) but also with redemption; in a Christian economy, confession (not unlike indulgences) can be exchanged for sin in an even trade. At the same time, Frederick Whiting makes the case that Humbert’s confessional echoes the penitential mode of cold
war-era political interrogation generally, and, more specifically, his “account of himself is entirely compliant with the requirements placed upon him by [sexual psychopath statues established between 1937 and 1955]”; moreover, “his willingness to reestablish equilibrium by paying the proverbial debt to society prepares him for reintegration into the collective” (837–38). It should not be surprising, then, that Humbert’s confession makes him decent, if not exactly above reproach; to some rather large extent, the confession makes him not guilty of what he has just confessed. “Humbert is perfectly willing to say that he is a monster,” wrote Lionel Trilling in 1958, and “no doubt he is, but we find ourselves less and less eager to say so” (qtd. in Whiting 833). Similarly, Olsen finds in Lolita a “metamorphosis” of Humbert’s tone from “love into lust,” “lust into guilt,” and “guilt into grief,” as if in passage through these stages Humbert is absolved (121). And indeed Humbert suggests as much, at times, noting while sitting with Lolita’s husband that he felt “no grudge at all, nothing except grief and nausea” (276). He always, however, returns to the confessional and to the apparent self-consciousness of guilt: “I have hurt too much too many bodies with my twisted poor hands to be proud of them” (276).

But it is also this self-conscious tendency more than any other feature of the text that locates the novel firmly within the cultural matrix of late capitalism. i ek has argued persuasively that commodity fetishism is a function not of consciousness but of action; we know very well at this point in history that the commodity doesn’t really contain any magical, evanescent qualities, but we behave as if it does, and it is this behavior that preserves the “sublime object” (Sublime Object 18). i ek applies this “formula of fetishistic disavowal [—] I know very well, but still”—to the single commodity item and its advertised associations, such as the magical “it” of Coke, as well as to larger and less rigidly defined categories of commodity such as money, or the ethnic minority: “I know that money is a material object like others, but still . . . [it is as if it were made of a special substance over which time has no power] . . . . ‘I know that Jews are people like us, but still . . . [there is something in them]’” (Sublime Object 18). Real belief is attributed to a naive other—the person who is taken in by the idea that Coke represents some magical aura of joy and sexuality, for example. The German nun in Don DeLillo’s White Noise articulates precisely this process of attribution of belief that i ek argues is so crucial to late capitalism:

“It’s not what I believe that counts. It’s what you believe.”

“This is true,” she said. “The nonbelievers need the believers. They are desperate to have someone believe. . . . Our pretense is
dedication. Someone must appear to believe. Our lives are no less serious than if we professed real faith, real belief. As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that someone believe. Wild-eyed men in caves. Nuns in black. Monks who do not speak. We are left to believe. Fools and children. Those who have abandoned belief must still believe in us. They are sure that they are right not to believe but they know belief must not fade completely. (318–19)

As Jack Gladney's unnamed nun makes clear, belief in the (commodified) transcendent is in the late twentieth century ascribed to some other, faceless placeholder, less a person one might hope to meet than an "Other Scene," as i ek puts it, which is conceived to be "external to the thought whereby the form of the thought is already articulated in advance" (Sublime Object 19). Further, i ek suggests, "the symbolic order" is precisely such an "Other Scene"; like the German nun, the naive consumer, the canned laugh track of a sitcom, the symbolic order "supplements and/or disrupts" the relationship between "external' factual reality and 'internal' subjective experience" (19). Following this logic, we can see how Humbert Humbert's fetishistic narrative treatment of Lolita can persist for 311 pages side by side with his/narrative disavowal of belief in the "perilous magic of nymphets." Humbert—and the reader—"knows very well" by virtue of life in a liberal humanist (and feminist) world that "the real child Lolita" is a little girl and not an "immortal daemon" (127, 141), "but still," to use i ek's language, "it is as if [she] were made of a special substance over which time has no power," "but still . . . there is something in [her]" (Sublime Object 18). Humbert—and the reader—knows very well that Lolita "sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment [he] feigned sleep," but still, Lolita is a "fey child" possessed of "nymphen evil breathing" (178). Thus, a subject position of benevolent clear-sightedness is preserved at the same time that the romantic—and violent—commodification of the female body is not relinquished. One is positioned as a shrewd consumer—but a consumer nonetheless.

A similar mechanism structures the confessional segments. I note above that in 1958, Lionel Trilling makes the odd contention that "Humbert is perfectly willing to say that he is a monster, and no doubt he is, but we find ourselves less and less eager to say so" (qtd. in Whiting 833). No doubt a part of the effectiveness of Humbert's confession is due, as I argue above, to the traditional association of confession and forgiveness. And yet Trilling's comment suggests also something more, something akin to i ek's "formula of fetishistic disavowal": "I know very well, but still." This connection is based in the extent to which the confessional moments are,
at some times more than others, heavily ironic. It is difficult not to assign to Humbert’s “polluted rags and miserable convulsions,” for example, a certain amount of over-dramatization, and the self-castigation involved in his having been “a pentapod monster, despicable and brutal, and turpid, and everything, . . . living in a world of total evil” is equally contrived (286). In fact, the confession scenes are sometimes so overplayed as to become parodic, rippling with the irony endemic to the postmodern novel, a position I am not the first to take. Lance Olsen, for example, likens the text to John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* by virtue of its “fantastic autism” and a solipsism that “mocks the confessional mode” (123). The point to make would be that if the confession is doubled by irony, then we have again an example of the self-conscious presentation of a point of view undoubtedly not held by the subject presumed to know and yet preserved nonetheless: I know very well that my behavior has been monstrous, but still there is something in me that is not monstrous; I know very well that Humbert says he is a monster, and indeed he is a monster, but still something about him is not monstrous. Nabokov himself seems to suggest something similar when he admits that “there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year” (*Despair* 9)—in spite of consignment to Hell, something remains of Humbert that is of inestimable value.

The classical definition of ideology includes the inevitable failure to recognize it as such. “The very concept of ideology,” says i ek, “implies a kind of basic, constitutive naïveté: the misrecognition of its own presuppositions, of its own effective conditions, a divergence between so-called social reality and our distorted representation, our false consciousness of it” (*Sublime Object* 28). Following Peter Sloterdijk, i ek makes the case that this classical conception of ideology is no longer useful for understanding the ideological formations of late capitalism: in an age of cynicism, the “subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask” (29). i ek thus puts into question the effectivity of the basic form of postmodern critique—irony: “cynical reason, with all its ironic detachment, leaves untouched the fundamental level of ideological fantasy, the level on which ideology structures the social reality itself” (30). The ironic distance so central to late-capitalist intellectualism is thus dismissed as “part of the game” (28). As fetishistic disavowal attributes to some naive other a belief in the magical properties of commodities, irony abjures the point of view it nonetheless and at the same time preserves. Dominant ideological forms are unaffected by laughter, according to i ek—since the scaffolding that supports ideological formations is built not of what individuals “think or know they are doing” but rather of “what
the individuals are doing”: “Cynical distance is just one way—one of many ways—to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them” (31, 33).

A central “part of the game” that is Lolita is thus the ironic undertow that puts into question (and into tension) the transformational nature of rape (for the male subject) on the one hand and the monstrosity of the rapist on the other. The quagmire we are left with can be articulated in part like this: the rape of a child will/will not offer a transcendent payoff; the rapist of a child is/is not a monster. The instability of either pronouncement feeds back into the volatility of the other in a gesture that preserves even as it disavows the act of rape itself. The abuse of Lolita, in fact, becomes the unknowable reality upon which Humbert’s masculinity stands or falls. It represents a figurative stripping away of veils as desperate, endless, and ironic as Menelaus’s struggle to reach “naked Helen.” This is a masculinity structured uneasily upon the question of consumption and that folds the entire romantic quest tradition into a discourse of violent consumerism: the question is no longer whether the questing knight can find the lady, or woo her; the question is rather whether or not owning her will give access to the ineffable value she seems to represent. Thus the quest continues, as obsessive as it is ironized, no less real for having entered the realm of the consumer item. It is appropriate that Humbert begins to sense Lolita’s loss in the Yellow Pages for Wace, amidst “Drugs, Real Estate, Fashions, Auto Parts, Café, Sporting Goods, Real Estate, Furniture, Appliances, Western Union, Cleaners, Grocery . . . . Dignified Funeral Service . . . Druggists-Retail. Hill Drug Store. Larkin’s Pharmacy” (226–27).

Inescapably positioned as a consumer in a “sunny cellophane” world, the masculine subject is in Lolita troubled by an inability to get to the bottom of things, to peel away the layers that conceal some larger, aestheticized truth, and so it is fitting that the novel ends immediately after a murder scene that parodies the heavily masculinized scripts for murder and rape alike: “[E]very time I did it to him, that horrible thing to him, his face would twitch in an absurd clownish manner, as if he were exaggerating the pain; he slowed down, rolled his eyes half closing them and made a feminine ‘ah!’ and he shivered every time a bullet hit him as if I were tickling him, and every time I got him with those slow, clumsy, blind bullets of mine, he would say under his breath, with a phoney [sic] British accent . . . : ‘Ah, that hurts, sir, enough!’” (305). The scene that was supposed to have given Humbert proof of potent masculinity—in a moment of truth-seeking revelation—becomes a farce; the script provided to him by virtue of twentieth-century existence is old and tired, and Humbert cannot fill it
out convincingly. The bullet and gun make the phallus a ridiculously blunt and ineffective signifier, and the homoerotic transvestism of the scene puts the lie to the fantasies of transcendence attributed throughout to heterosexual rape. In fact, Nabokov draws our attention repeatedly and explicitly to the ludicrous ineffectivity of this gun as phallic symbol—bullets drop “feebly” from its “sheepish muzzle” (49)—and then caps the point by having Quilty offer Humbert “photographs of eight hundred and something male organs . . . examined and measured in 1932 [by a female explorer and psychoanalyst] on Bagration, in the Barda Sea, very illuminating graphs” (304).

The novel thus closes on the suggestion that the photographic lens has turned on Humbert, and that what is finally commodified is not only the female body but the white, educated, masculine subject in relation to that body. The consumer item he has bought to oil his gun has turned out to be “the wrong product”; rather than making the weapon more sure, it has rendered it literally unmanageable, as well as “awfully messy” (297). Similarly, the power implicit in Humbert’s monstrous desire to consume Lolita appears increasingly to be an “awfully messy” illusion; his desire is revealed as having been constructed, scripted, and imposed by the commodity culture he has critiqued and felt superior to throughout the novel. Humbert is represented repeatedly in this scene as himself a (not quite competent) echo of the movieland man whom he has from the beginning confessed that he resembles. Approaching Quilty’s house, he sees, projected by the “truly mystical” “selenian glow” of the drive-in movie screen, “a thin phantom” with a “raised . . . gun”—a “mystical” image that is at this late point in the novel “reduced to tremulous dishwater by the oblique angle of that receding world” (295). Quilty realizes immediately, of course, that the two are playing out the tired roles assigned to them by Hollywood, first “imitating the underworld numbskull of movies” and later delivering stage directions for Humbert: “I’m the author of fifty-two successful scenarios. I know all the ropes. Let me handle this” (299, 300). Humbert’s desire for a transcendent, climactic death scene is thus reduced to his roll as a “dumm[y] stuffed with dirty cotton and rags” in the “obligatory scene in the Westerns” of an elderly reader’s childhood (301). He finally “loses himself,” as Tweedie puts it, “in a narrative of someone else’s making, in ‘the end of the ingenious play staged for me by Quilty’” (13).

Nabokov was renowned for his long-standing antipathy toward psychoanalysis. Geoffrey Green goes so far as to claim that he “sustained the grandest and most extravagant contempt for psychoanalysis known in modern literature” (1). That contempt, Green argues, derived from Nabokov’s belief that Sigmund Freud was a “demonic monomaniacal champion of one interpretation for all situations” (19). Certainly Lolita...
does nothing to lessen Green’s argument and may well actually “parody Psychoanalysis,” as Ingham argues it does (30). Among Humbert Humbert’s most sympathetic moments are those when he describes the way he has in the past “trifled” with psychiatrists: cunningly leading them on; . . . inventing for them elaborate dreams, pure classics in style (which make them, the dream-extortionists, dream and wake up shrieking) teasing them with fake ‘primal scenes’; and never allowing them the slightest glimpse of one’s real sexual predicament” (36). The psychiatric “celebrit[ies]” are judged to be “deranged” for their reductive interpretations of realities that are clearly not only more complex than they imagine but more capable of fighting back and deceiving the examiner (37). At the same time, however, the predatory desire of “the dream-extortionists” is not unlike Humbert’s nympholepsy, which the novel critiques for its abusive solipsism: Humbert would distill Lolita into a universal abstraction, a nugget of condensed value, a “golden load,” or a “golden glow.” In fact, this compulsion to possess, to distill, and to interpret haunts Nabokov's novels generally. Not unlike Humbert himself, Nabokov returned repeatedly to the idea of the obsessive desire to penetrate an objectified materiality in order to come into possession of the transcendent payoff, just as he also always critiqued that gesture for its impossibility—if not its violence and stupidity. One thinks, for example, of the dual structure of *Pale Fire*, which stages the interplay between poem and “monomaniacal” critic (poem-extortionist, perhaps—and it makes sense to remember that Humbert is also a literary critic). This doubledness of the simultaneous desire for and rejection of “the golden goal” of abstract fantasy speaks directly to Todorov’s description of the fetishistic disavowal and enlightened false consciousness that help to structure the cynicism of postmodern thought: “Cynical distance is just one way—one of many ways—to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them” (*Sublime Object* 33).

D. M. Thomas’s *The White Hotel* replays in interesting ways precisely the doubled dynamic that powers *Lolita*. An explicit critique of the shortcomings of Freudian psychoanalysis, the novel nonetheless perseveres in the struggle to gain access to the secret of the woman at the center of the text, closing on a revelation so abstract and otherworldly as to suggest that the problem with Freud’s “monomaniacal” interpretations was simply that they did not go far enough, did not allow the individual consumer enough freedom to see in the fetishized female body the inexpressible power of the sublime. In fact Thomas’s novel suggests, in retrospect, that Humbert’s problem with Freud is not so much that his psychoanalysis sought out depths in the individual psyche but that it sought to explain those universal depths in
terms of the material history of the individual rather than the vaguely transcendent. And it did so without the doubled cynicism of postmodern self-awareness that paradoxically preserves the consuming autonomy of the (coded masculine) subject—ironically but surely. Wymer Rowland makes the persuasive case that *The White Hotel* stages the dismissal of Freud in favor of Jung, the rejection of the personal and sexual as an explanation for (female) behavior and the side-long defense of the universal and even archetypal as being able to render a better account. The shift is accomplished, however, in ways that call to mind the erasure under which Humbert gestures toward the unspeakable magic of the nymphet. With its first ending, the novel establishes that Freud’s attempts to get to the bottom of Lisa Erdman, “Anna G.,” have all been, in the final analysis, wrong—or at least not good enough—by virtue of the fact that her “hysterical” symptoms have a crushingly simple material explanation: they have foretold her gruesome death in the massacre of Jews at Babi Yar in 1941. In the second and final ending, however, Lisa Erdman’s brutal death and rape open a passageway to an ephemeral and golden image of the Promised Land, the place beyond death where injury and pain are healed and where separation is overcome.

As with *Lolita*, the narrative of *The White Hotel* opens by inviting the reader to ratify or second-guess a man’s attempts to get to the bottom of a woman we suspect will harbor a secret, or an injury. And as in *Lolita*, we are forewarned of the power of this man. In his “Foreword,” “John Ray, Jr., Ph.D” cautions us that Humbert Humbert is “[a] shining example of moral leprosy. . . . He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman. But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!” (7). D. M. Thomas’s “Author’s Note” is more circumspect. In the pages of *The White Hotel* we shall confront “the majestic figure of Sigmund Freud,” the “discoverer of the great and beautiful modern myth of psychoanalysis” (vii). The author hastens to qualify what might be taken as (because in fact this is what it will be) a criticism: “By myth, I mean a poetic, dramatic expression of a hidden truth; and in placing this emphasis, I do not intend to put into question the scientific validity of psychoanalysis” (vii). Both authors thus immediately introduce the problematic status of hermeneutics: whether or not the interpretation we will be treated to will be true, whether its truth will be “magical,” or “mythical,” whether the logic of “scientific validity” will contradict the “conjurings” and seductive power of the “singing violin.” Both novels thus evoke the reader’s autonomous responsibility to attend consciously to the act of interpretation, to consider the “multiple and often contradictory forms and points of view,” because, as Linda Hutcheon writes of *The White Hotel*, “[t]his is a novel about how we produce meaning in fiction and history” (83).
As readers we are thus located in such a way as to watch a man watch a woman and to pass judgment on whether or not he sees her truly. We are offered the late-capitalist gift of presumed awareness and distance over and beyond that of the naive consumer of the image. And at the same time—not coincidentally—we are still positioned as the subject of the scopophilic (presumed masculine, heterosexual) gaze as it has been defined by contemporary film theory; it is still our prerogative to look at the heavily sexualized body of the woman, a body that is offered up as the ultimate present for the voyeur, self-represented in the poem “Don Giovanni” in pornographic ways that emphasize fluidity, excess, and gaping crevices:

I could not stop myself I was in flames from the first spreading of my thighs, no shame could make me push my dress down, thrust his hand away, the two, then three, fingers he jammed into me. . . . . . . juices ran down my thighs . . . Beneath our rug your son’s right hand was jammed up to the wrist inside me, laced in skin. (15–16, 19)

The fact that the poem is presented in the context of having been given to Freud willingly—more, Freud claims that his “sexual hysteri[c]” has “no objection” to the publishing of the work (11)—highlights the extent to which the exhibition is a gift. In its sexual excesses, and in its association of those excesses with death—charred and drowned bodies, bodies plunging from open windows—it offers Freud “a strengthened conviction” in the idea of “a death instinct, as powerful in its own way (though more hidden) as the libido” (8). In fact, Freud recognizes the manuscript as a gift—“One of my patients . . . has just ‘given birth’ to some writings which seem to lend support to my theory”—and circulates it as such, calling it “a ‘parting gift’” for his friend Sachs (9). The descriptions of her genitalia work to reinforce this impression: large enough for “your son’s right hand,” for the hands of more than one person at a time, it turns out, her vagina imagines the home to which, posits Freud’s theory of a death instinct, we would all return to lose at last the anxiety of separation from the mother. Similarly, “Don Giovanni” stresses the (inexplicably) bounteous lactating breasts that she offers freely to all around her: she “fed [the] lips” of Freud’s son, for whom her “milk [comes] into being”; her milk supply being too great for him alone, she “flower[s] beads of milk” for the corsetiere, also, as well as “the chef” and “the old kind priest who . . . craved his mother who was dying in a slum” (23, 22, 24, 23). The pornographic offering of her poem thus emphasizes that at all levels she takes joy in being consumed; this is the nature of the gift.
Yet the narrative of *The White Hotel* works relentlessly toward the revelation that Freud is not, finally, able to get to the bottom of Anna G. As John MacInnes puts it, “Freud serves to show how the unveiling of a soul fails to bare it completely, his efforts to disclose resulting in revelations of the unknown, or of his own limitations” (257). The offering of the female body and psyche has been an untrustworthy gesture—not because she has been disingenuous (although to some extent she has been, as we later learn), but because of the unstable nature of the female body as semiotic touchstone. Freud’s narrative, modeled after his many early case studies of hysterics, complete with footnotes, runs for fifty-five pages and is located at the center of the book. Unsurprisingly, it narrates the extended and difficult process of probing beneath “Frau Anna’s” physical symptoms (pain in her left ovary and breast, a chronic respiratory condition), and then beneath her dreams and memories, to arrive at last at the point where the “release of repressed ideas into consciousness” is achieved (141). Her hysterical symptoms are satisfactorily (if partially) explained by a badly resolved Oedipal trauma: “Frau Anna’s document expressed her yearning to return to the haven of security, the original white hotel—we have all stayed there—the mother’s womb” (143). Freud pronounces her cured, “of everything but life,” and sets her off into the world with “a reasonable prospect of survival” (141).

From this point on, the Freudian narrative is gradually unpacked. The first disruption is accomplished through simple narrative contrast. The realistically narrated richness of “The Health Resort” puts into question the extent to which her life has been reduced to the “Oedipal” script, and the juxtaposition of narrative points of view—doctor explaining patient; omniscient third-person narrator describing thoughts and actions from Lisa Erdman’s perspective—is somewhat unsettling. Her life presents also something of a disturbance merely by continuing on beyond the Freudian narrative, that highly closed form that is compelled to end at precisely the point where the oppressive facet of an identity has been, to quote Mary Ann Doane, “annihilate[d . . . ] by fiat, simply declar[ed . . . ] non-operational at the level of an indisputable psychical reality” (“Commentary” 76). The far-reaching psychic growth she undergoes after the moment of the pronounced “cure” is further disruptive, although this point is not explicitly articulated in the novel, by virtue of the fact that it comes into direct conflict with the ways in which Freud in “Femininity” visualizes the woman over thirty, who, in contrast to the man of the same age, “often frightens us by her psychical rigidity and unchangeability. Her libido has taken up final positions and seems incapable of exchanging them for others. There are no paths open to further development; it is as though the whole process had already run its course and remains thenceforward insus-
ceptible to influence—as though, indeed, the difficult development to femininity had exhausted the possibilities of the person concerned” (qtd. in Doane, “Commentary,” 74). Lisa Erdman’s life—even well past thirty—continues to move in rich and unexpected trajectories not anticipated in the Freudian analysis of her youth, not the least of these being her late and satisfying marriage to Victor Berenstein.

More obtrusive than this contrast between what appears to be her life and Freud’s story, however, are the letters she writes to Freud later in life, included also in this chapter. She addresses him (kindly) as an old, sick man, and describes herself as healthy and strong, thus registering a shift in the balance of power. Further, she not only critiques the gap between his narrative and her own lived experience, but attributes that lacuna to the extent to which she was able to deceive him: “It has been like reading the life story of a young sister who is dead—in whom I can see a family resemblance yet also great differences: characteristics and actions that could never have applied to me. I don’t mean that to seem critical, you saw what I allowed you to see” (182). Making his “vision”—like our scopophilia, perhaps—dependent on her rhetorical choices detracts from his status as the autonomous scientist, with free access to a passive objective world. He is rather revealed as solipsist in the sense that Humbert so names himself, his patriarchal assumptions unsteady, and Lisa Erdman, like Lolita, has become increasingly lost to his story. We learn that she wrote “Don Giovanni” long before he believed she had done so; that the “primal scene” she witnessed was in actuality a ménage à trois; that it was she who rejected her father and not the other way around.

Most lethally, she reveals to him (yet another veil stripped away), that the “terrible crime” she took the most pains to hide from Freud was the fact of her Jewishness: “But from that time (of the explicitly anti-Semitic sexual assault by the sailors) I haven’t found it easy to admit to my Jewish blood. I’ve gone out of my way to hide it, and I think that may have something to do with my evasiveness and lies generally—earlier in my life; and particularly with you, Professor. Because I knew you were Jewish, of course, and it seemed shameful to be ashamed. I think that was the most important thing I kept back from you” (188). Thus, the event that makes clear to her how physically, sexually vulnerable her body is to a reduction—to meat, or to abstract Otherness—is the event that associates her with Freud himself, an association made clear to him near to the time that the historical Freud was himself forced to flee to London during the Nazi occupation of Vienna. The power of Freud’s own “patriarchal rationality,” as Linda Hutcheon has termed it (86)—whereby one’s subjective existence is translated (and diminished) by another—is turned back onto his own weakening constitution. We remember now that it is Freud also who has
been the object of gossip, the butt of jokes. The letter of Sandor Ferenczi with which the novel opens, for example, has humorously narrated Freud’s having fallen into a faint over Jung’s discussion of “peat-bog corpses” and having over-dramatically accused Jung, upon regaining consciousness, of “wanting him out of the way” (5). Freud himself confesses to his friend Sachs that he “shall miss your Jewish jokes” (10). The hidden alliance of hysterical patient and Freud himself thus echoes what is implicit from this beginning: Freud’s fear of “risk[ing] his own authority” is a cover for the fact that he has already “lost” it, as Jung points out (5–6).

His authority as psychoanalyst rests in his being in a position to determine what it is that resides in the hidden depths of the pathological (or pathologized) other. Now it is he who enters the pathologizing objectification of racism, whereby the ethnic other is believed to contain or stand before some abstract form of universal evil. For Žižek, “the case of anti-Semitism . . . illustrates perfectly” the ways in which racism ascribes “a surplus, [an] evasive feature, which differentiates [Jews] from all other people”; this is an assignment of value that effaces the person in order to construct a space in which to think “all the phantasmic richness of the traits supposed to characterize Jews” (Sublime Object 114, 89, 99). Thus in the final analysis, the signifier “Jew” does not so much refer to a series of material properties (even if falsely identified) as it gestures toward “that unattainable X, to what is ‘in Jew more than Jew’ and what Nazism tried so desperately to seize, measure, change into a positive property enabling us to identify Jews in an objective-scientific way” (97). The mechanism Žižek argues powers anti-Semitism is similar to the work of psychoanalysis as it is represented in this novel, as it is also similar to Humbert Humbert’s scientific attempts to pronounce that Lolita is beyond rape because she is a member of the phylum “nymphet,” that category of girl “between the ages of 9 and 14 . . . who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as ‘nymphets’” (18). As with Humbert, Freud’s scientific project to identify and claim the “true nature” of the hysterics becomes less and less possible, and at the end the tables seem to turn so that Freud himself is trapped inside a script he has not chosen. On the one hand he has been fetishized (and thus erased) as “Jew,” forced to flee from his home and practice; on the other, he is dying, being slowly consumed by mouth cancer, the result of his own earlier consumption of cigars. The novel itself plays with this parallel: in a 1931 letter to “Frau Erdman,” Freud notes a “diverting” “slip of the pen” made by an English correspondent who wrote “to commiserate with me on my ‘troublesome jew,’ in place of ‘jaw’” (195). Perpetuating the slippage, Freud continues, “That is the cause of my delay in replying. My jaw, I mean” (195).
The validity of his psychoanalytic interpretations comes finally to an end in “The Sleeping Carriage,” which narrates Lisa Erdman-Berenstein’s death at Babi Yar. The lifelong pain in her left breast turns out to have been foretelling the “crashing” “jackboot” of an SS man; the pain in her left ovary has been foretelling the same boot “cracking into her pelvis” (248). Her inability to enjoy sex with her first husband—an anti-Semitic German soldier who, as a lawyer, prosecutes deserters—has perhaps been related to the SS bayonet that is later forced into her vagina, repeatedly, in “imitation of the thrusts of intercourse[; . . .] the woman’s body jerked back and relaxed, jerked and relaxed” (249). Certainly the fantastical sexual violence of “Don Giovanni” is now revealed to have been speaking to the real sexual violence of her death:

then he rammed in again. . . .
. . . driving like a piston in
and out, hour after hour. . . .
. . . without warning,
your son impaled me. . . .
I jerked and jerked until his prick released
[. . .]
I think something inside me had been torn. . . .
. . . now turning inside-out the blizzard tore
my womb clean out, I saw it spin into
the whiteness have you seen a flying womb. (17, 19, 20, 21)

The “son” of Freud—inheritor of the prerogative to do fetishistic violence to an Other—turns out to be the anti-Semitic Nazi. Like her epistolary confession of the sexual assault by the sailors, then, her gruesome death obstructs and finally empties out the Freudian narrative, which in the end pales beside the crushing materiality of the event, and, at the same time, beside the figuratively bottomless individuality of the murdered:

The soul of man is a far country, which cannot be approached or explored. Most of the dead were poor and illiterate. But every single one of them had dreamed dreams, seen visions and had amazing experiences, even the babes in arms (perhaps especially the babes in arms). Though most of them had never lived outside the Podol slum, their lives and histories were as rich and complex as Lisa Erdman-Berenstein’s. If a Sigmund Freud had been listening and taking notes from the time of Adam, he would still not fully have explored even a single group, even a single person. (250)
In significant ways the passage is reminiscent of the concluding chapters of *Lolita*, the points where we (with or without Humbert’s fellow recognition) are given “flashes of separate cries,” glimpses of a Lolita we have not seen or imagined, in both physical and psychological terms; we are shown the immensity of her absence from the narrative, which our knowledge of her death only heightens (310).

Yet *Lolita* is double-voiced in this sense, as I argue earlier, and Humbert quickly returns to a faith in the transcendent power achieved through his representation of Lolita: Nabokov’s novel concludes with “this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (311). By the same token, *The White Hotel* also pivots on the pathos generated by the now-revealed-as-absent woman. It both disavows the validity of a narrative that would claim hidden and possibly universal depths within human experience, and persists nonetheless in that pursuit—knowing very well, as I ek might put it, that the female body is a body, the female mind a mind, and yet persisting nonetheless in intellectual behavior that preserves the magical, evanescent qualities distilled in representations of rape and violence. In the end, Frau Erdman’s death and rape at Babi Yar—like the holocaust generally—signify something other than themselves, something of unstable ontological status, and yet real nonetheless: “The corpses had been buried, burned, drowned, and reburied under concrete and steel. . . . But all this had nothing to with the guest, the soul, the lovesick bride, the daughter of Jerusalem” (253). In fact, it is partly because Lisa Erdman-Berenstein is killed so horribly that the text can get away with a more or less believable escape through the open gate of the brutally raped woman to an other world of feminized transcendence. The final chapter posits an after-death promised land that fulfills the moment of direct address in “Don Giovanni”:

> . . . I was split open by your son, Professor, and now come back, a broken woman, perhaps more broken can you do anything for me can you understand. (16)

It is the returning “broken woman” who opens a narrative space in which “you,” perhaps, can act, where “you” can possibly understand—where “you” are authorized (again) to read a text that gestures obliquely toward fir and cedar, the rose of Sharon, and the shining tents of Israel; where old friends and lovers and parents are alive again.

At one level, then, we come up against the blank wall of a materiality that resists fetishism and the work of interpretation generally; at this level, MacInnes is correct to note that “the opportunity” the text offers to seek
out truth is “no more than a lure” (266). In “The Camp,” Freud is revealed to have been the priest in the fantastical White Hotel, the failed cleric/father of transubstantiation who literally feeds on the female speaker, nursing from her abundant breasts. His interpretive work is thus reduced to an act of infantile (and Christian) consumption, and Freud himself, although he does make it to the final chapter, is wheelchair bound, “his head . . . drooping, [. . . looking] dreadfully ill and unhappy” (260). On the other hand, Lisa Erdman’s symptoms have still been signs, even if Freud has been unable to read them—they have held a “future-oriented meaning” beyond Freud’s program (Foster, “Magic Realism in The White Hotel,” 210). And it is that “future-oriented” semiotic richness that enables the move to the last chapter, which “sketches for us,” according to MacInnes, “a spiritual dimension that is not to be found in the traditional theories of psychoanalysis” (264). Freud (and his unmasking) has merely been a decoy, a scapegoat, our imagined armchair channel surfer who takes for us the burden of doomed belief (that “Coke,” for example, “is it”) so that we also can continue to behave as if we believe—without embarrassment. The raped and brutalized female body continues to offer the consuming gaze some sustenance, continues to produce an aura of meaning beyond the material—even when that highly abstracted value is understood to “exist” within the frame of a distanced spectator’s “knowing better.” In this sense the female body is imaged by Vasca, the spayed family cat—“skeletally thin, and its paws a red pulp”—who manages to “[crawl] through streets, desserts, and over mountains, to find them again,” and then produces a litter of kittens (and an abundant milk supply), even though she has been spayed, and even though there is no potential father in evidence. The father’s kingdom endures—under erasure: “But the greatest miracle of all was—as Liuba said, laughing—where was the father?” (263).