The Woman in the Window

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L is for the way he looks at her. The grammar is not accidental. At her: she does not need to look back or even know he is looking. Of course, it can be a terrible thing, that object, predicate, subject complement, but nor is inspiration to be easily dismissed. I issue myself an orange alert to tread lightly here. Potential pitfalls abound, far too many for any one person to ever see—I am trying to be one person, let’s not forget. This is the crossroads between inspiration and titillation, sacred and secular, art and manipulation. These are the stakes. I might as well set them out from the start.

To be honest, I am a little blinded by the two lights I’ve brought with me. They are incomparable, except perhaps with each other. That claim will probably surprise some and I’ll get to it, but first things first. It is not what she looks like: I’ve already said the light is too bright to see clearly, and anyway wouldn’t that be just too predictable of a certain aged white male, l’homme moyen sensuel, rounding about the middle as he looks for some accordant

But if it were given to man to gaze on beauty’s very self—unsullied, unalloyed, and freed from the mortal taint that haunts the frailer loveliness of flesh and blood—if, I say, it were given to man to see the heavenly beauty face to face, would you call his, she asked me, an unenviable life, whose eyes had been opened to the vision, and who had gazed upon it in true contemplation until it had become his own forever?

—Plato, Symposium

Love passed, the Muse appeared . . .

—Pushkin, Eugene Onegin

Lara, Lolita, and Other Things that Start with L
buoyancy, anything more uplifting than the mere words that have hitherto
kept him afloat? I was not aware when I began this project that man in crisis
would be so central to it. Not human in crisis, man. If it turns out predictable
that I should be implicated in that discovery because of my age and gender, so
be it. It is something I’m going to live with. Perhaps that too is why it doesn’t
matter what she looks like.

The crisis of male middle age is a thin veneer atop the masculinity in cri-
sis I have in mind, the crisis inaugurated by the decline of the heroic ethic
amid the spread of the commercial one that I have been tracing in this book.
It is something more than what Deirdre McCloskey has grouped under the
title “anachronistic courage,” by which she seems to mean the stiff upper lip
of British officers in World War I and the later John Wayne ethos of Ameri-
can popular culture.³ That is a kind of epigonal nineteenth-century (or, if
you like, Homeric) aristocratism whose peak she identifies with the Greatest
Generation’s postwar experience, the extended homecoming of the 1950s. Per-
haps it isn’t at all out of place in my comments that her primary example of
such an ethos in action was the Russian-born Harvard economist Alexander
Gerschenkron. In McCloskey’s idiom, “Gerschenkron was, as we say, quite a
guy.”⁴ He was also of the same generation and class as the two Russian male
authors invoked in this chapter.

In McCloskey’s contrast of taciturn masculine courage and feminine
words (223–230), surely she has neglected the distinction between words and
voice that would have been so immediately apparent to the men and women
of that generation of revolutionary upheaval. Just as surely she is correct in
asserting that the silent tough guy is a gendered cultural type often contrasted
to the empty wordiness of women, but her emphasis on this point tends to
eclipse the equally important fact that acquiring a voice, and words with it,
has a long-standing political association with power, particularly subaltern
power. Thus when Maxim Gorky’s Mother comes at last to political self-con-
sciousness at the end of his novel of that name, she starts talking, and she
talks so much that a soldier has to strangle her to shut her up.⁵ In other words,
she, like so many others of her time, acquires words when she comes to politi-
cal understanding, and her words are associated with revolutionary force,
not feminine blather. It would be quite a stretch to say that the man kills her
because he cannot stand the racket. Talking such that a soldier must silence
one is integral to the generational experience of men like Gerschenkron, and
I would say, Pasternak and Nabokov, too. It is a value McCloskey does not
credit enough, I think, and it is central to the something more in the search
for masculine character whose outlines I am tracing here.⁶
McCloskey wants to argue, among other things, for well-timed, phronetic efficacy in place of the kind of manly confrontationalism that makes courage an all-or-nothing necessity. Like most strict dichotomies, this is only a helpful starting place. The ideal extremes she has identified make the more commonly crossed middle seem obscure by contrast. In practice it is not obscure at all. On the contrary, common ground is both very well lit and where all the most interesting work takes place. Neither battlefield nor cloister, common ground is both fantastically powerful and delicately changeable. We give it the solid name of ground because, like the vast array of symbolic value that undergirds modern life, it is not in fact solid. It is the space where words meet other words, and the life of consensual fantasy transforms and gives shape to the world in which we live. How the urge to maintain a single face inside it remains one of the most consistent and powerful cultural responses is something I hope this chapter will make clear.

McCloskey’s account of the bourgeois virtues, moreover—or the virtue of being bourgeois, for these are bound up together in one and the same econo-moral argument—relies on instrumentalist presumptions so profound that they find no articulation in her work. It is not just that the account is for something else, or the various kinds of behavior described in it are presented as the means to achieving something else. The presumptions I have in mind are prior to these. They are tied to the discovery or invention of modernity; they give birth to or arise with it; they envision it as a mise-en-scène of inert materials to be acted upon, linked together or disassembled, created or destroyed in our image or some image we have devised for our purposes. The vision is secular humanist and late modern and contemporary. It characterizes, moreover, the hypermodernity of both Soviet and American cultures of the early twentieth century, the extension of instrumentality from things to persons to the earth itself, and the intensification of modern conditions that creates the necessity for now-familiar repair concepts like therapy and empathy. Like the commercial metaphor inside which Tolstoy implicitly equates adulterous sex with murder in Anna Karenina, such instrumentalist presumptions are likely to slip by without comment, indeed, without notice. They have become assimilated to the bulk of our interactions. They often blend in.

The heroic ethos stands largely in opposition to such a trend. Its historical precedence makes it difficult to call it a repair concept, but its various incarnations, and the ingenious means by which it has managed to make and remake itself, up to and including in the present day (one need only think of popular science fiction, fantasy, or video games), indicate its continuing importance, perhaps psychological, clearly artistic and cultural. The degree to which man
thus envisioned—as heroic masculine character—can continue to be depicted as finding all-encompassing meaning and inspiration by Framed Woman, is indeed remarkable in an age so otherwise thoroughly imbued with the virtue of prudence. This is not to say that the tropic relationships have remained stable. As other moments in this study have shown, heroic masculine character is in flux through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He may still look at Her. But what he sees and what he does as a result no longer resonate within the heroic mode of old. That music has long since become largely atonal and fragmentary.

*Lolita* and *Doctor Zhivago* may, I am aware, appear an odd couple to use for illustrating this point, especially together, and from the outset I have my doubts about being able to pull it off. But my lights are here, shining bright. I hope it is no mere conceit of male middle age to think that among the paths they illuminate is one well suited to my purpose.

**Two Books, Four Movies**

Published within two years of each other in the mid-1950s, *Lolita* and *Doctor Zhivago* were both written by Russian authors, one in Russian, one in English, on either side of the Atlantic. Both had troubled publication histories and were surrounded by scandal. Both transformed the lives of their authors. And both stand as central markers of domestic and international cultural politics of the Cold War. Both in turn were adapted to the screen by major film directors, Stanley Kubrick and David Lean, respectively, in the 1960s, with smaller-budget remakes appearing in the post–Cold War 1990s and early 2000s.

Such similarities are probably not enough to throw a pedophile and a poet together. Let us leave that for later. For now it is enough to reconsider the work of their respective fictional lives. While both books begin with a portrait of the artist—ten-year-old Yury’s observation of his mother’s funeral, Humbert Humbert’s recounting of his pivotal erotic encounter at the age of thirteen (between ten and thirteen one senses the great fulcrum)—both books end with the art itself, Yury’s poems, Humbert’s revelation of the work we have just read as an artistic monument:

That husband of yours, I hope, will always treat you well, because otherwise my specter shall come at him, like black smoke, like a demented giant, and pull him apart nerve by nerve. And do not pity C. Q. One had to choose between him and H. H., and one wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple
of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita.¹³

She is dead at this point in the story, of course, a stipulation of H. H.’s confession being made public. It was a text for others from the start, a remembrance in durable pigments. A remembrance of what exactly—love, guilt, perversity, sickness—isn’t the issue, not yet. Lara too is dead when Yury’s poems about her become known to the world, just as both male characters have died by then as well, of heart failure no less.

Kubrick is most blatant in making the theme of artistic refuge central to his adaptation. In the closing moments of his film, he has Humbert Humbert fire his revolver at Claire Quilty through a painting of a woman, apparently the same portrait lying on its side at the entrance to Pavor Manor, Quilty’s cavernous mansion, as H. H. makes his way through the debris of Western culture to commit his murder.¹⁴ The bullets rip through the canvas on which the woman is represented, beginning at the bottom and making their way up the portrait to end with her face. Quilty is sprawled on the other side, his

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groans audible as the bullets, having passed through the painting, presumably enter his body off camera. The scene ends with a lingering full screen of the pictured woman’s face and the holes through the painting that could not protect him. So much for the refuge of art.

The setting does two things well. First, it cleverly translates H. H.’s invocation of artistic refuge at the close of his literary confession by employing other, highly filmable, objects—two portraits of a woman, one leaning, the other displayed in a room full of bric-a-brac and assorted art pieces. Second, it pronounces judgment on that invocation through the room’s apparent disorder and association with the moral-free aesthete Quilty, and, most effectively, by having Humbert Humbert shoot holes through the woman’s face, laying waste to the art as a simple by-product of his drunken, jealous rage. It is a sweeping gesture on Kubrick’s part. In effect, he offers up the refuge-of-art line and then unveils the monstrosity that such an enterprise can become, a move that accords with the basic antihumanist thrust of his darker film oeuvre, from *A Clockwork Orange* to *Full Metal Jacket* and *Eyes Wide Shut*.

In Kubrick’s version, however, H. H. destroys the woman in the window a little too definitively. The proviso needs clarity: this is James B. Harris’s and Stanley Kubrick’s *Lolita*. Nabokov’s endings, to both the novel and the screenplay he created on its basis, leave room for doubt as to the murderer’s intent, let alone the author’s, in invoking artistic refuge, which is, of course, more in keeping with both the author and the character he has created, arch-trixters *tous les deux*. Some scholars have even argued that the entire last section of the book, in which H. H. reunites with Lolita and tracks down and murders Quilty, should be read as imaginary, a form of authorial sleight of hand, up to and including H. H.’s receipt of her letter. Kubrick appears to gesture toward such an interpretation when he breaks the narrative to introduce the close-up of a typewriter in action—invention momentarily eclipsing mimesis. This move suggests something of the subtle complexity of Nabokov’s depiction, but only something of it.

Plenty of readers have understood the final pages of *Lolita* as demonstrating a real change in the character of its narrator, who, at the very least, seems to lament the loss of a child’s voice. That, however, is about as much as we can say when he remarks,

Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic—one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of a bat, or the clatter of a toy wagon,
but it was all really too far for the eye to distinguish any movement in the lightly etched streets. I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord. (308)

Read by Jeremy Irons, as in the Adrian Lyne film adaptation of 1997, or the more recent Random House “books on tape” version of the novel, this passage is as lyrical as can be, poignant and regretful, but also fundamentally one-sided in the most un-Nabokovian manner imaginable. What has happened in such adaptations is something akin to the inevitable choice a translator might make in the face of a pun that works in the source language but not in the target. Part is all you can manage, a narrowing occurs, and the multiplicity of readings that an audience might bring to it gets reduced to one.

Sensitivity to audience, which is present throughout the narrative but especially prominent in hortative passages like this, makes rhetorical concerns essential. This is speech intended to move. As such, a little skepticism is not at all out of place since by now we have some sense of the speaker’s shifty ethos. What exactly is the sensation he describes? It could be simple nostalgia for all we know, rather than the regret, let alone remorse, we might like him to be experiencing. Perhaps he is merely sorry she’s not a child anymore. On the other hand, this summing up is laden enough with pathos to accommodate remorse too, especially with a narrator as aware as this one—he seems to be missing something after all. Read in this way, his account could be seen as pulling no punches with regard to his own brutality and culpability toward Delores Haze: he knows what he has done and is sorry for it. Moreover, despite Kubrick’s apparent dismissal, the possibility of artistic refuge is real in Nabokov’s oeuvre, even when it is perverse. Nabokov’s fictional world is, moreover, undeniably muse-centered, and traces of that world are evident even in the distorted and morally ugly form that the novel Lolita unveils.

The possibility of art as refuge in Nabokov, however, is a thin shadow of its bulk in Pasternak. The argument needs to be explicitly made in the former, while in the latter it seems self-evident. Calling art mere refuge is in fact saying far too little for its role in Pasternak’s life and work, in Doctor Zhivago above all. “Where shall I put my joy?” is the typically momentary revelation of the splendor of being alive that Pasternak believed could be raised by the artist to “a constant poetic symptom.” Art is a celebration of living in all its authentic mundane detail, an invitation to “wake up and see afresh.” It is also
a response to suffering, particularly feminine suffering. This peculiar mix of symbolist impulse (art as a response to suffering) and modernist motivation (art as a way of overturning conventional perceptions of the world) is, for Pasternak, “not the name of a category, not an aspect of form, but a hidden mysterious part of the content [of life].” The content of Pasternak's envisioned world is mysteriously artistic. The manner in which it links the most disparate things provides a key to the many, often striking figurative connections in his writing. Such, in fact, are the sutures that bind together a vision of the magical, green world that Yury Zhivago constantly witnesses around him.

All the flowers smelled at once; it was as if the earth, unconscious all day long, were now waking to their fragrance. And from the Countess's centuries-old garden, so littered with fallen branches that it was impenetrable, the dusty aroma of old linden trees coming into bloom drifted in a huge wave as tall as a house.

Noises came from the street beyond the fences on the right—snatches of a song, a drunken soldier, doors banging.

An enormous crimson moon rose behind the crows' nests in the Countess's garden. At first it was the color of the new brick mill in Zybushino, then it turned yellow like the water tower at Biriuchi.

And just under the window, the smell of new-mown hay, as perfumed as jasmine tea, mixed with that of belladonna. Below that a cow was tethered; she had been brought from a distant village, she had walked all day, she was tired and homesick for the herd and would not yet accept food from her new mistress.

“Now, now, whoa there, I’ll show you how to butt,” her mistress coaxed her in a whisper, but the cow crossly shook her head and craned her neck, mooing plaintively, and beyond the black barns of Melyuzevo the stars twinkled, and invisible threads of sympathy stretched between them and the cow as if there were cattle sheds in other worlds where she was pitied.

Everything was fermenting, growing, rising with the magic yeast of life. The joy of living, like a gentle wind, swept in a broad surge indiscriminately through fields and towns, through walls and fences, through wood and flesh. Not to be overwhelmed by this tidal wave, Yury Andreyevich went out to the square to listen to the speeches. (140–41)

The lyricism of this passage, or the many others like it in the book, is not mere celebratory song. Nor is it a safe capturing of landscape for consumption by a bourgeois readership. The world around Zhivago is being obliterated in sheer marvels of senseless destruction. His observations constitute acts of creation,
a countermeasure of sorts that Pasternak's character, at this moment in the narrative, mistakenly associates with the revolution. He learns better.

What he learns is already implicit in this passage, which contains a contrast between, on the one hand, the artistic observation of the ordinary as an inspired creative act, an act that gives meaning and fullness to life and, on the other, the directed political activity of revolution, which curtails such fullness. In effect, the call to create a better life, like the speeches that subdue the tidal wave of emotion building in Zhivago, are countered by unassuming life itself, often some marvelously obscure corner of it observed inopportune, undramatically. Countless times in the book, Zhivago, whose name, it should be remembered, derives from the Russian root word for life, observes the mundane and soars—so much so that his responses, by any ordinary standard, sometimes seem ill-placed. Amid the dismembered corpses of the dissecting room, he finds the human body beautiful “even in its smallest sections.” He senses wonder in the continuing connection between the body of “some water nymph brutally flung onto a zinc table,” a drowning victim, and “her amputated arm or hand.” His observation infuses the dead space between the body and its appendage with life.

This creative act of filling the apparently empty, unifying the apparently disparate, is the most important thing Zhivago does in the book, his principal virtue. It is also likely the most difficult trait to capture cinematically, especially in the nondramatic guise Pasternak gives it. Shots of Omar Sharif’s eyes or the sounds of Maurice Jarre’s swelling score do not quite manage it; in fact, they have the opposite effect, turning the ordinary revelations into something too special. These are not revelations or climactic moments. Pasternak consistently deflates climaxes in his storytelling, defusing nearly every potentially explosive encounter in the book by skipping them all and informing his readers of what happened “back there” in some subsequent passage. When, for instance, at the climactic parting between Zhivago and Lara after Komarovsky has reappeared at their Varykino hideaway, readers might reasonably be expecting to witness a dramatic scene. But Pasternak provides nothing of the kind—the entire passage leading up to the parting is made up of dialogue between Zhivago and Komarovsky, with no description of any kind and no interaction between the lovers. One chapter ends on Komarovsky’s words, “Would you like some? I’ve got enough”; and the next begins with Zhivago’s lament to himself, “What have I done? What have I done?” Other important moments are similarly skipped, as when Yevgraf saves the starving Gromekos and Zhivagos by showing up at their Moscow home to provide much-needed supplies and information, or when Zhivago comes face to face with Lara at her Yuryatin apartment after his escape from the Partisans. Neither scene is
actually shown. It might be possible to explain these moments of deflated drama as a by-product of limited third-person narration—Zhivago is unconscious during the latter two—were it not for the fact that Pasternak’s book employs a variety of points of view and is not limited consistently to that of his main hero. He could have approached these momentous meetings and partings differently but chose not to. According to the convention-bound creative writing industry of contemporary letters, this is simply bad storytelling, the mark of an immature writer, someone who knows how to lead up to the set piece but shies away from delivering it.

That would be a weak reading of Pasternak, whose hyper-Tolstoyan technique unfortunately makes his book appear inferiorly constructed: dramatic climax, like a story that ends with a marriage or a death, or like a plot without extraneous details and only the characters you need to remember, is always contrived, always artificial. Conventional storytelling might make for good stories, but it makes for unlikely lives. Pace David Lean and Paul Bowles, who provided Lean’s screenplay, *Doctor Zhivago* is an experimental modernist novel, not a romance. This is why passionate observation, the hero’s “constant poetic symptom”—rather than the trite courageous struggle to find love

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*Figure 7.* The “constant poetic symptom.” *Doctor Zhivago*, dir. Lean, 1965.
against the backdrop of war and revolution—should be seen as the hero’s chief virtue. Even the apparently conscious composition of the poems he leaves behind is something he suffers rather than calls forth. They come to him, overwhelm him, and he merely directs the flow. I shall return to this theme of artistic inspiration below. Here it is worth remembering that the two films in question attempt different things, Lean by making the book of poems the central organizing feature of his work, Giacomo Campiotti, director of the more recent BBC production, by making Yury’s poetry his first and most consistent defining trait, the apparent purpose of his life, with Lara a close second and his obvious muse. Both miss the point, but neither because of any limitation of medium or technique.

The problem is interpretive. The desire to see the story as being primarily about a cosmically fated love turns the novel’s genre inside out, making Zhivago’s life into something of a tool for the realization of romance, or perhaps for the creation of the Lara poems. If that is what one claims the story is mostly about, then who can blame contemporary readers, many of whom have been primed with reminiscences (those of their parents and grandparents usually) of a great love narrative if they see the character as a failure, or at least of questionable moral fiber? If this is about a man and a woman attempting to find happiness in the midst of war and revolution, the man may be a tragic testament to the revolution’s fundamental inhumanity, but he falls short of being a worthy hero. He lacks the virtuous constancy of purpose it requires, especially in his passionate loves for different women at different times.

**Women in Windows**

Such constancy is not a failing of Nabokov’s hero, though some readers will surely see this as an objectionable manner of characterizing Humbert Humbert’s attachment and motivation. Nevertheless, Nabokov clearly suggests such a line as he too, like so many before him, invokes the recuperative trope of the woman in the window, albeit with characteristic circumspection, and filtered through several layers of narrative fog, when H. H. recounts in his diary the following:

Dorsal view. Glimpse of shiny skin between T-shirt and white gym shorts. Bending, over a window sill, in the act of tearing off leaves from a poplar outside while engrossed in torrential talk with a newspaper boy below (Kenneth Knight, I suspect) who had just propelled the Ramsdale *Journal* with a very precise thud onto the porch. (54)
In the window she is, and H. H. is the one seeing her there. But his view is backward, skewed. As he puts it later in the same passage, “I seemed to see her through the wrong end of a telescope” (54). Lest we slip too quickly into symbolic readings, Knight, it turns out, is a classmate. He never enters the narrative again (except in the list that makes it clear he is in Lo’s school). H. H. may really think he is standing down there, so the self-conscious manipulation of the trope is probably V. N.’s alone rather than his character’s. More important, however, is the deformation of the heroic vision that the scene suggests: the inspiring image is uncannily distant, just as the inspiration linked to it is morally ugly. But it is still a vision rooted in the heroic: here is the woman in the window, though she is no woman and the inspired seeker is a pedophile who sees her askew and may only be imagining the boy Knight looking up at her from below. That desire transforms the vision is evident from earlier attempts to peep at her through a pane, only to find some seductive part of Her dissolve into a man’s hairy forearm.

The dorsal view is a transformation of the trope akin to that performed by Dostoevsky at the end of *Crime and Punishment* and, as we shall see below, by Pasternak in *Doctor Zhivago*. But where both Dostoevsky and Pasternak appear to operate within the dichotomies of whore versus Madonna, or, as Laura Mulvey has put it, the “voyeuristic” and the “fetishistic,” Nabokov’s treatment questions the position of the viewer and, by extension, the reader, more fundamentally. The inspired viewer inside the book (Humbert) may very well sense that he sees the woman in the window incorrectly somehow; at least he says as much. But the fact that his is the only voice through which the viewers outside the book (us) experience the inspired gaze, the extended contemplation of the beloved object, implicates us as well. We see her, think of her, only through his depiction, his manipulation. He clothes her, makes her talk for us, act for us; he gives her expressions, gestures, emotions. There is no Lolita (as if this were her name) without the collection of graphemes he sets running along the page of his diary in this passage and everywhere else. We are implicated by our consent from the moment we begin accepting these symbols as representing something, the girl and the man who make this story so beautiful and so ugly.

Nabokov’s critique of the minor reader in us is perfectly apropos. There is nothing morally objectionable about this story as long as we agree that it refers to no thing, no person. Thus when Leland de la Durantaye, in his 2007 book *Style is Matter*, laments that Lolita “is everywhere referred to, everywhere described, everywhere poetically loved, but of her thoughts and feelings, Humbert offers us scarce a glimpse,” whatever specific point he may be try-
ing to bring home (in this case, that H. H. will not see things from her point of view) must be preceded by the recognition that, technically speaking, she does not have any thoughts or feelings, not until we give them to her, not until we allow him to give them to her for us. This is as true of H. H. as it is of V. N. Whatever inspiration, or, if you are a pervert too, whatever titillation, you might experience at the depiction Nabokov provides is dependent upon your willingness to see the fiction as representing something, someone.

The play upon our sensibility is palpable. When Humbert (as if that were his name) catches up with Lo on the street in Elphinstone after she appears to have given him the slip in chapter 19, he questions her closely on what she has been doing, where she has been for the past several minutes. On quickly checking her excuses, he ends up standing with her in front of a shop window where she claims to have been looking at dresses with a friend.

It was indeed a pretty sight. A dapper young fellow was vacuum-cleaning a carpet of sorts upon which stood two figures that looked as if some blast had just worked havoc with them. One figure was stark naked, wigless and armless. Its comparatively small stature and smirking pose suggested that when clothed it had represented, and would represent when clothed again, a girl-child of Lolita’s size. But in its present state it was sexless. Next to it, stood a much taller veiled bride, quite perfect and intacta except for the lack of one arm. On the floor, at the feet of these damsels, where the man crawled about laboriously with his cleaner, there lay a cluster of three slender arms, and a blond wig. Two of the arms happened to be twisted and seemed to suggest a clasping gesture of horror and supplication.

“Look, Lo,” I said quietly. “Look well. Is not that a rather good symbol of something or other?” (226)

Humbert immediately darts off to another topic, leaving Nabokov’s “your symbol here!” announcement apparently undeveloped, so let us see what we can do: Sexless “girl-child,” naked and formless, without protection (she has no arms) but also without animation, the ultimate in plasticity (she is plastic), waiting to be clothed and reordered by the man at her feet; second “damsel,” adult woman figure, also inanimate, adorned as bride by the man at her feet; and the man at her feet, a mere shop clerk, one who dresses up the figures for others to look at—admire, be inspired by, order their lives around—through the window. And who is looking now? A broken girl-child and the parody of a father, parody of a lover, parody of a husband, at her feet, clothing and reordering her for himself and for us.
Kubrick manages the iconicity of the latter relationship elegantly in his opening credits, which feature a man’s hands in the act of deftly painting a young woman’s, or child’s, toenails: at her feet, serving her, dressing her up in private for presentation to a public.\textsuperscript{57} Here, moreover, the trope has morphed yet again, with attendant layers of representation and, in effect, an unmasking of the objectifying gaze. If one response to the pictured woman is to lament her absence of agency, give her roundness, and convert the trope into a character, Nabokov’s move here does the opposite, stripping the trope completely of its person-like veneer and clarifying as a result what we are all doing here—dressing up figures and pretending together that they are persons. The former nudges art into morality; the latter pulls the two apart. The scene’s magic derives from the delicate play between the two realms, which depend on each other, and from the marvelous duplicity it encourages in readers, who can understand very well that they are referring to no one, but no matter how many times they remember this, can continue to feel compassion and remorse the moment these no ones are made to dance.
She is not such a plastic affair in Pasternak’s hands, but nor is she the singularity that Nabokov insists on for his hero. Not that there aren’t indications in the text that a cosmic love between Lara and Yury exists. There are. He sees Lara framed after all, or rather, he appears to sense her aura behind the casement, as he sleds across snowy Moscow, in a moment that defines him in the minds of many as the romantic poet par excellence.

As they drove through Kamerger Street Yury noticed a dark melted slit in the icy crust of one of the windows. Through it the flame of a candle glimmered, imbuing the street almost with consciousness, as if it were watching the passing carriages and waiting for someone.

“A candle burned on the table, a candle burned . . . ,” he whispered to himself, the beginning of something confused, unformed; he hoped the rest would come by itself, without constraint. It did not come. (81)

Behind the window is Lara, of course, and the cosmic interpretation puts her at the tipping point of his universe without his knowing it. A facile reading has us turn to the end and feel vindicated in discovering the line used as a refrain in one of the poems in “The Poems of Yury Zhivago.”

Winter Night

Snow swept the world over
from end to end.
A candle burned on a table,
a candle burned.

Like a horde of summer midges
flying to a flame,
the flakes swarmed from the yard
up to the windowpane.

The blizzard sculpted on the glass
circles and spears.
The candle burned on the table,
the candle burned.

Shadows lay
on the lighted ceiling:
crossings of arms, of legs—
crossings of destiny.
Two small boots fell
to the floor with a thud.
Wax tears from the nightstand
dripped on a dress.

And all was lost in snowy murk,
gray and white.
The candle burned on the table,
the candle burned.

A draft blew on the flame,
and the fever of temptation
lifted two angelic wings,
like a cross.

It snowed through all February,
and almost always
the candle burned on the table,
the candle burned.28

Now, the thrill of recognizing the moment of inspiration, not to mention the
 crystalline beauty of the poem itself, serves to draw plot lines together and
provide closure and meaning to the story. But it is not at all clear that Zhivago
wrote this poem about Lara. There is a linguistically simple concreteness in
it: midges, snow, wax, a candle, a window, but no distinguishing marks, no
clearly delineated actions, only shadows. For all the poem’s remarkable sug-
gestiveness, it is impossible to be certain how many characters are silhouetted
by it, let alone who they might be.

Even if we assume this is a love poem and Yury and Lara are the lovers
whose shadows play fatefuly on the ceiling, the uniqueness of the encounter
is spread across time and across the entire snowy expanse of the earth. There
may be an exceptional moment assumed behind the depiction, but equally if
not more important is the generalized experience it projects outward, which
becomes exceptional only when singled out by the “eyes of genre,” in this
case those of romance, which find the magical other and are blind to every-
thing else.29 When we realize that Zhivago sees much of life in this manner,
that such moments are peppered throughout the novel, that his vision of the
world’s magical connectedness has indeed been raised to a constant poetic
symptom, then this apparently unique communion of star-crossed lovers
becomes merely one coincidence among many—one spellbinding, miracu-
lous, and utterly mundane coincidence among all those that make up life. Nor is there any blinding light of unmediated vision outside this cave; the poet’s gift is a gift of vision. This is why “Winter Night,” which could easily be some unique, transforming eve, is not that at all. Just as Pasternak’s tragic partings and wondrous meetings are skipped, this moment is stretched and broadened, made nondramatic, general.

Romantic exclusivity also disappears. He will love Tonya, and very likely Marina (his third wife, generically expunged from the film versions—the audience’s tolerance for his polygamy goes only so far), in much the same manner that he loves Lara: passionately, that is, sufferingly, as one suffers a burden, an insult, a poetic gift, a heart attack. Oh, all right, perhaps he’ll love Lara just a bit more or at least express it differently, because the conditions are more tragic, and he is a younger man, and he can’t do anything with himself during his time together with her except write anyway. I shall return to Zhivago’s manner of loving shortly. The point here is that romance skews the picture, creates a spotlight that excludes the rest of the poet’s vision, which extends in his case as far as imaginary cowsheds in other worlds.

While it is narratively simpler than Nabokov’s, Pasternak’s use of the trope of the woman in the window is not merely a clichéd attempt to invoke a dead heroic ethos by anchoring the man or giving his life purpose through her imagined constancy and unattainability. It is an invitation to find meaning in life itself, of which the candle is an easy, if somewhat hackneyed, symbol. He does not see her, after all, he sees only the light, and his response is the simplest statement of fact: “A candle burned on a table; a candle burned.”

**Doubles and Heroes**

The power of these images to inspire is directly proportional to their consensual fantasticality, their promise for the future, the degree to which we can imagine into them our hopes about tomorrow. Money and other symbolic values can thus stand in for the woman in the window when heroic man cedes his place to commercial man. The construction of Dostoevsky’s *Double* implies such a direct relationship: the hero begins by counting his paper money and ends by staring up at Her window. The fact that he is sent off to the madhouse as a result suggests something of the social reception that staring up at women’s windows is likely to occasion under modern conditions. I am only half joking, for there is another half to the man: the other, the “usurper,” the “upstart,” takes on a modern mantle to live a modern life—in
Golyadkin’s case one of salaried dependency, obsequious shapeshifting, and a rejection of the “firmness of character” that defined an older virtuous ideal. In effect, Dostoevsky’s portrayal places the two masculine characters in opposition to each other, the lover and the opportunist, the conscience and the careerist. They fight it out in mock heroic fashion, a battle that Humbert and his double Quilty’s slug fest appears to echo:

Fussily, busybodily, cunningly, he had risen again while he talked. I groped under the chest trying at the same time to keep an eye on him. All of a sudden I noticed that he had noticed that I did not seem to have noticed Chum protruding from beneath the other corner of the chest. We fell to wrestling again. We rolled all over the floor, in each other’s arms, like two huge helpless children. He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us. (298–99)

Subject and object grow confused as the hero and his double grapple for the means to destroy each other. But where the relation of authentic and fraud was relatively clear in Dostoevsky’s book of a hundred years before, the masculine character whom we might wish to see as hero here, the one who “really” loves, with constancy and truth and “firmness of character,” is the same Humbert Humbert who has impersonated a hero throughout the book, both to the characters in it—through his “adult disguise,” his “great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood” (39) looks, and the various frauds he perpetrates on adults and children alike—and to us, through his rhetorical skill and narrative posturing: he has played on trust.

If before I seemed especially insistent on the genre distinction of what is and is not romance, it is because the shaping of sensibility that romance occasions is itself insistent, culturally pervasive, seductive in its ease, and Nabokov’s treatment has played on this “genre trust” of ours as well. The suggestion that romance entails, of a purpose in artistic achievement for the artist’s life (he has lived knightlike in order to love and produce this work) is as pernicious as the impulse, however brief, to accept Humbert Humbert’s claim of a purpose in the refuge of art (he has lived in order to love Lolita and produce this book). In his argument, she is the reason for his poetic treatment of her. In writing about her, he makes her into a means. This is the context for his claim that, contrary to Freud, “sex is the ancilla of art” (259). Both these approaches reduce the life lived to an instrumental end, discounting the life lived in the process. It should not be difficult to see that Humbert Humbert evokes Lolita as an instrument for fulfilling his own needs, as a means to
such fulfillment, throughout his account, up to and including the book's final lines, which attempt to elevate that account to the level of something akin to, well, romance. The even momentary acceptance of such an emotional manipulation implicates our own habits of reading, just as the reception of Doctor Zhivago as primarily a story of star-crossed lovers marks us far more than it does Pasternak.

Doubles are equally formative in Zhivago, with Pavel Antipov (aka Strelnikov) mirroring Yury’s life as angel or demon, an anti Yury as it were, and the similarities and contrasts are palpable: both support the revolution but for the “wrong” reasons; both tend toward the ascetic but also passionate excess. Strelnikov is characterized by willful action and the desire to make change happen, while Zhivago tends toward endurance, acceptance. Pasha’s doubt leads to a split; from Lara’s husband he becomes another man, a masked rogue Red militant, whose fall from power leads in the end to his fateful encounter with Lara’s lover in the cabin in the woods. They do not roll on the floor. Nor do we ever lose track of where one character begins and the other ends. There is never any confusion between his and Yury’s character, and only the slightest play on our sensibilities: Antipov seems to suggest what following the revolution might have meant for a hero of the old school, and indeed his devotion to his (one) wife and family is a defining trait. His story resonates in the romantic mode, ending in the tragic.

What Pasternak has attempted with his main character, however, is a more radical recasting. Yury does not see anyone through the wrong end of a telescope, but nor does he rush past the symbolic when it is staring him in the face, as Humbert appears to do in front of the shop window. Unlike Humbert, he is prepared to see himself in heroic guise, as a knight if need be, constant and courageous, a fact suggested by his poetic version of the legend of St. George (Georgy, Yury) and the dragon, as recounted in the poem “Fairy Tale” of the final chapter.

The immediate impulse for this call to the heroic mode, the context of its creation, is the howling of the wolves that Yury hears in chapter 9 of part 14, which gradually turn into a creative theme for him, the symbol of “a hostile power bent upon destroying him and Lara and on driving them from Varykino,” which looms “like a prehistoric beast or some fabulous monster, a dragon whose tracks had been discovered in the ravine” (44). These lines suggest that the poem is little more than an allegorized projection of his fear of losing Lara at this moment, an inspiration under the constraints of their imminent danger. But the habitualized poetic vision noted earlier runs beneath the theme, making the heroic mode rather more modulation than recourse. He has been thinking these thoughts for some time now.
Traces are evident, for instance, when he is traveling with his family to the Urals and reflects on seeing a waterfall in a ravine that “it was like a living conscious creature, a local dragon or winged serpent who levied tribute and preyed upon the surrounding land” (238); or when Strelnikov remarks to him in their encounter on the train: “This is a time for angels with flaming swords and winged beasts from the abyss” (252); or when, during his captivity with the Partisans, he is transfixed by the image of a sunset in the woods.

At such moments he felt as if he too were being pierced by shafts of light. It was as though the gift of the living spirit were streaming into his breast, piercing his being and coming out at his shoulders like a pair of wings. The archetype that is formed in every child for life and seems forever after to be his inward face, his personality, awoke in him in its full primordial strength, and compelled nature, the forest, the afterglow, and everything else visible to be transfigured into a similarly primordial and all-embracing likeness of a girl. Closing his eyes, “Lara,” he whispered and thought, addressing the whole of his life, all God’s earth, all the sunlit space spread out before him. (343)

He speaks to a girl here, a young girl (devochka), not a grown woman, not the Lara waiting in Yuryatin. If his words pertain to any actual incarnation of her, it is to the “girl from another circle” whom he witnessed suffering in the novel’s second chapter. But even that experience has been generalized to such an extent that her physical existence is now interwoven with his life experience. In contrast to Humbert’s tendency to let the symbolic pass without comment, Zhivago is willing to allow her to stand for no less than the “whole of his life” and, simultaneously, “all God’s earth.”

Zhivago’s aesthetized, anthropomorphized vision of his love for life, for the suffering girl, and for “God’s earth” provides the clearest contrast to what I would claim is Humbert’s instrumental orientation to his love object—I use the words adversely—in Lolita. Humbert’s appeals to artistry, his claims to be “lost in an artist’s dream” (153), from beginning to end of his confession, function equivalently to the peasant Mikolka’s claim, in Raskolnikov’s nightmarish memory, that the horse he is about to kill is his “goods” (dobro). Mikolka’s mare and Humbert’s Her are equivalently instrumentalized, with Raskolnikov’s old pawnbroker standing squarely between the two—the image of a person whose own internal ends are sacrificed in favor of the misguided and misunderstood ends of the protagonist.

The confusion revolves around notions of ownership, property, and authority, but these in turn are conditioned upon a conception of the figures
as representing something fundamentally material and plastic. Zhivago, by contrast, lives in a different world altogether, one in which magic and symbol invite us constantly into other worlds and times and the represented materiality of persons yields to a sacramental mode where agency turns into a form of self-revelation, memory becomes anamnesis, and heroism suffers itself in all its mundane and otherworldly splendor.