Narrating Demons, Transformative Texts

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

O'Hara, Daniel T.
Narrating Demons, Transformative Texts: Rereading Genius in Mid-Century Modern Fictional Memoir.
The Ohio State University Press, 2012.
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MY RELATIONSHIP TO Lolita (1955; 1958) has not been an easy one. I chose not to read it in the 1960s when I first heard about it because of its subject matter (pedophilia, kidnapping, murder) and because it was already such a controversial success as a cultural icon (“You’ve read the book, now see the Stanley Kubrick movie!”) among the intellectual class to which I then aspired. I preferred, like my perennial hero Nietzsche, never to join the winning side, which doesn’t mean I always join the other, losing side either. Sometimes it means that, like him, I just wait, sitting it out, watching or ignoring the parade as it passes me by, which is what I did with this mid-century, modern classic novel whose narrator describes himself as an artist and a madman, “a murderer with a fancy prose style.”

And his double in all things, Clare Quilty, is both a semi-successful playwright and a pedophile with whom a desperate Dolores Haze (“my Lolita,” as Humbert repeatedly calls her throughout) manages her escape, only to be pressed into pornographic films, which when she resists, gets her thrown out of Quilty’s ersatz Gothic, libertine mansion. This is what was meant way back then by “literature”? I thought not. Pulp fiction, maybe. . .

Similarly, with the rest of its author’s celebrated oeuvre: just so many too-clever-by-half traps. Nabokov was just too famous for his self-conscious ironies, his reflexively elaborate games, his buried traps for the
reader, all those largely parodic allusions—topical, literary, and cultural; elite and popular—and the repeatedly cited pastiches of conventional structures, forms, discourses, fictional scenes, styles. Although I had read—twice, with lots of guide-books—Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, and despite knowing Nabokov’s special disdain for this last work and even later portions of *Ulysses*, I felt his methods were just a continuation of late Joycean tricks to the point where they were completely hollowed-out, mere magician’s sleights of hand, empty gestures made without any passion, and who needs that? In short, having read all about the would-be enchanter Nabokov at the time, like any good college sophomore, I formed my opinion in cement on the basis of no experience and was stuck in it.

Then, in my first semester (fall 1976) as an assistant professor at Princeton University, I was assigned to teach one of the breakout sections (a “preceptorial,” in Princeton lingo) of a lecture course on the modern American novel being taught by an advanced assistant professor, Dorothy Klopf. (Thanks, Dorothy.) So, during the summer before I started, I read or reread all of the texts for the course, having gotten the syllabus in advance, eager-beaver that I was. Or maybe just frightened rabbit? I found that I liked *Lolita*, despite all my ignorant expectations. To me at that time the pedophilia (“pederosis” in Humbert’s neologism, 55) was not the point but the inhumanity of the narrator’s lust. I was such a simple young man then. What I certainly did not believe was that the novel was about its reflexive metafictional games—these were intellectual equivalents of the pornographic passages—which were hardly that even by mid-century standards—for its audiences: different bait for different readers.

One thing crystal clear to me then too was that the authentic European high culture was being represented by a mere would-be genius, a manqué-man as Humbert virtually calls himself (one of many “manqué talents,” 15), an ersatz figure or, in one of our contemporary terms, a simulacrum. As I said, I was such a simple young man then. Lionel Trilling had spent his life warning against—and some unkind critics would say, exemplifying, despite himself—such bad faith sensibility. These folks have the imagination of genius but none of the genius, for either creativity or hard work.

But the America represented—that was what I had lived through myself: it was the real thing, for sure—that is, the real phony, filled with
all its authentic gimmicks, cons, fabrications, lies, brand X advertisings—plastics was its watchword. And what Humbert was, a cruel pedophile wannabe artist and madman (that too I took as fake), and what America was, as represented by its impact on Dolores Haze, his Lolita: was there really a dime’s worth of difference between them as far as the genuine article was concerned? At the time I assimilated Nabokov to the neither/nor, plague on both your houses type of high modernist irony familiar from Joyce or in some moments Yeats and Forster. I had not yet learned that in a world of fakes the fake of however horrible sort at least cannot logically be called inauthentic.

Reading Lolita nearly thirty years later, and catching up on most of what has been written about it and its author since, I do not think the same way. Although I do not endorse single-mindedly his wife Vera Nabokov’s 1978 statement that the otherworld (Potustoronnost) is “the main theme” in her husband’s work, I think Lolita, like all his major texts, is designed as a humanistic heterocosm. In the introductions to both his Lectures on Don Quixote and Lectures on Literature, for just two major instances, Nabokov begins by stressing that literary works are new or original worlds unto themselves, whose details are, if they are aesthetic masterpieces, uniquely selected and uniquely arranged, even perhaps singularly so.4

But at this point I hear advocates of the otherworld thesis objecting that this is a metafictional, while they intend a metaphysical, meaning to the word, although not necessarily an afterworldly one. Here is where I need to make some finer distinctions.

One of the key features of literature as an institution, no matter which critical theorist one consults, is that of the «system» it formed as it emerged with the rise of the bourgeois to power at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. And this system is based on the idea of the literary work of art as a heterocosm: an “organically” composed model of the world as it is and/or should be.5 This literary system, both ideology and institution, comprises the means of production, circulation, evaluation, and reproduction of texts, commentaries, translations, editions, etc. Among its assumptions and justifying ideas is that the authors studied are geniuses, the works masterpieces; and these masterpieces produced by these geniuses, these “little worlds” unto themselves, depending on the genius and masterpiece under scrutiny, may correspond to, coincide with, or allusively symbolize the big world of either everyday reality
or a higher reality, or even an intentional non-reality, a utopian or dystopian vision, depending on the case at hand. In sum, the literary system or institution is at bottom romanticism, as revised out of a certain strain or set of strains in early modern or renaissance writings. All later developments in literary history—realism, naturalism, symbolism, aestheticism, impressionism, imagism, modernism, postmodernism, etc.—are children of this literary system, often now returning home to the imperial capitals from the margins of former empires in further revised but still recognizable forms.

The literary system, in its emergence, has as its highest term usually not God but Nature, or in its later symbolist and post-symbolist variation, “anti-nature.” Nature refers then to the proper operation of the literary system as it incorporates the life-works of its authors, scholars, critics, and, I suppose, its most devoted readers. And this proper operation? It is to produce visions of freedom in which individual voices compose a harmonious order, no matter how discordant any one voice may be, so that the norm of what it means to be human at the heart of the literary system may be passed on as cultural capital. And what is this norm? Ah, there’s the rub. It of course varies from time to time, culture to culture, author to author, audience to audience, as they debate and revise in response to conditions.

I generally accept this argument about the literary system, although unlike Northrop Frye, I would not try to generalize from it to the entire verbal universe and make Blakean metaphysical claims. Instead, I would turn to Spinoza to make claims about Lolita and the literary system as parts of one nature, one world. In Nabokovian terms, the otherworld for the creative reader is, and can only be, this world.

I know: Spinoza? If one says his name today, the likely response is to paraphrase something from Deleuze, his contemporary champion, and then say that post-structuralist stuff is all history now anyway. But I want to argue that Spinoza is still viable for us once we return to him and read the Ethics for ourselves. This is my experiment.

Spinoza defines God, the mind (its origin and nature), human bondage to emotions, the power of the intellect or human freedom. None of what you might expect concerning these topics will you find in the pages of the Ethics. Yes, “the intellectual love of God” is the highest value, but what Spinoza means by that is something else again. But I need to focus on only a few things for my purposes here.
The famous, indeed infamous, phrase drawn from this posthumously published book is “Deus, sive Natura,” God or Nature. Since it was the seventeenth century, one understands why these were fighting words. For Spinoza, God or Nature refers in two different ways to the one substance that is the infinite universe and everything in it. God (to simplify my exposition, I will usually say “God” in what follows, except when I want to stress a point, so please also understand “or Nature” or that I am being pointed) has two infinite attributes, à la Descartes no doubt: extension and thinking. The mind and the body of human beings are finite versions of God. What is more, the mind is the idea of the body the body forms, even as the body and the mind cannot directly affect each other causally. The chain of causation of the mind and that of the body are separate but can indirectly affect each other via the ideas arising about each. All actions of the mind, of the body, are determined by causes, even if we do not know what they may be, and our ideas about them are confused and fragmentary, not clear and distinct—terms Spinoza again takes over from Descartes. It was the times. The freedom we have is that of learning what those causes (all modes or affections of God) specifically are and of producing our own appropriate cause to affect it and its effects. In this Spinoza, then, knowledge is naturally the highest value, and since God is the source of the greatest knowledge, the intellectual love of God makes a lot of sense if we want to maximum our albeit limited or determinate freedom.

What are the kinds of knowledge we possess? Here is Spinoza:

1. From individual objects presented to us through the senses in a fragmentary [multilate] and confused manner without any intellectual order . . . and therefore I call such perceptions “knowledge from casual experience.”
2. From symbols. For example, from having heard or read certain words we call things to mind and we form certain ideas of them similar to those through which we imagine things. . . . Both these ways of regarding things I shall in future refer to as “knowledge of the first kind,” “opinion,” or “imagination.”
3. From the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things. . . . I shall refer to this as “reason” and “knowledge of the second kind.” Apart from these two kinds of knowledge, there is, as I shall later show, a third kind of knowledge,
which I shall refer to as “intuition.” This kind of knowledge proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things. (51)

So we possess three kinds of knowledge, according to Spinoza: 1) opinion or imagination, 2) reason, and 3) intuition. This tripartite division looks familiar to us from Kant, with his sensibility (including imagination), understanding, and reason, the last two names of which make things clearer. Spinoza means by reason what Kant means by understanding, namely, calculating, piecemeal or incremental reasoning (not to say rationalizing), the step-by-step ratio following the chains of cause and effect, and the logical anticipation of what must follow in the series of causes and effects; and he means by intuition what Kant means by reason, what Wordsworth calls imagination in its most exalted mood: the intuition of where we fit in the vision of God or Nature, which is like the sudden simultaneous vision of all the phases of a process in an instant, what Spinoza calls sub species aeternitatis. The example Spinoza gives here to demonstrate that each kind of knowledge, based on the perception of, reasoning about, and intuition of proportions and ratios of numbers, is a complicated one, so I will chose another example he gives later, to illustrate a somewhat different point, but I will treat it as an instance in the Spinozian spirit of his more familiar geometrical method.

Here is the example:

The nature of a circle is such that the rectangles formed from the segments of its intersecting chords are equal. Hence an infinite number of equal rectangles are contained in a circle, but none of them can be said to exist except insofar as the circle exists, nor again can the idea of any one of these rectangles be said to exist except insofar as it is comprehended in the idea of the circle. (33)

Imagination, reasoning, and the intuition of the geometrical principles for the formation of circles, chords, and rectangles—all are nicely demonstrated in this one instance. To put it another way: We experience a world of chords and must construct the circle from our partial experiences, but at a certain point in our learning experience we intuit the whole—circle and chords generating and constituting each other and our experience. (It can also work vice versa.) We see that vision with a clarity
and distinction and so a certainty as surely as we know any principle or law that exceeds the merely empirical collection of details. We become active, creative readers of the cosmos that we live in and are. What Spinoza performs in this example and in his text as a whole is the logic of such formations, per se. His *Ethics*, in other words, whatever its value as a contribution to philosophy—metaphysics, epistemology, ethics—is a major contribution to the aesthetics of textual production that will be enshrined in what is to come in literary and intellectual history. Thanks to its adoption, revision, and incorporation by Kant and Hegel in their influential work, Spinoza’s life-work permeates the literary system from romanticism to postmodernism and beyond.

In claiming this, I want to underscore, I am not making a comment, critical or otherwise, on the validity of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. I am not trying to reduce or deconstruct it, nor am I saying that it is an allegory of anything or that it prophetically surveys allegories to follow. What I am claiming is that Spinoza’s *Ethics* formulates originally and most purely the logic of textual production carried out by the conventions of the literary system in work after work, text after text. It is an instance of what it outlines, as are the texts of the literary system to come. It is like the literary system’s “schematics,” which have now gone global, virtual, and viral on the Internet.

Here is Nabokov’s intuition of such a logic of reading in a celebrated passage on the positional power of poetry taken from his revised autobiography, *Speak, Memory* (1951; 1967)

But then, in a sense, all poetry is positional: to try to express one’s position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness, is an immemorial urge. The arms of consciousness reach out and grope, and the longer they are the better. Tentacles, not wings, are Apollo’s natural members. Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical friend of mine, in later years used to say that while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of time, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time. Lost in thought, he taps his knee with his wandlike pencil, and at the same instant a car (New York license plate) passes along the road, a child bangs the screen door of neighboring porch, an old man yawns in a misty Turkestan orchard, a granule of cinder-gray sand is rolled by the wind on Venus, a Docteur Jacques Hirsch in Grenoble puts on his reading glasses, and trillions of other such trifles occur—all forming an
instantaneous and transparent organism of events, of which the poet (sitting in a lawn chair, at Ithaca, N.Y.) is the nucleus. (218)

Vivian Bloodmark is, of course, an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov. The expansiveness and self-irony, even self-parody, as in Nietzsche’s idea of “the buffoonery of an emotion,” go hand in hand.9 To Spinoza-ize Nietzsche, the energies of the body, in battling each other for expressive release, inspire opposing images of each other, seeking to subsume and arrange a hierarchy of forces under themselves. God (or Nature) is simply the generic name for whichever side wins the latest battle in this endless war of affects, passions, and their active self-imaginations. Sooner or later, Nietzsche reminds us, the new favorite “ass” takes the stage.10 A momentary stay against confusion thus supervenes, with tragic or comic resonances and reverberations.

Spinoza outlines the lineaments of the new symbolic order of virtually infinite imaginaries. And Lacan’s real, since I am on that roll now? If we remember that the mind is the body’s idea of itself in action, then the following passage surely points to it:

The mind’s intellectual love toward God is the love of God wherewith God loves himself not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he can be explicated through the essence of the human mind considered under a form of eternity. That is, the mind’s intellectual love toward God is part of the infinite love wherewith God loves himself. (157, italics Spinoza’s)

Nabokov, again citing this “friend” (or himself), names the power of the poet to envision life performatively along similar lines: “cosmic synchronization” (218). And all God’s children be poets, in principle. Whether we think back to Spinoza and his discussion of God (or Nature) as the one substance of the universe, or further back to the Stoics and their vision of Cosmic Reason, or forward again to Rousseau and his “sense of being” and Wordsworth and his “sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused,” or forward still to later ironic writers, such as T. S. Eliot in “Preludes,” or even the furthest forward for now to us, making our trivial entries, each one of us positionally a poet, probably, on Facebook or some other popular social networking site, the world expands ever outward, spiraling out from the nucleus of a notation to the whole of the inscribed universe—or so it seems.11 “Self-love,” as Oscar Wilde
Deus sive Natura

Deconstructively opined (avant la lettre of Derrida or Lacan), “is the beginning of a life-long romance”—for Deus sive Natura, too, apparently. After such self-irony, self-parody, who needs them?

“A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life” (275). Again and yet again, the logic of the text unfolds outward with the blazon of Deus sive Natura—or their equivalents—at its invisible heart. This is so for the creative reader.

Nabokov celebrates what he calls “the creative reader.”

The good reader is one who has imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense—which sense I propose to develop in myself and in others whenever I have the chance. Incidentally, I use the word reader very loosely. Curiously enough, one cannot read a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader. And I shall tell you why. When we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, stands between us and artistic appreciation. When we look at a painting we do not have to move our eyes in a special way even if, as in a book, the picture contains elements of depth and development. The element of time does not really enter in a first contact with a painting. In reading a book, we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it. We have no physical organ (as we have the eye in regard to a painting) that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its details. But in a second, or a third, or fourth reading we do, in a sense, behave towards the book as we do towards a painting. However, let us not confuse the physical eye, that monstrous achievement of evolution, with the mind, an even more monstrous achievement. A book, no matter what it is—a work of fiction or a work of science (the boundary line between the two is not as clear as is generally believed)—a book of fiction appeals first of all to the mind. The mind, the brain, the top of the tingling spine, is, or should be, the only instrument used upon a book. (3–4)

Such a creative reader would be able to see, as in the sense of Spinoza’s third kind of knowledge, that Speak, Memory repeatedly anticipates in partial forms the final form of the vision of “cosmic synchronization” we discussed previously. Of course, not in a solemn spirit, but with ludic
excess, as is Nabokov’s wont. Similarly, the creative reader would see the same repeated partial anticipation of the vision concluding *Lolita* that Nabokov singles out in his famous afterword as containing the humanistic moral of the novel. Before turning to those passages, however, I want to spell out, based on Nabokov’s broad hints in this passage, who is the creative reader par excellence.

Clearly—and distinctly!—the creative reader, the good reader, is first of all the author himself:

The good reader is one who has imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense—which sense I propose to develop in myself and in others whenever I have the chance. (3)

The author of the text is like Spinoza’s God—or Nature!—in his cosmic vision of things by virtue of working through the imagination of sensuous details to a step-by-step rereading that follows the logic of the text’s unfolding to a simultaneous intuition of the principle, the rule, of this text’s formation. So too the good reader, the creative rereader is all of us—potentially, in our avatar guises as *Deus sive Natura*, following suit. I mean, ideally so, of course, that as with any regulative ideal supporting the intellectually loving norms of good reading, Nabokov himself in practicing criticism strongly endorses and underwrites herein.

“On a Book Entitled *Lolita*” is now printed as an afterword to most editions of the novel, a total of some fourteen million sold as of a decade or so ago. And now we have Kindle or Nook or iPad with our *Lolita* on them as they are on our laps. The general aim of the novel, as of any literary work, is not, Nabokov classically stipulates, a moralizing message (“in tow”) but an ethic of humane intellectual ecstasy:

*Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. (314–15)

That is, for the creative reader first of all, the author, the text is one substance existing in the dimensions of time and space like a world where aesthetic bliss in Nabokov’s unfolding multifarious sense exists: the novel, fiction, literature is the otherworld. And if Spinoza should be right, it is
the real world, too.

Here is Nabokov pointing out what he calls “the nerves of the novel” (316) which he rediscovers on rereading:

Every serious writer . . . is aware of this or that published book of his as a constant comforting presence. Its pilot light is steadily burning somewhere in the basement and a mere touch applied to one’s private thermostat instantly results in a quiet little explosion of familiar warmth. This presence, this glow of the book in an ever accessible remoteness is a most companionable feeling, and the better the book has conformed to its prefigured contour and color the ampler and smoother its glows. But even so, there are certain points, byroads, favorite hollows, that one evolves more eagerly and enjoys more tenderly than the rest of one’s book. I have not reread Lolita since I went through the proofs in the spring of 1955 but I find it to be a delightful presence now that it quietly hangs about the house like a summer day which one knows to be bright behind the haze. (315–16)

I am not sure if the enjoyment recollected here is all that far in its lineaments from both Spinoza’s intellectual love of God and Humbert’s more extensively self-loving kind. Despite Nabokov’s best intention, Freud pops up in our minds—okay, in my dirty mind. I suppose one could claim that Humbert Humbert reaching the climax to end all climaxes against Lolita’s squirming thighs and left buttock on the couch in her house while mother Charlotte is at church is a demonic parody of Freud, Spinoza, and Nabokov’s own joy. Being able to see many opposing things converging into one is something both Nabokov and Spinoza prize. But oh that last “puny” word—haze. (Lolita’s given name, we recall with a minor jolt, is Dolores Haze.)

In any event, Nabokov proceeds in the rest of the passage to single out “the nerves of the novel,” paying particular attention, by its climactic placement in the expansively spiraling series, to Humbert’s vision in the valley:

And when I thus think of Lolita, I seem always to pick out for special delectation such images as Mr. Taxovich, or that class list of Ramsdale School, or Charlotte saying “waterproof,” or Lolita in slow motion advancing toward Humbert’s gifts, or the pictures decorating the stylized
garret of Gaston Godin, or the Kasbeam barber (who cost me a month of work), or Lolita playing tennis, or the hospital at Elphinstone, or pale, pregnant, beloved, irretrievable Dolly Schiller dying in Gray Star (the capital town of the book), or the tinkling sounds of the valley town coming up the mountain trail (on which I caught the first known female of *Lycæides sublivens* Nabokov). These are the nerves of the novel. These are the secret points, the subliminal co-ordinates by means of which the book is plotted. (316)

And plotted not so much for meta-fictional ironies, parodies, or the like, as for the aesthetic bliss Nabokov loves.

While Humbert sits in his car awaiting the police to catch up with him, he recalls suddenly the vision he suffers on a mountain road shortly after Lolita ran off with Quilty:

One day, soon after her disappearance, an attack of abominable nausea forced me to pull up on the ghost of an old mountain road that now accompanied, now traversed a brand new highway, with its population of asters bathing in the detached warmth of a pale-blue afternoon in late summer. After coughing myself inside out, I rested on a boulder, and then, thinking the sweet air might do me good, walked a little way toward a low stone parapet on the precipice side of the highway. Small grasshoppers spurted out of the withered roadside weeds. A very light cloud was opening its arms and moving toward a slightly more substantial one belonging to another, more sluggish, heavenlogged system. As I approached the friendly abyss, I grew aware of a melodious unity of sounds rising like vapor from a small mining town that lay at my feet, in a fold of the valley. One could make out the geometry of the streets between blocks of red and gray roofs, and green puffs of trees, and a serpentine stream, and the rich, ore-like glitter of the city dump, and beyond the town, roads crisscrossing the crazy quilt of dark and pale fields, and behind it all, great timbred mountains. But even brighter than those quietly rejoicing colors—for there are colors and shades that seem to enjoy themselves in good company—both brighter and dreamier to the ear than they were to the eye, was that vapory vibration of accumulated sounds that never ceased for a moment, as it rose to the lip of granite where I stood wiping my foul mouth. And soon I realized that all these sounds were of one nature, that no other sounds but these came from the streets
of the transparent town, with the women at home and the men away. 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 here 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. (307–8)

Some of Nabokov’s best commentators simply do not buy this climactic vision. Either Nabokov does not carry off Humbert’s conversion, in a case of too much, too late, and all at once; or, given its position out of chronological order, this vision is too clever by half, clearly having special pleading designs on the reader—witness Humbert’s campy direct address à la Jane Eyre; or it is too much of Nabokov shining through Humbert here and so fictional illusion is broken. I agree with this view, but the breaking of illusion is not done here in the interest of gamesmanship but of humanity, granting it as much to Humbert as to Dolores, by imaginatively presenting them, each in their own tragically meeting worlds, to the creative reader for critical judgment, as character, reader, and author coincide in an instant approximating, as best the finite can, the infinite, the divinely creative, visionary love.

For me, this vision is thus a case of “cosmic synchronization” if there ever was one. It is the unfolding point of the whole novel. Some of its evident pedigree: Rousseau’s “sense of being” from Reveries of a Solitary Walker; any number of Wordsworthian visions; Blakean minute particles and fugitive creative moment; Emeronian transcendental Genius or Nature; Paterian moments of the tragic dividing of forces in a person; Joycean epiphanies; Woolf’s moments of being; Heidegger’s moment of vision when the call of conscience repeats the subject’s resolute commitment to its better angel; even Mallarmé’s famous definition of poetic beauty as the perfect rose missing from all the bouquets (like that “first known female of Lycaeides sublivens Nabokov” from nature?); or pick one of your own. This is your literary institution at work. In mentioning these
names, I may seem to be claiming too much for Nabokov or simply covering for the visions that I missed in Milton, Dante, the Bible, or some Russian classic: so be it!

What I propose is that we divide this vision between Humbert and his creator and best reader, much as Lionel Trilling does with Joyce and Gabriel Conroy in his commentary on the famous cosmic vision of the snow falling faintly through the universe on all the living and the dead at the end of “The Dead.” Joyce magnanimously grants his creature a share in this vision so that Conroy, not known previously in the story for his generosity of spirit or acute self-knowledge, may see and feel—at least to some degree—what Joyce sees and feels about the human condition and how best to respond to it, with “generous tears” for all concerned. I think the demonic fusion of Quilty and Humbert in the wrestling scene we have just read, in which the former is murdered by the latter, is comic preparation for what turns into an imaginative fusion of a higher kind, in which Humbert and Nabokov—and we fellow readers of “the friendly abyss”—become, after Humbert and we too perhaps, get over an acute case of Sartrean nausea, part of “one nature” (307)—or God. In perceiving imaginatively Spinoza’s third kind of knowledge via Nabokov’s “cosmic synchronization” of Deus sive Natura, the creative reader coincides moments at a time with the loftiest vision of human potential in this or any otherworld.

Lest this proposal appear too sentimental for any hardnosed critic, despite my subtle use of the Jesuitical double-truth, adapted from Averroes—hardly sentimentalist any of them—I also would like to suggest in conclusion that becoming, momentarily, avatars of the creative (re-) reader function in Nabokov’s Lolita, Deus sive Natura, may sound less glamorous or sublime if we remember what kind of novel we are in—and what kind of pornographic scenes Clare Quilty appears to specialize in. Orgies would be Nabokov’s old word; “cluster-fucks” would now be our brand-new one no doubt.