The Contingency of Moral Education: Nabokov versus Rorty

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> [N]ovels rather than moral treatises are the most useful vehicles of moral education.
> —Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress*

Introduction

In 1956, the year after the publication of the widely known novel *Lolita*, the Russian-American author Vladimir Nabokov wrote a six to seven page text — à la Friedrich Schiller's letters upon the aesthetic education of man from 1794–1795 — where he communicates with the *Lolita* reader in a rather personal way. Nabokov's letter is called *On a Book Entitled Lolita*, and, quite obviously, the scene is reminiscent of *Lolita*. The year after, Olympia Press published the letter in L'Affaire Lolita, Paris. At the time the letter existed in its own right, but in 1958 it became a part of *Lolita*. It turned out to be the afterword to the novel, and thus the author returns to his own book. But why this return? And why write a letter? A probable answer is that he wants the reader of *Lolita* to wrench herself free from delusion and come to her senses. He does not, however, play with open cards. The novelist is ironic, through and through, by mixing pranks and seriousness, hence giving the reader a problematic and educational task, or, perhaps better, he is making a dialectical knot to be solved by the reader. Here is an example: "there are at least three themes," says Nabokov,

> which are utterly taboo as far as most American publishers are concerned. The two others are: a Negro–White marriage which is a complete and glorious success resulting in lots of children and grandchildren; and the total atheist who lives a happy and useful life, and dies in his sleep at the age of 106.[1]

Incest, one of the themes, is not mentioned by name. Nabokov speaks and does not speak, but through this "silence" he brings forth this taboo, which involves a total act of power. Then he compares the theme of incest with themes of interracial marriage and atheism, which are completely innocent to other people. Why, then, is Nabokov doing this? I suggest he is doing it for educational purposes; that is to say, he is constantly interrupting and surprising the reader, giving her a chance to readjust concepts and values.

Usually, education is defined as a purposeful and formal approach to consciously guiding others (as in schooling). Nabokov, however, is exposing the contingency of education by showing that things might turn out differently than expected. This will be the main argument of this essay. Moreover, a Nabokovian education is per se unpredictable and may happen through an unexpected event. It may not even happen at all. One can also imagine many unforeseen events that are not educational. There are no guarantees in "the classroom" of Nabokov. That claim is easy to back up because, as we just saw, he is trying to dazzle and perplex the reader so that she can be enticed away from the seriousness of incest. Thus, it is possible that the reader will dissociate herself with the young girl, Lolita, who is exposed to incest.

We have to ask ourselves, though, whether it is possible to read *Lolita* and other novels of Nabokov in a moral educational light — because the Russian-American author does everything, so it seems, in order to stay away from the moral and educational aspects. Nabokov:

> There are gentle souls who would pronounce *Lolita* meaningless because it does not teach them anything. I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray's assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only 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.[2]

Has *Lolita*, after all, nothing to do with educational matters? Is the reading supposed to end in a pure form of aestheticization of life? Or is Nabokov talking about art for art's sake? I think not. However, there is no instructive form of didactics in which the teacher is guiding the student onto the correct moral path. *Lolita* has, as Nabokov says, "no moral in tow." Neither does the author carry educational content to the novel. That does not mean the book has no moral and no educational concerns. The reason for not towing moral and educational content to the novel seems to be that it would "kill art." In a letter, dated 1945, Nabokov says:

> I never meant to deny the moral impact of art which is certainly inherent in every genuine work of art. What I do deny and am prepared to fight to the last drop of my ink is the deliberate moralizing which to me kills every vestige of art in a work however skillfully written.[3]

From this point of view *Lolita* is neither an amoral nor an anti-educational novel. Neither is it a moralizing nor a didactical book, due to the reason that art must be kept alive. I suggest that *Lolita* is a "moral" and an "educational" novel in the sense that it can cause an unforeseen moral impact on the reader. In that way *Lolita* does not afford the reader "aesthetic bliss" only because the reader may be touched in such a surprising way that her hitherto view on morality changes. This sums up what I call the "contingency of moral education", a kind of moral education that has no faith in general ideas.

From now on I have to bring support to my claim, and to begin with I give an account of Richard Rorty's moral educational reading of Nabokov from the book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. However, Rorty does not only support my claim. His own image of moral education differs, at a certain point, from Nabokov's — and this difference will, I think, make it easier to see what kind of original and unorthodox image Nabokov offers on moral education.

On Rorty's Moral Educational Reading of Nabokov

Central to Rorty's reading of Nabokov are the four characteristics that are associated with art — curiosity, tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy — and whether these features should be inseparable or not. "Nabokov would like the four characteristics which make up art to be inseparable", Rorty states, "but he has to face up to the unpleasant fact that writers can obtain and produce ecstasy while failing to notice suffering."[4] He continues:

> So he creates characters who are both ecstatic and cruel, noticing and heartless, poets who are only selectively curious, obsessives who are as sensitive as they are callous. What he fears most is that one cannot have it both ways — that there is no synthesis of ecstasy and kindness. (*CIS*, 160)

How may we understand Rorty's assumption? Imagine that there is a bridge between the four characteristics of art. Then what? Whoever fulfils the requirements of art — or, more precisely, the one who is curious, tender, and kind — will experience moments of ecstasy. Nabokov has thus solved a moral dilemma, because all the reader of *Lolita* has to do is to follow the didactical instructions given by Nabokov, that is, to be vigilant and kind, and then wait for the big reward — aesthetic bliss or joyful experiences. The trouble with this pedagogical dictum or moral law, which Rorty points out, is that ecstasy will only happen to one particular group of readers: namely, the artistic ones or those who are "connected with other states of being." If the reader does not follow the moral law, she will not experience the blissful state. This is naive and simple minded, Rorty indicates, because the person will end up pressing the moral aspects into certain rules. Rorty's conclusion seems to be clear: to make a synthesis between kindness and ecstasy will lead to a conception of moral education that goes hand in hand with dogma.

Rorty does not, however, conclude that Nabokov believes in such a concept of moral education: "But Nabokov knew quite well that ecstasy and tenderness not only are separable but tend to preclude each other" (*CIS*, 159). Rorty argues that the novelist solves the problem of dogma by making no attempts to unite the four conceptions of art. To support his assumption Rorty says repeatedly that the curious and kind person is not the only one who will get into rapture; the person who is attentive and humane does not have exclusive rights to ecstasy. The philosopher even indicates that it is possible to experience this excitement if the person is not curious, tender, and kind (*CIS*, 159). Hence there is no connection between curiosity, tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy. This can be seen, Rorty continues, in the light of *Lolita's* protagonist Humbert Humbert who is both a genius — due to his eloquence — and a "cruel monster" — because he only sees what he himself is possessed with. As such, the reader can behold cruelty from the inside, and *Lolita* becomes a particular *Bildungsroman* in that it places "the Devil" — Humbert — in front of the reader's eyes so that she can witness his cruelty. With that the reader can be moved by a somewhat Kafkian feeling of discomfort, but contrary to Josef K. — who is innocent of any wrongdoing — the reader can regard Humbert as her "brother" (*CIS*, 163). Thus, the reader may understand that she, too, has been both selectively curious and unkind because she has been too preoccupied with private feelings. Rorty: "The reader [of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* is] suddenly revealed to himself as, if not hypocritical, at least cruelly incurious" (*CIS*, 163). In that way the reader can change her mind and comprehend that the search for autonomy and ecstasy often contradicts curiosity, tenderness, and kindness (*CIS*, 164).

Rorty has thus brought forth a concept of moral education where dogma has no role to play. He writes: "I share Nabokov's suspicion of general ideas when it comes to philosopher's attempts to squeeze our moral sentiments into rules for deciding moral dilemmas" (*CIS*, 148). In Rorty's view, Nabokov is neither a moralizer nor a didactician because he has no clear theoretical answers to questions such as "Why not be cruel?" and "What is it to be done about injustice?" Nabokov merely depicted cruelty from the inside, making sure that he was not surrendering to the rules of moral

conduct. Still, he did create space for moral education, that is to say, a kind of moral education that may happen out of sheer contingency. With luck, the reader might start to see her own cruelty (of thoughtlessness), or at least that she has a potential of being cruel. All in all, the best novels of Nabokov will create a good basis for Rorty's liberal democratic society because they do have the power to create better citizens, or, to be more precise, citizens who are working for a less cruel world.

The Problem with Rorty's Concept of Moral Education

The main problem with Rorty's concept of moral education, though, is that he believes that texts in general are "permanent possibilities for use."[5] The only thing that matters for Rorty is that the reader of any text can invent a vocabulary that can help us diminish suffering in the world. The Rortian concept of moral education thus begins with the subject, or, in this case, the reader and her political interests and purposes, which are likely to be imposed into the work of art. That means Rorty's reading can end up being didactic because he may read his political interests into novels, which will then become desired. On Nabokov's view, "politics in a work of art is not merely a shot fired during a concert which distracts and even frightens its audience, it is the shooting of the musicians themselves."[6] In other words, any reader who projects her own motives into a novel will kill its art. The novels of Nabokov, too, will suffer from such a didactic reading. In fact, they will become like the fictitious girl Lolita: namely, abused. To Humbert, Lolita was only a private invention. He saw her solely in his own misconstrued image; hence, they were always separated from each other. Lolita, the stepdaughter, never became kin with her stepfather. The same evasive connection will likely happen between a Rortian reader and texts in general because this particular subject has political purposes. Rorty and Nabokov have, after all, a totally different view on moral education.

While Rorty thinks it is possible to "master" a text or a work of art, Nabokov turns the table: he thinks that works of art have the capability to "master" the reader. A work of art, like *Lolita*, is haunted by unknown forces, even unknown to the creator. These forces are brought to life by Nabokov's rhetoric and they have the power to touch and move the reader. To be moved is to be set in motion; hence, things may be seen in a different light. One's moral beliefs and conduct may change. In that way the person has underwent a process of moral education through art. That does not mean education is foreseeable. Again, a Nabokovian education may only happen as a surprise. These are the crucial things that Rorty overlooks. His view on moral education is created out of political interests; hence, a novel is just an inspiration to Rorty. That is, the task of the novel is to give inspiration to a new moral vocabulary so that the society can become a less cruel place (*CIS*, xvi). In that case the novel will remain untouched and will not be brought to life. The reason for this is that Rorty is totally insensitive to the moral and educational impact of the work of art itself. Instead of escaping the prison of dogma Rorty may read behind the bars of dogma because the chances of towing moral content to the novel are high.

Ecstasy and Moral Education

Rorty is, however, right to point out the problems with regard to ecstasy. A person may, for example, become ecstatic when she sees something of relevance to

her own obsessions. That kind of ecstasy is solipsistic by nature. Take Humbert for example. He is inattentive to everything but his own obsession, and still he does experience ecstasy. Humbert: "But all that was nothing, absolutely nothing, to the indescribable itch of rapture that her tennis game produced in me — the teasing delirious feeling of teetering on the very brink of unearthly order and splendour."[7] The "itch of rapture" and "the teasing delirious feeling" which Humbert talks about are experiences of ecstasy and blissfulness. However, and this is important, that kind of ecstasy is not produced by Lolita, the "actual" girl. Humbert's Lolita produces it. As he watches Lolita playing tennis he sees his own, private image, an image of a nymphet that was created before he met Lolita. Nabokov dreads such imagery, which is separate from the person involved or from a work of art. From his earliest days at Cornell University he said to his students: "I am concerned with the specific text, the thing itself."[8] Whoever brings something to the text that lies outside it, like any solipsist would do, is incapable of being educated. Such a reader is — after having read a book — unchanged.

The plane crashed into the Twin Towers on 9/11, to take yet another example, may induce feelings of ecstasy. Such a person, who only sees the beauty of the most tragic event, is totally insensitive to the tragedy of other people's lives. There is no moral involved.

Even though Rorty is aware of these problems he has a rather one-sided definition of the concept of ecstasy. In his essay on Nabokov he is talking as if ecstasy can cause aesthetic bliss, and nothing else. Hence, he totally overlooks the fact that ecstasy can produce a moral impact on the reader. It is here that we can see Rorty's and Nabokov's different views on moral education. What we should notice is that Nabokov in the letter from 1945 (cited early in this essay) is not just talking of an impact on the reader, but a moral impact. Most of his novels contain the history of pain, because pain "is the insufferable indignity, and the failure to remember or imagine it, as it brutalizes the self and others, is the unhappy privilege of solipsists and torturers."[9] That does not mean Nabokov is offering ethical maxims; no, the relationship between morality and art is integral. Hence, his finest works of art are able to induce emotions of ecstasy where the reader is on her way to becoming a singular and moral human being. Through the fictitious writer of the prescript to *Lolita*, John Ray Jr., Nabokov strongly indicates that moral education begins not with the reader but with the work of art: "But how magically his [Humbert's] singing violin [*Lolita*] can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!"[10]

Nabokov's statement that a work of fiction exists only as it affords him aesthetic bliss may now be understood as an overstatement. In the sentence just quoted he is not just talking of aesthetic bliss. He is also talking of the moral educational value of art. He is indicating that *Lolita*, a work of art, behaves in a magically or unpredictable way as it conjures the reader into a state of tenderness in which she pities Lolita. The reader thus becomes entranced, that is to say, she is drawn into an ecstasy and carried away from established positions by the "magical violin" or the unknown conjurer in the text. This event — which is always unexpected and

different from reading to reading and reader to reader — has a moral educational element since the reader has been conjured into a moral state which is new to her: in this particular case, a state where she becomes compassionate toward Lolita and disgusted in regard to Humbert's encroachment.[11]

Tears That See

The rapture of ecstasy may even lead to tears, due to Nabokov's artistry. The problem is of course that Humbert, too, weeps. However, he weeps either because he pities himself, by means of himself, or in order to deceive the reader. Thus his tears are crocodile tears, that is to say, he weeps so as to gain sympathy from the reader. As a result of this insincerity and fake tears he does not see anyone but himself. There is, however, one scene in particular in which he actually sees Lolita. Humbert has not seen Lolita for several years and when he meets up with her she is a pregnant seventeen year old. Humbert:

> [T]here she was with her ruined looks and her adult, rope-veined narrow hands and her gooseflesh white arms, and her shallow ears, and her unkempt armpits […] and I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else.[12]

Humbert loves Lolita, probably for the first time. Earlier he "loved" Lolita due to her innocence and all her nymphet characteristics, but that is only a fixed viewpoint of the girl, not love. Now, after his moral education, he makes no attempt to glorify the image of Lolita.[13] He loves her for who she is, and goes "mad with tenderness," even though her looks are "ruined."

Nabokov, who often spoke of tears, referred to this scene in a French interview. He said that he wept while writing it.[14] Contrary to the solipsistic Humbert, he wept because he pitied Lolita, not by means of himself but by means of the girl, whose childhood Humbert had destroyed. Nabokov's vision was not blurred by prejudices or private obsessions: rather, it was blurred with tears — but it was, paradoxically, through the tears that he could see Lolita: the Other. "[T]he tears see," says Derrida of *Memoirs of the Blind*.[15] The tears come to the eyes, like a moral impact, and the tears cause a certain form of blindness — which, strangely enough, can see.[16] One of the reasons is that "tears are not something the eyes 'take in' but rather that they 'give out'."[17] Weeping is thus the opposite of seeing. A person who is seeing — pace Rorty — takes in and makes use of the Other. Paradoxically, the person who struggles to see is unable to see the Other because of the unwillingness to give and sacrifice. That means the person is unable to overcome prejudices, whereas the Other is painted in one's own image. A person who is weeping tenderly, though, gives out — through tears. All one's prejudices are destroyed in that way and the weeper can catch glimpses of the Other.

Nabokov was quite right in indicating that tears see, but quite wrong to expect that "the good reader should feel the forerunner of a tear" ["le bon lecteur devrait avoir un picotement au coin de l'œil."].[18] (Nabokov is here referring to the passage about Lolita's "ruined looks.") Nobody can expect an Other to weep. To weep does not come out of demand or commandment. It is the cause of a highly unpredictable event. The reader may weep or she may not. Neither can Nabokov expect the reader

to weep at this particular scene. It is possible that the reader may weep in other places, or long after the book has been read. If the tears come to the eyes they always come as a contingent surprise, otherwise the tears are private with no moral concern.

Conclusion

Moral education is doubly prescriptive: (1) morality or how we should behave toward our fellow human beings is inherently prescriptive, (2) and education is prescriptive about curriculum, at least in situations of schooling. A Nabokovian moral education, however, shares something prescriptive with art: both the moral and the educational aspects should emphasize curiosity, tenderness, kindness, and ecstasy. Now, what does this nonformal moral education of Nabokov have to offer teachers?

One suggestion is that the teacher should constantly revisit history, especially the history of pain. Nabokov, since he knew how limited and fragile human explanations are, always looked in the rearview mirror and rewrote the history of pain. He even talked about what is almost impossible to talk about, such themes as incest and the brutalizing of children. The reason is simple: if such suffering is forgotten we end up being narcissists and solipsists who are humiliating not only ourselves but others as well. At the same time, following the style of Nabokov, the teaching should be full of forking paths, where contingent stories of pain and suffering constantly interrupt the students. The interruptions and intermittences may even be performed in the form of deceits, so as to really challenge the students.[19] It is like placing a magic mirror in front of the students, who may behold their own insensitiveness and callousness. While most educators in schools rely on goals and objectives, which serve as predictors of educational outcomes, Nabokov indicates that teachers must be careful not to jam their moral beliefs and attitudes into rules for deciding moral problems. If so, the teacher will end up being a didactician and a moralizer who, most likely, is unable to set students in motion. Any moralizing lesson will easily create negative feelings in the students, because they are being told, in a straightforward fashion, what kind of values to strive for. That is why I think the teacher should be artistic in a sense, as Nabokov really was. Such a teacher is more likely to move the students, who are almost forced to respond to the unexpected and unforeseeable challenge. Hence, they are on their way to becoming singular and moral human beings.

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1. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 316.

2. Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 316–17.

3. Vladimir Nabokov, "Letter, October 1945," in *Selected Letters 1940–1977*, eds. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1989), 56–57.

4. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 159. This work will be cited as *CIS* in the text for all subsequent references.

5. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 153.

6. Leland de la Durantaye, *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007), 189.

7. Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 232.

8. Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 133.

9. Michael Wood, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), 234.

10. Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 7.

11. In *The Infinite Conversation* (1969) Maurice Blanchot may clarify our understanding with regard to the relationship between ecstasy and education: "I will add that if we are able to have commerce with this unknowable, it is precisely in fear or anguish, or in one of those ecstatic movements that you just refused as being non-philosophical; it is there that we have some presentiment of the Other — it seizes us, staggers and ravishes us, carrying us away from ourselves. But precisely in order to change us into the Other." (Quoted in Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 132).

12. Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 279.

13. In the foreword to the novel *Despair* Nabokov compares the protagonist of *Despair*, Hermann, with Humbert. Both are described as "neurotic scoundrels," but the former of the two shall never be paroled from Hell (Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 9). Hermann is — solely — cruel, but when it comes to Humbert Nabokov is, to a certain degree, conciliatory. He says: "there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year" (*Despair*, 9).

14. Vladimir Nabokov, "Interview," *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, October 29, 1959, 17–18.

15. Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 128.

16. Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 122.

17. Michael Newman, "Derrida and the Scene of Drawing," *Research in Phenomenology* 24, no. 1 (1994): 230.

18. Vladimir Nabokov, "Interview with Anne Guérin," *L'Express*, January 26, 1961, 27.

19. See Herner Sæverot, "Educative Deceit: Nabokov and the [Im]possibility of Education," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 5 (2010).