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*Self-Deception in Literature*

Edited by  
Zeynep Talay Turner

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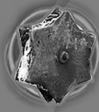
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# The Wrong End of the Stick: Self-Deception in Nabokov

Charles Turner

## Abstract

The problem of self-deception is often couched in terms of whether it is possible for someone to lie to themselves, whether the lie is an act of masking a truth - either previously known or simultaneously adhered to - and whether the lying is intentional. This philosophy of mind approach relies heavily on the question of whether someone does or does not believe something at any one time, and features scenarios involving hypothetical agents with markedly thin biographies. Here I pursue a different tack. Firstly, Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis* invites us to think less about 'beliefs' about states of affairs held by isolated actors than about the reality status of the social interactions we get involved in and the susceptibility of that reality status to multiple shifts in significance and import. Secondly, I read Nabokov's *Lolita* partly as a story some of whose substantive content warrants a frame analytic approach, but also as a piece of frame analysis in its own right.

...Nabokov was capable of writing entire fictions...in which the narrators have no idea what is going on at all.

Martin Amis

...one can think of self-deception (or delusion) as wrongheadedness actively aided, if not solely produced, by the head that is wrong.

Erving Goffman

Every man likes to flirt with a pretty girl, and every pretty girl likes to be flirted with. The wider the distance between them the less harm there is, for then she's not likely to deceive herself.

Arthur Donnithorne, in George Eliot, *Adam Bede*.

## Introduction

At the beginning of *Despair* Nabokov says that had he lacked the power to write, not only would he have refrained from describing 'certain recent events', but "there would have been nothing to describe, for, gentle reader, nothing at all would have happened"<sup>1</sup>. The novelist's ability to create a world is at once a readiness to create a reality that then confronts him/her as something over which he/she is less than sovereign and with which he/she must wrestle.<sup>2</sup> Nothing happens without the author, but he/she is always unreliable. In so far as Nabokov's fictions feature narrators who themselves

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1 Nabokov (1965), p.7.

2 Blumenberg (1979).

advertise this unreliability, they are writerly to the second degree, the narrators being not so much the author in disguise as testimony to the author's self-consciousness about matters of writing. These narrators, these murderers indeed – Hermann Karlovich, Humbert Humbert – are struggling to fathom something, their descriptions inviting the reader to wonder whether any of this happened. The reader may not go that far. But he or she, once attuned to that extreme possibility, will be open to the equally extreme idea that the narrator has had no idea what was happening. Nabokov's playfulness consists partly in the fact that his creations, these know-all and know-nothing narrators, are supremely, one might say implausibly clever – in their manipulation of others, in their capacity to notice everything, and in their facility with language.

He points to the possibility – and that is about as direct as Nabokov ever manages to be – that the greatest vulnerability to self-deception may be found in those who are the most alive to the possibility of deceiving others. When Nietzsche asked, “why should I not deceive myself?” he seemed to imply that a certain comfort, an easier life, might be had by not wanting to get to the bottom of things, including things having to do with oneself. Yet the philosophy of mind literature has stressed that the psychological dynamic of self-deception may well involve the opposite of an easy life, a repeated, obsessive attention to and then misinterpretation of information concerning oneself and one's relationship with others. In what Mele calls

“garden variety” cases, be they straight – a scholar rationalising a negative report on his rejected paper as a misinterpretation by a careless reader, a student who, hoping for a relationship with someone who is already spoken for, sees her hesitation as egging him on – or twisted – the jealous husband believing his wife is having an affair despite the meagre evidence for it – the information is treated by the self-deceiver as largely something there, produced by others and having to be dealt with<sup>3</sup>.

Humbert Humbert is both an obsessive interpreter of what Goffman called the “give off signs” of others and an engineer of situations in which those signs, or the right sort of signs, might proliferate. He moves between a domestic space in which he can believe he is King and a public space – parks – in which he embraces his own helplessness, and between three principal characters: the naïve widow Charlotte, willing to deceive herself, her cynical daughter Dolores, and the broodingly absent Quilty. The possibilities for self-deception in Humbert Humbert are partly structured via the discrepancy between the attention he pays to clues about the first two and the relationship between them, and his willful disregard for those about the latter and his relationship with Dolores.

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<sup>3</sup> Mele (2001), pp.25-49.



## Psychology, Philosophy, Sociology

When we put the matter like that we could choose to consider self-deception as a psychological or a philosophy of mind problem, and respectably so. The issues raised by the latter over agency and non-agency, and intentional versus non-intentional self-deception, including the question of whether it is possible for someone to deceive themselves at all, are important. However, there is a tendency in this work to turn what would seem on the face of it to be primarily an ethical problem into a cognitive one, or at least to enter into a lot of important cognitive groundwork without obviously getting back to the ethical problem that is the reason for being interested in these matters in the first place. *Lolita* is surely amenable to an analysis in philosophy of mind terms, but here I seek both to retain a sense of its ethical urgency and keep to the fore the way Nabokov does what he does as a novelist. He is not so much illustrating the problem of self-deception as giving us some of its architecture.

Now describing analytical philosophy as turning ethical questions into cognitive ones sounds a bit rich when Nabokov is supposed to be the contrast. As Eric Naiman has put it,

Nabokov's literature has a penchant for turning moral questions about life into procedural ones about reading. The intensity of his reader's engagement with his work has much in common with the tortured urgency of the conversations and internal debates that

are so compelling in the heroes of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and, in some cases, Chekhov, but that engagement does not revolve around whether the reader is a good person or whether life is worth living but concerns whether he is a good reader and, implicitly, whether Nabokov is worth reading<sup>4</sup>.

That point is well taken, but even if Nabokov's demand for good readers was solely a demand for readers ready to enter into the complexity of his mode of delivery, with the ethical implications left to one side, he gave us the books he did, books that, however indirect they are, provide us with some of the more delicate explorations of the properties, and the props, the architecture, of our lives as moral agents.

Below I will suggest that the indirectness and the architecture be usefully seen through the lens of Goffman's *Frame Analysis*. But before that, a brief reminder of what Freud and Sartre had to say about these matters. Clearly, technical philosophical progress has been made since then, but both Nabokov and Goffman were themselves writing against a background in which psychoanalysis and existentialism were prominent.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Naiman (2010), p.9.

<sup>5</sup> One thing that Sartre and Freud shared (with a good deal of analytical philosophy it turns out) was a habit of trying to squeeze a lot of meaning out of a small number of examples. Sartre's primal scenes of bad faith are the café waiter doing his thing and the over-attentive pupil. Goffman made something of these examples himself but only in passing; Sartre, though recognizing that the waiter is just doing his job, sees his and all professionalisms as mere inauthentic ritual: 'this obligation is not different from that which is imposed on all tradesmen. Their condition is wholly one of ceremony. The public demands of them that they realize it as a ceremony; there is the dance of the

In the famous discussion of bad faith Sartre says that:

...the one to whom the lie is told and the one who lies are one and the same person, which means that I must know in my capacity as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived. Better yet I must know the truth very exactly in order to conceal it more carefully - and this not at two different moments, which at a pinch would allow us to re-establish a semblance of duality - but in the unitary structure of a single project.<sup>6</sup>

Sartre here was being hostile to Freud, not only because Freud “cut consciousness in two”, but also because the popularisation of psychoanalytic terminology had made available to individuals who knew how to use it, and even to those who didn’t, a larger menu of excuses and rationalizations for our behaviour:

If I have a little knowledge of psychoanalysis, I can, under circumstances particularly favourable, try to psychoanalyze myself. But this attempt can succeed only if I distrust every kind of intuition, only if I apply to my case from the outside, abstract schemes and rules already learned<sup>7</sup>.

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grocer, of the tailor, of the auctioneer, by which they endeavour to persuade their clientele that they are nothing but a grocer, an auctioneer, a tailor’ (Sartre (1957), p.59.

6 Sartre (1957), p.49.

7 Sartre (1957), p.51.

These, he says, “will never have the certainty which intuition confers; they will possess simply the always increasing probability of scientific hypotheses”.<sup>8</sup>

Sartre’s mocking tone would not have been lost on Nabokov, who himself rarely lost an opportunity to dismiss Freud, though one doesn’t have to be a Freudian to wonder whether the vehemence of his negative references to Freud expresses something of a need for him. He plays with psychoanalytic formulations, and he has Humbert Humbert say that when he was in a sanatorium he liked to have fun with doctors of all kinds by going along with their explanations or offering them up as his own. The detached, quasi-scientific tone that HH adopts early on in *Lolita* to describe his relationship with other people will be part of what ensures that his self-knowledge, such as it is, falls short of intuition, and will also be part of what keeps us at bay whenever we want to get to the bottom of his relationship with Lolita. His own curiosity about himself, or rather the mode in which he express it, the way he frames it, anticipates and is intended to deflect our curiosity about him.

That is an everyday use of the term “frame”. Erving Goffman formalised what we might mean by it. He had become an international bestseller with *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* in 1956, a year after Nabokov did with *Lolita*. Among the many things it does is to show how, whatever Freud might have thought about the psychopathology of them,

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<sup>8</sup> Sartre (1957), p.51.

or Sartre about the various forms of inauthenticity involved in them, face-to-face encounters with other people mean social order and psychic health, in the face of all the possibilities for their opposite. *Asylums* in 1961 *Stigma* in 1963 were both about darker matters. All three books were about what it is to be a person, and about how much information we need others to know about us and how much information about others we need to know in any given encounter. But more importantly, they were about the unfolding dynamic of the interactions in which attributes such as mental illness or stigma get applied to people. They were emphatically not an account of mental illness as a state of mind or ‘the mental patient’ as a type, or about “the stigmatised” as groups of people. “Mental illness” and “stigma” are addressed solely in terms of the organisation of experience. *Frame Analysis* of 1974 reworked all this into something more ambitious: the devices through which the reality status of “what is going on here”, is established and maintained, including cases where “here” includes situations where there is no co-proximity<sup>9</sup>.

Goffman’s starting idea is that all our doings are “guided”, not by us alone but by what he calls the “frames” that define the reality status of what we become involved in. His central point is that while much of our social life occurs within what he calls

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9 Nabokov’s hostility to Freud is not voiced in the name of sociology. He was not interested in social class or groups hierarchies or institutions, and an early reviewer even stated that ‘there is no clinical, sociological or mythic seriousness about *Lolita*’ (Hollander (1956), p.60). Yet he offers much of what we may call the interactional architecture of self-deception, both its props – the luxuriant physical detail through which we make and unmake a world – and its rhetorical supports.

“primary frameworks”, which define a minimum level of reality, a great deal too happens when another layer or “lamination” is added to the frame. When a lamination is added, it is that outermost layer that specifies what is to be taken for reality. These laminations can be what he called “rekeyings” or fabrications, and the fabrications can be “benign” or “exploitative”. A rekeying occurs when a strip of action for which there is a primary framework is carried out for a different purpose, as when a play is being rehearsed or when a fire drill is being staged, or when a piece of pornography is read in an obscenity trial rather than for the purpose of sexual gratification. The actions or words are “the same”, the sense of what is going on, and what is real, is different. These rekeyings all work because everyone is, so to speak, on the same page. We all know we are involved in a rehearsal, we in court all know how these dirty words are to be heard.

Fabrication occurs when one party to an interaction seeks to mislead another about where that outer layer lies, and so to speak to occupy that outer layer and keep another on a lower one. This may occur in a benign way, as when someone is fooled into attending a business meeting only to discover that it is a surprise birthday party, or it may be exploitative, as in the con trick, a device by which an individual is deprived of their money without the use of violence, usually by a team of others.

One of the features of the con trick is often that the victim of the con is someone who him or herself believes that he/she is an insider to a con

being played on someone further down the line. In other words, the “mark” believes he/she is “in on” an exploitative fabrication only to discover that he/she is the mark in another one. The role of double and triple agents belongs in the same territory, as does one of Goffman’s favourite examples, of the person who thought he was taking a relative to be admitted to a mental hospital only discover on arrival that he was the one being taken<sup>10</sup>.

Laminations may be piled on top of one another – fabrications may be rekeyed, benign ones reframed as exploitative ones, and the way in which this took place rekeyed too. Goffman’s point is that part of our skill as social actors is to know where the outer rim of the frame lies and to know if and when to shift levels or peel a layer off. We have to know for instance that it is a fire drill and not a real fire; between couples a jokey imitation of a love game may be an enjoyable part of that game, relieving both parties of the burden of seriousness, but if it becomes too playful and remains at that same level, one party may begin to wonder whether the love making is nothing more than a rehearsal. An aging rock star looking at child pornography may, when questioned by the police, claim that it was “research” motivated by memories of sexual abuse he suffered when young, just as a university lecturer who, while researching terrorism, has occasion to look at terrorist websites may find himself arrested by the security services,

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<sup>10</sup> Curiously enough, Goffman’s own examples of what he takes to be self-deception are rather disappointing: dreams, dissociated states like sleep walking, psychotic fabrications.

and it may not be straightforwardly clear that the arrest was wrongful. In *Lolita*, when Charlotte Haze has broken into his desk drawer and read his diary, Humbert Humbert defends the contents by insisting that the brutal descriptions of her are not about her at all but merely notes for a novel.

Goffman was extraordinarily sensitive to these ordinary troubles but also attuned to more spectacular cases of reframing and frame breaking, and the difficulties they present to our efforts to maintain our sense of “what is going on”. But he extended the point as far as he could; an exploitative fabrication may be rekeyed, as when con artists practice their trade, and rekeyed after the fact, when they re-enact what they claim happened for their friends or when the police demand that they do it. Just how far this can be taken is shown by his account of the play within the play in *Hamlet*:

The “play within a play” which Hamlet uses to catch the conscience of the king is, starting from the innermost point, a strip of possible past happening – the murder of Gonzago – and the sort of strip that could be keyed from drama were Hamlet real. So we have a theatrical framing of reality. The staged audience for this inner play, including the King, ought to be able to sustain an open agreement with the performers, the visiting troupe familiar of old to Hamlet, that a “mere” play is in progress: the staged audience need not know the outcome of the play but need only be willing to give itself over to the unfolding drama as if it could be real, yet do this in such a way that it will withdraw



its involvement after the curtain comes down, clearly having seen from moment to moment all along that of course only a play was being presented. However, Hamlet's particular choice of play under the circumstances, and especially his quiet change of some dozen or sixteen lines in the script, transforms the theatrical keying into an exploitative fabrication, into something the king would have denounced were he to have known in advance what he was getting in for. So we have a fabricated theatrical framing. But this, of course, is all in itself part of the play that Shakespeare wrote, a play that persons who are actors stage before persons who are really members of an audience. The actors who play the staged audience and the actors who play the stage actors equally share the information state that the producer possesses. And since the play is *Hamlet*, no actual audience is likely to be much ignorant of the play's development and outcome. However, the individuals on the stage will be obliged to manage and conceal their knowledge of the play's development and outcome in a different way from the way the real audience manages theirs. So one has, starting from the innermost point, a strip of events which could have actually occurred, transformed for dramatic production, retransformed as a construction to entrap the King, transformed once again, since all this plotting actually happens in a play, not merely by means of a play. And of course, the mountain of literary comment on the play is a keying of all this<sup>11</sup>.

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11 Goffman (1974), pp.183-4.

One area to which frame analysis is especially pertinent is matters of taste, notably in relation to religion and sexuality, and particularly in relation to the way these are treated by humourists. Often treated as matters of degree, Goffman suggests something more decisive is at work. Thus the satirical French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* published cartoons of the prophet Mohammad that it could claim were not cartoons of Mohammad at all but exemplifications of the sort of thing at which radical Islamists might take offence, and designed to provoke a reaction among those who did not understand that that was what they were. The British comedy writer Chris Morris's 2001 satirical TV programme, *Paedogeddon*, was a satire on the way television deals with moral panics and also an examination of television itself, but his own framing of the framing devices moral panics require was itself treated by some viewers as turning child abuse itself into an object of humour. Defenders of the programme argued that those viewers had not seen where the outer rim of the frame lay, and not seen what the programme was "really about".

## Nabokov as Frame Analyst

Nabokov's most famous novel is notable for its humour around a matter – paedophilia – of the utmost seriousness. The account of a kiss Lolita gives Humbert Humbert is as frame-analytical as

could be: “a bit of backfisch foolery in imitation of some simulacrum of fake romance”<sup>12</sup>.

We may want to say that all literature is frame analysis in the sense that the author is always one step ahead of the reader; the reader may or may not be ahead of the characters, depending on how much of the outer rim of the frame the author chooses to give the reader. And the reader, whose own suspension of disbelief may itself require a mode of attention or inattention akin to self-deception, may or may not want this, like the audience for magic tricks who do not want to know how the trick is done. This is why the self-consciously frame analytical novel – the model for which is surely *Don Quixote* – is a source of annoyance to a reader who prefers the pleasure of the narrative to the pleasure of the text.

At any rate, with this in mind we can list the framing layers in the 1992 Everyman edition of *Lolita* like this, starting, so to speak from the bottom up: guided doings within some primary framework of which we the readers are unaware but which we are invited to infer; Humbert Humbert’s diary which, he says, was written in summer 1947 but then lost<sup>13</sup>; Humbert Humbert’s manuscript, written while in prison following the murder of Quilty, and a reconstruction of what was in the diary, with two alternative titles, *Lolita* and *Confessions of a White Widowed Male*; the manuscript as edited by John Ray Jr. and which we read “as” the narrative we know as *Lolita*; the foreword by editor John Ray Jr. in

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<sup>12</sup> Nabokov (1992), p.120.

<sup>13</sup> Nabokov (1992), p.42.

which he offers his scientific assessment of Humbert Humbert's personality and anticipates a reader's moral judgment; Nabokov's afterword suggesting the existence of all these levels but itself implying that that very afterword's status is ambiguous; interviews with Nabokov about the book and its reception; Kubrick's cinematic treatment of the novel; the film starring Jeremy Irons; the introduction to the Everyman edition by Martin Amis. Some of these layers are rekeyings (the films), some are benign fabrications (John Ray Jnr's foreword).

It matters not for a competent response that any one of us might encounter these reframings in a different order from this, or only encounter one or two of them. Addressing each successively reframed version of the story "in the right order" doesn't take us nearer to the facts of what happened, or give us a more complete portrait of its central character, whoever that is, or of what actually happened, if anything<sup>14</sup>. The reality status of what we are being asked to see as real is maintained for us by our readiness not to "break frame" and head down or up a level.

If we approach Humbert Humbert in these terms we may perhaps escape the alternative of Sartre's consciousness-is-all and Freud's unconscious censor; in so doing we may say that the one who is self-deceived, rather than simply lying to himself or being driven on to his doom by something of which he is unaware, is someone well able to move between

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14 How hard it is to accept the idea that nothing happened at all between HH and Lolita.

one rim of the frame and another, to confer thereby a different reality status on what is going on as he or she moves up and down. Humbert Humbert is such a character, much of whose existence consists of his attempts to contain others through his own exploitative fabrications (becoming Charlotte Haze's lodger, then her husband and going through the motions – though only literally, so he claims - of fulfilling his conjugal duties in order to get access to Dolores, engineering situations in which proximity to Dolores results in sexual pleasure). And like all such fabrications it brings with it risks attendant on a cognitive loosening, a readiness to believe that he is always ahead of the game but having constantly to tear a lamination off the frame to interact successfully with those around him, only to stick it back on again later, with the lamination's adhesive quality being weakened through wear and tear in the process.

The “foreword” which is not a foreword, by “John Ray Jr., PhD” presents a pseudo-scientific overview of and justification for publishing the manuscript Humbert Humbert left behind when he died, and an anticipatory claim that we will never get to the bottom of what went on and who HH was: “this mask – through which two eyes seem to glow – had to remain unlifted in accordance with its wearer's wish”<sup>15</sup>, yet this very mask is key to the “cause and purpose of the crime”. In a nice reference to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the full version of which was still banned in 1955, we read of “the shocking lack of four-letter words”, and the equally shocking statistic,

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15 Nabokov (1992), p.3.

backed up by no evidence, that at least 12% of males enjoy in one way or another at least once a year the sort of experience HH describes with such “despair”; we are given some pseudo-scientific typologies - the wayward child, the egotistical mother, the panting maniac - that “warn us of dangerous trends”, trends that Nabokov himself does not want us to take seriously at all; we are also told that, had HH gone to a psychiatrist in 1947 the manuscript would not exist, and that HH is such a good writer that his “singing violin” can conjure up “a compassion for *Lolita* that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author” (i.e. HH). That in turn may be seen as a move by Nabokov himself, either to ward off criticism from a shockable public, or indeed to invite an inversion, in which we may be entranced with the author Nabokov while abhorring the book (the novel we know as *Lolita*, not HH’s manuscript).

Then, after the text, there is Nabokov’s afterword, another reframing that immediately asks us to see it not as a straight afterword at all but as ‘an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book, or a conjurer explaining one magic trick by performing another’. Which is fair enough if, as he says, “reality” is one of the few words that can mean nothing without quotes. But Nabokov’s rhetorical strategy here is ambivalent, suggesting at once pure playfulness and an effort to control the book’s reception by means of so many disclaimers.

As to Humbert’s manuscript itself, it is, we are told, based on one that he himself entitled a confession but which he reframes as written testimony to be

presented at his trial in which he acts for his own defence. This is itself a form of displacement activity because the confession or testimony is itself an explanation to the “jury” – itself an imagined audience – of how he came to be in prison for murder. His illicit sexual relations with, or rape of, Lolita, far from being the object of any criminal investigation, let alone an alibi, are presented both as the primary mitigating circumstance and as the only thing worth charging him for: give me 35 years for that and drop the rest he says. Nabokov though is playing with the idea that a major crime – rape of a minor – might itself serve as part of the justification of another one – the murder of a sexual rival, a rather more spectacular and disturbing idea than that of one magic trick explaining another.

## Active-Passive

The first section of Humbert Humbert’s manuscript offers the sort of rationalizations that psychotherapy makes available to those needing self-justification. He at first draws us away from himself towards the object of every paedophile’s attention, the ‘girl child’ between 9 and 14<sup>16</sup>. “Now I wish to introduce the following idea”<sup>17</sup>, he says, adopting a

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16 The sense of this being a window of opportunity that needs to be entered is made all the more stark by the way in which Lolita simply disappears from his life and is rediscovered two years later, married and pregnant and soon to die in childbirth.

17 Nabokov (1992), p.17.

scientific framing device that complements that of John Ray Jr.; the idea here is that ‘the true nature’ of such children ‘is not human but nymphic (that is, demonic)’, which sets up the idea that the relationship, before there is any contact, is not one between a human being and the human object of his desire but between the human and the demonic; the paedophile is still an agent, but his agency is played down, passive in relationship with the demonic creature who stands out from other children and who herself may be “unconscious herself of her fantastic power”; “the majority of sex offenders...are not sex fiends” but “innocuous, inadequate, passive, timid strangers who wish to pursue hot wet private acts of sexual deviation without the public cracking down on them”. So instead of being able to rape in public “as good soldiers do”<sup>18</sup>, they have to suffer the “strain of this intolerable temptation”<sup>19</sup>, driven insane by the “dreary childishness” and “eerie vulgarity” of these creatures.

This is a first stab at getting the audience – the “ladies and gentlemen of the jury” or “gentlemen of the jury” as they are variously addressed – on his side by means of a self-justification made all the more easy by the genuine if deluded belief that he has been borne along by a mechanism he does not control, even as he himself exhibits a rare capacity for self-control, strategic planning, and calculated recklessness, during the second part of the account parading Lolita in one hotel or motel after another. The scaffolding of self-deception is made up of poles

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18 Nabokov (1992), p.93.

19 Nabokov (1992), p.42.



of agency and planks of passivity, held together with couplers of ambiguity. HH claims, for instance, that despite his passivity he belongs to a select few ‘lone voyagers’ who can distinguish the “little deadly demons” from “otherwise essentially human little girls”. He is like a paedophile in many ways, but not, he suggests, one of them.

Having drawn attention to his own cognitive superiority, he reverts to the pseudo-scientific mode, writing of himself in the third person and once again asserting the non-human character of the nymphet: “HH tried hard to be good...he had the utmost respect for ordinary children, their purity and vulnerability. But how his heart beat...when he espied a demon child”. This post hoc, rationally reconstructed ambivalence will later be abandoned in favour of a father’s solicitude when he says he intended to protect the purity of this twelve year old child, neither demon nor inhuman<sup>20</sup>, a solicitude made all the more impressive in his own eyes by the fact that his “brutal good looks” and “seductive cast of demeanour” are something he cannot control<sup>21</sup>. “I was as naïve as only a pervert can be”, “despite my manly looks I am horribly timid”<sup>22</sup>.

This assertion of agency-passivity at times resembles the sort of sad tale Goffman made so much of in *Asylums*, where the new inmate of a mental hospital regales patients and staff alike with a story of how, unlike them, he is not mad at all but has

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<sup>20</sup> Nabokov (1992), p.66.

<sup>21</sup> Nabokov (1992), pp. 26, 45, 51, 56.

<sup>22</sup> Nabokov (1992), p.27.

ended up there through a series of contingencies, the connecting thread between which is the bad luck that has been amplified with each setback. Humbert Humbert has no audience save the jury he will never meet; he is not about to live among them, and his sad tale is at once highly deterministic and a celebration of his own ingenuity, of his ability to move between different framing levels that range from that which made him, in his youth, a helpless voyager in public parks, to the one in which he succeeds in turning Lolita into his biological daughter in the eyes of the world but then as a result finds himself having to negotiate the grey zone between paedophilia and incest.

Or rather, there are two sad tales, the one he tells us, or the jury, and the one, with the periods of mental breakdown and incarceration in a sanatorium removed, he tells Charlotte Haze, deploying the licence afforded him as the European scholar-lodger. The first tale is made sadder in Goffman's sense of sad by the way HH claims to have treated himself while inside a sanatorium by "trifling with the psychiatrists, cunningly leading them on, never letting them see that you know all the tricks of the trade...teasing them with primal scenes; and never allowing them the slightest glimpse of one's real sexual predicament"<sup>23</sup>; "I love to fool doctors"<sup>24</sup>. HH claims to have been a step ahead but he has remained so by means of the sort of fabrication that had by mid-century become less than exploitative, the Freudian way of talking – "the scholastic rigmarole and

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<sup>23</sup> Nabokov (1992), p.36.

<sup>24</sup> Nabokov (1992), p.100.

standardized symbols of the psychoanalytic racket” - having become so readily available that someone using it as a formula to ward off Freudian doctors could be re-contained by those doctors, easily able to spot when someone is avoiding the truth of their condition, especially when they do so by claiming to have occupied the outer rim of the frame<sup>25</sup>.

If making appeal to the publicly available narratives of psychoanalysis is one way of avoiding one's condition, so too is the aestheticized literary description, the attempt to foster the impression of amused and self-mocking detachment from the ordinary and overly guided doings of ordinary human beings, ordinary paedophiles. And in this, the out of the ordinary paedophile resembles the great writer himself, or rather, the great writer resembles the out of the ordinary paedophile. The thing that Nabokov could never resist, and this was perhaps his greatest weakness, was writing well; he renders HH's account of what happened to him in a way far more impressive than seems plausible. There is a delicious cleverness in this though; as opposed to most other cases where clever authors put clever thoughts into the mouths of their characters, it is through this that, in 1955, Nabokov shows that he cares for HH no more than HH cares for Lolita. By making an art of perversion Nabokov renders HH with extraordinary care and yet in a way that borders on making him an implausible character; there is something missing, just as, as many commentators have averred, Lolita is missing from HH's account of her.

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<sup>25</sup> Nabokov (1992), pp.302-3.

The literary artist in Humbert Humbert also leads him to believe that he is not merely writing an autobiography that will be of service to a superior sort of psychiatry but making himself an ethnographer of his own world. To be sure, the two road journeys are field trips of a sort, the European scholar discovering America and seeking whatever is in it that doesn't remind him of Paris or Switzerland or Russia, and delighting on the way in its trashiness. But as HH knows, his account of them increasingly becomes one in which he himself turns his own post-hoc awareness that he has been deceiving himself into a device for framing what has happened to him: "I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever, but I knew that she would not be Lolita forever". These lines are written in a prison cell, the arrested man, more than in *Despair*, proving less clever than he thinks he is or as others take him to be; he has first chosen his victims, the victims of his cleverness, from among the ranks of those who are, literally, beneath him: Lolita, like Felix in *Despair*, is first encountered lying down outside in the sun; Felix has his eyes closed; and playing a trick on the blind or the unconscious is a recurring motif; the cruel scenes in which Rex sits opposite the blinded Albinus in *Laughter in the Dark*, HH fantasizing about administering sleep-inducing drugs to Charlotte and Lo, and later to Lo alone, the latter to "preserve her purity" by keeping her unaware of what is happening to her. As Jean-Baptiste says in Camus' *The Fall*:

I contemplated, for instance, jostling the blind on the street; and from the secret, unexpected

joy this gave me, I recognized how much a part of my soul loathed them; I planned to puncture the tires of invalids' vehicles, to go and shout "lousy proletarian" under the scaffoldings on which labourers were working, to slap infants in the subway. I dreamed of all that and did none of it, or if I did something of the sort, I have forgotten it.<sup>26</sup>

Yet when he collects Lolita from the summer camp the loss of her innocence that has taken place while they have been apart is a relief, or is at least presented by HH as though he met it with equanimity; at any rate the transition from girl child in the house of Dolores Haze to promiscuous young woman is shockingly abrupt. "I've been revoltingly unfaithful to you", she says, and suggests he has stopped caring for her because "you haven't kissed me yet". Her having in the meantime been sexually initiated, and by a boy in the woods, goes against what he wants to believe, or against the sense of the reality of what might have happened that he seeks to maintain, one in which her purity was only slightly damaged, and damaged only through some "juvenile erotic experience, no doubt homosexual". When the truth becomes clear, he claims to have got over it as readily and with as little emotion as her accepting him and saying for the record if nothing else, "the word is incest".<sup>27</sup> From then on he has to reconcile his continuing desire to protect her purity with his relief that he has not had the task of initiating her.

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<sup>26</sup> Camus (2004), p.325.

<sup>27</sup> Nabokov (1992), p.127.

## Conclusion

We may like to think of self-deception as being a matter of someone believing that  $p$  in the face of evidence to the contrary, and of their doing so intentionally or out of an unacknowledged desire that  $p$ , and we may distinguish between those cases where  $p$  is mistakenly believed because a greater or less degree of benign or malevolent agency is attributed to others. Yet doing so may leave open or unaddressed the question of how it is that someone may come to believe these things about themselves and others. One of the ways in which they can is through the accounts they give of what it is they do and what happens to them. One of the ways in which we can be convinced or otherwise of whether someone was self-deceived is through the accounts we have of how those people give their accounts. For it is through accounts, through the stories we tell, the mode of narration, that much of the reality status of what happens to us is established...or established until further notice. Goffman's work suggests that social life is as much about the reality status of situations and how we comport ourselves in the face of them as it is about beliefs. That point applies to reading too. The question of whether Humbert Humbert is really self-deceived or whether for that matter he is really a paedophile, or whether any of what he said happened happened, is hardly the point. What we get from reading *Lolita* is not an answer to them, but rather a sense of the unfolding dynamic of how a world is sustained, and how it can fall apart,

through interaction, and more importantly in this case, through the accounts we give of what we think that interaction is about, and through the ways in which we read those accounts and are invited to read them.

It would have been a nice display of self-deception to reach the end of this without having discussed Quilty, whose death, whose murder, resulted from HH's misguided belief that all along he has been protecting the purity of the girl he calls his daughter from the predations of others. This fiction, as all fictions have to be, is maintained to the end: while his protection has never been enough to secure her obedience, incarcerated in a psychopathic ward and then in prison proper, he writes the story we know as *Lolita* in fifty-six days, maintaining that he needed to live two months longer than Quilty in order to make her "live in the minds of later generations". Which is, perhaps, the greatest self-deception of all: his manuscript is not about her. It is he, not she, who will live on.

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