

Don Quijote and Lolita Revisited

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I remember with delight tearing apart *Don Quixote*, a cruel and crude old book, before six hundred students in Memorial Hall, much to the horror and embarrassment of some of my more conservative colleagues.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV¹

AS THE SMOKE AND conference halls clear following celebrations of the 400th anniversary of *Don Quijote* (Part I) and the 50th of *Lolita*, a reconsideration of Nabokov's infamous pronouncements on Cervantes is in order. Much has already been done to set the record straight. Hispanists have rightly pointed out that Nabokov's *Lectures on Don Quixote* is a somewhat dubious piece of literary criticism (Close, Kunce, Márquez Villanueva); Milan Kundera persuasively suggested how Nabokov misunderstood Cervantes' humor (Kundera 59–61); Robert Alter, Michael Wood, and others have discussed similarities between *Lolita* and *Don Quijote*. Yet the links between these two masterpieces—the titles of which regularly appear in close proximity on the fashionable “top ten lists”—have by no means been exhausted.

Nabokovians, who have tended to focus primarily on the French, Russian, and English-language references in *Lolita*, could benefit from a more thorough consideration of *Don Quijote*.² And *cervantistas* have

1 In a BBC interview (*Strong Opinions* 103).

2 Alfred Appel's excellent and otherwise thorough introduction to his annotated *Lolita* makes barely a mention of Cervantes in his discussion of very cervantine sources and traditions relating to Nabokov's novel: Joyce and Sterne as great forebears in parody (xx), *Hamlet* as an exemplar of involuted narrative (xxx), the literary “assemblages” and “unclassifiable masterpieces” of Burton, Rabelais, and Sterne (xlv). Appel's failure to follow the natural link from Sterne especially, and also from his numerous mentions of Borges, back to Cervantes leaves a gap in his

more to gain than a vindication of our dear novel, so sensationally maligned in Nabokov's lectures. A look at *Lolita's* self-reflexiveness, deployment of parody, and representation of games and play affords a useful perspective from which to reconsider some of the critical debates surrounding *Don Quijote*, particularly the occasionally misleading assumptions behind the "romantic" vs. "hard school" controversy. If I commit the sin of anachronism by drawing *Don Quijote* into a modern conceptual framework, recklessly disregarding its Counter-Reformation context, I am also guilty of attempting to demote *Lolita* as a paragon of postmodern allusion and mirror-play.

Nabokov's near-categorical denial of influence on his own work certainly merits skepticism, and Hispanists are entitled to their righteous indignation at his *Lectures on Don Quixote*. But Catherine Kunce distorted the issue by asserting, in this journal, that "Nabokov is really an imitator [of Cervantes]" (103). Kunce's many insightful observations regarding character, theme, and narrative strategy in *Don Quijote* and *Lolita* would benefit from a more nuanced approach to the complicated question of influence. Nabokov himself comments: "The only matter in which Cervantes and Shakespeare are equals is the matter of influence, of spiritual irrigation—I have in view the long shadow cast upon receptive posterity of a created image which may continue to live independently from the book itself" (*Lectures* 8). This "long shadow" represents influence in a very general sense, what Nicholas Round terms "availability" in contrast to the more direct and intentional mining of "appropriation." Archetypes such as Falstaff and Don Quijote, or techniques of narrative self-reflection become so generally familiar that a particular author need not have even read the original work to be within its range of influence. Alter, for whom the two novelists form the bookends of his study of the self-conscious novel, provided one of the most substantial discussions of Cervantes' "availability" to Nabokov.³ The representation of fictitious "found manuscripts" and editors who ponder their meanings is just one example of how both novelists unremittingly interrogate the nature of story-telling in the very act of telling the stories. As Alter made clear, even though Cervantes looms smilingly behind such practices, there were many other sources from which Nabokov might have drawn—including his own very idiosyncratic earlier works. Michael Wood has entertainingly argued that, notwithstanding the modern master's celebrated invo-

analysis.

3 For a recent discussion of *Don Quijote* as a model for realism and philosophical reflection to writers outside the Hispanic tradition, see Alexander Welsh.

lutions, Cervantes' self-reflexive narrating in certain respects is actually more radical than Nabokov's.⁴

The following pages are concerned with how *Don Quijote's* influence on *Lolita* involves both availability and direct appropriation. It bears emphasizing that even when such influence is plausibly established, another important question remains: to what extent are the later author's borrowings consistent with the *intention* of the predecessor? A look at any number of appropriations of the Quijote figure would illustrate how meanings quite alien from Cervantes' original intent are generated (Anthony Close's landmark *The Romantic Approach* claims that many of the most salient novelistic receptions of *Don Quijote* involve such distortions). I will argue that *Lolita* and *Don Quijote* articulate fundamentally similar attitudes regarding the relationship between fiction and reality, that there is a consistency of intention between them. An examination of play and parody will support this claim. On one hand, the role-playing and other recreational activities represented in both novels correspond to solipsistic and escapist tendencies on the part of the characters: Humbert's tyrannizing of Lolita and his own inability to integrate socially; Don Quijote's delusional journey with Sancho. But both works also present moments in which play becomes a means of authentic expression, community-formation, and understanding. In like manner, parody initially functions to expose and undermine moribund conventions (e.g., the chivalric romance, the confessional novel). In addition to mocking, however, parody may be used to salvage and revitalize. Nabokov's formulation of parody as a "springboard" can help us understand how Cervantes' "funny book" developed into something much more profound—as Cervantes himself realized the possibilities of the strange combinations his imagination proposed.

I. PARALLELS AND ALLUSIONS.

Para mí sola nació don Quijote, y yo para él; él supo obrar y yo escribir; solos los dos somos para en uno... (II, 74; 592)

I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments,

4 "In Nabokov we have endless grounds for a fine modern distrust, but find ourselves trusting (some of) what our shifty narrator says. In Cervantes the situation is more or less the reverse. Broadly: where there is trust Cervantes finds multiple grounds for mistrust; indeed finds such grounds pretty much everywhere; devotes himself to finding them, gets many of his best jokes out of such moves" ("Cervantes Reads" 33–34).

prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. That is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita. (309)

The closing apostrophes in *Don Quijote* and *Lolita* announce the narrators' ultimate devotion and permanent claims to their creations: Humbert wrests Lolita from Quilty ("One had to choose between him and H. H., and one wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations," 309), and Cide Hamete's pen does so from the likes of the literary usurper, Avellaneda ("que se atrevió o se ha de atrever, a escribir con pluma de avestruz grosera y mal deliñada las hazañas de mi valeroso caballero" [II, 74]). Thus the novels end by redeeming their deceased title characters in art, claiming a conjoined immortality for artist and protagonist alike, and affirming the authenticity of both. We shall see that this final consonance is a culmination of many parallels and allusions that in fact begin at the very outset of both novels.

As with *Don Quijote*, Humbert's "bizarre cognomen [as the fictitious foreword's John Ray, Jr, PhD informs us] is his own invention" (*Lolita* 3), and both authors have their men choose comical names: Cervantes gives us "Sir Thighpiece;" Nabokov, a similar combination of exaltation and bathos: "The double rumble is, I think, very nasty, very suggestive.... It is also a kingly name, and I did need a royal vibration for Humbert the Fierce and Humbert the Humble" (*Strong Opinions* 26). In Quixotic fashion, Humbert also transforms the names of others: "Dolores Haze" becomes "Lo-lee-ta" (9), just as *Don Quijote* changes "Aldonza Lorenzo" (a near anagram, and prosaically phonetic sister to Dolores Haze) into Dulcinea—"nombre, a su parecer, músico y peregrino y significativo, como todos los demás que a él y a sus cosas había puesto" (I, 1; 78). Humbert also calls his pistol "chum," and the personification of his bedraggled, "limping car" near novel's end puts one in mind of Rocinante. And so when Humbert says of Lolita that "There was in the fiery phantasm a perfection which made my wild delight also perfect, just because the vision was out of reach, with no possibility of attainment to spoil it" (264), one is compelled to agree with Ronald Paulson's comment that "It is fascinating to think of Nabokov writing his Harvard lectures on *Quixote* and his obsession with Dulcinea in 1952 as he was also writing the story of Humbert and Lolita" (218 note 3).

Part of the richness of both novels resides in the fact that the putative "normal" world surrounding the deranged protagonists pulsates with its own low-grade quixotism: Lolita's imagination is captured by

movies and advertisements, Charlotte Haze's by cheap paper-backs and magazines, the headmistress Pratt of Beardsley by the psychobabble of "progressive schooling" (177). The range of Cervantine characters with similar "incitements" is broad, including the aficionados of chivalric novels at Juan Palomeque's inn (I, 32), and the many pastoral characters in both parts of the novel. Now, neither Cervantes nor Nabokov means to suggest facile equivalences: "observe, dear reader, *everybody's* crazy, so who are we to judge?!" (Such is actually a strategy employed by Humbert to justify his crime.) Through the gallery of quixotisms the reader learns to discriminate, to appreciate varying levels of illusion and imaginative identification, and to understand the dangers as well as the rewards of fiction.

Nabokov implicitly places his protagonist in the company of Fielding's Parson Adams, Sterne's Uncle Toby, Flaubert's Emma Bovary, Melville's Captain Ahab—that is to say, in Don Quijote's company—in the very act of denying influence in a real-life model. "Did Humbert Humbert...have any original?" asks a BBC interviewer; "No. He's a man I devised, a man with an obsession, and I think many of my characters have sudden obsessions, different kinds of obsessions" (*Strong Opinions* 16). Humbert would have us believe that his obsession bespeaks not pathology but heightened sensibilities and insight (*Lolita* 13). Of course, as Martin Amis and others have observed, his grotesque adventure illustrates the consequences of trying to turn one's life into art (Amis 117). What makes Humbert especially akin to Don Quijote is the thoroughly literary character of his obsession. Much as Cervantes' self-made knight draws from the *romances*, chivalric novels, pastoral literature, love sonnets, etc., to guide and justify his obsession, Humbert avails himself of Poe, Proust, confessional literature, and any and every literary or historical precedent that will serve—including Cervantes. Humbert's childhood recollections include his father reading *Don Quijote* and *Les Misérables* to him (10).

Among the entries in the hotel registers that Humbert frantically sifts for traces of Claire Quilty following Lolita's disappearance, he finds the "redresser of wrongs," "Donald Quix" of "Sierra, Nev" (251). Nabokov tantalizes the more paranoid among us with numerous combinations resulting in the initials "DQ" intermittently emerging in the text. Pattern-hunting comparativists are bound to sometimes see meaningful allusions where none exists, and Nabokov fully expects us to do so. An idea that underpins much of his work is that some perceived patterns

are figments of a hopeful or demented mind, whereas others are indeed manifestations of an intentional order.⁵ The initials of Humbert's dentist, "Dr. Quilty" (63), may only resonate with compulsive *cervantistas*. But when Humbert finds in his prison library a record of "Dolores Quine," the pattern is imbued with more verifiable significance, since the entry is an allusion to Lolita and her decidedly quixotic endeavor of pursuing a life in theater (31–32).

The guest-register glimpse of the playwright and pornographer Quilty as a sort of knight-errant attempting to rescue Lolita from villainous Humbert is but one instance of Nabokov's playful yet extensive incorporation of chivalric conventions. As in *Don Quijote*, *Lolita* combines the chivalric with the theme of the double. Quilty is described as a shape-changer as he pursues Humbert and Lolita cross-country: "A veritable Proteus of the highway, with bewildering ease he switched from one vehicle to another" (227). Sansón Carrasco pursues Don Quijote, appearing alternately as "el Caballero de los Espejos" and "de la Blanca Luna." We remember that, following his fortuitous defeat early in Part II, Sansón's motives become ambiguous, as he himself admits to his own squire:

—La diferencia que hay entre esos dos locos es que el que lo es por fuerza lo será siempre, y el que lo es de grado lo dejará de ser cuando quisiere.

—Pues así es—dijo Tomé Cecial—, yo fui por mi voluntad loco cuando quise hacerme escudero de vuestra merced, y por la misma quiero dejar de serlo y volverme a mi casa.

—Eso os cumple—respondió Sansón—; porque pensar que yo he de volver a la mía hasta haber molido a palos a don Quijote es pensar en lo escusado; y no me llevará ahora a buscarle el deseo de que cobre su juicio, sino el de la venganza; que el dolor grande de mis costillas no me deja hacer más piadosos discursos. (II, 16; 147)

Appel has noted that Quilty functions as a projection of Humbert's guilt: his character distorts Humbert while also representing a truth about him (lx). The same might be said of Sansón Carrasco vis-à-vis Don Quijote, especially when the former's desire for revenge suffuses his purportedly pragmatic knight-errantry (to "rescue" Alonso Quijano)

5 Michael Wood (*The Magician's Doubts*) and Brian Boyd are particularly good at elucidating this aspect of Nabokov's art.

with its own touch of lunacy. Many other characters straddle the *cuerdo/sano* divide in different ways, including the barber and curate (both well-versed in chivalric novels) as they don costumes in pursuit of our hero, as well as Dorotea/Micomicona and Grisóstomo. Cardenio and Don Diego de Miranda are further instances of doubles who enhance the reader's perspective on Don Quijote: the former as an example of lunacy legitimized by a motive, the latter as a model of social conventionality and integration who nevertheless appears as another sort of play-actor ("Caballero del Verde Gabán").⁶ As with the anticipation created by Quilty in *Lolita*, Sansón Carrasco's aggravated resolve makes the reader wonder when and where the nemesis will reappear for a definitive encounter: "Whatever happens to Don Quixote, on the road, in the magic cave, in the ducal castle, or at Barcelona... is but a respite, and at any moment Carrasco, in some brilliant, tinkling, and flashing disguise may bar Don Quixote's road and clout and clown him to his doom" (*Lectures* 80). The bungling hit-man of *Pale Fire*, Jakob Gradus, is another manifestation of Nabokov's interest in such fatidic figures.⁷

It is not only the mischievous Quilty who, casting himself as a "redresser of wrongs," impugns Humbert's heroic aspirations. Even Humbert occasionally envisions himself as a fairy-tale villain disgustingly threatening the captive damsel. A recollection of Maese Pedro's spectacle in *Don Quijote*, featuring the fair Melisendra wistfully gazing from the castle tower, will place one of Humbert's scenarios in its appropriate context:

Miren también un nuevo caso que ahora sucede, quizá no visto jamás. ¿No veen aquel moro que callandico y pasito a paso, puesto el dedo en la boca, se llega por las espaldas de Melisendra? Pues miren cómo la da un beso en mitad de los labios, y la priesa que ella se da a escupir, y a limpiárselos con la blanca manga de su camisa, y cómo se lamenta, y se arranca de pesar sus hermosos cabellos, como si ellos tuvieran la culpa del maleficio. Miren también... (II, 26; 241–42)

Now behold Humbert, as he approaches Lolita upstairs in her bedroom:

6 Charles Presberg has described a dialogic relationship between Don Quijote and Don Diego, one that contributes to the self-knowledge of both characters.

7 Nabokov felt Cervantes had missed an opportunity by not having Don Quijote confront Avellaneda's spurious knight. For a scathing critique of Nabokov's *Lectures*, accompanied by some observations on the Quilty/Avellaneda parallel, see Márquez Villanueva.

Dorsal view. Glimpse of shiny skin between T-shirt and white gym shorts. Bending, over a window sill, in the act of tearing off leaves from a poplar outside while engrossed in torrential talk with a newspaper boy below (Kenneth Knight, I suspect)... I began creeping up to her—"crippling" up to her, as pantomimists say. My arms and legs were convex surfaces between which—rather upon which—I slowly progressed by some neutral means of locomotion: Humbert the Wounded Spider...toward her taut little rear I moved like some paralytic, on soft distorted limbs, in terrible concentration. At last I was right behind her when I had the unfortunate idea of blustering a trifle—shaking her by the scruff of the neck and that sort of thing to cover my real *manege*, and she said in a shrill brief whine: "Cut it out!"—most coarsely, the little wench, and with a ghastly grin Humbert the Humble beat a gloomy retreat...

But now listen to what happened next. (54–55)

Humbert's cinematic technique and minstrel-like address to the reader recall the visual and aural emphasis in the Maese Pedro episode—and here it is worth recalling the narrator's introduction to the chapter: "el trujamán comenzó a decir lo que oirá y verá el que le oyere o viere el capítulo siguiente" (II, 26; 239). I am not prepared to claim that Nabokov had the Maese Pedro show in mind when he composed the scene above, but one may certainly speak here of "availability," and of a commonality of source material in particular. Both Cervantes and Nabokov incorporate medieval romance conventions (damsel in tower, at mercy of revoltingly lascivious villain, hero appearing below) to a sophisticated thematic and narrative effect. As George Haley illustrated, Maese Pedro's show replicates and examines in miniature many of the novel's central concerns: appropriation and transmission of materials, the relationship between author and audience, truth and verisimilitude, the fragility of the aesthetic space, etc. Like Ginés, Humbert is an artist-criminal who is very aware of his audience, frequently addressing us and directing our vision. His oozing passion for the young girl charges the entire scene with fairy-tale transcendence (the paperboy is a knight, Humbert a menacing beast, the bedroom an imprisoning tower), until the delirious illusion is shattered by the mundane and very plausible words of a real twelve year-old American girl: "Cut it out!"

Such jarring and deflationary shifts in perspective are familiar to readers of *Don Quijote*. After our knight, inspired by his association of

acorns with inviolate nature, delivers an exalted speech on the Golden Age, we see the recalcitrant Sancho heedlessly munching on the acorns (I, 11). Marcela's sudden appearance above the tomb of Grisóstomo, and serene refutation of the litany of claims leveled against her *in absentia*, undercuts the assumptions behind the men's indulgence in pastoral self-pity (I, 14). But while the dominant strain of both novels is mock-heroic, Cervantes and Nabokov also achieve a tenuous redemption of romance. Edwin Williamson has persuasively argued that Cervantes was interested in preserving some of the ethical and aesthetic virtues of the knight-errantry novel. Part of Nabokov's ire at the "cruelty" in *Don Quijote* derives from his affection for the protagonist, in whom he discerns moments of dignity and even Christ-like suffering. And Nabokov's own chivalric allusions are often associated with qualified quests for authenticity and fortitude: the attempt to reconstruct the biography of a beloved artist-figure in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (same patronymic as Lolita's paperboy); the Arthurian echo of the youthful space-explorer in "Lance"; Van Veen's anagnorisis upon viewing the film with the waning, quixotic Don Juan figure in *Ada*.⁸ When commenting on Don Quijote's ignominious return from his first sally and the anticipation of the courtyard book-burning, Nabokov expresses what some critics may regard as anachronistic romanticizing, but what others consider one of the central subtleties of Cervantes' masterpiece: "We are haunted by the creeping feeling that these books and those dreams and that madness are of a finer quality—and, in a word, ethically better—than the curate's and the housekeeper's so-called common sense" (43).⁹ Such ambivalence underlies Nabokov's use of the term "fairy tale" to designate a story that is both highly artificial and profound (more on this below). The following consideration of games and play will help us understand how and why the romance mode survives in both *Don Quijote* and *Lolita*.

8 "The Don rides past three windmills, whirling black against an ominous sunset, and saves her from the miller who accuses her of stealing a fistful of flour and tears her thin dress. Wheezy but still game, Juan carries her across a brook..." (489).

9 In a sympathetic review of García Márquez's *Memoria de mis putas tristes*, J. M. Coetzee compares the old man's Humbertian relationship with Delgadina to Don Quijote and Dulcinea, and asserts that, despite the obvious problems with the couplings, both propose "the ethical superiority of a world in which people act in the name of ideals over worlds in which people act in the name of interests." A romantic reception, to be sure, but Coetzee sees some of the knight's arguments with the Duchess regarding the "reality" of Dulcinea as part of "the long debate on the nature of being from the pre-Socratics through Thomas Aquinas" (6).

II. SOLIPSISTIC GAMES AND TRANSCENDENT PLAY.

As Johan Huizinga discussed in his seminal study, participation in a game presupposes order:

Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns. Here we come across another, very positive feature of play: it creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. (10)

The player can therefore be confident that skillful adherence to the rules produces a desirable outcome—that, if in accordance with the order of the game, his or her actions are imbued with meaning. A fundamental question is what happens when such a mentality is adopted in the “imperfect world.” As Don Quijote repeatedly demonstrates, it is usually an addled mind that attempts to do so, and with farcical results. The *barco encantado* episode provides a fine illustration of the dynamic, as Don Quijote’s recognition of pattern upon seeing the boat on the shore (“éste es el estilo de los libros...,” II, 29; 262) and his deduction of transcendent order (“la mano de Dios, que nos guía,” II, 29; 262) is contrasted with an indifferent if pleasant natural phenomenon: “sosegadamente se deslizaba el barco por mitad de la corriente, sin que le moviese alguna inteligencia secreta, ni algún encantador escondido, sino el mismo curso del agua, blando entonces y suave” (II, 29; 265). It all ends in a wrecked boat, soaked knight and squire, and angry millers and fishermen.¹⁰ Many of Nabokov’s protagonists reveal similar disorders, from Luzhin’s chess-infused lunacy in *The Defense*, to the young man who, suffering from “referential mania,” discerns signifying patterns everywhere (“Signs and Symbols”). But Cervantes and Nabokov also depict moments in which the real world does resonate with the ideal order of play, when the lunatic’s aim is true. The frequent subversions of the aesthetic space in Nabokov and Cervantes—incomplete manuscripts, delusions revealed, fights breaking out between story-teller and audience, the break of day, etc.—certainly point up the fragility of fiction, and even its potential insidiousness. But insistence upon disillusioned and ironic clear-sightedness is not the ambition of either author. This would be to take at face value the claim in *Don Quijote’s* prologue that the novel was created solely to discredit the chivalric romance, or that *Lolita*, as “John Ray

¹⁰ The inclusion in the scene of numerous references to cosmography, the science and superstitions of navigation, and an unusually high concentration of religious references and gestures results in a comic range encompassing far more than the knight-errantry novel.

Jr., PhD,” earnestly notes, is meant to “warn us of dangerous trends” (5). Both novels undeniably promote the spinning of tales, which involves a partial endorsement of the protagonists’ insanity—and a validation of play as a meaningful activity.

The prologue to the *Novelas ejemplares* memorably presents the collection as a sort of billiards table placed in a public square: “Mi intento ha sido poner en la plaza de nuestra república una mesa de trucos.” Cervantes’ apology for play goes on to describe the citizen’s need for recuperative escape, as well as a fundamental human inclination to seek and create form. He alludes to Aristotle’s therapeutic *eutrapelia* (“Horas hay de recreación, donde el afligido espíritu descanse”), and gives a compelling account of human creativity and inquisitiveness: “Para este efeto se plantan las alamedas, se buscan las fuentes, se allanan las cuestas y se cultivan, con curiosidad, los jardines” (I, 52). In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov says the following:

[T]here is in every child the essentially human urge to reshape the earth, to act upon a friable environment (unless he is born a Marxist or a corpse and meekly waits for the environment to fashion *him*). This explains the child’s delight in digging, in making roads and tunnels for his favorite toys. (302)

This urge to mold the natural world serves as an expression both of the author’s creative power and the reader’s desire to partake of the ordered realm of art. And as the passages above make clear, both authors associate such recreation with a non-deterministic view of the individual.¹¹

The famous invitation to the idle reader in the prologue of *Don Quijote* includes a seemingly radical emphasis on individual agency: “tienes tu alma en tu cuerpo y tu libre albedrío como el más pintado, y estás en tu casa, donde eres señor della, como el rey de sus alcabalas, y sabes lo que comúnmente se dice, que debajo de mi manto al rey mato” (I, Prólogo; 51). The striking change in venue—from the communal setting of the public square to the interior privacy and solitude of home (not to men-

11 A book-length comparative study would require a chapter on the pastoral conventions in *Don Quijote* and *Lolita*. Even though Nabokov ridiculed the “stale Arcadian theme” in Cervantes, his own copious representations of Golden Age gardens and landscapes engage many of the same concerns: the perfection of nature by art, the imaginative quest for coherence, the desire for a realm of human interaction uncorrupted by social norms, etc. Both authors often include such conventions within dissonant and dialogic contexts.

tion the subversive suggestiveness of the regicidal proverb)—appears to signal a very different type of ideal reader from that of the *Novelas ejemplares*.¹² The novel of course opens with an embodiment of the private reader, and he promptly loses his mind, only to become something of a complex character after he has extensively interacted with the world beyond the walls of his library. Ultimately, the readers posited by *Don Quijote* and the *Novelas ejemplares* (like the characters themselves) are obliged to actively reflect upon the narrative conventions presented, and to mediate their subjective response with a community of narrators, narratees, editors, and other manifestations of the author's presence. In both Cervantes and Nabokov, the narrative involutions and the playful mystifications regarding the status of the text—history, legal document, case study?—are also implements of authorial control. The reader is challenged by such an author, and encouraged to think creatively; we are also given a master class, if we read carefully and pay close attention, on how to appreciate fictions *as fictions*. And while an indulgence in radical subjectivity is frequently entertained, we are also given a means to transcend the solipsistic self.

Both authors memorably use prison imagery in accounts of the origins of their novels. Says Nabokov:

As far as I can recall the initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: the sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage. (311)

Cervantes' surrogate in the prologue poses a question that is similarly cryptic:

¿qué podrá engendrar el estéril y mal cultivado ingenio mío sino la historia de un hijo seco, avellanado, antojadizo y lleno de pensamientos varios y nunca imaginados de otro alguno, bien como quien se engendró en una cárcel, donde toda incomodidad tiene su asiento y donde todo triste ruido hace su habitación? (I, Prólogo; 50)

12 Alban Forcione has argued that the two works in fact contain different visions of the individual and community, and consequently imply different types of readers: an individuated, "modern" subject in *Don Quijote*; a more community-oriented, integrated reader in the *Novelas ejemplares*, especially in the more idealizing romance narratives ("Exemplarity"). Forcione provides a compact and elegant account of the humanist ideal of play in this same article.

Speculation on the genesis of *Don Quijote* in the Seville jail aside, the prison is an apt expression of the stifling, prosaic routine of the middling *hidalgo*, emphasized in the opening lines of the novel. But Mr. Quijada's reading-induced metamorphosis into Don Quijote is a transfer to another sort of prison: his solipsistic chivalric vision, the specialized language of which functions—like the bars of Nabokov's ape-cage—as a barrier between him and the world. As Ellen Pifer and others have discussed, Humbert's delusions imprison Lolita (a condition that was particularly appreciated by Azar Nafisi's secret group of women in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*); but he also imprisons himself—in his obsession, and in its intensely literary, involuted language.

Dulcinea (or the “real” Aldonza Lorenzo) suffers no harm from Don Quijote's delusions, for she remains oblivious to him throughout. Sancho Panza, on the other hand, *is* drawn into his master's solipsistic world. Early in Part I, Don Quijote and Sancho receive the rustic hospitality of goatherds—a fine moment, in Don Quijote's estimation, to impress upon his squire the virtues of their relationship. He invites Sancho to dine at his side, “porque de la caballería andante se puede decir lo mesmo que del amor se dice: que todas las cosas iguala” (I, 11; 154). In Sancho's resistance to his master's offer, we have another dramatization of the solitary, free individual presented in the prologue:

¡Gran merced! —dijo Sancho—; pero sé decir a vuestra merced que como yo tuviese bien de comer, tan bien y mejor me lo comería en pie y a mis solas como sentado a par de un emperador. Y aun, si va a decir la verdad, mucho mejor me sabe lo que como en mi rincón sin melindres ni respetos, aunque sea pan y cebolla, que los gallipavos de otras mesas donde me sea forzoso mascar despacio, beber poco, limpiarme a menudo, no estornudar ni toser si me viene en gana, ni hacer otras cosas que la soledad y libertad traen consigo. (154)

Sancho's anti-ceremonial, independent spirit goes unappreciated by Don Quijote, whose principle concern is the coherence of his chivalric enterprise:

—Con todo eso, te has de sentar; porque a quien se humilla, Dios le ensalza.

Y asiéndole por el brazo, le forzó a que junto dél se sentase.
(I, 11; 154–55)

Don Quijote's enforced community is contrived—as much so as the Golden Age speech that neither Sancho nor the goatherds appreciate (and the allusion to St. Luke as he forces Sancho to “humble himself” provides a neat irony). Rather than serving as a stage that will allow his chivalric ideals to flourish, the banquet scene reinforces the artificiality of Don Quijote's imaginative vision, and the inefficacy of his role-playing.

Humbert's recruitment of Lolita is facilitated by her own curiosity and pop-culture quixotism: “I knew I could kiss her throat or the wick of her mouth with perfect impunity. I knew she would let me do so, and even close her eyes as Hollywood teaches,” for Lolita is “a modern child, an avid reader of movie magazines, an expert in dream-slow close-ups” (48, 49). Long after the initial intrigue wears off, and Lolita has become Humbert's captive, a tennis game provides a distilled image of their relationship:

...the initial tennis coaching I had inflicted on Lolita—...remained in my mind as oppressive and distressful memories—not only because she had been so hopelessly and irritatingly irritated by every suggestion of mine—but because the precious symmetry of the court instead of reflecting the harmonies latent in her was utterly jumbled by the clumsiness and lassitude of the resentful child I mistaught. (233)

Despite his claims against society's crassness and hypocrisy, Humbert realizes here that his own community with Lolita is far worse, that his artistic vision has wrought destruction. Indeed, the novel is full of instances that confirm Humbert's desecration of Huizinga's civilizing and ordered “play-ground.” In contrast to the “unearthly order” (230) intimated by Humbert as he watches Lolita's tennis—and which emblemizes what he hopes to achieve in his union with her—, Humbert laments that in reality “everything about her was of the same exasperating impenetrable order” (204). After leaving the fever-stricken girl at a hospital room, he sees “what looked like the silhouette of gallows on what was probably a school playground” (241). Other basic tenets of play that Humbert violates include the importance of voluntary participation and of maintaining a distinction between play and “ordinary” life (Huizinga 7–10).

But it is crucial to acknowledge that, even while revealing a failure to achieve its ideal, Lolita's tennis game suggests the transcendent *potential* of play. The order of the play-ground (“precious symmetry of the court”) does afford the girl a chance to express her “latent harmonies,” to mani-

fest an essence clouded by the conditions of her real life:

She would wait and relax for a bar or two of white-lined time before going into the act of serving, and often bounced the ball once or twice, or pawed the ground a little, always at ease, always rather vague about the score, always cheerful as she so seldom was in the dark life she led at home. Her tennis was the highest point to which I can imagine a young creature bringing the art of make-believe, although I daresay, for her it was the very geometry of basic reality. (231)

This passage is peculiar because it partly consists of Humbert's typical rhapsodizing over the otherworldly beauty of the nymphet, and therefore is another display of the subtle sensibilities of those select few who can appreciate such creatures. In other words, it involves further indulgence of his solipsistic vision. On the other hand, Humbert realizes that he has damaged the girl and that, in addition to vulgar teenage mannerisms, she possesses virtues overlooked by his nymphic obsessions: cheerfulness, generosity, equanimity. Faced with the brutal manipulations of life with Humbert, Lolita is momentarily able to express aspects of her genuine self through the make-believe of play. Near novel's end, Humbert will again recognize these qualities in his former nymphet when he visits her as the pregnant wife of Dick Schiller.

Nabokov's interest in the transcendent potential of play is evident throughout his corpus. The ungainly Luzhin, in *The Defense*, displays penetrating insight and grace while playing chess until his quixotic mania for the game commandeers his perception of reality.¹³ Oblivious to the machinations in his academic department, socially awkward and prone to solecisms, Professor Pnin reveals hidden qualities in his peerless croquet-playing:

As soon as the pegs were driven in and the game started, the man was transfigured. From his habitual, slow, ponderous, rather rigid self, he changed into a terrifically mobile, scampering, mute, sly-vis-

13 Nabokov's own prefatory remarks to *The Defense* are of interest to readers of *Don Quijote*: "My story was difficult to compose, but I greatly enjoyed taking advantage of this or that image and scene to introduce a fatal pattern into Luzhin's life and to endow the description of a garden, a journey, a sequence of humdrum events, with the semblance of a game of skill, and, especially in the final chapters, with that of a regular chess attack demolishing the innermost elements of the poor fellow's sanity" (8).

aged hunchback. It seemed to be always his turn to play. Holding his mallet very low and daintily swinging it between his parted spindly legs (he had created a minor sensation by changing into Bermuda shorts expressly for the game), Pnin foreshadowed every stroke with nimble aim-taking oscillations of the mallet head, then gave the ball an accurate tap, and forthwith, still hunched, and with the ball still rolling, walked rapidly to the spot where he had planned for it to stop. With geometrical gusto, he ran it through hoops, evoking cries of admiration from the onlookers. (*Pnin* 130)

There is in Nabokov a tenuous distinction between the indulgence of degenerative obsessions and the cultivation of virtues, between lunacy and insight (humanist-leaning *cervantistas* might characterize it as an interplay between folly and wisdom). Humbert himself expresses the clarity he finds in play:

I suppose I am especially susceptible to the magic of games. In my chess sessions with Gaston I saw the board as a square pool of limpid water with rare shells and stratagems rosily visible upon the smooth tessellated bottom, which to my confused adversary was all ooze and squid-cloud. (233)

Of course, through much of the novel, Humbert's vision is distorted by his unctuous pedophilia, and most of the second part finds him also foundering in Quilty's "squid-cloud." But in the famous final scene of Humbert looking down on the little town from a roadside parapet, he does achieve a clarity of vision. As with his description of the chessboard, the clarity is a function of a certain distance, of being able to comprehend the harmonizing order of the phenomena at hand:

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 timbered mountains. (307)

Unlike his medieval abduction fantasy in the second floor of the

Haze house (see above), Humbert's mountain ascent to clarity is not a gross parody of Petrarch on Ventoux or Wordsworth on Snowdon. There is a sense that Humbert has achieved the integrated understanding of the true artist, an appreciation of the relationship between things that includes, for once, an understanding of the relationship between himself and Lolita. His epiphany is memorably spurred by the "melody of children at play," of a beautiful order that he has violated: "...and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord" (308). As Pifer has argued, Humbert arrives at such an understanding by mediating his experience through art: "The nature of his (highly qualified) redemption is aesthetic as well as moral, for it depends less on his expressed remorse than on the vital image of the child he recreates in his narrative" (197). Rather than violently imposing his nymphic vision on reality, he has learned to perceive and express a truth about the girl through his imaginative effort.

Numerous characters in *Don Quijote* reveal themselves in play.¹⁴ Basilio's prowess at the wedding games of Camacho is a fairly traditional example, for his virtuosity at play is consistent with his good looks and winning manner (II, 19; 179). It is precisely such prowess that Don Quijote would hope to demonstrate as he takes leave of Don Diego in anticipation the tournaments, "las justas de Zaragoza" (II, 18; 176). Sancho's exuberant report of Aldonza Lorenzo's dominance in hurling the bar contains a comic dissonance, as the reality of rustic physical vigor undermines the ethereal identity of Dulcinea: "tira tan bien una barra como el más forzado zagal de todo el pueblo. ¡Vive el Dador...!" (I, 25; 312). Sancho's appointment as Governor of Barataria is even closer to the examples from Nabokov, since it is a realm of "make-believe" that reveals surprising truths. The simpleton does, in fact, play the role well, using his common sense grounded in humble experience to successfully judge the cases brought before him, and his sober resignation of the post and reunion with his ass reveals that the experience has deepened his self-understanding (II, 53; 443–44). This sequence is in fact one of the few that receives the open admiration of Nabokov: "the story develops a very special pair of very special wings" (*Lectures* 68). Famously fond of metamorphosing moths and butterflies, Nabokov was to incorporate a similar metaphor in his discussion of parody's potential in *The Real Life*

¹⁴ The *Novelas ejemplares*, of course, contain other compelling instances, such as "La ilustre fregona" and, in a more complex manner, "El casamiento engañoso" and "El coloquio de los perros."

of *Sebastian Knight*: “a clown developing wings” (89). The final section of this article will consider how Alonso Quijano’s “latent harmonies” find expression in *Don Quijote*.¹⁵

III. THE REALITY OF FAIRY TALES AND THE SPRINGBOARD OF PARODY.

Nabokov had no taste for the farcical and carnivalesque humor of *Don Quijote*, but the “cruel and crude” novel is redeemed by “episodes and passages that gently usher or sweep the reader into the dreamworld of permanent and irrational art” (*Lectures* 68). Don Quijote’s nocturnal encounter with Altisidora (II, 44) is, according to Nabokov, just such an episode. The ascendant Sancho has gone off to govern his island. Our knight, finding it increasingly difficult to sustain his chivalric vision, misses his squire and, as he silently undresses by the light of two candles in a room at the duke’s estate, a run in his stocking exacerbates his melancholy. A recognized master of zeugma, Cervantes is mischievous in his description of the rip:

Cerró tras sí la puerta, y a la luz de dos velas de cera se desnudó, y al descalzarse—¡oh desgracia indigna de tal persona!—se le soltaron, no suspiros, ni otra cosa, que desacreditasen la limpieza de su policía, sino hasta dos docenas de puntos de una media, que quedó hecha celosía. (II, 44; 370)

But the floodgates of farce remain tenuously intact: we are led to contemplate that what was “let loose” on the knight as he is stooped in the exertion of disrobing might well have been melodramatic sighs or even flatulence (“no suspiros, ni otra cosa, que desacreditasen la limpieza de su policía”), but were in fact the stitches of his stocking. As with the acorns in Part I, the sight of the tear inspires a rather Shandean digression—this time on poverty—, complete with authoritative citations (it is curious that Nabokov loved Sterne, who loved Cervantes, and yet the syllogism was not complete). The peculiarly muted tone of the scene then resumes:

¹⁵ Focusing on his comic revitalization of the cosmic vision aboard *Clavileño* (II, 41) and the aftermath of his governorship, Forcione has recently discussed Sancho’s emergence in Part II as a champion of individual authenticity and the creative imagination (“Cervantes’ Night-Ernantry”). For an interesting study claiming that Alonso Quijano is conscious of his game, that he is intentionally play-acting, see Torrente Ballester.

Finalmente, él se recostó pensativo y pesaroso, así de la falta que Sancho le hacía como de la irreparable desgracia de sus medias, a quien tomara los puntos, aunque fuera con seda de otra color, que es una de las mayores señales de miseria que un hidalgo puede dar en el discurso de su prolija estrechez. Mató las velas, hacía calor y no podía dormir, levantóse del lecho y abrió un poco la ventana de una reja que daba sobre un hermoso jardín, y al abrirla, sintió y oyó que andaba y hablaba gente en el jardín. (371–72)

Don Quijote has momentarily been reduced from an intrepid adventurer to a man who misses his companion and is burdened by material concerns. And it is notable that the narrator should underscore the disgrace of an *hidalgo* darning with thread that doesn't match. Are we witnessing another adventure of our *caballero*, Don Quijote, or the waning struggles of Alonso Quijano to sustain his make-believe?

Battling the deterioration of his imaginative world and beset with insomnia, our hero must contend with the confounding events in the ducal castle: among those heard in the garden beneath the window is Altisidora pretending to be a lovesick maiden. What enchants Nabokov about the scene is his perception that Don Quijote, despite growing doubts, is able to draw strength from his chivalric fantasy in the face of a "reality" that is doubly deserving of quotation marks, since Altisidora is intentionally staging a parody of the chivalric romance:

And the voice of the little damsel Altisidora (with the rolling R of Reality) so close at hand, in the garden, becomes for a moment, physically and mentally, more vivid than the vision of Dulcinea del Toboso, with all those limp, lispng l's of lean illusion. But his innate modesty, his purity, the glorious chastity of the true knight-errant, all this proves stronger than his manly senses—and after listening to the song in the garden he bangs the window shut... (*Lectures* 70)¹⁶

According to Nabokov, the scene depicts Don Quijote "fighting one delusion by means of another delusion" (70). We can understand the first delusion as Altisidora's parody, the offer of love; the second, as Don

16 That *Lolita*, whose story is being written during the period of Nabokov's lectures, so roundly partakes of the "limp, lispng l's of lean illusion" demonstrates at the very least that Cervantes' novel resonates in Nabokov's mind, that he easily "reads" some of his pet concerns back into *Don Quijote*. The numerous quixotic themes and figures we have considered show how the Spanish work did in fact make its way into *Lolita*.

Quijote's chivalric vision, his desire not to betray Dulcinea. In addition to illustrating the complexity of fictional layers that obtains in part II, the episode presents a good example of what Alter called the "shuttling of our perception between the poles of fiction and reality" (193): from the knight's armor to the hidalgo's stockings, from the difficulty of falling asleep in a warm room to an affirmation of Dulcinea. And, as Cide Hamete famously observes, the "reality" of the ducal castle, with its petty intrigues and delight in making sport of Don Quijote and Sancho, does not emerge in a particularly dignified light: "que tiene para sí ser tan locos los burladores como los burlados, y que no estaban los duques dos dedos de parecer tontos, pues tanto ahínco ponían en burlarse de dos tontos" (II, 70; 564–65).

Appel describes the unique quality of Nabokov's parody thus: "With the possible exception of Joyce, Nabokov is alone among modern writers in his ability to make parody and pathos converge and sometimes coincide" (li). Anthony Close, who is perhaps one of the most inimical critics to the type of comparison I am proposing, made a similar observation when describing Cervantes' syncretism: "This strategy endows Cervantes's parody with a peculiarly internal, empathetic relation to its target, and also a bewildering breadth of eclectic reference."¹⁷ The comments of both critics distinguish the authors from their respective literary-cultural milieu; I have attempted to show how these very idiosyncrasies make Cervantes and Nabokov appropriate for comparison despite their mutual distance. Dare I suggest that the same sequence in *Don Quijote* that Nabokov singles out for praise might serve to illustrate the point made by Close, the stern historicist? Parody in such a scene becomes, to use Nabokov's suggestive term, a "springboard." A shift in context may cast a particular convention in a ridiculous light; it may also be a catalyst for new possibilities of expression. In the metafictional excursus which is Chapter 10 of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the narrator describes a peculiar example of crime fiction: "The detective, a shifty fellow, drops his h's, and this is meant to look as if it were meant to look quaint; for it is not a parody of the Sherlock Holmes vogue but a parody of the modern reaction from it. The lodgers are examined afresh. New clues are guessed at" (92). The entire episode of Don Quijote and Sancho's residence with the Duke and Duchess indicates that the "modern reaction" to chivalric romance was based on its ability to provide

17 Cited by Iffland (432). Iffland's sensitive critique of Close's *Cervantes and the Comic Mind of His Age* offers historical grounds for identifying carnivalesque elements in *Don Quijote*.

cheap entertainment for an unreflective public. The appealing pathos of the knight and squire's comportment within a rather decadent funhouse gives the sequence an unexpected richness, resulting in a reassessment and qualified redemption of chivalry.

The constant foregrounding of artifice in Cervantes and Nabokov assures, perhaps, that we do not read naively. But an educated imagination is not necessarily the same as a jaded one. Several fine critics have pointed out how the sophisticated Nabokov had a profound affection for romance, and how his constant articulation of "doubt" actually fortified his celebration of the mind's capacity for understanding, for finding coherence and meaning (e.g. Frosch and Wood). Within what Borges called the "magias parciales" of *Don Quijote* we are repeatedly reminded that the chivalric, the pastoral, the picaresque, and the puppet show (those punctuating p's of parody—to appropriate Nabokov's play with l's) are fictions, or (as Nabokov says of *Don Quijote*, *Bleak House*, and *Madame Bovary*) fairy tales. I have attempted to shed some light on why it is that, in Nabokov's words, "without these fairy tales the world would not be real" (*Lectures* 1). Suspending our disbelief, Sancho-like, we accompany Cervantes and Nabokov on strange adventures, fighting one delusion (the authority of documents, of genres) by means of another (the enchantments of fiction). We do it in part because a curiously cultivated garden allows us to escape the chaos and contingencies of the world beyond. But we also do so because we suspect that the truth of existence lies somewhere between what the confines of lived experience affirm, and what the grand designs of imagination propose. Despite his dyspeptic and dismissive complaints, Nabokov recognized the formidable vindication of fiction in *Don Quijote*; Cervantes' masterpiece can be found on the shimmering surface and in the very sinews of *Lolita*.

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