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HUMBERT'S "SENSE OF SIN"
 AND DOSTOEVSKY'S *THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV*

This note amplifies the arguments I made in an essay published in *Nabokov Studies* 13 (2014): 20-32. In that essay, "*Lolita*: Nabokov's Rewriting of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*," I argued that some of Humbert's most memorable and troubling assertions are keyed into Ivan Karamazov's challenge of Christian theodicy. Siding with Ivan, *Lolita* rejects the utilitarian calculus that lurks in Dostoevsky's faith in the redemptive power of suffering. I argued further that suffering in *Lolita* can, at best, lead to the production of art, but that the value of this art is not high enough to justify the suffering of a child.

Revisiting this essay recently, I made a discovery pertaining to a passage that I have returned to again and again in my writings on *Lolita*. The passage in question describes Humbert's efforts to console himself after losing Dolores at Elphinstone. One such effort involves turning for help to a Catholic priest from Québec because he wishes "to deduce from my sense of sin the existence of a Supreme Being" (L 266). This effort fails, however, for the following reasons:

Alas, I was unable to transcend the simple human fact that whatever spiritual solace I might find, whatever lithophanic eternities might be provided for me, nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted upon her. Unless it can be proven to me—to me as I am now, today, with my heart and my beard, and my putrefaction—that in the infinite run it does not matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac, unless this can be proven (and if it can, then life is a joke), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art. (L 266)

These conclusions are nearly identical to those that Ivan spells out to Alyosha in the "Rebellion" chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov*: namely, both Humbert and Ivan contend that there can be no compensation for the suffering of a child regardless of the timeframe we might allow for such a compensation to materialize. However, the

novels in which they reside take opposing views when it comes to the questions that provoke these conclusions. In the case of *Lolita*, the question that frames Humbert's thought experiment pertains to the existence of a Supreme Being. Though this question is the driving force behind the totality of *The Brothers Karamazov*, the "Rebellion" chapter is narrower in scope: the question that sets it in motion is whether it is possible to reconcile the suffering of children with a just and merciful God.

Humbert explains his reasoning for seeking the help of the Catholic priest by telling us that he wished "to deduce from my sense of sin the existence of a Supreme Being" (L 266). Though Humbert *himself* fails to achieve this, he succeeds in reminding his readers that some of Dostoevsky's most famous characters do derive from *their* sense of sin the existence of a supreme being. This is the main argument for the existence of God in *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Brave freethinkers that they are, Raskolnikov and Ivan are horrified to discover that their moral conscience cannot accommodate itself to murder or complicity in murder, respectively. Unable to escape moral feelings, they experience an overwhelming despair. Within the fictional worlds in which they reside, the despair produced by their "sense of sin" serves as evidence for the existence of God and immortality. In short, their stories can be summed up precisely as Humbert puts it: they deduce from their sense of sin the existence of a Supreme Being.

As proof of God's existence in Dostoevsky's fiction, this sense of sin instigates forms of penance that lead to redemption. Though redemption is withheld from Ivan within the horizon line of the novel (he succumbs to a "brain fever" after discovering his complicity in his father's murder), the theodicy that he sought so ardently to refute has been validated by his experience. Readers of *The Brothers Karamazov* are encouraged to place their trust in the following logic: though there might not be a rational (or, to use the novel's terminology, "Euclidean") justification for the suffering of children, there must be an irrational (or "non-Euclidean") explanation for such suffering in that murky Christian geometry invoked by the Elder Zosima before he dies. Dostoevsky counts on his readers to find comfort in Zosima's assurance that "everything is a mystery."

In *Lolita*, however, there are no "lithophanic eternities" that might provide "spiritual solace" to an abuser of children like Humbert. I see Humbert's assessment of his visits to the Catholic priest as a riposte to the Elder Zosima's assurance that no theodicy is necessary because "everything is a mystery." Dostoevsky's final word about suffering children is not all that clear given that Ivan's rebellion against God's universe is made to

dissolve in the murk of Zosima's non-Euclidean geometry. By contrast, Nabokov's final word about suffering children is absolute: Humbert fails to deduce from his sense of sin the existence of a Supreme Being and this failure also precludes any possibility of assimilating children's suffering into an all-embracing spiritual dispensation. The rejection of such a dispensation also forecloses the possibility that Humbert might successfully atone for the suffering he inflicts upon Dolores and, in doing so, find some kind of redemption.

But if Humbert's sense of sin is not theologically productive in the way that it is for Ivan and Raskolnikov, is it meaningful in any way beyond its polemics with Dostoevsky? Perhaps it accounts for Nabokov's assertion in the Foreword to *Despair* that "there is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year." Readers have often wondered why Nabokov allows this modest reprieve to Humbert while he sentences Hermann, the protagonist and narrator of *Despair*, to Hell without parole (xiii). Perhaps it is because Hermann, unlike Humbert, is never troubled by a "sense of sin." Yet the playfulness of Nabokov's statement about Humbert's annual stroll through a darkling Paradise is out of sync with the moral gravitas of *Lolita* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. The networks of meaning that emerge in these novels demand a deeper moral probing than Nabokov's serio-comic assessment of Hermann's and Humbert's crimes in *Despair*'s Foreword.

A more satisfying answer might be provided by *Pnin*, whose chapters Nabokov began writing after having started *Lolita*. The novel's most frequently cited passage describes how Pnin has trained himself "never to remember Mira Belochkin" because "no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible" (P 394). Like Humbert's description of his foray into Christian theology via the Catholic priest, this passage deploys the high-voltage prose style that Nabokov reserves for the most emotionally charged moments in his fiction. As the novel's narrator, Vladimir Vladimirovich, explains, "[i]n order to exist rationally," Pnin had to teach himself to forget Mira because "one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one's lips in the dusk of the past" (P 394). Both passages assert that certain crimes are so enormous that they overwhelm human reason: in the case of *Pnin*, the mind cannot assimilate the fact of the Holocaust without becoming undone; in the case of *Lolita*, life becomes "a joke" if the theft of a childhood has only trivial

importance in “the infinite run.” The implications are instructive: whereas a “sense of sin” serves as a portal to the divine in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the act of contemplating certain crimes in Nabokov’s fiction is like a wrecking ball that threatens to demolish either the mind or the cosmos.

The second notable asymmetry has to do with Pnin’s and Humbert’s respective coping mechanisms. Reflecting upon the magnitude of his crimes against Dolores, Humbert seeks refuge in what he calls “the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art” (L 266). Not an artist himself, Pnin seeks refuge in willed forgetting. Vladimir Vladimirovich, however, is an artist and feels no qualms about turning Mira’s death into art. What is more, Vladimir Vladimirovich underscores the fact that art feeds upon suffering. As he states in *Pnin*’s opening chapter, artists like him know that art flourishes in an environment where “[h]arm is the norm” (P 314).

Pnin also reminds us of art’s compact with deception when he accuses Vladimir Vladimirovich of being a liar. Recalling an earlier encounter in Paris, Vladimir Vladimirovich reports how a conversation among fellow compatriots produced an unexpectedly aggressive outburst from Pnin: “Now, don’t believe a word he says, Georgy Aramovich,” interrupted Pnin. “He makes up everything. He once invented that we were schoolmates in Russia and cribbed at examinations. He is a dreadful inventor [*on uzhasniiy vidumshchik*]” (P 430–31). *Pnin*’s triangulation of art, suffering, and deception explains my choice of epigraph to my earlier essay on *Lolita* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. The epigraph is taken from Nietzsche’s *The Will to Power*: “We possess art lest we perish of the truth.” Nietzsche’s aphorism gets at the heart of *Pnin*’s and *Lolita*’s stony acknowledgement that some truths are too grim to absorb and that only artists might have the tools for dealing with such truths. For non-artists like Pnin, forgetting is the only remedy.

Humbert’s “sense of sin” does not produce any evidence for the existence of a Supreme Being as it does in *The Brothers Karamazov*. But it does hint at the existence of an artist who invented Humbert and who made him allude to Ivan Karamazov’s predicament in Dostoevsky’s novel. In *Pnin* (the novel that Nabokov began writing after having started *Lolita*) artists are shown to be liars who prey upon the suffering of others to create art. It is tempting to see this conjunction of art, suffering, and deception as bringing more evidence to bear on the debate surrounding *Lolita*’s so-called calendric anomaly. First floated by Elizabeth Bruss in 1976, the hypothesis that Humbert invented the concluding nine chapters of his memoir turns on a dating discrepancy that Nabokov did not correct in *Lolita*’s 1967 Russian translation (Toker 210-11). The discrepancy in question has to do with the number of days that are said to have elapsed between Humbert’s arrest and

the completion of his memoir. According to Humbert, it took him fifty-six days to pen his memoir; according to John Ray Jr., only fifty-three days elapsed between Humbert's arrest and his death. If intentional, the three-day discrepancy challenges the veracity of the events that follow from Dolores's letter from Coalmont, including the letter itself. Notwithstanding Brian Boyd's compelling argument that the anomaly is a typographic error rather than an intentionally planted clue, the matter continues to be robustly debated. Christina Tekiner, Leona Toker, Julian Connolly, Alexander Dolinin, George Ferger, Anthony Moore, Bruce Stone, Deborah Martinsen, Stephen H. Blackwell, and I have mined the fascinating interpretive possibilities provoked by the anomaly.

Following such an interpretive path, we might arrive at the conclusion that Humbert's dealings with the Catholic priest produce a double disappointment. The first disappointment is the stated one: Humbert must live to the end of his life in a universe permanently blighted by his crimes against Dolores. The second disappointment is related to the first: without Dolores's letter from Coalmont and the events that follow, Humbert is denied the amends that he might have made in *this* world. For the events recounted in the memoir's concluding nine chapters provide Humbert with more resources and opportunities than his art. There is Quilty, a fellow child abuser with whom Humbert gets to split the guilt over his theft of Dolores's childhood. Additionally, there is the visibly aged and heavily pregnant Dolores who mitigates the magnitude of Humbert's guilt by eliciting his love and compassion. Stripped of the consolations produced by his encounter with a mature Dolores and a pedophile even more brazenly vicious than himself, Humbert appears before us both as a liar and a truth teller. His early claim that he is "only a very conscientious recorder" (*L* 67) turns out to be a lie, but the lament he addresses to Dolores that he has "only words to play with" turns out to be truer than he would have us believe.

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