

T W O

### **The Storable Future and the Stored Past**

How does one create a memory for the human animal? How does one go about to impress anything on that partly dull, partly flighty human intelligence—that incarnation of forgetfulness—so as to make it stick? As we might well imagine, the means used in solving this age-old problem have been far from delicate: in fact, there is perhaps nothing more terrible in man’s earliest history than his mnemotechnics.

— FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *The Genealogy of Morals*

The idea of time plays such a magic part in the matter.

— HUMBERT HUMBERT, IN NABOKOV, *The Annotated Lolita*

In the mid-1990s a new technology debuted on our screens. Known colloquially as Bullet Time,<sup>1</sup> it employs a full 360-degree ring of cameras which simultaneously capture an object and moment from all angles. This effectively “freezes time,” so that the spectator can virtually move around a person spilling a glass of orange juice or (in the case of one Nike advertisement) a bicycle falling and-yet not falling. It suddenly became possible to freeze the exact moment of a glass exploding, each fragment caught perfectly in the timeless moment of combustion. Or of a woman throwing a pillow at her lover in a passionate rage, so that the viewer can almost walk around the scene in a virtual 3D tableaux. It suddenly seemed possible that Nicholson Baker’s concept of the Fermata was being rendered on-screen as an experiment before being applied to Real Life.

This special effect tended to prompt something approaching the technological sublime in the viewer, at least for the first few exposures. It seemed that we had been granted a glimpse of the secret inner workings of life, a

revelation via the artificial arrestation of something we normally take for granted: the flow of time. Indeed, these images seemed to be examples of Benjamin's "chips of messianic time," to be read and decoded in their pregnant silence. Predictably, the modern media soon overexploited this new "technique" (for how are we to distinguish between a new technology and a merely new assemblage of existing technologies?), with the result that it became so common as to move swiftly into the realm of cliché, erasing any connection this new visual mode once had with a graceful phenomenological shock.

Biologists tell us that when adrenalin floods the nervous system, the perception of time actually slows down. Evolutionary speaking, this allows us to have more time in which to escape marauding mammoths. Similarly, the brain chemicals of a fly are processed so quickly that our rolled-up newspaper coming toward it is perceived in slow motion. (Unfortunately, evolution didn't factor in airplane travel—so, when we are strapped into our seats during turbulence, every nerve-shattering second is elongated, like satanic chewing-gum.) Any attempt to distinguish "time itself" from "the perception of time" would therefore have to take into account the Einstein-Bergson-Deleuze constellation, which itself points to a galaxy of accounts which extract the subject from time—or at least consider time as something far more complex than "homogenous, empty time," in which the subject is said to move like a commuter through a tunnel.<sup>2</sup>

The daguerreotype was the first technology to actually capture the contours of "frozen time," as opposed to the pictorial representation of painting; the uncanny effect of preserving an image of the ephemeral has been well-documented by writers such as Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag. The melancholy structure of somehow "cheating" time, of capturing a token of immortality, of course only serves to highlight the mortality of that which is photographed. A photograph merely attests to something as past, a fleeting punctum which we can never truly grasp, but only mourn. Bullet Time allows us, however, to virtually enter the frame, bringing us another step closer to the unspoken goal of capturing time in a medium which allows us to rewind, fast-forward, and pause our own lives.

Take, for instance, the case of Humbert Humbert. The narrator of Nabokov's intricate tale not only describes his mother as "very photogenic" but claims to possess a photographic memory, the former perhaps being a happy

result of the latter (or even, perhaps, encouraging such a faculty).<sup>3</sup> Although she is killed at the fringes of Humbert's memory—by lightning at a picnic when he is age three—her image is the first of several female ghosts to haunt this erudite fetishist with a penchant for nymphets and “the Proustian theme.”

Indeed, Humbert is rocked to his foundations when he is first confronted with the image of Lolita. In this scene the noumenal Lolita coincides perfectly with not only the retinal image of Lolita lounging in the backyard but also Humbert's childhood memory of Annabel:

It was the same child—the same frail, honey-hued shoulders. . . . I recognized the tiny dark-brown mole on her side.<sup>4</sup> . . . The twenty-five years I had lived since then, tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished. I find it most difficult to express with adequate force that flash, that shiver, that impact of passionate recognition. (Nabokov 1991, 39)

It is this “passionate recognition” which enables us to reread *Lolita* through the unconventional lens of science fiction, specifically through the trope of time travel. Humbert seems to fall into the space of revelation—itself a kind of “resonance machine”—as if two chronological moments telescope so perfectly that the past rises up within the present, as with Proust's madeleine.<sup>5</sup> The catalytic shock in this case is not taste but a coup d'oeil, igniting the “total recall” of his preadolescent love affair with Annabel.

It is the uncanny fusion of all these elements which make Lolita—both the book and the character—a consummate study in mnemotechnics, refusing a notion of desire outside the often violent conjunction between the “soft” technologies of language, law, memory, and phantasm and the “hard” technologies of writing, photography, and cinema.

Humbert in fact believes that there are two kinds of visual memory:

one when you skillfully recreate an image in the laboratory of your mind, with your eyes open (and then I see Annabel in such general terms as: “honey-colored skin,” “thin arms,” “brown bobbed hair,” “long lashes,” “big bright mouth”); and the other when you instantly evoke, with shut eyes, on the dark innerside of your eyelids, the objective, absolute optical replica of a beloved face, a little ghost in natural colors (and this is how I see Lolita). (11)

These two kinds of visual memory echo the phenomenological writings of Henri Bergson, who wrote over a century ago:

Whenever we are trying to recover a recollection, to call up some period of our history, we become conscious of an act *sui generis* by which we detach ourselves from the present in order to replace ourselves, first in the past in general, then in a certain region of the past—a work of adjustment, something like the focusing of a camera. But our recollection still remains virtual; we simply prepare ourselves to receive it by adopting the appropriate attitude. Little by little it comes into view like a condensing cloud; from the virtual state it passes into the actual; and as its outlines become more distinct and its surface takes on colour, it tends to imitate perception. But it remains attached to the past by its deepest roots, and if, when once realized, it did not retain something of its original virtuality, if, being a present state, it were not also something which stands out distinct from the present, we should never know it for a memory. (1988, 171)

The “virtual” in this text—written in 1896, during the birth of cinema (the Lumière brothers held their very first public screening the year before)—points to a certain technology which dwells within perception, so that mnemonic faculty itself is a form of technology (“a work of adjustment like the focusing of a camera”). Human memory accordingly mimics an artifact only in its infancy, a pure vector of recall as yet unsullied by sentiment and nostalgia.

Later in the story, after Humbert has wrenched Lolita from her oblivious suburban life and into his feverish road trip, he watches her playing tennis at school in Beardsley College:

I could have filmed her! I would have had her now with me, before my eyes, in the projection room of my pain and despair! . . . That I could have had all her strokes, all her enchantments, immortalized in segments of celluloid, makes me moan to-day with frustration. They would have been so much more than the snapshots I burned! (Nabokov 1991, 231–32)

In contrast to Bullet Time or still photography, *movement* seems to be the key to capturing the moment. According to Humbert, a simple super-8 camera would be sufficient to immortalize Lolita’s grace and preserve forever that combination of elements which had him drenched in “an almost painful convulsion of beauty assimilation”—a kind of pop-Kantian sublime processed through a quasi Freudian libidinal economy.

But is it really this simple? Is it merely a matter of having the right equipment at the right time to capture the moment?

In “The Seducer’s Diary” by Kierkegaard, Johannes writes: “It would be of real interest to me if it were possible to reproduce very accurately

the conversations I have with Cordelia. But I easily perceive that it is an impossibility, for even if I managed to recollect every single word exchanged between us, it nevertheless is out of the question to reproduce the element of contemporaneity, which actually is the nerve in conversation, the surprise in the outburst, the passionateness, which is the life principle in conversation” (1987, 399).

And, presumably, in a game of tennis.

*Contemporaneity* is something which no technology can fully capture, and it is that remainder (an accursed share, perhaps) which will always exceed the reproduction<sup>6</sup>—unless, that is, we manage to find a way to “actually,” rather than “virtually,” relive the moment. Such technology may bear little resemblance to a machine which reproduces the past, but perhaps be a technique which allows us to (re)experience the past as present—something like Nietzsche’s eternal return. This is also felt in Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1962), a film entirely composed of a succession of stills except for one moving shot, of a woman blinking, which functions as the exact opposite of the Bullet Time effect.

In Hirokazu Koreeda’s 1998 film *After Life* (*Wandâfuru raifu*), the dead are first taken to an old school building in which they are asked to choose one favorite memory from their recently passed lives, which they can take with them to the afterlife. It is the task of the dedicated staff, who themselves are dead, to recreate this memory, using extremely low-budget props and techniques (part of the charm of the film). One old gentleman has trouble selecting a particular memory, not because his life was so eventful but quite the opposite: because it was the life of a typical salaryman with an arranged marriage. In order to prompt this gentleman’s memory, his case manager orders all 70 tapes of his life (one tape for each year), and the old fellow spends several days sifting through the raw footage of his personal biography.

The tone of this austere sentimental film issues from “magic realism” and therefore does not explain the logistics behind the existence of this operation, neither the institution itself nor the method used to film every second of every person’s life and store it in a warehouse, waiting for someone to view the rushes. The most pressing question, however, is why this diligent branch of the postmortal bureaucracy *reenact* these people’s memories, rather than just edit it out of the footage they clearly already have. It

would do the writer and director a disservice to suggest that this is an error in the narrative logic of the film, since the inconsistency is so obvious. Rather, this process points to nostalgia at one remove, a touching belief in simulacra, on the condition that the subject has an input toward the production of the memory scene. The paradox is clear: In creating the copy, you more fully invoke the original. The “aura” of the event is transferred or recreated in the reenactment.<sup>7</sup>

One wonders whether Humbert Humbert, after dying of a coronary thrombosis (i.e., a broken heart) in his cell while awaiting trial, would have been satisfied with such a shabby facsimile of his cherished memories. It seems extremely unlikely that Koreeda’s unnamed office could find an adequate starlet to play Lolita, especially when the “real” Lolita would presumably be gathering dust in their own archives. (Humbert makes it clear that we are reading his confessions only after the death of the other protagonists.)

Remarkably, Humbert—in the lost years after being abandoned by Lolita—composes and even publishes

an essay on ‘Mimir and Memory,’ in which I suggested among other things that seemed original and important . . . a theory of perceptual time based on the circulation of the blood and conceptually depending (to fill up this nutshell) on the mind’s being conscious not only of matter but also of its own self, thus creating a continuous spanning of two points (the storable future and the stored past). (Nabokov 1991, 260)

Such a “continual spanning of two points” brings us back into Bergsonian territory, specifically the Bergson reinterpreted by Deleuze, in which the element B (Lolita) appears as a *contraction* of A (Annabel).<sup>8</sup> Hence, the Annabel-Lolita hybrid is not simply a morphing of images in Humbert’s mind but the chronotopia of virtuality itself becoming actual. Just as human perception experiences the past and the present simultaneously (both the “current” and the “previous” frames of a film), the materiality of presence embodies that which is (no longer):

A succession of instants does not constitute time any more than it causes it to disappear; it indicates only its constantly aborted moment of birth. Time is constituted only in the originary synthesis which operates on the repetition of instants. This synthesis contracts the successive independent instants into one another, thereby constituting the lived, or living, present. It is in this present that

time is deployed. To it belong both the past and the future: the past in so far as the preceding instants are retained in the contraction; the future because its expectation is anticipated in this same contraction. . . . The present does not have to go outside itself in order to pass from past to future (Deleuze 1994, 70–71)

In other words, we dwell on the tip of the cone, “with the acoustics of time, domed time” (Nabokov 1991, 236).<sup>9</sup>

In this notion, then, we find ourselves reacquainted with those mysterious Proustian essences which provide a “superior viewpoint” by superimposing the past and the present—or more accurately, by contracting the past in the present, since we are always-already in the past, even in the so-called present. It is, however, Humbert’s phrase “storable future and stored past” which resonates most with the topics at hand: the deployment of mnemonic technologies in contemporary culture, and the way such technologies can simultaneously enhance and erode the affectivity of their own “storage capacity.”<sup>10</sup>

I am personally unaware whether Nabokov read much Bergson, but given his astonishing knowledge of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and ideas, it seems likely that some basic Bergsonian concepts captured his attention, especially when we consider his obsession with the “free world of timelessness” (1991, xxi). In his autobiography, *Speak Memory* (alluded to in the scholarly introduction to the annotated *Lolita*), Nabokov spatializes time, describing it as a spherical prison “without exits.” Elsewhere in the same text, the author-narrator states, “I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another” (xxix), a literary variation of Leibniz’s fold:

for every dimension presupposes a medium within which it can act, and if, in the spiral unwinding of things, space warps into something akin to time, and time, in its turn, warps into something akin to thought, then, surely, another dimension follows—a special Space maybe, not the old one, we trust, unless spirals become vicious circles again. (xxxiii)

How to locate and define this special Space? Is it the space of literature? The space of play? Does it delineate duration, or the fold itself?

At this point, we have introduced two conceptions of time which seem to be at odds: time as pure movement (a future which is constantly pouring

into the past through the present), and time as a rapid series of frozen moments (perhaps even jumping from one to the other, sometimes much slower than 24 frames per second). It is this first notion, however, which produces the possibility of the second, the artificial production of the (inherent) spatiality of time. The implication is that if we properly unlock the post-Einsteinian secrets of time—say, via Bullet Time—then we see how space itself is a product of time (and perhaps even allow us to construct a means of “traveling” “through” “time” which is less mediated and less melancholic than the effect of celluloid on brain-cells via optic nerves, what Humbert refers to as “retrievable time” [261]).

Sometimes Humbert is caught in the static: “I would like to describe her face, her ways—and I cannot, because my own desire for her blinds me when she is near. . . . If I close my eyes I see but an immobilized fraction of her, a cinematographic still” (44). Sometimes he is at the mercy of the kinetic: “I prayed we would never get to that store, but we did” (51). His love for Lolita can become so overwhelming that it becomes the static of a certain “frequency,” the kind of aural static that moves, as when he makes a request to the printer to repeat the word Lolita until it fills the page—the proper name of an improper obsession.

In contrast to Alfred Hitchcock, whose corpulent physique became the delight of vigilant cameo spotters, *film itself* spools around the words of the Humbert-Nabokov amalgam, daring the reader to recognize the significance of this nubile technology and its seductive relationship to the leering, overeducated advances of the written word.<sup>11</sup> As we have seen, Humbert laments the fact that he has no material record of his beloved and that his memory is merely photographic, not cinematic: “[P]ity no film had recorded the curious pattern, the monogrammic linkage of our simultaneous or overlapping moves” (58).

In matter of fact, Lolita *had* been captured on film, specifically the highly illegal blue movies directed by Clare Quilty at his mansion. But it is extremely doubtful whether Humbert, despite his depravities, would cherish this particular footage, since it would only serve to release the more poisonous memories of his loss, including his ultimate defeat at the hands of his rival. As with the Koreeda film *After Life*, Humbert’s very effort of re-creating a memory (say of Lolita playing tennis) serves as the “saving” or “salvaged” simulacra of that which is “re-membered” the etymology being

particularly relevant, when we consider how many times Humbert recalls his nymphets via their particular body parts: limbs, freckles, hair, and more).

Lolita herself is described as “a modern child, an avid reader of movie magazines, an expert in dream-slow close-ups.” She is so much so that Humbert hopes that her early and extended exposure to the lover’s discourse—via the media—will adequately prepare Lolita for his initial advance, and that she “might not think it too strange” should he try to kiss her, since she has seen its likeness on the silver screen (49). This phenomenon produces a neat twist, in that the annexed, sexless kingdom of modern childhood—dated by some with the publication of *Mother Goose’s Melodies* in 1760—“loses ground” to the urgencies of desire, again thanks to the media, one of the (double) agents of the construction of innocence.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, it is Humbert’s attempt to “fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets” which leads to the book itself and the flirtation with cinema which lies at the heart of the narrative’s logic. Being a man of letters, however, he eventually puts his faith in “aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art” (309), a form of immortality compromised by the medium in which it dwells.

This leads us to the function of Lolita herself, specifically the lo-fidelity of her behavior towards Humbert and to the passing of her precious nymphic years, defined as that “enchanted island of time” between the ages of 9 and 14. While sitting on a park bench surrounded by nymphets, Humbert pleads to nobody in particular, “Let them play around me forever. Never grow up” (21). He treasures the fleeting nature of nymphets, yet he wants to preserve them, like one of Nabokov’s butterflies pinned to a velvet board in Lausanne’s Cantonal Museum of Zoology.<sup>13</sup>

It is the fluid movement of the aging process which provokes in Humbert a desire to control this particular flux.<sup>14</sup> The “continuous spanning” of two points—whether we map these coordinates as Annabel in 1920s versus Lolita in the 1950s, or as too-young Lolita versus too-old Lolita—bracket the ungraspable. For Humbert the passage from nymphet to irrelevancy is too slow for the human eye to capture, yet other faculties and organs are only too sensitive to this process. The crucial question then emerges: Would Humbert fixate on the nymphet if there were no risk of her evaporation? Is it the imminent (and immanent) dissolution of her nymphancy which makes the *presence* of these creatures so unbearable, as if they were carved of smoke

and impossible to hold at all? (Hence the moment of “redemption” in the novel, when Humbert confesses his enduring love for the pregnant and post-nymphic Lolita.)

It is this paradox which is missed as soon as the reader is tempted to accuse Humbert of pedophilia. Lolita is a cusp-creature, not simply a child. And it is this elongated metamorphosis which fascinates. Lolita’s gangly legs straddle childhood and maturity, the past and the present, and it is the libidinal search for this hinge that constitutes Humbert’s crime. Time dilates, time contracts. His is an ontological affliction, and perhaps no less grave for it.

Lolita—and more generally the nymphet (as we shall see later)—thus signifies time itself. Lolita *is* time. (Just as *Lolita* is chronography.) Humbert is incapable of fixing her perilous magic “once and for all,” since such a technology (remembering that language itself is a technology) would have to resolve the paradox of freezing time *within* time, something Bullet Time hints at but does not achieve. If time can be conceived as anti-Euclidean spatialized movement, as Deleuze maintains, then it seems impossible to simply freeze time.

In Philip K. Dick’s novel *The World Jones Made* (1993), the protagonist is born with one foot in the future and one foot in the past, so nothing comes as a surprise. (Hence the notable lack of crying when he is born, since he is prepared for it.) Similarly, the Tralfalmadorians in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* can see in four dimensions, simultaneously inhabiting past, present and future: “They pitied Earthlings for being able to see only three. They had many wonderful things to teach Earthlings, especially about time” (1991, 26). Humbert himself is well aware of such temporal options and twice discusses the possibility that life constantly branches and forks, as certain theories of quantum physics maintain. “Time moves ahead of our fancies,” he writes. Moreover, this knowledge leads him to wonder whether the girls that he phantasmatically molests are actually affected by his desires: “In this wrought-iron world of criss-cross cause and effect, could it be that the hidden throb I stole from them did not affect *their* future?” (Nabokov 1991, 21).

In a crucial scene, more explicitly tied to technology (and discussed in more detail below), Humbert realizes that Lolita remains completely oblivious to the carnal component of an orgasmic tussle on the couch: “The child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her. And nothing prevented me from

repeating a performance that affected her as little as if she were a photographic image rippling upon a screen and I a humble hunchback abusing myself in the dark” (62). In trying to “possess” Lolita with neither her consent nor her knowledge, Humbert attempts to have his cake (Lolita) and eat it too (Lolita’s image). Yet, he will end up hungry, due to the contradictory logic of mediated time.<sup>15</sup>

The term which links the vision of Jones, the Tralfalmadorians, and Humbert is the notion of “forever,” a figure as familiar as it is abstract. *Forever* suggests a stasis, an immortality, traced by the eye reflecting the phantasmatic object: “The word ‘forever’ referred only to my own passion, to the eternal Lolita as reflected in my blood” (65). If the medium is time and the message is Lolita (or Humbert’s passion for Lolita, which amounts to the same thing, diegetically speaking), then the medium is most certainly the message—a message Humbert seems to be sending himself, rather than the ladies and gentlemen of the jury, whom he so often addresses.

His confession stems from a string of separate “first impressions”—on the lawn, after summer camp, pregnant and married—all of which unfold in the “very narrow human interval between two tiger heartbeats” (111). (Consider Bataille’s famous observation that eroticism moves in time as a tiger moves in space.) These moments, along with the attempt to represent them, force Humbert to confront “the stark lucidity of a future recollection (you know—trying to see things as you will remember having seen them)” (86). They are the punctuation marks, the punctual quilting points, of his encounter with essence. A temporal truth is thus glimpsed within the articulate white noise of his obsession: *His* Lolita, even an aging Lolita, unlocks the essence of love-within-duration. An enduring love. (And in this context, we are in a better position to understand the retrospective jealousy of Lolita’s mother, Charlotte Haze, who “desired me resuscitate all my loves so that she might make me insult them, and trample upon them, and revoke them apostately and totally, thus destroying my past” [79].)

Perhaps we can justify being jealous of the past, when we actually—literally—live in the past.<sup>16</sup>

### *A Spectator Is Haunting Europe*

Memory is not so all-enwrapping, Dream sooner or later betrays itself. If an Actor or a painted Portrait may represent a Personage no longer alive, might there not be other Modalities of Appearance, as well?

— CHARLES MASON, in Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*

Every lover is the first love in terms of the simultaneous operations of the brain.

—JOHN BROCKMAN, *Afterwords*

Much is made of Humbert's European pedigree and Lolita's crass American charm. Whether or not we are tempted to make an allegorical reading of their fraught relationship, it seems appropriate to consider how Marx's specter has broken loose from the cellars and now inhabits even the "little ghost in natural colors" of Lolita and her celluloid siblings.<sup>17</sup>

Derrida, via Hamlet, has unpacked the implications of time's being out of joint. The uncanny persistence of the past, he insists, is distilled in the figure of the ghost, suggesting that the contemporary moment is haunted by its inability to assimilate that which came before. This has nothing to do with "reconciliation," or laying old ghosts to rest so that we may proceed with a clear conscience. Even less is it a case of "working through," as opposed to "acting out." It is, rather, a figure for the inherent fracture within certain human conceptions of time, as well as the symbolic economy we share with the dead, whether it be dead people, objects, or ideologies.

According to Humbert Humbert, one must be "a creature of infinite melancholy" in order to appreciate the ghostly symbolic power of the nymphet. "You have to be an artist and a madman . . . with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine" (Nabokov 1991, 17).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it is significant that Humbert's melancholy plagues him both before *and* after his encounter with Lolita and leads to several extended periods inside psychiatric institutions. Melancholy has traditionally been associated with Saturn, the god of time, the very same god who eats his own children. The erotic component of melancholy is thus a kind of preemptive and romantic loss, figured through both the spectral and the spectacle. The inaccessible or forbidden object becomes integrated in the subject via an introjection of the libido. The melancholic thus "keeps his or her own desire fixed on the inaccessible" (Agamben 1993b, 14).

Both Nabokov and Humbert play with the motifs of what Giorgio Agamben calls "this erotic constellation of melancholy." The latter's remarkable book *Stanzas* demonstrates how the love object is neither appropriated nor lost, but both possessed and lost at the same time, since "melancholy appears essentially as an erotic process engaged in an ambiguous commerce with phantasms" (1993b, 24).<sup>19</sup> The lessons of melancholy are thus that "only what is ungraspable can truly be grasped" (26) and that love itself is a form of "melancholic diligence" (27):

No longer a phantasm and not yet a sign, the unreal object of melancholy introjection opens a space that is neither the hallucinated oneiric scene of the phantasms nor the indifferent world of natural objects. In this intermediate epiphanic place, located in the no-man's-land between narcissistic self-love and external object-choice, the creations of human culture will be situated one day, the interweaving of symbolic forms and textual practices through which man enters in contact with a world that is nearer to him than any other and from which depend, more directly than from physical nature, his unhappiness and his misfortune. (25)

The question then must be asked: Who possesses whom when Humbert and Lolita get in between the sheets of Nabokov's elliptical book? Loss haunts the former, no matter how many times he may have "had" her. Lolita is so much more—and *so much less*—than her body. On the one hand, she is the intangible and elusive spirit of the nymphet, representing an essence which Humbert cannot ever really grasp.<sup>20</sup> On the other, she is the trans-temporal phantasm of Humbert's desires, mocked by the "real" flesh-and-blood Lolita who chews gum, does soda burps, and gets bored. Humbert's Lolita never manages to overlap Lolita's Lolita.

Hence, "melancholia offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object" (Agamben 1993b, 20).<sup>21</sup> It is part of "the rigorously phantasmatic character of the amorous experience" (106) which leads to this "epiphany of the unattainable" (38). According to Agamben, then, the topos of melancholy traces a circle in which "the phantasm generates desire, desire is translated into words, and the word defines a space wherein the appropriation of what could otherwise not be appropriated or enjoyed is possible" (129). While Humbert holds the little ghost of Lolita in his arms, he is only too aware that the clock is ticking: "I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but I also knew she would not be forever Lolita. She would be thirteen on January 1" (Nabokov 1991, 65).

Humbert's frustration with the inability to fix Lolita as a moving image leads to the extended lament of spilled ink that makes up the narrative. And yet, as we have seen, it is this very frustration which produces the desire, according to the circular logic of melancholy, an intrinsic aspect of the lover's discourse. "The object of love is in fact a phantasm," writes Agamben, "but this phantasm is a 'spirit,' inserted, as such, in a pneumatic circle in which the limits separating internal and external, corporeal and incorporeal, desire and its object, are abolished" (1993b, 108). Thus, Humbert swings violently between the poles of the spectral and the material, at one moment

even wishing to turn Lolita inside out “and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys” (Nabokov 1991, 165)—the hidden signs of her ontological (in)accessibility.

As anyone who has played eye hockey with a fellow subway traveler knows, love is a disease of the eye (Agamben 1993b, 87). Rare is the Western tale of romance which begins with a perfume or song. Both Agamben and Nabokov attest to the significant and signifying role of optic interpenetration, the former noting that the whole cognitive process of Eros “is conceived as speculation in the strict sense, a reflection of phantasms from mirror to mirror. The eyes and the sense are both mirror and watcher that reflect the form of the object, but phantasy is also speculation, which ‘imagines’ the phantasms in the absence of the object” (81). (A dynamic circuit exploited as much by the adman as by the beloved.)

Through writing, Humbert seeks to turn the mirror of Lolita into a window, a window in which he can reexperience his past as present. “The basic drive in the human subject,” states Silverman, “is the urge to see once more what has been seen before” (2000, 78). Despite the overwhelming impression of his rhetoric, Humbert’s passion is not exclusive to Lolita but rather a vector affording access to essence. Through the time machine of confession (itself an interesting technology, reconfigured by Augustine, Rousseau, and Foucault), Lolita reanimates Annabel and, through Annabel, reanimates Humbert before the Fall—which, of course, is the fall into time. Thus, the specter haunting Europe turns out to be the spectacle itself, that being the scopophilic logic which traverses the sociopolitical history of the West. The aesthetic project of modernity, as embodied in the paradox of Humbert’s unfocused intensity, marks the saturation point of this particular economy.

Despite the overlapping aporias, contradictions, and fissures in his account, Humbert’s *fixation on fixation* points to an emerging awareness of Agamben’s *whateverbeing*. The ontological slippages between Annabel, Lolita, Lolita’s handmaidens, Lolita’s mother, and of course Humbert himself allow both the narrator and the reader to resituate the unresolved tension between the radical interchangeability of the beloved and the profound irreplaceability of the same. Humbert writes, “And what is most singular is that she, *this* Lolita, *my* Lolita, has individualized the writer’s ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is—Lolita” (Nabokov 1991, 45).<sup>22</sup>

We must, however, zoom in a little closer in order to answer the subsequent question: Who exactly is “*this* Lolita, *my* Lolita”?

### *That Complex Ghost*

It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.

— THE WHITE QUEEN IN LEWIS CARROLL, *Through the Looking-Glass*

Reckoned chronologically, this is correct. Thought historically, it does not hit upon the truth.

— MARTIN HEIDEGGER, “The Question Concerning Technology”

“Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did.”

So says Humbert Humbert. In fact, our narrator goes on to admit that “in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel” (Nabokov 1991, 9, 14). How do we read this claim in relation to whateverbeing, or the kind of *transdividualism* discussed thus far? How exactly does one person “begin” with an-other, outside the process of biological reproduction or allegorical Freudian blurring?

We have already mentioned the “passionate recognition” Humbert felt when he first saw Lolita. In this scene the phantasms which had haunted Humbert since his seaside romance with Annabel suddenly found a new object in which they could be transferred—hence Humbert’s claim that he “broke her spell by incarnating her in another” (15). Such a reading, however, is too dependent on inadequate or distracting Freudian coordinates. Moreover, it becomes imperative to utilize certain concepts—such as narcissism, transference, desire, trauma—outside the strict Freudian constellation, accessing their pre- or post-Freudian resonance, specifically through ontology, phenomenology, and indeed Lacanian reconfigurations of the same.

We have already introduced the notion of the trauma of the second love. One method employed in order to avoid this trauma is simply to deny the ontological difference between two love objects, to fuse them into a hybrid. If Lolita is a miraculous incarnation of Annabel, then the trauma can be

resolved, since there is no real transference, just an extension or expansion. While Humbert once loved Annabel, he now he loves Annabel *through* Lolita (and vice versa). But this answers nothing until we acknowledge how slippery such names function as signifiers of desire and designation.

We can see the stakes more clearly by returning to the quasi sex scene on the couch, in which Humbert wrestles with Lolita, up to and including the point of his own surreptitious orgasm. “Blessed be the Lord,” remarks Humbert, “she had noticed nothing!” (61)

I entered a plane of being where nothing mattered, save the infusion of joy brewed within my body. What had begun as a delicious distension of my innermost roots became a glowing tingle which now had reached that state of absolute security, confidence and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life. With the deep hot sweetness thus established and well on its way to the ultimate convulsion, I felt I could slow down in order to prolong the glow. *Lolita had been safely solipsized.* (60, my emphasis)

On the one hand, we are presented with a lecherous middle-aged man, waxing and rationalizing the forbidden, yet ultimately banal, pleasures of domestic frottage. Yet, on the other, we have a remarkable concept, clouded in obscurity. “Lolita had been safely solipsized.” From what? From Humbert’s own disreputable desires? Beyond the moral taint of his own subjective *jouissance*? Or is the reference to Lolita-as-phallasm, wrapped in a bundle and incorporated into Humbert’s fantasy world, in a process similar to, and perhaps preempting mourning, with all its cannibalistic and melancholic overtones?

In using *solipsize* as a transitive verb, Humbert both reduces Lolita to a doll-like figurine with which he can have furtive phantasmatic sex, and reduces *himself* to the kind of person who would find joy in such a process. When dealing with a nymphet, Humbert finds that he must throw out phantasmatic webs in which to catch his prey, and devour her—paradoxically—only after she “escapes” (at least until he transgresses the law completely). This is in direct contrast to his sexual encounters with Lolita’s mother, in which he “possesses” Charlotte Haze physically yet refuses to devour her, or be devoured by her, even in the immediacy of the conjugal bedroom.

“I felt proud of myself,” states Humbert, reflecting on his erotic tussle with Lolita:

I had stolen the honey spasm without impairing the morals of a minor. Absolutely no harm done. The conjurer had poured milk, molasses, foaming champagne into a young lady's new white purse; and lo, the purse was intact.<sup>23</sup> Thus had I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe—and I was safe. What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own. (62)

This is a remarkable statement from Humbert, especially considering his stated investment in fixing the perilous magic of nymphets. Humbert's own phantasmatic artifact (this "fanciful" Lolita) floats between their two bodies, *perhaps more real than Lolita* herself. Here we are given a glimpse of the machinic nature of desire (or even love "itself"), in which a couple necessarily unfolds into an orgiastic multiplicity of partners and narcissistic reflections. We need only think of Freud's bedroom, crowded with the ghosts of parents, friends, and siblings; or of the plague of fantasies unleashed in Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), leading to a literal orgy no less crowded than the Harfords' enormous Manhattan apartment.<sup>24</sup>

Humbert's project is thus encapsulated in the possessive pronoun, and he is continually at pains to distinguish *his* Lolita from other lolitas: "And what is most singular is that she, *this* Lolita, *my* Lolita, has individualized the writer's ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is—Lolita" (45). Again we see the trope of singularity versus multiplicity. This Lolita as opposed to what? Or whom? *That* Lolita? *Other* lolitas? All Lolita's "handmaidens," who, from Humbert's perspective, circle around his beloved like satellites around the sun?

At this point, then, we have identified at least three Lolitas: the imaginary (nymphet), the symbolic (schoolgirl), and the "real" (ungraspable, even by her). The narrative explicitly flags this polyontic quality when Humbert's chess partner, Gaston, asks, "*Et toutes vos fillettes, elle vont bien?*" Here Humbert realizes that Gaston "had multiplied my unique Lolita by the number of sartorial categories his downcast moody eye had glimpsed during a whole series of her appearances: blue jeans, a skirt, shorts, a quilted robe" (183). Thus, for Gaston there is a different Lolita for each of her outfits, just as for Humbert there is a different Lolita for each nervous heartbeat, a mental flip book at 24 frames per second, giving the illusion of simple continuity.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, it is precisely this paradox between essentializing and fetishizing the singularity of the beloved, *when framed by the plurality of others*, that holds Humbert's (and indeed the lover's) discourse together. While he may dream of being shipwrecked on a desert island alone with Lolita, such a scenario attests only to the artificiality of such a situation, in which there is no third term (options, potentialities, threats) and which therefore cannot survive except in the circumscribed theater of fantasy.

But let us step outside literature and philosophy for a moment in order to find other examples that help underline this phenomenon. Consider a pop star and his or her role in the standard performative formation. Whether it be Madonna, Michael Jackson, or the latest star to hit the charts, the star dances in front, while the backup dancers shimmy behind and around him or her, not to be noticed in and of themselves but to delineate the contours of stardom itself. If there were not these anonymous supports behind the star, acting as the biomass from which the star is forged and distinguished, then the star would simply be extinguished for lack of oxygen. One cannot be singular without multiplicity. The backup dancer is like the character actor, a figure of whateverbeing, whom it would be absurd to fetishize or even notice according to the current economy of media identity cults. (At least since the *Monkeyes*, it is irrelevant whether this identity is "manufactured" or not, so long as it functions *as* identity.) Imagine Jennifer Lopez dancing on her own. It simply would not have the same impact without the "relief" of an ornamental humanity which provides the logic of distinction—what Heidegger calls "the ontological difference"—of a distinctive persona.

This same logic can be seen in Lolita's class list of names, a roll call which literally reads like a poem to the enamored Humbert. These thirty-nine students, listed with family name first, represent the sheer multiplicity of subjects as potential love objects, the miracle always being that we focus exclusively on one only if we are to satisfy the love code:<sup>26</sup>

I am trying to analyze the spine-thrill of delight it gives me, this name among all those others. What is it that excites me almost to tears (hot, opalescent, thick tears that poets love to shed)? What is it? The tender anonymity of this name with its formal veil ("Dolores") and that abstract transposition of first name and surname, which is like a pair of new pale gloves or a mask? . . . Or is it because I can imagine so well the rest of the colorful classroom around my dolorous and

hazy darling; Grace and her ripe pimples; Ginny and her lagging leg; Gordon, the haggard masturbator; Duncan, the foul-smelling clown; nail-biting Agnes; Viola, of the blackheads and the bouncing bust; pretty Rosaline; dark Mary Rose; adorable Stella, who has let strangers touch her; Ralph, who bullies and steals; Irving, for whom I am sorry. And there she is there, lost in the middle, gnawing a pencil, detested by teachers, all the boys' eyes on her hair and neck, *my* Lolita. (52–53)

The gulf separating a bureaucratic document and the living flesh of the narrator's desires is sustained by the increasing modernization of the lover's discourse. Anyone who has experienced an erotic shock at seeing his or her beloved's name in print, especially surrounded by other, far less significant names, understands the potency of this dynamic. (One unpublished short story I have read features a narrator who masturbates to his beloved's name in the phone book, a perfect illustration of this theme.) "Lolita"—real name Dolores Haze—is flanked by a Mary Rose Hamilton and a Rosaline Honeck and is thus "a fairy princess between her two maids of honour." (And much later Humbert will explicitly remind the reader "what importance I attached to having a bevy of page girls, consolation prize nymphets, around my Lolita" [190]).

Such logic, of course, is not exclusive to this century. We can in fact see the same impulse underpinning the following remarkable passage from Kierkegaard's "Seducer's Diary," in which the narrator, Johannes, implicitly considers the properly Scandinavian invention of the smorgasbord:

What is glorious and divine about esthetics is that it is associated only with the beautiful; essentially it deals only with belles lettres and the fair sex. It can give me joy, it can joy my heart, to imagine the sun of womanhood sending out its rays in an infinite multiplicity, radiating into a confusion of languages, where each woman has a little share of the whole kingdom of womanhood, yet in such a way that the remainder found in her harmoniously forms around this point. In this sense, womanly beauty is infinitely divisible. But the specific share of beauty must be harmoniously controlled, for otherwise it has a disturbing effect, and one comes to think that nature intended something with this girl, but that nothing ever came of it. (1987, 428)

Johannes thus seems to acknowledge that each particular beauty emerges from the whole kingdom of womanhood; the aesthetic genetic pool, if you will. Accordingly, the singular girl which catches his eye becomes the only

incarnation he can possibly imagine seducing (just as Cordelia becomes the object of his obsessive attentions):

My eyes can never grow weary of quickly passing over this peripheral multiplicity, these radiating emanations of womanly beauty. Every particular point has its little share and yet is complete in itself, happy, joyous, beautiful. Each one has her own: the cheerful smile, the roguish glance, the yearning eye, the tilted head, the frolicsome disposition, the quiet sadness, the profound presentiment, the ominous depression, the earthly homesickness, the unshriven emotions, the beckoning brow, the questioning lips, the secretive forehead, the alluring curls, the concealing eyelashes, the heavenly pride, the earthly modesty, the angelic purity, the secret blush, the light step, the lovely buoyancy, the languorous posture, the longing dreaminess, the unaccountable sighing, the slender figure, the soft curves, the opulent bosom, the curving hips, the tiny feet, the elegant hands.

Each one has her own, and the one does not have what the other has. When I have seen and seen again, observed and observed again, the multiplicity of this world, when I have smiled, sighed, flattered, threatened, desired, tempted, laughed, cried, hoped, feared, won, lost,—then I fold up the fan, then what is scattered gathers itself together into a unity, the parts into a whole. Then my soul rejoices, my heart pounds, passion is aroused. This one girl, the one and only in all the world, she must belong to me; she must be mine. (428–29)

It is worth dwelling on this passage, since Johannes has traced something crucial to the lover's discourse and, therefore, to the related constellation of community and ethics. "This peripheral multiplicity"—figured in the book by various cameo appearances by young maidens of the "fishmonger's daughter" variety—is a heterogeneous hypertext of qualities which splash across the entire gender, landing on some and not others.

"Each one has her own," suggests Johannes. And yet it is not merely a case of a unique essence, for he can "fold up the fan" and reterritorialize all these women under the universal signifier Woman, specifically in the body Cordelia, who becomes the representative of her sex. (Yet, if Johannes were to be pressed as to Cordelia's singular uniqueness, we may not get a straight answer.) In this metaphor of "folding the fan," then, Kierkegaard anticipates—and complicates—this point of Deleuze's: "It is not the subject that explains essence, rather it is essence that implicates, envelops, wraps itself up in the subject. Rather, in coiling round itself, it is essence that constitutes subjectivity. It is not the individuals who constitute the world, but the worlds enveloped, the essences that constitute the individuals. . . . Essence is not only individual, it *individualizes*" (2000, 43).

Returning to *Lolita*, it is clear that she also becomes individualized, if not completely solipsized, by essence. After marrying Lolita's mother, Humbert notes, "I kept telling myself, as I wielded my brand-new large-as-life wife, that biologically this was the nearest I could get to Lolita; that at Lolita's age, Lotte had been as desirable a schoolgirl as her daughter was, and as Lolita's daughter would be some day" (Nabokov 1991, 76).

Such a temporal notion concerns "the virtual"—not as in cyberspatial "virtual reality" but rather in the achronological unfolding of things through nonlinear time. It is in this sense of the virtual that the "nymphet" *always-already* qualifies as "woman." In simple terms, the nymphet *is* a virtual woman. What Humbert desires in Lolita is not exclusive to her and her alone but rather tied to a particular moment in the ontological chain of being. If the only thing Humbert loves in Lolita is her nymphancy, and her nymphancy is not essential to Lolita (since she will leave it behind in a few birthdays), then he does not love Lolita's essence. Through Humbert's eyes there is no essence to Lolita, to her individuality, since the ephemeral quality that attracts him can be passed on through the continuum of generations, as he notes while pondering Charlotte Haze:

How different were her movements from those of my Lolita, when *she* used to visit me in her dear dirty blue jeans, smelling of orchards in nymphetland; awkward and fey, and dimly depraved, the lower buttons of her shirt unfastened. Let me tell you, however, something. Behind the brashness of little Haze, and the poise of big Haze, a trickle of shy life ran that tasted the same, that murmured the same. A great French doctor once told my father that in near relatives the faintest gastric gurgle has the same "voice." (92)

Another name for this "trickle of shy life" is, of course, essence.

After losing Lolita, Humbert is haunted by her in his dreams. However, she does not possess the kind of solid identity that we associate with our wakened state; rather, "she appeared there in strange and ludicrous disguises as Valeria or Charlotte, or a cross between them" (254). This "complex ghost" is a cipher or amalgam of his past wives and present obsessions, suggesting that the criteria we use to distinguish one lover from another—or indeed, simply one person from another—is suspended in the oneiric state. This familiar phenomenon points to the trickle of shy life which flows between all monads, and indeed slowly but patiently erodes the solid foundations of modern subjectivity.

If we leap out of the book, for the moment, into the “real” world, we also see how the character of Lolita is similarly an amalgam or synthesis. When asked about any research undertaken for his novel, Nabokov stated, “I travelled in school buses to listen to the talk of schoolgirls. I went to school on the pretext of placing our daughter. We have no daughter. For Lolita, I took one arm of a little girl who used to come to see Dmitri [his son], one kneecap of another,” and thus a nymphet was born (xl).<sup>27</sup> In a clear case of the permeability between life and art, the whateverbeing of Lolita is lifted from the whateverbeing of several anonymous girls, who nevertheless inhabit the character, as essence, as much as the ghost of Annabel.<sup>28</sup>

As we have seen, Lolita shares the lease of her selfhood with several others, each of whom refracts still others in a prism effect. (Recall recent advertisements for “safe sex” which emphasize the interconnected nature of human collectivity, plainly stating that when you sleep with one person, you are simultaneously sleeping with the—perhaps viral—ghosts of his or her sexual biography.) Humbert is well aware of such fractal rhetoric and repeatedly addresses the various genealogies from which it emerges: “A breeze from wonderland had begun to affect my thoughts, and now they seemed couched in italics, as if the surface reflecting them were wrinkled by the phantasm of that breeze” (131). Indeed, in one particularly lucid moment, Humbert confesses that his lust for the “fiery phantasm” of Alice in Wonderland nymphets may actually stem from the fact that there is “no possibility of attainment to spoil it by the awareness of an appended taboo” (264). For

it may well be that the very attraction immaturity has for me lies not so much in the limpidity of pure young forbidden fairy child beauty as in the security of a situation where infinite perfections fill the gap between the little given and the great promised—the great rosegray never-to-be-had. (264)

This particular form of “security”—shattered the moment he wrenched Lolita from the phantasmatic or imaginary realm to the Real—refers directly to a kind of pure potentiality, one which became compromised as soon as it passed into the relatively degraded state of actuality (the legacy of Platonic idealism, perhaps, as much as the postromantic forces under discussion throughout this book). The twin engines of drive and desire compel Humbert to realize his fantasies in regard to Lolita, which catapults

him into an ambivalent realm somehow “beyond happiness.” To first be circumscribed by the law, and then actively prosecuted under its name, leaves few places to inhabit other than the potential. Thus, Humbert must swap the kinetic energy of the fugitive for the potential energy of the writer, at once a curse and a consolation.

*Arachnography: Writing the Web*

At one point in the novel, Humbert describes himself in the following terms:

I am like one of those inflated pale spiders you see in old gardens. Sitting in the middle of a luminous web and giving little jerks to this or that strand. My web is spread all over the house as I listen from my chair where I sit like a wily wizard. Is Lo in her room? Gently I tug on the silk. She is not. (Nabokov 1991, 49)

Only a few pages later, he repeats the claim, referring to himself as Humbert the Wounded Spider (54). More than simply playing the frightening, hairy arachnid to Lolita’s Miss Muffett, however, Humbert functions in the Deleuzian sense of a literary machine. In this case, Humbert’s web is not the tool of his trade—à la Nabokov’s butterfly net—but rather an extension of the organless body of the spider-machine itself: “The spider too sees nothing, perceives nothing, remembers nothing. . . . Without eyes, without nose, without mouth, she answers only to signs, the merest sign surging through her body and causing her to spring upon her prey” (182).

Humbert of course seems to do nothing *but* see, perceive, and remember. However, these operations are conducted in the mode of spider and not the traditionally human(ist) narrator. In this context perhaps it is not too violent or clumsy to transpose Deleuze’s comments concerning Proust’s narrator to Humbert himself—specifically, the claim that “the narrator has no organs or never has those he needs, those he wants” (2000, 181). This is due to the fact that “the web and the spider, the web and the body are *one and the same machine*” (182, my emphasis). Humbert thus extends his exoskeleton beyond the confines of his holding cell in order to catch the perilous magic of Lolita in the sticky threads of his prose.

Significantly, the Australian slang for a pedophile is *rock spider*, a name which acknowledges the arachnid’s particular predator assemblage in rela-

tion to its prey. To put it in crude Deleuzian terms, a lion (in contrast) is a molar organism: It has *organs*. It assesses the world through a phenomenological matrix which prompts the human world to bestow it with a royal and dignified demeanor. Hers is an autonomous and organized mode of approach, ruled by the head and the heart. In contrast, the spider is a patient and ex-centric creature, relying on a strategy whereby it literally spins its own world from its own belly, making and unmaking its environment and thus itself. This is an altogether different “worldwide web” from the one we are used to, although we find a relevant resonance on the level of public concern over the internet as a “pedophile’s paradise.” The spider-as-organism may in fact be molar, but it is constantly becoming-something-else, through the various webs linking it with parasites, prey, and the various interlocking phyla of the ecosystem.

More specifically, the spider’s web—Humbert’s web—is an articulation of the technology of writing itself. It is a tangible, emergent property of the meaning-making machine, and its purpose is to read, capture, and extract. When Humbert *tells us* that he is testing his web for Lolita’s exact location, he is both reading and writing signs.<sup>29</sup> Thus, to write *is* to read—and any attempt to separate these functions into different operations, albeit of the same process, is already working on an artificial, indeed impossible, conceptual division of labor.

The previous point can be made with recourse to the worldwide web itself, which, as all teachers now know, has become the world’s largest, laziest, and least reliable library.<sup>30</sup> According to this now indispensable resource, two German scientists, Michael Stuke and Markus Koch, are literalizing the common metaphorical link between information technologies and spiderwebs. Working at the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry in Göttingen, these researchers have managed to use silk from the black widow spider as the raw material for “nanowires”—ultrathin conductors which could “spark a revolution in miniature electronics” (Zandonella, 2001, 20). If their research fulfills its promise, fiber-optic cables could be a thing of the past, and our worldwide web may literally be connected by spider silk threads, cut to approximately one-twentieth of their normal diameter without any loss in strength or flexibility.

Harnessing “nature” for “culture” in this way (an instance of technology) only serves to blur the already tenuous and disingenuous distinction between the two realms. While Humbert is only a *metaphorical* spider ac-

ording to all the topologies we are familiar with, he is engaged in an intense exercise of “becoming-spider” according to the fluxing categories proposed by Deleuze. Just as a workhorse is “closer” to an ox than a racehorse in Deleuze’s system, Humbert is closer to a spider than another person who writes and lives according to a different ethical system. Ultimately, Humbert gets caught up in his own web, but this particular inevitability is less a result of some kind of poetic justice than a purely mechanical one. He lives *on* and *through* his web, so his fate unfolds according to the exigencies of this particular literary machine.

Nabokov states that the germ of his novel was provided by a news item concerning an ape held in captivity at the Paris Zoo. When encouraged to draw a picture, the ape drew the bars of his cage. In line with this genealogy, Humbert shares a simian heritage, as well. But the point is not to multiply and distribute Humbert along the Orwellian line of various animals—deciding whether he is now a spider and then a ape—but to emphasize the role of the “anthropological machine,”<sup>31</sup> of which “literature” comprises but one cog.

According to Zandonella, the scientists have also found that “spiders can learn from experience, with mature spiders building better webs than novices.” Researchers from the Universities of Vienna and Melbourne—Astrid Heiling and Mariella Herberstein, respectively—have studied two species of orb web spider, *Argiope keyserlingi* and *Larinioides sclopetarius*, and concluded:

In both species, practised builders made bottom-heavy webs compared with the novices’ more symmetrical attempts, because it is quicker to run down from the hub, rather than up, to pounce on prey. ‘The use of cumulative experience has not been shown [in spiders] before,’ says Heiling. (2001, 20)

Such research seems to reflexively trace the Darwinian logic which lies dormant within traditional literary theory, especially when considered alongside Lacan’s belief that spiderwebs allow us to “grasp the limits, impasses, and dead ends that show the real acceding to the symbolic” (1999, 93). As a consequence, the relationship between spider to web, author to text, should not be seen purely in terms of instrumentality or tools but rather a symbiotic form of bringing the world into being.<sup>32</sup>

During his famous lecture series on Hegel, Alexandre Kojève noted, “It is necessary to admit that after the end of History, men [will] construct their edifices and their works of art in the same way that the birds construct their

nests and the spiders weave their webs” (Agamben 2004, 9). In his book *The Open: Man and Animal*, Agamben dwells on an interesting fact: “The spider knows nothing about the fly, nor can it measure its client as a tailor does before sewing his suit. And yet it determines the length of the stitches in its web according to the dimensions of the fly’s body, and it adjusts the resistance of the threads in exact proportion to the force of impact of the fly’s body in flight” (2004, 41–42). And thus, despite the fact that these two creatures are intimately connected by the choreographies of ecology, [t]he “two perceptual worlds of the fly and the spider are *absolutely uncommunicating*” (42, my emphasis). It is at this point that the parallel with Humbert becomes clear, as witnessed in the scene where our narrator offers Lolita “a penny for your thoughts.” Her response is to mutely stretch out her hand, in an attempt to simultaneously literalize—and therefore negate—the transaction. That is to say, the spiderweb, for Humbert as much as for Agamben, expresses the “paradoxical coincidence of . . . reciprocal blindness” (Agamben 2004, 42).

In his study *The Extended Organism*, biophysicist Scott Turner suggests that “animal structures like webs, nests, hives, burrows and mats are physiological extensions of their animal creators. They take energy and materials from the environment, including sunlight, water and oxygen, and funnel them to the organisms inside. This makes these structures as much a part of a living animal as more conventional organs such as livers, lungs, kidneys and hearts” (in Brown 2000, 30). From this perspective “the boundary between the living and non-living seems very arbitrary.”<sup>33</sup>

In relation to this constellation—mapped between extended phenotypes, animal architecture, and malleable environments—the key question becomes: What is the difference between architecture and a stable exoskeleton? If a termite mound is “really an extension of the termites themselves, an integral and active part of their physiology” (31), then the skin or skeleton may be one of the most arbitrary limits ever enforced, based as it is simply on genetics, rather than a more holistic biophysical understanding.

In keeping with our discussion, Turner offers the example of the diving bell spider, which manages to live underwater due to the construction of an external “lung,” basically a web that traps a bubble of air below the surface. Moreover, other species of spider have managed to acquire the ability to create dummy, or decoy, spiders inside their webs in order to fool any

nearby predators. “Nature is full of energy ready to be tapped,” states Turner, “and I see engines everywhere” (32). Learning how to adapt to the assemblage—or how the assemblage adapts *us* to its mobile structure—becomes inscribed in the expanded definition of literature which must surely accompany the recent developments in technology and media.

Humbert’s arachnography can indeed be viewed as a form of “emergent literature”—specifically, symbolic activity with real-world effects. According to Wlad Godzich:

The term “emergent” does not belong to the discourse of economics, but to that of evolutionary biology. Far from positioning a single, prescribed or even described path of evolution, it refers to what biologists call an emergence, namely the appearance of some functional features that are unforeseeable from the path of evolution of the organism concerned. In other words, the word “emergent” means exactly the opposite of the word emerging. (2000, 3)

Following on from this important distinction, Godzich states: “We need a theory of biological semiotics and a theory of creation semiotics if we are to build devices which construct their own semantic relations to the world. . . . In effect we must consider [literature] . . . as a creative intelligence that co-evolves sense receptors, computational coordinators and effectors needed for specific tasks” (2000, 6, 8)—a supplementary perspective on Deleuze’s literary spider-machine.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast to this, the legacy of literary criticism has been either to focus on authorial expression, intent, and even “genius,” or to play the glass bead game of semantic formalism within truth value systems. Like E. B. White’s spider Charlotte, writing is compelled by the ethical or satirical—the author is “commenting” on society or even hoping to make an instrumental intervention in a certain debate or event. “Terrific,” she writes in her web—the implicit rhetorical counterpoint to every editorial and the stock phrase of every literary critic. Literature is thus kept in check by those who wish to read it only in the service of a moral lesson or some other anthropocentric, demonstrative purpose. Accordingly, a story without redemption or revelation is considered no story at all, or at least an incomplete one.

It should not surprise us, then, that one of the most common readings of Nabokov’s novel is a tale of ultimate redemption, since Humbert professes his love for Lolita even when she has long departed that “enchanted island of time” which previously represented the sole condition for such intense affect:<sup>35</sup>

I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else. She was only the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet I had rolled myself upon with such cries in the past . . . but thank God it was not that echo alone I worshiped. What I used to pamper among the tangled vines of my heart, *mon grand péché radieux*, had dwindled to its essence: sterile and selfish vice, all *that* I canceled and cursed. You may jeer at me, and threaten to clear the court, but until I am gagged and half-throttled, I will shout my poor truth. I insist the world know how much I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another's child, but still gray-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond, still Carmencita, still mine. (Nabokov 1991, 277–78)

Thus, what for many critics is the moment of redemption—Humbert's love *in duration*, an *enduring* love—can alternatively be seen as the moment he succumbs to the overdetermined code of the lover's discourse. ("What I used to pamper . . . had dwindled to its essence.") Lolita no longer *is* an essence, but rather *has* an essence—one which has become identifiable, like a stone polished smooth in the clear river of time. This essence is a property of Lolita, rather than the other way around. Essentializing Lolita thus, individualizing her beyond all reasonable doubt, is the necessary moment for the novel to qualify as a love story ("the *only* convincing love story of the twentieth century," according to *Vanity Fair*). However, this means that Lolita herself (and now we *can* securely use such a term as "herself") is no longer a candidate for whateverbeing, at least through the eyes of Humbert, since her qualities are bound by her body and no longer overlap the phantasms of alterity.

Thus, we have seen how the "virtual" (defined as the potential achronological unfolding of things) circulates throughout the text in order to collect at this particularly dense point in the narrative. Just as intelligent spiderwebs are bottom-heavy in order to funnel the force of gravity toward the prey, Humbert's web draws the narrative towards the chronotopia of epiphany. Modern love thus flirts with the metaphysics of a coming community but is ultimately reterritorialized by the essentializing code. Humbert really does love *this* Lolita, and only this one. And so, there is nothing left to do other than die in isolation of a broken heart. (Or retire to a hotel in Montreal and live off royalties.)