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HUMBERT'S HEGELIAN SYNTHESIS

When Humbert Humbert drives his car off the road "among surprised cows," having been testing the experience of sinistral driving while under police pursuit, he follows his car's "gentle rocking stop" with a fairly cryptic commentary: "A kind of thoughtful Hegelian synthesis linking up two dead women" (307 {1970}/ 309 {1991}). Alfred Appel, in his first *Annotated* Lolita notes to this line, proposes:

> the death of Charlotte is remembered here (the killer's car going up the slope; p. 99) blending with the whole story of Lolita from the cows on the slope (p. 114) to her assumed death (if the reader reads the book, Lolita must be dead . . .) (1970, 437)

Since we know that Appel has shared his annotations with Nabokov, who frequently peeks in as a character in this very commentary (quoted or paraphrased by Appel from personal correspondence), we can assume that Nabokov offered no objection to this gloss, and Appel surely believed that, therefore, he had gotten it right. It seems, though, that he was not fully satisfied with his conclusion, and continued thinking about Humbert's strange comment in the years that followed. In the 1991 revised and expanded notes, Appel nearly quadruples the length of this note, suggesting that the

> "Hegelian synthesis" realizes Quilty's "Elizabethan" play-within-the-novel, *The Enchanted Hunters,* and its "profound message, namely, that mirage and reality merge in love" (p. 201). When Humbert [invites Dolly Schiller in Coalmont to rejoin him forever], he demonstrates that the mirage of the past . . . and the reality of the present . . . *have* merged in love, a "synthesis linking up two dead women." (1991, 450)

In this version of the commentary, clearly, Appel has moved far beyond annotation and deep into interpretation; we can only wonder what Nabokov might have thought of this reading. It may be true (as Nabokov suggested in an interview)[1] that "the nymphic Lolita as [Humbert's] lost Annabel" and "The Charlotte-like woman Lolita is becoming" (Appel, 450) have "merged" in Humbert's newly authentic, unselfish love for Dolly. Given the entire plot arc of *The Enchanted Hunters*, it feels somewhat glib to suggest that the play, as written, foreshadows the Dolly-Humbert denouement—especially since, in the play, Diana proves her reality as a "rustic, down-to-brown-earth lass" to the poet by pulling him to a farm behind the forest, the impending consummation signaled by the play's "last-minute kiss" (201). This kiss and consummation are clearly *not* what happens in Coalmont; perhaps in this moment, both Dolly and Humbert have transcended Quilty's art.

But that is not the point I'm after in this note. Whatever we might think of the resonances between Quilty's play and the novel's final scenes, there has always remained (for this reader at least) something not quite satisfying about the notion that Dolly makes the second of the "two dead women" forming the "Hegelian synthesis." After all, the details of two of these elements—say, the "thesis" (Charlotte's death followed by Mr. Beale's car going gently up a grassy slope and stopping [97]) and the "synthesis" (Humbert rolling gently up among the "curious cows") very clearly share the specifics of a car going off a road, into grass, and coming to a stop. There is nothing about Dolly's end in Alaska, or her final scene in the novel, that bears any relation to these images. It also remains troubling that at the point of the narrative when Humbert drives off the road, Dolly very definitely remains alive (she will live until Christmas day, more than three months later), notwithstanding Humbert's anticipatory reference to her as "my sweet immortal dead love" (280); he expects her to live to "the early years of 2000 A. D. (1935 plus eighty or ninety years)" (299). Nabokov has trained us to expect intricate gizmos when we see these kinds of clues; why not here too?

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1 "I do think that Humbert Humbert in his last stage is a moral man because he realizes that he loves Lolita like any woman should be loved." "Interview with Douglas M. Davis for *National Observer* (1964)," in Vladimir Nabokov, *Think, Write, Speak*, Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy, eds. (New York: Knopf, 2019), 337.

It turns out that there is a well-formed puzzle behind this comment, after all; most likely, it would have been discovered much sooner, but scholars and readers were thrown off the scent by Appel's preliminary solution (as Appel himself was by Nabokov's tacit assent). I had the pleasure and good fortune this year to read in draft the forthcoming (fascinating) book by Marie Bouchet, and one passage grabbed my attention. At first it created something of a scholarly itch, then a vague memory of another unsatisfied itch, and soon, gradually, the pieces fell into place. Bouchet pays intense and exquisite attention to relatively neglected passages and images in many Nabokov works, including a passage in *Lolita* describing the murder, by G. Edward Grammar, of his own wife (she also identifies the documentary source, from which Nabokov drew, mostly verbatim, in crafting this episode). Grammar, we learn, has beaten his wife to death, and put her into a car. He then sent the car "speeding crazily down a hill [. . .] The car sideswiped a pole, ran up an embankment covered with beard grass, wild strawberry and cinquefoil, and overturned" (*Lolita* 288). For convenient juxtaposition, recall:

> A big black glossy Packard had climbed Miss Opposite's sloping lawn at an angle form the sidewalk [. . .], and stood there, shining in the sun, its doors open like wings, its front wheels deep in evergreen shrubbery. (97)

and

> With a graceful movement I turned off the road, and after two or three big bounces, rode up a grassy slope, among surprised cows, and there I came to a gentle rocking stop. (306)

The common features among the three scenes go slightly beyond what we see here, and are, generally, self-evident once noticed. (See full discussion of the Grammar source in Marie Bouchet, *Nabokov's Poetics of the Mundane: An Entomology of the Everyday*, Chapter 2, ms. pp. 66-68).

Keeping in mind that "in comparison to [Rita], Valechka was a Schlegel, and Charlotte a Hegel" (259), our quest to decode the "thoughtful Hegelian synthesis" continues. (One notes in passing a new

triad: thesis=Valechka, antithesis=Charlotte, synthesis=Rita; provocative, but perhaps meaningless, unless "Rita"= "reader"). On the proposed Hegelian model, the thesis is Beale's accidental killing of another man's wife, with his car's journey off the road and up the hillside (in this episode, Humbert can be viewed as, and views himself as, an indirect murderer: "I did better," he says [288]); the antithesis is Grammar's murder of his *own* wife, and dispatching her in a car that goes off the road and up a hill; and the synthesis is a murderer (Humbert) completing his act and then driving *himself* off the road and up a grassy hillside. I have not solved, and do not want to hold back this information in order to solve, exactly what makes this Hegelian triad "thoughtful" or interesting. I have confidence that others will produce some excellent theories or even watertight explanations.

A final note of attention is worthwhile here to Nabokov's treatment of this passage's treatment in Appel's annotation. The many places where Nabokov's authority is invoked in the *Annotated Lolita* commentary deserve some study; it is fairly clear that at times, Nabokov is playing his own game with Alfred Appel, and with the very notion of annotation itself. What is interesting about a case like this one, where Nabokov allowed a misinterpretation to stand, is that it demonstrates a place where he was willing to tolerate the text's ability to provoke meanings he did not intend. It's quite possible that Nabokov would have condoned the conclusions from the 1990 expansion, quoted above. But we can tell from the clear alignment of details that such a solution was not his original intent.