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THE EL GRECO PASSAGE IN *LOLITA*

The passage under consideration transpires during Humbert and Lolita's journey across the United States:

Or again, it might be a stern El Greco horizon, pregnant with inky rain, and a passing glimpse of some mummy-necked farmer, and all around alternating strips of quick-silverish water and harsh green corn, the whole arrangement opening like a fan, somewhere in Kansas. (*Lolita* 152–53)

One is left to wonder why Humbert's thoughts turn to El Greco, especially in the unlikely setting of Kansas. Nabokov's 1951 diary, which he kept while composing *Lolita*, offers an insight into this mystery. In the entry for June 30, Nabokov jots down: "Night. St. Francis. Old farmer with a mummy's neck, furrowed and tanned. A grim El Greco horizon. Alternating stripes of water and green corn—of brightness and darkness opening like a fan as we drive by—somewhere in Kansas" (Boyd 201).

As Brian Boyd explains, "in 1948, Nabokov had named and described *Lycaeides argyrognomon sublivens* on the strength of nine male specimens in the M.C.Z." (Boyd 200). Boyd further clarifies that three years later, "[K]een to capture the first female *sublivens* specimens and simply study the insect in the field," Nabokov was heading westward, from Ithaca, New York, to "Telluride, Colorado, where the M.C.Z. specimens had been caught half a century earlier" (ibid.). While Véra was driving their Oldsmobile, Nabokov was recording travel observations, including those in Kansas, which he later used in the novel.

It seems that Nabokov followed an associative chain of thought that led him to El Greco. To begin with, St. Francis, the county seat of Cheyenne County, Kansas, in all likelihood, reminded the writer of Saint Francis of Assisi, and through him, of the Cretan-born artist widely known for his numerous depictions of the saint. El Greco experts maintain that "[T]his was the subject which was followed with most regularity and persistency during El Greco's long period of activity in Toledo," counting "about one hundred paintings" (Gudiol 195). More recent scholarship avers that "the production of different representations of the Saint from Assisi by the artist and his Toledo workshop was extremely prolific," listing "about two hundred works related to El Greco's Franciscan invention" (Grabski 103).

Suffice it to mention works such as *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (ca. 1585–90, The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore), *Saint Francis in Prayer before a Crucifix* (ca. 1590, The Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille), and *Saint Francis Kneeling in Meditation* (ca. 1595–1600, The Art Institute, Chicago).

This association was further reinforced by the sight of a mummy-necked farmer reminiscent of El Greco's figures. In his annotation of the novel, Alfred Appel remarks that Nabokov “describes the farmer as though he were an ‘El Greco’—his elongated ‘mummy neck’ is optically distorted in the manner of this artist” (*Lolita* 388).

The stormy weather supposedly evoked in Nabokov's memory the landscapes in El Greco's paintings, especially as described by a highly influential source from his youth—*A History of Painting* by Alexander Benois, a distinguished art historian and a notable painter in his own right (see Shapiro 51 and 213n67).¹ Thus, Benois writes: “How characteristic of El Greco are these stormy dove-gray clouds that appear in almost all his paintings depicting the open air” and further singles out the landscape in *Laocoön* (ca. 1610–14, The National Gallery of Art, Washington): “[S]o good is his dove-gray stormy tone, so beautiful is the view of Toledo in the depths, behind the figures.”² In addition, Nabokov might have been thinking of El Greco's well-known *View of Toledo* (ca. 1599, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), which, along with its later variant (ca. 1608, Museum of El Greco, Toledo, Spain), Benois describes as follows:

These are not only views of Toledo, but views of “Spain in general.” Not in the spirit of the luxurious Renaissance are also the colors of these canvases—dove-bluish, gray, monotonous, and surprisingly truthful. It was exactly as they are depicted here that I happened to see the surroundings of Toledo; it is exactly this eerie, ashen, “cadaverous” tone that has been etched into my memory, and, obviously, it is

¹ Most recently, Priscilla Meyer has linked the El Greco passage in *Lolita* to Harold Nicolson's memoir, *Some People* (1927); see her “*Speak, Memory* and *Some People*: Vladimir Nabokov and Harold Nicolson,” *The Nabokovian* 87 (Fall 2024);

https://thenabokovian.org/sites/default/files/202409/Meyer_fall_2024.pdf.

² «как характерны для Греко эти грозовые сизые облака, что встречаются почти на всех его картинах, изображающих открытый воздух»; «так хорош ее сизый, грозовой тон, так красив вид Толедо в глубине позади фигур» (Benois, 3: 76 and 74n93).

extremely characteristic of the desolate rocky plateau, over which leaden masses of thunderclouds occasionally rush by, in the rarest of cases dispersing into a life-giving rain.³

The penultimate phrase of the *Lolita* passage contains the mention of a fan. This item, a traditional cultural attribute of Spain, further strengthens the link to El Greco's adopted country.

Finally, on the way to St. Francis, Nabokov apparently recalled either passing by earlier that day or noticing on a map a small community of Toledo, Kansas. With this homonym of the renowned Spanish city, where El Greco lived for the last thirty-seven years of his life, the associative chain became complete.

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³ «Это не только виды Толедо, но виды «Испании вообще». Не в духе роскошного ренессанса и краски этих полотен—сизые, серые, монотонные и удивительно правдивые. Именно такими, какими они изображены здесь, мне случилось видеть окрестности Толедо, именно этот жуткий пепельный «трупный» тон врезался мне в память, и, очевидно, он чрезвычайно характерен для обездоленного каменного плоскогорья, над которым изредка проносятся свинцовые громады грозных туч, в редчайших случаях распадающиеся живительным дождем» (Benois, 3: 74 and 76).

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