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Humbert's Arctic Adventures: Some Intertextual Explorations

“Mr. Edgar H. Humbert (I threw in the ‘Edgar’ just for the heck of it), ‘writer and explorer’” (*Lolita* 75). This is how Humbert Humbert introduces himself to the journalist who interviews him for the Society Column of the Ramsdale *Journal*.¹ This passage, whose trace is preserved in Nabokov’s screenplay of the novel (*Lolita Screenplay* 76), glamorously displays Humbert’s explorer identity and associates it with the act of writing. The choice of the name Edgar is not fortuitous. Edgar Allan Poe is Humbert’s privileged existential model and intertextual source due to his love for archetypal nymphets and to his celebration of a “kingdom by the sea,” which shelters the ideal love of two ideal children.

Humbert’s expedition to arctic Canada, to “Pierre Point in Melville Sound” (33), seems to legitimize the apparently extravagant explorer-writer identity he invents for the Ramsdale journalist. Melville’s shadow looms large over the Canadian trip thanks to the Hyperborean prelude that opens book 9 of *Pierre*. If Humbert’s talent as a writer is praised by John Ray Jr. (who subordinates it to the moral lessons of the text), his achievements as an explorer are less discernible, especially before the Ramsdale episode and before the American travels he will undertake later. Humbert’s first voyage (to arctic Canada) has psychiatric motivations and therapeutic purposes that transform it into a parody of the exploration of the Poles and of explorations in general, shamelessly annihilating the metaphysical anxieties of great explorers and the mystery traditionally attributed to the Poles. The expedition to arctic

¹ Edgar H. Humbert appears two more times (*Lolita* 118, 189).

Canada, circumscribed to the brief chapter 9 of the first part of *Lolita*, reverberates throughout the book. It surfaces in the courtship of the nymphet, at Ramsdale, when Humbert attempts to seduce Lolita by narrating his supposedly heroic arctic adventures. It also surfaces in the final pages, where a whole series of echoes point backward to arctic Canada and forward to Alaska (the latter being the destination of Dolores and Richard Schiller). Alaska seems to be a mirror image of Humbert's arctic "blankness and boredom" (33), but also a variation on the deeply mysterious northern land that Nabokov introduces in a certain number of texts, notably "Ultima Thule" and *Pale Fire*.

This article explores the intertextual potential of the arctic episode and analyses its place within the structure of the novel. Besides the overt reference to Melville's *Pierre*, I also take into account a certain number of diffuse intertextual echoes coming from Shakespeare's *Othello* and from Poe's *Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Beyond the attempt to combine the annotation and interpretation of this particular episode, I also try to offer a covert meditation on Nabokovian intertextuality in general, its temptations and its dangers. In Nabokov's work, intertextuality is usually a precise science, in which specific pointers signal a precise source. *Lolita* is pervaded with such dense, elliptical and highly suggestive markers that indicate a univocal literary link. The phrase "Chateaubriandesque trees" (145) necessarily leads the reader to *Atala*, "*Dolorès Disparue*" (253) to Proust's *Albertine disparue*, "the ramparts of old Europe" (163) to Rimbaud's *Le Bateau ivre*. Humbert uses these landmarks in order to draw a bookish path for the erudite reader. Sometimes, annotation fails and the path leads the reader astray, as Carl Proffer argues when attempting to trace the reference to Chimène and the Cid in Mona Dahl's letter ("*Ne manque pas de dire à ton amant, Chimène, comme le lac est beau car il faut qu'il t'y mène,*" 223). This sentence is twice misleading, both for the reader inside the book (Humbert, who misses the reference to Quilty) and for the reader outside the book, who is unable to find the original text it belongs to. Mona Dahl's invented verse—a parody of Corneille and not a genuine borrowing—is mockingly meant, according to Proffer, "to make the over-studious reader waste his time" (Proffer 72). Nabokov's intertextual signals are therefore either seriously erudite or mischievously erudite, part of a game that includes the reader, challenging him or

fooling him, transforming him into a discoverer of the intertextual world of the book. For the annotated edition of *Lolita*, Alfred Appel Jr. relied heavily on Nabokov's comments, especially as far as sources are concerned. The authorial figure is always present in the critical apparatus, clarifying some of his intentions and illuminating "the underside of the weave" (*Pale Fire* 17). This powerful presence casts a shadow on the reader's path through the book. In *The Annotated Lolita*, but also in his prefaces and interviews, Nabokov projects an ideal reader, who shares the author's aesthetic beliefs and who does not go source and influence-hunting when the author does not encourage him to.

However, beyond the seriously or ironically transparent signals Nabokov makes use of in his texts, at times, intertextuality turns out to be an imprecise science, a matter of intuition and association. In this case, the reader is tempted to identify his own intertextual landmarks, bringing his own projections and reminiscences in the adventure of creating rather than discovering literary sources.² This article, with its "intertextual explorations," speculates on the Melvillian vein of the arctic interlude, while also offering other possible literary connections. It is certainly dangerous to build interpretations based on tenuous details. Nevertheless, the critical blank that surrounds Humbert's arctic adventures encourages one to take risks, while also being aware that going too far is very often not going far enough.

This article attempts to show that "Pierre Point in Melville Sound" (33) indicates both a specific Melvillian reference and a general literary-cartographic anchorage in the quest literature of nineteenth-century America. It can be argued that although it deals with the South Pole and with Antarctica, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* could be added to the intertextual framework of the arctic episode.

² In the proceedings of the 2006 Nice conference organized by Maurice Couturier ("Annotating vs. Interpreting Nabokov"), a number of articles deal with sources that are not at all foregrounded or alluded to in the text: Gerard de Vries compares *Pale Fire* with the structure of a Bach fugue, Priscilla Meyer analyses Hawthornian influences in a number of novels, Galya Diment evokes early Russian film and the work of Evgueni Bauer. My article on Marco Polo and John Mandeville in *The Gift* plays with the way the text seems to suggest certain connections (I call them "literary mirages"), while at the same time leaving them suspended and refraining from fleshing them out.

“Pym, Roland” (31): this name opens the extract from *Who’s Who in the Limelight* that Humbert reads in prison before embarking upon the narrative of his arctic adventures. Poe’s and Melville’s texts are permeated by the same endless melancholy produced by impenetrable snows—a white medium that encourages introspection and philosophical meditation on the subject of the ultimate truth of human life. Humbert deflates the philosophical enterprise inherent to literary arctic expeditions and distorts it into a banal therapeutic interlude staged in one of the few places on earth that is deprived of nymphets.

Melville’s Pierre: “Wandering in the Boreal Realm”

What seems to characterize the group of researchers Humbert joins and the expedition itself is the general lack of purpose, the utter ignorance of the object that is pursued: “I had little notion of what object the expedition was pursuing” (33). Explorations usually imply moral growth, surprise and excitement, an inner and outer quest that transfigures the hero. Humbert will later refer to this expedition as his “arctic adventures” (45). The word “adventure” is highly significant, carrying a venerable heritage of meanings received from medieval quests. In the purposeful wanderings of knights, the notion of adventure (“adventura,” literally “what will happen,” implying the necessity and meaningfulness of events that befall the knight) is closely connected to a teleology that is made clear in retrospect. In Humbert’s case, the purpose of the expedition remains completely obscure at its closure: “[the expedition] in conclusion, was not really concerned with Victoria Island copper or anything like that, as I learned later from my genial doctor; for the nature of its real purpose was what is termed ‘hush-hush,’ and so let me add merely that whatever it was, that purpose was admirably achieved” (34).

The Melvillian intertext of *Pierre* is introduced thanks to two distinct hints, drowned in an ocean of comic platitudes having to do with the incoherent activities of the researchers and the hilarious portraits of the various participants: “Judging by the number of meteorologists upon it, we may have been tracking to its lair (somewhere on Prince of Wales’ Island, I understand) the wandering and wobbly north magnetic pole” (33). The group’s weather station is situated in a strategic position from an intertextual point of view, at “Pierre Point in Melville Sound” (33).

The connections between *Pierre* and *Lolita*³ point quite obviously to incest and to warped human relationships. In *Pierre*, the protagonist's mother is addressed by her son as "sister Mary" (symmetrically, she calls him "brother Pierre"), in which Isabel, the dark woman, is both Pierre's half-sister and wife, and in which Lucy, the blonde and blue-eyed *donna angelicata* who is in love with Pierre, is presented to the world as his cousin. According to the exceedingly talkative and philosophical narrator, Pierre's marriage to his half-sister has its origins in the previous projection of the mother as sister: "possibly the latent germ of Pierre's extraordinary mode of executing his proposed extraordinary resolve—namely, the nominal conversion of a sister into a wife—might have been found in the previous conversational conversion of a mother into a sister" (209). This labyrinth of unlikely bonds is inherited from the tangled human web of Gothic fiction, offering a descent into the murky waters of the human psyche, with an emphasis on the "fictitiousness" of "domestic relations" (*Pierre* 209), an appraisal to which Humbert would have probably subscribed.

If we look more specifically at the North Pole motif, *Pierre* mentions the arctic regions several times metaphorically, as a place of loneliness and banishment, but also, as we will see, as the setting of a perilous

³ For a survey of the Melvillian references present in several works by Nabokov (notably *Bend Sinister*, *Lolita* and *Ada*), see Suellen Stringer-Hye, "'The Weed Exiles the Flower' (Melville and Nabokov)." *Pierre* also features in *Ada*. Brian Boyd insists on the tenuous basis of the Melvillian intertext in *Ada* and notes the absence of a present-day toponym corresponding to Pierre Point in Melville Sound ("*Pierre*, or the Ambiguities of Allusion" 6). Stringer-Hye points out that a certain number of explorers called Melville participated in the exploration of arctic regions and that, for this reason, the name often surfaces in the toponyms of the region. In 1822 there used to be a Pierre Point in Melville Sound, but this is no longer the case today ("Response" 18). This debate illustrates precisely the controversial and ambiguous nature of Nabokovian intertextuality. To add another hesitant and questionable link between *Pierre* and *Lolita*, perhaps it is worth mentioning that in the Foreword to *Pierre*, the word "ray" appears twice, and one cannot help thinking of Nabokov's John Ray: "But since the majestic mountain, Greylock—my own more immediate sovereign lord and king—hath now, for innumerable ages, been the one grand dedicatee of the earliest rays of all the Berkshire mornings, I know not how his Imperial Purple Majesty (Royal born: Porphyrogenitus) will receive the dedication of my own poor solitary ray" (*Pierre* 3).

quest for truth that confers refinement and lucidity to the probing mind. In a long interlude on the meaning of love, it is a land reclaimed by Eros, a land where the lover can test his or her mettle: “Love made not the Arctic zones, but Love is ever reclaiming them” (43). Lucy’s declaration of love to Pierre is couched in a particularly stilted language, characterized by hyperbole and orotund formulations. The Arctic regions are a place of death and sacrifice, where the lover could give the ultimate proof of her passion: “My own, own Pierre! Pierre, into ten million pieces I could now be torn for thee; in my bosom would yet hide thee, and there keep thee warm, though I sat down on Arctic ice-floes, frozen to a corpse” (48). In the same dialogue between Lucy and Pierre, the Arctic regions are also a land of exile and separation from mankind, redeemed, again, by the power of love: “But now I was infinite distances from thee, of my Lucy, wandering baffled in the choking night; but thy voice might find me, though I had wandered to the Boreal realm, Lucy: Here I sit down by thee; I catch a soothing from thee” (47–48). These examples emphasize a link between the Arctic region and eroticism, whereas the North Pole becomes in *Lolita* a place that one reaches in a deplorable state of erotic sickness looking for a potential therapy. A circular logic reigns, since the absence of nymphets is compensated precisely by the absence of nymphets.

The most substantial reference to the North Pole in Melville’s *Pierre* projects the Arctic regions as the country where the traveller who wishes to reach the quintessence of human existence finds himself confronted with the harshest ordeals before being engulfed by the melancholy snow. Melville’s novel establishes a link between the spatial proximity of truth and the disruption of human axioms, which are annihilated by the pure air of northern regions:

In those Hyperborean regions, to which enthusiastic Truth, and Earnestness, and Independence, will invariably lead a mind fitted by nature for profound and fearless thought, all objects are seen in a dubious, uncertain, and refracting light. Viewed through that rarefied atmosphere the most immemorially admitted maxims of men begin to slide and fluctuate, and finally become wholly inverted; the very heavens themselves being not innocent of producing this confounding effect, since it is mostly in the heavens

themselves that these wonderful mirages are exhibited.

But the example of minds forever lost, like undiscoverable Arctic explorers, amid those treacherous regions, warns us entirely away from them; and we learn that it is not for man to follow the trail of truth too far, since by so doing he entirely loses the directing compass of his mind; for arrived at the Pole, to whose barrenness only it points, there, the needle indifferently respects all points of the horizon alike. (196)

While it may very well be a coincidence that this quotation, taken from Book 9 of *Pierre*, finds its Nabokovian echo in Chapter 9 of Part I of *Lolita*, it does not seem mere coincidence that Humbert retains from the Melvillian intertext the reference to “the wandering and wobbly north magnetic pole” (32). In *Pierre*, this passage plays the role of a contemplative interlude that breaks the flow of the narrative, which had become too intense and therefore unbearable. As the protagonist approaches the northern land of mirages⁴ and deceptive lights that dissolve the most reliable landmarks, the omniscient narrative voice intervenes to re-establish a semblance of equilibrium, to warn, in parables, againstgnoseological excesses. Its serene tone and its slowly unfolding sentences proceed from the calm wisdom of ancestral experience. The loss of bearings and the drifting which threaten the mind naturally endowed for reflection, but overestimating its capacity to reach truth, is illustrated by the metaphor of arctic exploration, elaborated with the help of a whole series of converging elements: the North Pole (which denotes the object of the quest and, by metonymy, the place where it can be found), the inefficient compass (the spirit which is naturally inclined to follow the right direction), the misleading mirages (the nefarious external influences). Nabokov uses the image of the compass, associated with the metaphor of truth, in *The Pole*, a play about Robert Falcon Scott, the explorer of the South Pole whom Amundsen preceded by only three weeks. The needle of the compass is equated with Scott's life, which is coming to a close. The direction it points to (in *Pierre*, truth) is defined as being God himself:

⁴ In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov mentions the illusory ships that show themselves to travellers at the Poles: “those companionable phantoms of ships in polar waters which explorers have described” (99).

Lord, I'm ready. My life, just like the needle of a compass,
 has quivered and has pointed to the Pole—and
 Thou art that Pole.... (*The Pole* 281)

The aphorism inscribed on the pediment of the Scott Polar Research Institute at the University of Cambridge establishes a close link between Scott's polar quest and mystic vision: "Quaesivit Arcana Poli Videt Dei" ("He sought for the secret of the Pole but found God").

The paradoxes of the passage from *Pierre* are condensed in the title of the chapter, built around two paired oxymora: "More light, and the gloom of that light; more gloom, and the light of that gloom." The complexity of the bipolar relationship *light/gloom*, just like the danger inherent in the search for truth, is ousted from Humbert's narrative, which insists from the very beginning of the chapter on the neatly divided light and shade of his own existence: "As I look back on those days, I see them divided tidily into ample light and narrow shade: the light pertaining to the solace of research in palatial libraries, the shade to my excruciating desires and insomnias, of which enough has been said" (32). The insertion of the arctic episode after Humbert's psychic breakdown mimics the place and the structural function of the arctic interlude in *Pierre*. The narrative flow is interrupted, since the character is no longer capable of accomplishing lucid actions and an aphoristic loop serves as a means of temporarily appeasing the crisis. The arctic journey appears as a dispassionate entertainment, not at all as a risky enterprise, as an intransitive journey. Metaphysics (denoting the quest for truth, which can either illuminate or crush the individual) is replaced by therapy, conceived as a parasite of psychoanalysis (denoting the quest for an illusory psychic health by an individual who is already crushed). Humbert's fundamental posture during the expedition is that of a modern hermit, deprived of halo and of transcendence under a disenchanted sky: "permeated, and, I suppose, cleansed by a whistling gale; seated on a boulder under a completely translucent sky (through which, however, nothing of importance showed), I felt curiously aloof from my own self" (33). The celestial space, which is closely connected, in Melville's novel, with a transcendent entity that prevents mortals from reaching their objective, does not produce, in *Lolita*, mirages and light: it is threatened by a latent opacity, totally exempt of depth. Hum-

bert offers an arctic, monomaniac version of Rodin's *Thinker*, as well as a parody of the classical motif of the temptation of St. Anthony: "No temptations maddened me. The plump, glossy little Eskimo girls with their fish smell, hideous raven hair and guinea pig faces, evoked less desire in me than Dr. Johnson had. Nymphets do not occur in polar regions" (33). Seated on his speculative boulder, Humbert runs no risk whatsoever under the flat arctic sky. Instead of a grandiose confrontation, marked by significant surprises, we are dealing here with a temporary purification whose agent is the wind, accompanied by a dry, laconic statement: there are no nymphets in these regions. Humbert deals a mortal blow to myths, to the metaphysical underpinnings of grandiose quests, to the possibly fatal element of surprise or accident that characterizes major explorations. However, if the arctic trip itself is deflated, stripped of its virtual awe, it is undeniable that, more generally, Humbert's quest for the nymphet—a sexual and aesthetic object—is nourished by the splendours and perils of the great American visionary quests.⁵

A crucial feature of Nabokov's explorers and naturalists is their transfiguration when coming into contact with a real or imaginary unknown. "The Aurelian," "Terra Incognita," and *The Gift* are three cases in point. Humbert's expedition is a superficial and ignorant one, devoid of any noteworthy consequence. It is undeniable that the Poles, although enveloped in mystery because of their inaccessibility, do not offer the reward of a luxuriant landscape. In *The Pole*, Scott is confronted with a disappointing white desert of an ascetic exoticism, which stirs his jealousy of Columbus, who was lucky enough to discover the fabulous exoticism of the American continent:

You know, I was just
 thinking—Columbus, for example.... True,
 he suffered, but, in recompense, discovered
 such splendid lands, while we have suffered to
 discover only ruinous white deserts. (*The Pole* 277)

⁵ Suzanne Fraysse interprets the novel's subtitle (*Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male*) as a play on Melville's "white whale" (Fraysse 288). According to her, Quilty is the chased monster (the monster-hunter as well), while Humbert is cast as the new Ahab.

Nevertheless, the final, fragmentary lines of the text place on the same footing Scott's enterprise and Sinbad's adventures, which quench the human thirst for fairy tales (in the Russian original "skazki," translated into English by "fables"):

People are fond of fables, aren't they?
Thus, you and I, amid the snows,
so far away ... I think that England ... (*The Pole* 283)

It is not the wondrous plenitude of the newly discovered space that matters, but simply the fact of having set foot on unknown land—an act that offers enough substance for dreams and fiction alike.

Shakespeare and the Tradition of the Seduced Listener

Humbert briefly evokes his arctic expedition in front of Charlotte and Lolita at Ramsdale, but a new, invented element is added to the universe of the arctic trip. A polar bear unexpectedly emerges in the narrative, only to be spectacularly killed by Humbert with the help of the "muse of invention." Humbert is both the narrator and the thrilled listener of his own embellished feats, which function as a means of seducing the nymphet:

I launched upon a hilarious account of my arctic adventures. The muse of invention handed me a rifle and I shot a white bear who sat down and said: Ah! All the while, I was acutely aware of Lo's nearness and as I spoke I gestured in the merciful dark and took advantage of those invisible gestures of mine to touch her hand, her shoulder and a ballerina of wool and gauze which she played with and kept sticking into my lap; and finally, when I had completely enmeshed my darling in this weave of ethereal caresses, I dared stroke her bare leg along the gooseberry fuzz of her shin, and I chuckled at my own jokes, and trembled, and concealed my tremors, and once or twice felt with my rapid lips the warmth of her hair as I treated her to a quick nuzzling, humorous aside and caressed her plaything. She, too, fidgeted a great deal so that finally her mother told her sharply to quit it and sent the doll flying into the dark [...] (45)

This episode is a variation on a motif borrowed from Shakespeare, to

which Nabokov also refers in *Glory* and *Look at the Harlequins!* In *Othello*, the joint travel and adventure dimensions are at the heart of a narrative act whose ultimate result is erotic seduction. Desdemona falls in love with the narrator by compassionately listening to his amazing adventures. Dido is the archetypal erotic listener: her love for Aeneas is kindled precisely by her sympathetic participation in Aeneas' narrative of his tribulations. Exceptional travellers invariably become exceptional narrators fascinating their audience. Marco Polo bewitches Kubla Khan and his court with his incredible tales.

Nabokov's famous description of the writer brings together three distinct identities, and the storyteller is one of them: "There are three points of view from which a writer can be considered: he may be considered as a storyteller, as a teacher, and as an enchanter. A major writer combines these three—storyteller, teacher, enchanter—but it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer" (*Lectures on Literature* 5). The source of this association between narrative and enchantment can be found in classical rhetoric, notably in Cicero's treatise on the art of the orator. The orator's purpose is threefold: he has to prove his point, please and move his audience (*probare, conciliare, movere*). It is clearly the *movere* that is foregrounded in the case of Marco Polo and Othello. According to the pre-Socratic and Socratic traditions, poets, just like bards and oral narrators, are inspired from above, a theory famously developed in Plato's *Ion*. "The muse of invention" invoked by Humbert reminds one of Homer's appeal to the goddess of poetic creation at the beginning of the *Iliad*.

When Othello is questioned about the magical means of seduction he had employed to conquer Desdemona, his answer insists exclusively on the tales he used to unfold every evening for her pleasure: "This is the only witchcraft I have used" (*Othello* 1.3.170). Othello expands upon the content of these tales, which brim with travels, wars, the exotic spaces he had crossed, their wonders and their atrocities:

Her father loved me, oft invited me,
 Still questioned me the story of my life
 From year to year—the battles, sieges, fortunes
 That I have passed.
 I ran it through, even from my boyish days

To th' very moment that he bade me tell it,
 Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,
 Of moving accidents by flood and field,
 Of hair-breadth scapes i' th' imminent deadly breach,
 Of being taken by the insolent foe
 And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence
 And portance in my travailous history;
 Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,
 Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven
 It was my hint to speak—such was my process
 And of the cannibals that each other eat,
 The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
 Do grow beneath their shoulders. This to hear
 Would Desdemona seriously incline (*Othello* 1.3.129–47)

Interestingly, even this second-degree tale of a tale manages to enchant the new audience, who had simply desired to know how he had won Desdemona's heart. The Duke, when hearing this secondary summary, projects his daughter in Desdemona: "I think this tale would win my daughter too" (*Othello* 1.3.172). Moved, Desdemona expresses the wish of impossible identification with the teller. Since she cannot become the hero of these tales, she contents herself with loving the teller:

She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,
 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful;
 She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished
 That heaven had made her such a man. She thanked me
 And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
 I should but teach him how to tell my story
 And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake:
 She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
 And I loved her that she did pity them. (*Othello* 1.3.161–69)

Nabokov uses this episode in a certain number of his texts, starting with *Glory*: "[Martin] imagined how, after many adventures, he would arrive in Berlin, look up Sonia, and, like Othello, begin to tell a story of hair-breadth escapes, of most disastrous chances" (*Glory* 119). These are Othello's exact words (*Othello* 1.3.135–37). In the Russian original,

the sentence is neutral, intensified only by repetition: "just like Othello, he was going to talk and talk" (*Podvig* 184, my translation). *Look at the Harlequins!* offers another variation on this episode. This time, the protagonists are Vadim and Iris: "I told her in dramatic detail of my escape from my country. I mentioned great exiles of old. She listened to me like Desdemona" (*Look at the Harlequins* 21).

Humbert, the new Othello, adopts the same strategy by replaying the Shakespearean scene in a more physical and premeditated way. Trembling bodies are mentioned, bodies that move and touch in the darkness of the Ramsdale night, while a web of caresses and words is being woven around them. "Humbert the Wounded Spider" (54), who disperses his threads all over the house in order to detect Lolita's slightest movements, also produces a text of narrative seduction. The web of Humbert's arctic adventures (the verbal correlative of the web he spreads all around the house) is characterized by shyness and uneasiness: his tale is an awkward screen meant to dissimulate his desire, a veil behind which the seducer approaches his victim. These sexual/textual relations remind one of Sheherazade and of the fusion of night, voluptuousness, and narrative enacted by the Oriental tale. Humbert's stance thus places him in an illustrious family of "confabulatores nocturni" (tellers of night tales) dominated by the figure of Sheherazade.

Both Humbert's hand and Humbert's tale seem to touch Lolita: the word and the skin come together for one magic moment. According to Roland Barthes, erotic discourse is like a skin, with words functioning like fingers, touching and caressing the interlocutor. Erotic language becomes, in his view, a body trembling with desire, a privileged means of intercourse through mere verbal contact (Barthes 87). Arguably, the scene in which Humbert narrates his embroidered arctic adventures to Lolita and her mother is an emblem of the book itself as erotic narrative enveloping itself around the nymphet, as an act of remembrance of the brief, but highly disrupting, contact with the nymphet. The teller and the listener are momentarily embraced in a scene that stages a tremulous intimacy between words and bodies, behind the verbal and sensual texture of Humbert's arctic adventures. The tale becomes a strategy of envelopment and displacement. The Latin etymology of the word "seduction" refers precisely to a detour: "se-ducere" signifies leading astray. The tip/trip of the tongue mentioned in the first paragraph of

the novel (“the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate,” 9) resurfaces in the moments of ephemeral happiness which bring together narration and seduction, when Humbert’s hand searches out the nymphet in the dark to lead her astray from her peaceful provincial life. Seduction as displacement is reflected also in Humbert’s oblique trajectory, in the loops and meanders that make up the two characters’ travels across the United States (“many sidetrips and tourist traps, secondary circles and skittish deviations,” 154). Humbert’s rhetorical skills are only briefly displayed in the polar bear episode, but Humbert’s memoir itself, as a whole, is definitely an exercise in Cicero’s oratorical art of *probare, conciliare, movere*, with the purpose of craftily moving a reluctant or disgusted reader.

The Enchanter constructs a different vision of the narrative act and of bodily closeness, of Shakespearean origin as well. King Lear and Cordelia become models for the protagonist’s unreasonable dream of a harmonious life in a claustrophobic landscape by the sea: “Thus they would live on—laughing, reading books, marvelling at gilded fireflies, talking of the flowering walled prison of the world, and *he would tell her tales and she would listen*, his little Cordelia, and nearby the sea would breathe beneath the moon” (*The Enchanter* 57, italics mine). However, in *King Lear* the narrative act is a plural one, shared by the father and the daughter, not a one-sided one, coming only from the paternal enchanter:

Come, let’s away to prison:
 We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ cage:
 When thou dost ask me my blessing, I’ll kneel down
 And ask of thee forgiveness: so we’ll live,
 And pray, and sing, *and tell old tales*, and laugh
 At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
 Talk of court news; and we’ll talk with them too,
 Who loses and who wins, who’s in, who’s out;
 And take upon’s the mystery of things,
 As if we were God’s spies: and we’ll wear out,
 In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones

That ebb and flow by th' moon.⁶ (*King Lear* 5.3.8–19, italics mine)

The polar bear Humbert invents, just like the comical interjection he utters, placidly resurfaces throughout the text. Humbert finds a polar bear fur in his rival's house, at Pavor Manor: "There was a rather bare room with ample and deep mirrors and a polar bear skin on the slippery floor" (249). Quilty possesses both the nymphet and the animal trophy Humbert had attributed to himself, that is everything that Humbert desires and manages to possess only through invention or coercion.

"Ah" is the usual interjection of Humbert's victims, notably Quilty, the bear, and Valeria's lover, Mr Taxovich ("shooting her lover in the underbelly and making him say 'akh!' and sit down," 87). In the murder scene, the interjection of Humbertian power is the expression of an intentional theatrical effect premeditated by the victim himself: "his face would twitch in an absurd clownish manner, as if he were exaggerating the pain; he slowed down, rolled his eyes half closing them and made a feminine 'ah!' and he shivered every time a bullet hit him as if I were tickling him" (303). Even before having tracked down Quilty, the interjection of submissiveness is projected by Humbert on a banal object, the rusty door of the telephone booth from where he calls the only Schiller in the telephone book: "I stepped neatly into a telephone booth in Coalmont (Ah-ah-ah, said its little door). [...] Ah-ah-ah said the little door" (268).⁷

Nineteenth-Century Whiteness and Humbert's Apricot Nymphet

The chromatic dimension of Humbert's arctic trip, with its dull whiteness, needs to be considered within the general chromatic framework of

⁶ The Russian translation of *Lolita* contains a reference (absent from the original text) to the forgiveness mentioned by King Lear in the passage I have quoted above (Dolinin 325). Here is the passage in question: "I recall certain moments, let us call them icebergs in paradise, when after having had my fill of her [...] I would gather her in my arms [...] and mutely ask her blessing" (*Lolita* 285). In Russian, Humbert is compared to Lear, who asks forgiveness of Cordelia and carries her dead body in his arms.

⁷ Julian W. Connolly has already drawn attention to the similar interjections of the bear, Mr. Taxovich, and Quilty, as well as to the polar bear skin at Pavor Manor (Connolly 58).

the book, with its heavy emphasis on the chromatic ripeness of the nymphet's skin. A second element of literary context to be taken into account is the fact that the whiteness of the Poles (and of the animals associated with them) is famously discussed in two nineteenth-century American novels, Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Poe's *The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*, which stand out as the prototypical literary manifestations of whiteness in American literature, together with Wallace Stevens's "The Snow Man."

The presence of the polar bear in Humbert's (failed) seductive narrative, when placed in the context of nineteenth-century American quests, could be linked to Melville and Poe, to *Moby-Dick* and *The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*. The reference to "Pym, Roland"⁸ (31) encourages the reader to embark upon an intertextual quest that could lead virtually anywhere, but it is tempting to start with the closest and most reasonable destination, that is Poe's novel of exploration. This is certainly problematic, since the Arctic regions and the South Pole are geographic opposites. However, beyond their polarized geographies, the North and the South share the same register of winter, whiteness, snow, and emptiness. Nabokov's work testifies to an interest in both the northern regions of Zembla and Ultima Thule, and the southern ice of the South Pole in the Russian play about Scott's tragic expedition. The link with *Pym* is relevant when one thinks not only of whiteness and ice, but also of the Poles as lands of finality, inherently carrying the sense of an ending. This ending comes however with an opening onto a vista of whiteness that invites the production of fiction and fairy tales (Scott's "skazki," Humbert's narrative as a conversation with Lolita "from here to Alaska," 309).

The *Pym* intertext in the Arctic episode further consolidates the Poesque presence in *Lolita*. As Brian Boyd argues in "*Lolita*: What We Know and What We Don't," Poe is both massively and elusively foregrounded by the text:

⁸ The name "Roland" has mysterious origins. Alfred Appel Jr. suggested to Nabokov a reference to *La Chanson de Roland*, to Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, and to Browning's "Childe Roland," but Nabokov did not acknowledge them as having initiated his choice (348). The author's comment filters the reader's annotations.

Nabokov and Humbert evoke Edgar Allan Poe repeatedly throughout the novel, in ways that do not seem sufficiently accounted for merely by Poe's marrying his cousin when she was only thirteen, or even by Poe's pioneer roles in the detective story, the double story, and cryptographic fiction. Nabokov makes Poe even more obtrusive, to the point of awkwardness, in the *Lolita Screenplay*. I have some hunches; but we simply have not found out deep enough answers about the presence and purpose of Poe in *Lolita*. (220)

And he concludes with "We still don't know *Lolita*" (228). I am not sure I have "deep enough answers," but this discussion of *Pym* certainly gives more substance to the mystery that surrounds Poe's role in the novel.

To go back to the dimension of whiteness in nineteenth-century American fiction, the chapter of *Moby-Dick* entitled "The Whiteness of the Whale" examines the fascination and the horror provoked by white animals like the polar bear, the albatross or the shark. In a footnote, the bear emerges as a synthesis of oxymora:

With reference to the Polar bear, it may possibly be urged by him who would fain go still deeper into this matter, that it is not the whiteness, separately regarded, which heightens the intolerable hideousness of that brute; for, analysed, that heightened hideousness, it might be said, only arises from the circumstance that the irresponsible ferociousness of the creature stands invested in the fleece of celestial innocence and love; and hence, by bringing together two such opposite emotions in our minds, the Polar bear frightens us with so unnatural a contrast. But even assuming that to be true; yet, were it not for the whiteness, you would not have that intensified terror.⁹ (994–95)

⁹ One of the categories in Humbert's arctic questionnaire is the fear of unknown animals. In *Bend Sinister*, Krug constructs a poem out of fragments taken from *Moby-Dick*. The "bashful bears" find their way in Krug's poem: "On the next slip of paper he had transcribed from a famous American poem *A curious sight—these bashful bears, / These timid warrior whalemens // And now the time of tide has come; / The ship casts off her cables // It is not shown on any map; / True places never are / /This lovely light, it lights not me; / All loveliness is*

There is no critical consensus, but the terror of whiteness in *Moby-Dick* and the meditation on the horrible mysteries of whiteness may have been inspired by the last chapters of *Pym* (chapters 18–24),¹⁰ in which the confrontation with the South Pole bear is one of the stages leading to the final fall, with its intermittent visions perceived through the strange white curtain:

Upon coming up with the floe, we perceived that it was in the possession of a gigantic creature of the race of the Arctic bear, but far exceeding in size the largest of these animals. Being well armed, we made no scruple of attacking it at once. Several shots were fired in quick succession, the most of which took effect, apparently, in the head and body. Nothing discouraged, however, the monster threw himself from the ice, and swam, with open jaws, to the boat in which were Peters and myself. [...] Leaping upon the back of the huge beast, he [Peters] plunged the blade of a knife behind the neck, reaching the spinal marrow at a blow. The brute tumbled into the sea lifeless, and without a struggle, rolling over Peters as he fell. [...] We then returned in triumph to the schooner, towing our trophy behind us. This bear, upon admeasurement, proved to be full fifteen feet in his greatest length. His wool was perfectly white, and very coarse, curling tightly. (*Pym* 159)

The nymphet is clearly devoid of the terrifying whiteness of Melville's and Poe's abhorred and celebrated animals. One of her defining traits is her unique complexion, inherited from Annabel, the color of ripe fruit, particularly the apricot ("apricot midriff," 231), with a touch of honey ("honey-hued shoulders," 39). Her color contaminates and fuses with her intense smell in a rich synesthetic vision ("that intoxicating brown

anguish" (*Bend Sinister* 155).

¹⁰ According to Philippe Jaworski (editor of the Pléiade Melville and author of a recent translation of *Moby-Dick* into French), there is no relevant element that allows one to establish a direct link between this particular chapter in Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *Arthur Gordon Pym* (personal communication). However, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of *Pym* Richard Kopley insists on Poe's influence on Melville as far as the theme of whiteness is concerned. These two stances illustrate the critical division that surrounds the relationship between the two texts.

fragrance of hers," 43). Out of Humbert's sight, Lolita loses her colors, as if bleached by the wandering of the last years. In Coalmont, an adult Lolita exhibits the withered whiteness of her new body, which displays no trace of her sumptuous nymphet colors: "her pale-freckled cheeks were hollowed, and her bare shins and arms had lost all their tan" (269). The whiteness of milk replaces the magic mixture of apricot and honey: "her watered milk-white arms" (270). Doubly estranged from Humbert—white and pregnant, therefore un-nymphetlike—she appears to have lost her nymphet nature, which is inseparable from the chromatic dimension of mellow autumn fruit and dark liquids.

Interestingly, this invasion of whiteness that dominates the final pages of the text is accompanied by multiple echoes of the arctic space, which awaits Lolita in order to engulf her. If Humbert is a self-styled romantic hero of the Canadian North, Lolita is a pragmatic dreamer. Alaska is waiting for the Schillers with the promise of a grandiose success. Trapped in Coalmont ("This town is something. You can't see the morons for the fog," 266), she hopes to become rich instantly in the remote North of the Gold Rush. The unexpected letter she sends Humbert records her (American) dream and her beautified description of Dick's job: "Dick is promised a big job in Alaska in his very specialized corner of the mechanical field, that's all I know about it but it's really grand. [...] Once we get there the dough will just start rolling in" (266). In his absurd discussion with his son-in-law, Humbert, victim of momentary amnesia, does not ask for (rhetorical) information about Alaska, but about Canada: "'And so,' I shouted, 'you are going to Canada? Not Canada'—I re-shouted—'I mean Alaska, of course'" (274). This slip of the tongue brings Humbert's Canadian trip to the visible surface of the story and confuses it temporarily with Lolita's Alaska.

Richard Schiller has "Arctic blue eyes" (273) and the word "hush-hush," which had previously described the strategic confidentiality of Humbert's expedition, surfaces to qualify, in front of a Ramsdale acquaintance, Dick's work in Alaska: "With exquisite pleasure I informed her that my stepdaughter had just married a brilliant young mining engineer with a hush-hush job in the Northwest" (289–90). The expression "hush-hush" is premonitory: the Schillers' trip to Alaska is a silent one in the sense that it is absent from Humbert's memoir. It is John Ray Jr.'s foreword that reveals the tragic denouement: "Mrs. 'Richard F.

Schiller' died in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl, on Christmas Day 1952, in Gray Star, a settlement in the remote Northwest" (4). Humbert's text stops on the threshold of this final voyage and, from there, he calls out to his American lover, filling the space that separates them with words, with the story of the nymphet: "I can still talk to you from here to Alaska" (309). In Nabokov's afterword, Gray Star becomes "the capital town of the book" (316). The therapeutic and comic overtones of the polar space, introduced by the arctic trip, are replaced by its funerary and melancholic overtones, already present in *Pierre*, *Pym*, and *Moby-Dick*. Dolly Schiller's Alaska could arguably be seen as an avatar of Nabokov's "distant northern land," Ultima Thule and Zembla. Gerard de Vries pointed out that Ultima Thule's essential feature is the fact that it is imaginary (Melville would have said that "it is not down in any map, true places never are"), contrary to Alaska.¹¹ In spite of this undeniable fact, it seems to me that the Alaska in *Lolita* is fundamentally distant, dim mysterious, melancholy and tragic—a cluster of related features that it shares with Nabokov's other northern lands ("distant dim Zembla" *Pale Fire* 78, "a melancholy and remote island," "Ultima Thule" 510).

The End: From Whiteness to Grayness and Back

Donald Barton Johnson connects what he calls the "Ultima Thule theme" in Nabokov's work with the otherworld, with metaphysical questioning and spiritual anxieties (Johnson 206–19). Ultima Thule is gray and misty, a continent that is born out of pain and loss: "Ultima Thule, that island born in the desolate, gray sea of my heartache for you, now attracted me as the home of my least expressible thoughts" ("Ultima Thule" 511). Grayness appears in "Solus Rex" as well, which mentions "the shore of the gray sea" (528). Gray Star is Humbert's gray goal, just like the gray goal of the book ("at the end of my journey, at my gray goal, *finis*, my friends, *finis*, my fiends," 269).¹² The profusion of "fixed stars" (152) that Humbert offers to Lolita during their Ameri-

¹¹ Personal communication.

¹² Alfred Appel Jr. (*Lolita* 443) and Brian Boyd identify Gray Star with Juneau, the capital of Alaska. Boyd ("Even Homais Nods" 77) interprets it as a reference to a cartographic convention (stars used to indicate capitals), "but also a play on Juno, the goddess of marriage."

can trips is replaced by this unique gray star (similar to the nymphet's eyes), that Lolita invents and chooses herself, the star that guides the book to its final destination.

The translucent sky, the whiteness, and the boredom of the northern lands are retrospectively transfigured by Dolly Schiller's arrival. Nymphets do not occur in polar regions, but it can be argued that Lolita colonizes these regions and impregnates them with her mystery. The comic blankness of Humbert's arctic Canada, mirrored in reverse by the funereal and silent blankness of Dolly's Alaska, ultimately simulates the whiteness of the blank page, soon to be filled by Humbert, in prison, with the tumultuous story of his beloved nymphet. This is how the "writer and explorer" is born and this is how the reader becomes an explorer herself looking for "the wandering and wobbly north magnetic pole" of Nabokov's metaphysical and intertextual geographies.

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