

MAILER, NABOKOV, AND THE AMERUSSIA / US-SU PHENOMENON

V I C T O R P E P P A R D

I WOULD LIKE TO BEGIN HERE BY SETTING OUT A NUMBER OF THINGS Norman Mailer and Vladimir Nabokov have in common, as well as some issues that set them apart.¹ Let's start with the obvious. That is, how can you compare Mailer, who began life as a nice, somewhat timid Jewish boy from Brooklyn and only became a tough guy as an adult, with Nabokov, who was from the Russian nobility and considered himself a European aristocrat as well, as is evident from his famous interview with Lionel Trilling (Fay).

Nabokov was an émigré, actually a serial émigré, who moved from Russia first to England, then to Germany, then to France, then to America, and finally to Switzerland. Mailer was not an émigré himself, but he was from an émigré family, which Michael Lennon describes as having a mix of Lithuanian and South African components (7–14), with a dash of English in the case of Mailer's father Barney, who his son called “an elegant, impoverished figure out of Chekhov,” who “was very English as only a South African can be” (11). Furthermore, Mailer was in a sense an internal émigré in his constant striving somehow to stand out in the crowd and stand away from it simultaneously. This may only narrow the differences between Mailer and Nabokov ever so slightly, but it does point to the multi-form cultural heritage each of them possessed. I would further claim that this heritage gave them a basis for the shape-changing they performed throughout their lives and literary careers. The pen name Sirin Nabokov used before coming out as Nabokov is itself suggestive of a dual nature or identity, for in ancient Slavic mythology Sirin is a bird with the head and breasts of a woman.

To continue the comparison: Nabokov and Mailer were both battlers, each in his own way. Mailer battled in public fervently and frequently, and

he took on all kinds of causes, issues, people, God, the Devil, the society and polity at large, and other writers. In *Advertisements for Myself*, he is free with his criticism of the whole gamut of American writers. Of Fitzgerald he writes that he “was an indifferent caretaker of his talent,” adding “and I have been a cheap gambler with mine” (477). Mailer thinks that “Steinbeck seemed to lose conviction . . . a man who needed Biblical simplicity for his art” (475). Of Hemingway and Faulkner Mailer says that “each of them has greatness, and yet neither has written the one novel which would be a monument to his work, and they had gifts on a grand scale” (475). Hemingway comes in for special scorn in that Mailer believes that “Hemingway is afraid to think, afraid of losing even a little popularity” (20). He also belittles Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, when he writes that it is “a bad piece of work if one knows nothing about the author. Only when one feels, more or less subliminally, the face of Ernest on the body of a Cuban fisherman does the fraud of the tale take on its surrealist truth” (*Advertisements for Myself* 21). This comment is not the final word of the ever mercurial Mailer, who had a complex relationship with Hemingway yet ultimately valued him as one of America’s most important writers.

Here Mailer would have received no argument from Nabokov, who airily dismisses Hemingway entirely by calling him a “contemporary substitute for Mayne-Reid” (*Lolita*, Ardis 308, my translation). Tomas Mayne-Reid was widely read in Russia, and Nabokov grew up with his works. Other writers of great fame did not impress Nabokov either, including Camus, Conrad, Brecht, Faulkner, Lawrence, Pound, and Sartre. Here is the kind of invective Nabokov used when “evaluating” such writers:

Brecht, Faulkner, Camus, many others, mean absolutely nothing to me, and I must fight a suspicion of conspiracy against my brain when I see blandly accepted as “great literature” by critics and fellow authors Lady Chatterley’s copulations or the pretentious nonsense of Mr. Pound, that total fake. I note he has replaced Dr. Schweitzer in some homes.

Nabokov did, however, in his “interview” with Herbert Gold, tell us that he valued highly the work of Kafka, Proust, and Joyce in *Ulysses*, but not at all *Finnegan’s Wake*.

Nabokov was particularly contemptuous of most Soviet Russian writers,

including Boris Pasternak, whose *Doctor Zhivago* he refers to in *Ada* as “*Les Amours du Docteur Mertvago*” (50), which comes out in English as “The Loves of Doctor Dead.” There were exceptions, especially the poet Alexander Blok and Andrei Bely, whose *Petersburg* he considered the best Russian novel of the century. Nabokov also had great respect for fellow émigré writers Ivan Bunin, Vladislav Khodasevich, and Mark Aldanov, and he believed that he and they comprised a generation of Russian writers that would never be duplicated again.

Mailer was also acutely aware of his contemporaries and of his place among them, since he regarded most of them as competitors. He claimed that James Jones was the only one with more talent than he, even if it was not completely realized (463-64). As for Styron, Mailer wants him to “write a book equal to his hatred and therefore able to turn the consciousness of our time” (465). Mailer says of Kerouac that he “lacks discipline, intelligence, honesty, and a sense of the novel . . . yet I think he has a large talent” (465). And, “Saul Bellow knows words, but writes in a style I find self-willed and unnatural. His rhythms have a twitch” (466). He sees much variety in Gore Vidal’s large output, but thinks Vidal “is in need of a wound which would turn the prides of his detachment into new perception” (470). Mailer finds that reading Ralph Ellison is “like holding a live electric wire in one’s hand,” and that his talent is too exceptional to predict where he will go with it (471). James Baldwin shows promise, in Mailer’s view, but he is “too charming to be major” (471). Perhaps the deepest critical cut Mailer administers is the one he delivers on Salinger, whom he calls “the greatest mind ever to stay in prep school” (467).

Thus does Mailer reveal as much or more about himself than he does about his predecessors and contemporaries, for he wants his fellows, and retrospectively even his precursors, to be more like him, that is, bolder, more unconventional, and more provocative .

Nabokov was far more reclusive than Mailer, and, as Sarah Fay has pointed out in her *Paris Review* article, he gave only tightly managed interviews, which he most often scripted by asking and answering all the questions himself. More than that, Nabokov carefully managed his reputation and in some cases the interpretation of his works, as is evident in both the interviews he gave and the postscripts to both *Lolita* and *Ada*. Unlike Mailer, for the most part Nabokov avoided commenting on the burning issues of the day, although as we will see here subsequently, he was fond of showing off

his knowledge of American popular culture. Nabokov carried out his battles almost exclusively on the printed page, sparring most energetically and longest with what he called “the fathers,” that is, his Russian predecessors, especially the big three, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Turgenev, and their fathers, Pushkin and Gogol, as well. He regarded Dostoevsky as simply a “mediocre writer” (*Lectures* 98), but he also jousted with his favorite Russian writers, such as Pushkin and Tolstoy, whose works he frequently parodied. Although he does not declare it openly as does Mailer, I suspect that much of Nabokov’s scorn for so many accomplished writers is part of his personal project to assure his own place in the Western literary pantheon.

Another noteworthy favorite battle of Nabokov was the one he waged throughout his career against “*poshlost*,” that is, a combination of vulgarity and kitsch, in so many of its forms and manifestations. (If you use a phonetic spelling of this word in English it comes out as “poshlust,” whose two syllables can easily be disengaged, forming the tantalizing combination of “posh lust,” which, come to think of it, is a prominent concern of Nabokov, especially in *Lolita* and *Ada*.)

If Nabokov managed his reputation and the reception of his works ever so carefully, Mailer had a completely different approach to his reputation. Although he, of course, valued praise and indeed curried it, he also had a penchant for striking out in reckless abandon without regard for self or reputation and let the chips fall and molder as they may in many cases. However highly they thought of their own work, both Mailer and Nabokov were not afraid of self parody. I will examine a couple of cases of Nabokov’s self-parody below. In the introduction to the 1967 edition of his *Short Fiction*, Mailer makes light of his short story writing, claiming he is really a novelist who does not invest a lot of time in stories. At the end, though, he cannot resist concluding that “The Time of Her Time” and “The Man Who Studied Yoga” “are superior to most good short fiction” (13).

As far as I know, Nabokov never made any flippant remarks about his own short stories, and it is no exaggeration to say that some of them are nothing short of brilliant. His stories about Russian émigrés create a poignant portrait of their life in Europe, especially the psychology of emigration with its hopes and dreams of a return to Russia that are frustrated in virtually every case. “The Return of Chorb,” (ch as in loch), 1925, and “A

Visit to the Museum,” 1939, are two of Nabokov’s best stories that have been anthologized by Clarence Brown (381–402).

A point of contact between Mailer and Nabokov that deserves notice is their love of mystification. For Nabokov, this was a constant *modus operandi* in both his interactions with readers and critics and in his fiction. Mailer was not so caught up in mystifications as Nabokov, nevertheless in his fiction he too was fond of mystifying readers, as is most notably evident in arguably his greatest novel, where a ghost shares the cellar of the house in which the hero, Harlot, lives, and also the title of the novel, *Harlot’s Ghost*.

It should be said that however many similarities there are between Mailer and Nabokov, the *ars poetica* of each of the two authors could not be more different. Mailer believed that literature must be purposeful and deal with substantive issues and ideas, but passionately, with an edge, and a point of view. In *Advertisements for Myself*, he writes, “the ambition of a writer like myself is to become consecutively more disruptive, more dangerous, and more powerful” (22). Nabokov’s philosophy of literature was completely antithetical to that of Mailer. In his interview with Trilling, he answers a question about the ideas he wanted to illustrate in *Lolita*, with a brilliant one-liner, “I leave the field of ideas to Dr. Schweitzer and Dr. Zhivago” (Fay). For Nabokov, art and literature are essentially sufficient unto themselves and do not need any justification from other areas of life for their *raison d’être*. Nevertheless, we see that he and Mailer shared a knack for pithy and sometimes memorable summative judgments, including “put-downs,” on writers and questions of all types.

What else draws Norman Mailer and Vladimir Nabokov together? Here one has to note their large egos and their will to be great among the greats of literature stand out, and they both strove to prove they were quintessential American writers. It was naturally easier for Mailer to prove his Americanness, whereas Nabokov had to resort to various stratagems, as for example his remark that “I am as American as April in Arizona” (Gold). Both are, of course, more than just American writers, for Nabokov’s international reputation is by now well established, and Mailer’s continues to grow, as we see from his reception in China, Russia, and Slovenia that has been described in this journal.

The signature works of Nabokov and Mailer are not just rich in different cultural strains, but are in places also multi-lingual. I have in mind here specifically *Harlot’s Ghost* and *Castle in the Forest* for Mailer and *Lolita* and

Ada for Nabokov, arguably these two authors' master works. Taken in the aggregate, these novels contain the English, French, German, Russian, and Spanish languages and span four continents: North America, South America, Europe, and Eurasia.

Nabokov wrote extensively about the émigré experience of Russians in Germany, especially Berlin, and in Paris before his two great "American" novels, *Lolita* and *Ada*, where, especially in *Ada* the French language is used constantly, even more than Russian in this tri-lingual novel, written in the three languages Nabokov considered the three greatest in the world: English, French, and Russian. Chapter 22 begins with a macaronic poem in these three languages (138). Nabokov also knew German but was not fond of the language.

Mailer's European theme is connected to Germany, as found in the Berlin section of *Harlot's Ghost*, and it emerges again fully blown in *The Castle in the Forest*, which is set in Germany, whose future *Führer* is the novel's central character. Spanish figures in the lengthy Uruguayan part of *Ghost*, but in its Latin American rather than Castilian form.

Writing in English, both Mailer and Nabokov are stylistic innovators who adhere to their own rules, and in the case of Mailer, their own grammar. My own sense is that Nabokov's English is a brilliant but sometimes artificial synthesis of the British and American varieties. For his part, Mailer is the master of clever phrases and graphic imagery, and his best prose has a special rhythmic quality. Both writers did significant research for their books and that is reflected in the scale of their novels, such as Mailer's *Harlot's Ghost* and Nabokov's *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*. In this particular competition, Mailer is the clear victor with the 1310 pages found in *Ghost*. (The main text of the novel's 1991 Random House edition ends on page 1282 with the words TO BE CONTINUED, followed by an "Author's Note," 1283–89, a list of books Mailer consulted, 1289–93, "Characters, Organizations, Cryptonyms, Cover Names," 1295–1301, and "Places," 1303–10.)

Here I would like to examine the phenomenon of Amerussia, the realm Nabokov creates in *Ada*, 1969, and Mailer's portrayal of the United States and the Soviet Union in *Ghost*. Nabokov's merging of the US and the USSR into an Amerussia was a poignant heresy in 1969, the peak of the Cold War but, characteristic for Nabokov, he is not in the slightest interested in the politics of the Cold War. Mailer's treatment of this Amerussia in the form of

what I am calling the US-SU (United States-Soviet Union, or You are Us—So are You) is, on the other hand, explicitly political.

In Nabokov's *Ada*, the "union" of the two countries is not on the political level, much less on the level of rival intelligence agencies as found in *Ghost*, but on the cultural and even geographical levels. There are many Russians living in Amerussia, and even place names are taken from Russia or are combinations of American and Russian names. For example, on the very first page of *Ada* Nabokov, through his narrative impersonator, describes this setting: "'Russian' Estoty, which comingles, granoblastically and organically with 'Russian' Canady, otherwise 'French' Estoty, where not only French, but Macedonian and Bavarian settlers enjoy a halcyon climate under our Stars and Stripes" (3). Estoty is presumably Nabokov's version of Estonia. Nabokov continues his multi-faceted play in the following passage:

A map of Terra . . . sidesplitting to imagine that "Russia," instead of being a quaint synonym of Estoty, the American province extending from the Artic no longer vicious Circle to the United States proper, was on Terra the name of a country, transferred as if by some sleight of land across the ha-ha of a doubled ocean to the opposite hemisphere where it sprawled over all of today's tartary, from Kurland to the Kuriles! But (even more absurdly), if in Terrestrial spatial terms, the Amerussia of Abraham Milton was split into its components, with the tangible water and ice separating the political, rather than poetical, notions of "America" and "Russia," a more complicated and even more preposterous discrepancy arose in regard to time. . . . (17–18)

Nabokov further flummoxes the reader with the statement that "minds *bien ranges* (not apt to unhobble hobgoblins), rejected Terra as a fad or phantom, and deranged minds . . . accepted it in support and token of their own irrationality" (18). This nexus of cross-language and cross-geographical play, as in so much of Nabokov, leads the reader on a wild chase through a puzzle of possibilities, some of them whimsical, some fanciful, or even fantastical that we are invited to figure out. For instance, who is Abraham Milton? As far as I can fathom, this is a bowdlerization of Abraham Lincoln's name, who, after all, was president of the actual United States of America at the time when Secretary of State Seward bought Alaska from Russia, an act that

prompted the term “Seward’s icebox.” In any case, Nabokov revels in his ability through verbal conjuring to create a fictional realm in which we can be absolutely certain of absolutely nothing.

In confecting his Amerussia, Nabokov transfers Russian places to America, as he does with Kaluga, a city west of Moscow, or mixes two place names together, as in a city called Balticamore. He also describes “American football” as “a kind of Rugby game cadets played at one time on the wet turf banks of the Goodson River” (69). (The Russian for Hudson is “*Gudzon*.”) Here Nabokov is taking advantage of his English point of view, which he acquired as a student at Cambridge University, to describe the game that is in fact the son of rugby football. The reference is clearly to West Point, where cadets do play the American version of football. Here, as in other parts of *Ada* and in *Lolita*, Nabokov shows off his familiarity with American popular culture in oblique or jocular ways.

Another favorite practice of Nabokov is toying with and testing his readers’ knowledge of literature, even as he parodies and/or stylizes the classic works of his “fathers.” In fact, parody and stylization are at the heart of all of Nabokov’s work, as is evident on the first page of *Ada*. Nabokov begins the novel with an inversion of the well-known first sentence of *Anna Karenina*. This is what Tolstoy wrote: “All happy families are alike; all unhappy families are unhappy in their own way.” And here is how Nabokov begins *Ada*: “All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike.” (3) In this way, Nabokov turns Tolstoy’s famous formulation on its head and thereby declares that nothing and no one will be exempt from his parodic and satiric thrusts.

Another game Nabokov plays with his readers in *Ada* involves made-up composite Russian-American literary references that complement the Amerussian place names he uses in the formation of this imaginary land. In one place, he writes about “Pushkin’s ‘Headless Horseman’ poem,” combining a classic of Russian literature with a classic of American literature and thereby forming a bogus classic of Amerussian literature (171). He makes no reference to Washington Irving and thus assumes the reader will know that he was the author of “The Headless Horseman” and not Pushkin. Pushkin’s poem “The Bronze Horseman” (*Mednyi vsadnik*) in which the statue in Saint Petersburg to Peter I, aka the Great, has a central role is the “real” Russian title Nabokov is playing with here.

Nabokov loved to pull the reader’s nose, as in his description of a motel

in Utah where a footprint of Tolstoy is preserved and where Tolstoy “had written the tale of Murat, the Navajo chieftain, a French general’s bastard, shot by Cora Day in his swimming pool” (171). The tale of Murat is a reference to Tolstoy’s late short novel called *Hadji Murat* (1905), which is about a Chechen prince who fought relentlessly against the Russians in their armed takeover of the Caucasus in the first part of the nineteenth century. Murat as a Navajo chieftain and bastard son of a French general is a miniature model of *Ada*’s thematic structure in that it combines, American, Russian, and French motifs and is thus self-referential or even self-parodic. Lastly, Cora Day is Nabokov’s twist on the name of the American singer and actress, Doris Day, that is designed to demonstrate his familiarity with the American popular culture of the time, or if you like, of the day, in a thoroughly jocular fashion.

Even if *Ada* were not populated with agents, double, and triple agents doing the detective work of the CIA and the KGB, as is the case in *Ghost*, Nabokov constantly challenges his readers to play the role of detective in following the twists and turns of his plot, not only in *Ada* but in most of his fiction. The first three chapters of *Ada* contain an extensive family tree of the central characters, Ada and Van, that is so elaborate and involved I can only assume it is a parody on the novelistic practice of giving detailed descriptions of characters’ family backgrounds one encounters in so much of nineteenth century fiction. The possibility that Van and Ada are brother and sister slowly morphs into reality during the course of the novel, as Nabokov turns his readers into sleuths who are supposed to follow and keep track of the many hints, leads, and suggestions he makes throughout about their relationship as siblings.

In Mailer’s *Ghost*, sleuthing is the profession of the narrator Herrick Hubbard, most often called Harry, as well as that of Harlot and many of the other central characters. The connections between America and Russia, now in their guises of the United States and the Soviet Union, are not geophysical, but rather a mix of the practical, tactical, and conceptual. We learn early in the novel that Harry Hubbard is writing a book called *The Imagination of the State*, which with Harlot’s urging was to be a monumental work about the KGB that was in the final analysis “too monumental.” Instead, Hubbard writes a memoir about his time in the CIA, what he calls his “Alpha manuscript” with the title of “The Game.” Realizing that any substantial exposure of the CIA could not be published in the US, he even contemplates becom-

ing the first exponent of *samizdat* on the American stage (35). This kind of “switcheroo” is both a precursor and a model for the many that take place in *Ghost* on both the characterological and political planes throughout the novel. It also signals Mailer’s penchant for suggesting the similarities between both country’s international spy agencies and by implication and extension their systems as a whole.

Amerussia in *Ghost* has to do with the United States and the Soviet Union emulating and imitating each other in their conduct of the Cold War, so that the differences between them are substantially blurred, if not eliminated entirely. Members of the CIA and the KGB frequent the same bars in Berlin and attend the same garden parties in Uruguay. In East Berlin each side employs double and triple agents means, as Dix Butler says, “you can’t even remember if they’re supposed to be yours or theirs, and you know, buddy, it doesn’t matter” (282).

This process of emulation and imitation includes especially the ways in which the CIA acted that mirrored the behavior of the Soviet KGB. In Berlin, the head of US intelligence, William Harvey, is the main proponent and practitioner of Soviet-style methods of espionage, diversionary tactics, and subterfuge. His tunnel digging project is the apogee of his battle against the evil forces of the Soviet Union. He and other like-minded CIA operatives, including Harlot, justify this and similar projects on the grounds that they are necessary to combat the same kinds of tactics employed by the Soviets. For Harlot, “dirty tricks” and “our assassins” are a necessary part of the game. E. Howard Hunt makes the strongest endorsement of doing as the enemy does when he writes in order to defeat him:

If the United States is to survive, long-standing American concepts of fair play must be reconsidered. We must develop effective espionage and counterespionage services and must learn to subvert, sabotage, and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated, and more effective methods than those used against us. (518)

In *Ghost*, the US and the SU are portrayed as borrowing from each other not just with respect to the tactics their (in)famous intelligence agencies employed, but on the ideological level as well. Harlot has developed a theory that the communist idea that nobody should have too much wealth is “sa-

tanic . . . it trades on the noblest vein in Christianity.” He believes further that the “reds” are clever enough to imply that “they are in the true tradition of Christ” (400). If we are to lend any credence to Harlot’s theory, I would say that the key word here has to be “imply,” because the explicit ideology of the Soviet communists, as they so assiduously proclaimed in the early years of the Soviet Union, was that religion was “the opiate of the masses.”

Another of Harlot’s conceptions, expounded by (John Foster) Dulles, which explicitly draws the KGB and the CIA together, is the notion that Felix Dzerzhinsky, the first head of the CHEKA, is not only the “intellectual godfather of the KGB,” but also “the first genius of our profession” (441). Harlot believes that “we and the KGB have both gotten so good [at counterespionage] that it has become difficult to lie successfully to each other” (426).

At the end of *Ghost*, Harry Hubbard goes to Moscow in an attempt to resolve the mystery that hangs over most of the novel, that is, was Harlot still alive, for early in the novel a badly decomposed body has been found near Harlot’s house in Maine, the Close, that is suspiciously like Harlot. And, if he is alive, has he gone to Moscow, where he “might have gone deeper into the wilderness of mirrors, switching sides and going to Moscow as a fake turncoat, or triple agent” (Lennon 644). The novel is unfinished, and at the end neither Harlot’s motivation nor his fate is clear. With respect to the mirroring of the US-SU and CIA-KGB, Harry Hubbard’s trip to Moscow brings the novel full circle, when in the Metropol Hotel, not far from the statue to Dzerzhinsky, he reads his memoir of his days in the CIA. As we see here in *Ghost*, Mailer is practicing the metafictional art of discussing novel writing over the course of writing the novel. This feature of the modern novel is also especially evident in Nabokov’s *Lolita* and *Ada*, where he continually comments on the devices that he employs in their composition. In *Harlot’s Ghost*, Mailer’s variation on this technique is found in his implementation of a story begun but not continued, “The Imagination of the State,” and another story told but not completed, that is, “The Game.”

In a novel that is thought to have a lot of loose ends, the “doubling” of the characters that I have described in *The Mailer Review* (2009, 187–90) resonates with the Amerussia I am claiming is found in both *Ada* and *Ghost*. Just as Bill Harvey’s tunneling exploits in Berlin mirror the espionage practice of the Soviets, the CIA as an institution mirrors the KGB. These two super power spy agencies are also officially in conflict in Uruguay, where

their competition consists largely of similar if not identical tactics and stratagems centered on recruiting local spies and informers to their side and trying to outsmart each other with double and triple agents and moles.

The relevance of Mailer's depiction of similarities and congruencies between the US and the SU seems to have come to an end in 1991, the year in which the Soviet Union ceased to exist and the same year in which *Ghost* was published. But not quite. I say that, because in the interval between then and now, and especially of late, virtually every day brings more and more news that the United States and Russia (and other countries) have turned into the kind of state Yevgeny Zamyatin describes in *We* (1920) and that of George Orwell, inspired by Zamyatin's work, depicted in 1984, published in 1949: a state in which a Benefactor, as in *We*, or a Big Brother, as in 1984, knows almost everything about us and attempts to monitor all of our moves, all in the name of our well-being and security. I do not subscribe to a theory of convergence, but in the area of spying—both on others and ourselves—and so-called “intel,” the US, partly under the spell of technology, and partly from fear of a perceived new threat to its security, has adopted many of the practices it used to castigate the former Soviet Union for, the practices Mailer describes so well in *Ghost*.

There are of course other themes that *Ada* and *Ghost* share in addition to that of Amerussia, including especially the interconnected themes of betrayal and unrealized or unfulfilled romantic liaisons. Betrayals are at the heart of *Ghost*, from start to finish, and they pervade all aspects and characters of the novel, from Harry Hubbard's cheating on Kittredge to her betrayal of him by running off with Dix, and the final betrayal we may suspect but cannot be sure Harlot may have made. In *Ada*, Van and Ada are locked in a continual cycle of betrayals and reconciliations. As Brian Boyd has suggested, the novel's pivotal betrayal is the one Ada and Van commit on Ada's sister Lyucetta by cruelly drawing her into their affair when she is only a child (352–62). The attraction Lucetta thus acquires for Van turns out to be fatal, even tragic, when she commits suicide after Van tells her that her love for him will never be requited because he loves Ada. Triangulated love and betrayal is also at the center of *Ghost* in the triad of Harlot, Harry, and Kittredge. Let me also note that the incestuous relationship of Van and Ada has an analog in *Ghost*, where Harry Hubbard is married to Kittredge, even though her former husband Harlot was his surrogate father. And, we recall

in *Lolita* that Humbert Humbert is Lolita's stepfather, a role he acquires through his opportunistic marriage to her mother, Charlotte Hays.

Heather Braun has analysed an illuminating connection between Mailer and Nabokov in her perceptive analysis of *Lolita* and Mailer's story "The Time of Her Time," where the narrator O'Shaugnessy bears a striking resemblance to Nabokov's Humbert Humbert, the narrator of *Lolita*, in his shiftiness and unreliability (225–32). Braun also makes a persuasive case for these two works as models for classroom discussion of the controversial sexual issues they raise, just the kinds of issues found in so much of Mailer and Nabokov.

In his comment on the passing of Norman Mailer, "Remembering the Pint-Size Jewish Fireplug," Christopher Hitchens reminds us of a connection between "The Time of Her Time" and *Lolita* that Mailer made when he claimed that his story "had nerved a hesitant editor to publish *Lolita*, of which novel he straight-facedly claimed that 'The Time of Her Time' was 'the godfather'. Chutzpah could do no more." (Hitchens)

Although *Lolita* was first published in 1955 in France, it appeared in print for the first time in the United States in 1958, the same year as "The Time of Her Time" was published, a coincidence that may have given Mailer the occasion for his claim. In any case, Nabokov would have scoffed at Mailer's declaration that he was the "godfather of *Lolita*" for a number of reasons, particularly, as Heather Braun has pointed out to me: Nabokov had the idea for the novel long before he wrote it and had it published. I take Mailer's assertion of his godly patrimony of *Lolita* more as an expression of his characteristic braggadocio mixed with a declaration of kinship with Nabokov, whom he saw as a fellow groundbreaker.

As we see from the two examples discussed here, we can add to the list of commonalities between them the fact that Nabokov and Mailer were both fearless literary provocateurs who went wherever their very dissimilar muses led them. Having said that, it seems clear that the aristocratic Nabokov is always careful to erect all kinds of barriers between himself and his characters, as he does so extravagantly in the forward to *Lolita* with the elaborate maze of story bearers who stand between himself and Humbert Humbert. This is one of the many aspects of *Lolita*, Nabokov's most "American" novel that has its roots in Russian literature, specifically in Pushkin and Gogol ("Works of V. Nabokov" 310–32). Mailer is also more than capable of various narrative subterfuges that can either ally him with the characters (see Kittredge as

mouthpiece for Alpha and Omega among other things), or give him some separation from them— see the dodgy Dieter in *The Castle in the Forest*. Despite Nabokov's own impressive arsenal of literary dodges, we can also often discern the dinkum Nabokov among his narrative surrogates and delegates, but on balance I would say that Mailer is the one who wades into the novelistic thickets he creates more openly.

There is one last question I would like to raise, and that is the one of closure. I have claimed that for Nabokov the Amerussia he creates in *Ada* brings two of the great antipodes of his life, Russia and America, together in the only form that was accessible to him, that is fiction, since return to Russia was not possible, however much he might have wished for it to be otherwise (321-22). Having said that, I should add that the "Europeanized" characters of the novel—including Van and Ada, Uncle Dan, and Marina—as well as their travels in Europe, fill out the other piece of Nabokov's personal puzzle embodied in the novel.

For Mailer, *Harlot's Ghost*, far from providing closure with respect to his own version of Amerussia /US-SU, and even more so with regard to the mystery of Harlot, remains unfinished. Nor was he finished with his Russian theme, as we know from the Coronation chapter in *The Castle in the Forest*. That Mailer left us much to contemplate and speculate about is not surprising in the least, for that, it seems to me, is the essence of his work.

There is of course more to be said about the relationship between Mailer and Nabokov, including especially the role that Time plays in their fiction. That is certainly a worthy project but a separate one.

NOTE

1. I presented parts of this article at The Norman Mailer Society conference at Wilkes University, October 9–11, 2014.

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