

THE ROVING PSYCHOPATH IN
LOVE: “THE WHITE NEGRO”
AND *LOLITA*

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“Love was love, one could find it with anyone, one could find it anywhere. It was just that you could never keep it. Not unless you were ready to die for it.”

(Mailer, *An American Dream* Ch. 6)

“We lone voyagers, we nympholepts.”

(Nabokov, *Lolita* 17)

IN HIS 1957 ESSAY “THE WHITE NEGRO,” Norman Mailer famously compares the hipster hero with other social outliers including the existentialist, the Negro, the lover, and the psychopath. Mailer celebrates their ability to live in the “burning” present with a constant awareness of their proximity to death (Mailer 6). The following year, Putnam published Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* in the U.S. after years of international censorship and whispered acclaim. (Graham Green named it one of the three best books of 1955, and it was the first book since *Gone With the Wind* to sell over 100,000 copies in the first three weeks of its American publication.)¹ Nabokov’s sexual psychopath endeavors to recreate and preserve his ethereal child-love through actions evocative of Mailer’s quixotic rebel-hipster. Mailer’s psychopath and Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert are wandering exiles who must remain at the edges of conventional morality, risking social censure to chase desires they can never satisfy. Mailer’s rebel psychopath and Nabokov’s eloquent narra-

tor thrive, for a time, through an acute self-awareness that they are at once “sexually crippled and . . . sexually alive” (13), living fully in the present and perpetually trapped within their own psyches.

Both “The White Negro” and *Lolita* first appeared at a moment when Americans were terrified and fascinated by the figure of the psychopath. Frederick Whiting has connected this particular moment in American history to:

sex crime panics and . . . the rise to popularity of psychoanalytic discourse . . . What amounted to a new species of monster, the sexual psychopath had emerged on the U.S. landscape. The horror his crimes occasioned and the difficulties he posed for traditional definitions of humanness urgently required his scientific explanation and legal containment. (Whiting 156)

At this time, discussions of the psychopath were inseparable from psychoanalytic explanations of his “infantile sexuality” and “arrested Oedipal development” (154). Estelle Freedman traces this panic to fictional examples of sexual psychopathy including Fritz Lang’s 1931 film, *M*, in which Peter Lorre plays a former psychiatric patient who lures young girls with candy and balloons, murdering them off screen in order to fulfill his deviant sexual fantasies (Freeman 83). Between the mid-1930s and mid-1960s, more than half of the United States passed laws—known as sexual psychopath statutes—in direct response to pressure from citizens’ groups and news media to apprehend sexual deviants (99).²

Mailer and Nabokov drew extensively on these contemporary discourses of psychopathy, criminality, and existentialism. Mailer saw the psychopath’s juvenile, pleasure-seeking narcissism as an opportunity for self-knowledge and rebirth. In “The White Negro,” he describes the psychopath’s efforts to “lessen the tension of those infantile desires and so free himself to remake a bit of his nervous system” (Mailer 27). Mailer was a great admirer of psychologist Robert Lindner, calling him “the most imaginative and most sympathetic of the psychoanalysts who have studied the psychopathic personality” (9). In “The White Negro,” he draws extensively from Lindner’s description of the psychopath in *Rebel without a Cause*—*The Hypnoanalysis of the Criminal Psychopath*. Here, Lindner describes the behavior of the psychopath as self-reflexive as he is unable to do anything to benefit some-

one other than himself: “All his efforts, hidden under no matter what disguise, represent investments designed to satisfy his immediate wishes and desires” (quoted in Mailer 8). Mailer interprets Lindner’s definition of the psychopath as one that, in the end, centers on his quest for love:

At bottom, the drama of the psychopath is that he seeks love. Not love as the search for a mate, but love as the search for an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it . . . in this search, the psychopath becomes an embodiment of the extreme contradictions of the society which formed his character. (Mailer 11)

The psychopath’s drama of “infantile fantasy” (10) is fatally imagined in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, a novel that recounts Humbert Humbert’s quest for an ethereal Lolita, a tortuous journey that ends with his startling revelation that what he has been seeking is at once everywhere and nowhere, an ideal that keeps him in perpetual motion yearning for an unknowable Lolita who is always just beyond his grasp.

Lolita and “The White Negro” showcase the figure of the post-war outcast who rebels against conventionality and dejection yet remains true to his natural impulses by disconnecting from his moral implications. Both texts directly challenge one-dimensional portraits of psychopaths as childish figures controlled entirely by their own selfish impulses. According to Mailer, the hipster-psychopath has the unique ability to “skulk unmarked” without having to “enforce his will on others, Napoleon-fashion . . . [he] contents himself with a magical omnipotence never disproved because never tested” (Mailer 1). Nabokov describes his suave nympholept as having the linguistic and artistic tools to transcend conventional discourse of the psychopath. By calling himself a nympholept, Humbert Humbert is engaging both definitions of the word: “an ecstasy or yearning, esp. that caused by desire for something unattainable” and “a passion or desire aroused in men by young girls” (*OED*). His drama begins with his own childhood and his first love, Annabel, on an “enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea” (Nabokov 16). It is here that Humbert fully embraces his solipsistic quest for Lolita.³ Lolita exists for him “with shut eyes, on the dark innerside of your eyelids . . . a little ghost in natural colors” and in “the mirror beaches and rosy rocks” of his “misty” memory (Nabokov

12, 16). Humbert's Peter Pan-like longing for nymphets to "play around [him] forever. Never grow up" (21) prolongs the inevitable but fatal predictability of adult life. It allows him to remain, for the moment, safely cocooned within an "adult disguise (a great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood)" (Nabokov 39). This disguise helps him to hide himself and his social deformities equally well as few would suspect a lover of nymphets to be lurking behind the face of a Hollywood movie star, especially if he also happens to be a romanticized British writer.

For Mailer, too, conventionality is a contagious disease that can be prevented by remaining in a vibrantly active and self-conscious present. In "The White Negro," Mailer attempts to remove moral judgment from the category of the psychopath: "whether the life is criminal or not, the decision is to encourage the psychopath in oneself, to explore the domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness, and one exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention" (Mailer 3). The only escape is "to know one's desire's, one's rages, one's anguish, one must be aware of the character of one's frustrations and know what would satisfy [them]" (5). Unfortunately, Mailer's hipster-psychopath is not only rooted inextricably to a specific moment in American history; this figure also remains incapable of understanding the world beyond his own insatiable desires.

Humbert Humbert is deeply aware of his desires and what will satiate them in the "burning" present (Mailer 6). After his first sexual encounter with Lolita, Humbert expresses pride in keeping his orgasm a secret from her and keeping them both "safely solipsized" in the perpetual present:

I felt proud of myself. . . . Absolutely no harm done . . . Thus had I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe—and I was safe. What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own. (62)

Here, Humbert reaffirms the solipsistic belief that by remaining in disguise and undetected, he can keep his necessary illusions about the ethereal Lolita intact. His pride arises from his extreme awareness of the present, how it

can be seized and frozen and remade to suit his desires. This description is about escaping detection and does not account for harm that becomes visible over time. Humbert's solipsism and constant motion help him maintain, for the moment, the illusion of isolation from his own actions and from those who grant him satisfaction in the immediate present.

For Mailer and Nabokov, movement is crucial to avoiding detection and fully expressing the character of the psychopath. Indeed, Nabokov's novel depends upon it. According to Jennifer Jenkins, "maps, motels, tourist traps, scenic viewpoints fill the novel, while issues of displacement and movement drive the narrative . . . this American journey is the final stage in a pilgrimage, a heroic question of sorts" (Jenkins 210). Like Mailer's hipster, Humbert is what Sandy Cohen has called a "self-controlled psychopath. He must exist in a state of perpetual anxiety in order to learn" (Cohen 68). According to Mailer, the psychopath is never fully satisfied: "[O]nce the sweet of sex has deserted him," the psychopath "still cannot give up the search" (16). Hence, for him, "Movement is always to be preferred to inaction. In motion a man has a chance, his body is warm, his instincts are quick, and when the crisis comes, whether of love or violence, he can make it, he can win, he can release a little more energy for himself" (14).⁴ Humbert embodies the movement that Mailer celebrates in the hipster-rebel. In those rare moments when Humbert begins to see Dolores Haze instead of his fanciful Lolita, he gets his first glimpse of a perspective other than his own. After Humbert finds himself suddenly and cruelly the sole caregiver of his Lolita, the real person beneath his desire for her emerges: "Mentally, I found her to be a disgustingly conventional little girl . . . the ideal consumer" (148). Despite this occasional disgust, however, Humbert retains his desire and recognizes the need for them both to remain in constant motion, to maintain the illusion that they can survive if they only preserve the solipsistic universe that each creates within him- and herself.

When glimpses of a Dolores extend beyond the amorphous boundaries of his child love, Humbert must continue moving and prolonging the moment when his crimes and potential guilt come into focus. In his defense, Humbert reminds the "ladies and gentleman of his jury" once again: "I am not a criminal sexual psychopath taking indecent liberties with a child . . . I am the therapist" (150). Taking on the competing roles of therapist, father, and lover, Humbert is also Dolores's only source of entertainment: "I had to devise some special point in space and time for her to look forward to, for

her to survive till bedtime. Otherwise, deprived of a shaping and sustaining purpose, the skeleton of her day sagged and collapsed" (151). This constant motion is crucial for Humbert, who must keep moving in order to delay the moment when he must surrender his illusions of and solipsistic love for his Lolita.⁵ What he seeks is something that threatens to disappear in moments of silence and stillness.

As a "moving man," the hipster-psychopath finds "safe refuge" in the upper-class world of acting and music. Music, like movement, provides Mailer's hipster with an adequate mode of self-expression: "jazz is orgasm, it is the music of orgasm, good orgasm and bad" (13). In the epigraph that opens "The White Negro," Caroline Bird identifies the hipster as "a jazz musician; he is rarely an artist, almost never a writer." Indeed, music is a recurrent metaphor in Nabokov's novel as well. Though Humbert is speaking to us from a psychiatric ward awaiting trial for his crimes, the novel becomes less a defense and more an eloquent and potentially sympathetic song.⁶ In *Lolita's* foreword, John Ray, Jr. introduces H.H. as "ponderously capricious," "abnormal," and "desperate[ly] honest." He also describes him as a musician whose "magical" violin "can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!" (5). Indeed, the final lines of *Lolita* describe "the melody of children at play" in which Humbert "stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries . . . and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord" (308). These sounds provide the "melodious unity" that shifts the emphasis of this novel away from the crime Humbert has just committed to his realization of his larger crimes against Lolita.

Mailer conceives the psychopath as moving back into the past in order to live dramatically and more fully present (11). Nabokov's sexual psychopath sees himself as less complicit in such theatrical performances; he is the unwilling actor in a play written by someone other than himself: "This was the end of the ingenious play staged for me by Quilty" (305). The actual climax of *Lolita*, in which Humbert begins to see beyond his solipsistic present, happens almost as a coda to the quest that precedes it. It occurs in the anti-climactic scene in Chapter 35 when Humbert finally meets and kills his double and nemesis, Clare Quilty.⁷ In a strangely comical performance of stumbling and delay, Humbert climbs Quilty's steps with painful slowness, gun in hand, his "heart pounded with tiger joy" in anticipation of meeting his dou-

ble at last (295). When he finally sees Quilty, who is physically and mentally askew in a bathrobe, Humbert rejoices to find him “in a fog and completely at my so-called mercy. I could enjoy myself.” What brings Humbert “intolerable bliss” in this moment is the knowledge that he has Quilty “trapped, [and] after those years of repentance and rage” (295) Humbert finds himself in control at last.

Quilty’s murder represents one of the few moments in the novel when Humbert is entirely free from social obligation and remorse. Before the murder, Humbert is obsessed with his invisible double, who must also remain in motion to avoid detection: “the tone of his brain, had affinities with my own. He mimed and mocked me” (249). After the murder, Humbert continues moving but no longer with any discernable purpose, driving haphazardly until finally surrendering to the police: “Since I had disregarded all laws of humanity, I might as well disregard the rules of traffic” (306). Humbert has killed his other half, the “beastly pervert” that has informed his movements and choices throughout most of this novel. In “Humbert Humbert *Through the Looking Glass*,” Elizabeth Prioleau reads Quilty as Humbert’s Doppelgänger, his “darker alter ego, the reflection . . . of his guilt” (Prioleau 431), and Nabokov’s frequent use of mirrors and doubling certainly supports this reading. But the question of Humbert’s guilt about Quilty is less clear by the end of the novel than his remorse for the loss of his Lolita. In *Without Conscience*, Robert Hare distinguishes psychotics from psychopaths by explaining that the latter are “rational and aware of what they are doing and why. Their behavior is the result of *choice*, freely exercised” (Hare 22). Humbert demonstrates this insistence on his hold on reality when he tells his jury: “I want to stress the fact that I was responsible for every drop of his bubble-blood” (304), but he does not yet extend this free choice to his crimes against Lolita.

Humbert embodies Mailer’s hipster-psychopath in his extreme solipsism, his proclivity for movement, and his ability to thrive outside the parameters of social retribution. Yet some of the most poignant moments in *Lolita* are those when Humbert breaks out of Mailer’s prescriptive mold. Perhaps the most startling revelation of Nabokov’s novel occurs just before Quilty’s murder. As Humbert reflects upon those “icebergs in paradise” where only he and his otherworldly Lolita exist, other thoughts and “smothered memories” begin to emerge (Nabokov 285). In this surprisingly intimate moment, Humbert confesses: “I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind

and that quite possibly . . . there was a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate . . . absolutely forbidden to me” (284). Up until this moment in the novel, Humbert’s solipsism prevents him from seeing his own culpability, and thus prevents him from making amends for his feigned ignorance: “I loved you,” he writes to a now dead Dolores. “I was despicable and brutal, and turpid, and everything . . . And there were times when I knew how you felt, and it was hell to know it” (284–85). For a time, Humbert succeeds in masquerading as a conformist in order to pursue his forbidden desires. Like Mailer’s psychopath, he achieves “the inner and the violent life, the orgy and the dream of love, the desire to murder and the desire to create” (Mailer 17). In this way, Mailer and Nabokov create aberrant anti-heroes who remain “safely solipsized” (Nabokov 62) within narratives of love and exile, within the timeless and boundless sanctuary of art.

NOTES

1. Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991. 293).
2. See Estelle B. Freedman, “Uncontrolled Desires: The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920–1960” for a discussion of how the sexual psychopath was codified at this time.
3. Solipsism is “the theory or belief that one’s own self or consciousness is all that exists . . . or all that can be known,” a metaphysical definition that is distinct from selfishness or narcissism (*OED*).
4. In his 2007 interview with Mailer for *The Paris Review*, Andrew O’Hagan describes how Mailer “uses his hands like a filmmaker or a boxing coach, forever framing the idea of movement” throughout the interview. When asked if he stood by his 1957 essay, Mailer responded: “I stand by it in that I’m sure there are any number of people—particularly young men—who lead their lives according to the quality of their orgasm. In other words they find a chick who gives them a greater orgasm than another chick and that’s what they follow, that’s their idea of love. And who’s to say they’re wrong? The orgasm is a very deep expression of ourselves” (O’Hagan 4).
5. Humbert’s quest for love as something always in motion and just beyond his grasp echoes Stephen Rojack’s journey in *American Dream* (see epigraph).
6. According to John Whalen-Bridge, it is “the transgression *within* the novel [that] is presented to readers who, as a kind of jury, either will or will not accept the transgression . . . Despite the introspective and solipsistic nature of his confession, the psychopath is surprisingly persuasive in his pleas” (Whalen-Bridge 78).
7. Victor Peppard, in “Norman Mailer in the Light of Russian Literature,” connects the double-named narrator Harry Hubbard of Mailer’s *Harlot’s Ghost* with the “slippery and pathologically unreliable Humbert Humbert” (Peppard 187).

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