Will Norman, extracted chapter from *Nabokov, History and the Texture of Time* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 104-129.

ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT VERSION

**CHAPTER 5**

**Freudian time: *Lolita*, psychoanalysis and the Holocaust**

**I**

About two thirds of the way through Nabokov’s 1957 novel, *Pnin*, the eponymous character has a chance conversation with another Russian émigré living in the United States, in which he is reminded of the death of a girl he had loved in his youth. Pnin and Mira Belochkin had courted in pre-Revolutionary St Petersburg before the Civil War of 1918-22 separated them. “History broke their engagement,” explains the narrator who, we have learned by this point, takes a malicious pleasure in relating Pnin’s misfortunes.[[1]](#endnote-1) Pnin is on holiday with a group of colleagues, friends, and fellow émigrés, but rather than join them for tea, he stumbles off into the woods in search of solitude. The memories of Mira, which he has spent years trying to banish, are inexorably present, and what follows is the most explicit passage Nabokov ever wrote in his fiction about the Holocaust:

One had to forget – because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one’s lips in the dusk of the past. And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one’s mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again, led away by a trained nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower-bath with prussic acid, burned alive in a pit on a gasoline-soaked pile of beechwood. (112-13)

It is crucial that we bear the narrator in mind as we read these disturbing sentences, for it is easy to slip into the idea that these are Pnin’s words. They describe, within the world of the novel, his thoughts. The words however, the lyrical heart beating in the dusk of the past, the alliteration of “sham shower,” the *aesthetics* of this passage, are someone else’s, a Professor of Russian literature at Waindell College. In fact, Pnin writes in a letter earlier in the novel “Why not leave their private sorrows to people? Is sorrow not, one asks, the only thing in the world people really possess?” (43). We are, then, in a position to read this articulation of Pnin’s thoughts as a direct violation of his deepest convictions. Not only this, but the narrator also tells us, just before this passage, that “if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira’s death were possible” (112). What follows then – the enumeration of the multiple possibilities of Mira’s death – is, in a sense, the attempt to abolish Pnin’s own conscience, his own consciousness.

How then do we respond to this passage? Before we congratulate ourselves on our pity for Pnin we need to remember that it may well be due, in large part, to our appreciation of the lyrical beauty which contaminates these lines, and its fastidious form. Then we need to remember that we are participating in the destruction of Pnin’s own consciousness, and in the perpetuation of his lover’s murder in his mind. Theodor Adorno, in what has now become a critical cliché, claimed that poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric, and this section of *Pnin* is addressed directly to this very question, about the ethical costs of the encounter between aesthetics and historical memory.[[2]](#endnote-2) It is plausible to suggest that Nabokov *had* to create this barbaric narrator in order to be able to write of the Holocaust in his art and thus to acknowledge the faultline scarring the twentieth-century historical landscape. This ethical impossibility and yet absolute necessity of writing the Holocaust, I will suggest in this chapter, is one of the chief preoccupations of Nabokov in his fiction from this period.

This passage in *Pnin* is, however, part of a broader set of problems concerning the ways history determines the subjective experience of time. In this case, Pnin consciously shields himself from history, constructing a space around it – before it is bridged by the novel’s narrator, who brings that deathly trauma straight into his present. It is no coincidence that this anamnestic structure which finds the traumatic past imposing itself, uninvited, upon the psychic present resembles that elucidated by Sigmund Freud. Pnin’s question “Why not leave their private sorrows to people?” is actually part of a letter about a Freudian psychiatrist, Dr. Eric Wind, who has seduced his wife. In this psychoanalytic sense, *Pnin*’s narrator does the job of the Freudian analyst in bringing up those memories of Mira Belochkin which Pnin had “taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember” (112). Pnin, we know from several episodes in the novel, is extremely skeptical of psychoanalytic discourse. It may well be that the narrator is too, except that he can also see what literature can gain from Freud, and is ready to exploit the structures of psychoanalytic theory in writing his novel, despite the ethical objections.

This is not only a passage about the ethics of writing the Holocaust, then, but also one about the ethics of deploying psychoanalytic discourse for aesthetic ends in fiction. At various moments in this novel, *Pnin* is caught thinking about precisely the things he is trying not to think about, and in fact this is not the first time Mira has intruded on his consciousness. At the end of the first chapter, as Pnin gives a lecture, he looks up to find characters from his past in the audience, “murdered, forgotten, unrevenged, incorrupt, immortal, many old friends were scattered throughout the dim hall among more recent people” (23). Included in this crowd is “a dead sweetheart of his” whom we do not yet know to be Mira, “shyly smiling, sleek dark head inclined, gentle brown gaze shining up at Pnin from under velvet eyebrows” (23). So when, in that unsettling passage describing her death(s), we hear about Mira’s “eyes, that smile,” we have met them before. We also know that, though Pnin had “taught himself . . . never to remember,” there are some elements of the past over which he has no control in the present; at least no conscious control.

What I have been describing is a moment in which two discourses, of the Holocaust and of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, engage each other. This relatively explicit encounter in *Pnin* will serve in this chapter as an introduction to the more complex negotiations of *Lolita* (1955), the novel written immediately before it.[[3]](#endnote-3) The coupling of psychoanalysis with questions of Holocaust guilt and complicity in *Pnin* represents a return to territory more tentatively mapped in *Lolita*, and if we must put *Pnin* aside now it is only in order that we might explore this ground in more detail, and in doing so reorientate our reading of Nabokov’s divisive masterpiece.

In incorporating the Holocaust and psychoanalysis into the composition of *Lolita* and then *Pnin* between 1948 and 1956, Nabokov was responding to very contemporary concerns.After an incremental escalation in state sponsored anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany, the “Final Solution” was implemented between 1942 and 1945, and realization of the extent of the extermination camps was a gradual one, dating from their liberation in 1945 through the much-publicized Nuremberg trials to at least the end of the decade.[[4]](#endnote-4) Although Freud died in 1939, it was the late 1940s and early 1950s which saw the most widespread acceptance and application of his thought in the United States, a time described by Nathan Hale, Jr. as “the golden age of popularization.”[[5]](#endnote-5) In addition to their historical specificity, however, both of these discourses have a reflexive relation to temporality, in that they both had a considerable impact upon the ways in which temporal relations could be conceived, and in particular upon contemporary debates about free will and the determining power of the past over the present. By historicizing *Lolita* within these contexts we stand to learn something new about the way that its temporal and rhetorical structures function. From this perspective it is impossible, as we shall see, to read Humbert Humbert’s voice, his attempts at exculpation, and his narrative of temporal repetition and determinism, without taking into account the massive debt he owes to Freud, or his responses to the Holocaust. To pursue these ends means taking seriously Nabokov’s own explicit coupling of Freudian psychoanalysis and totalitarianism.[[6]](#endnote-6) In *Speak, Memory* he refers to “the police-state of sexual myth” and observes: “what a great mistake on the part of dictators to ignore psychoanalysis – a whole generation might easily have been corrupted that way!” (230). In *Bend Sinister* we see a psychoanalytic institute which does corrupt children, by encouraging them to take out their aggressive instincts on the weak (this is where Krug’s son, David, is carelessly murdered through an administrative error). Here, already, we find signs of the links between Freud and the Holocaust which are developed by Nabokov in his writing over the following years.

As elsewhere in this study, I am here transgressing once more on Nabokov’s own edicts about how to read his fiction. The injunction against historicizing has already been discussed, but in this chapter I am exploring Nabokov’s engagement with the one figure he detested above all others – Sigmund Freud, or, as he called him, “the Viennese witchdoctor.” This deserves some comment, because it raises relevant questions about what constitutes a “Freudian reading.” It is well known that throughout the 1960s, in the introductions he wrote for his translated Russian works, and in the interviews which were collected in *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov repeatedly warned against Freudian readings of his works. “All my books should be stamped: Freudians keep out” he wrote in the introduction to *Bend Sinister* (xii).[[7]](#endnote-7) However, it is important that we understand the kind of crude psychoanalytic criticism often attempted in the American academy during this time, in which readers positioned themselves as analysts, interpreting narrative as raw psychoanalytical data, in order to be able to reconstruct the unconscious of either individual characters, or the author. This is emphatically not the kind of reading I propose to pursue here, but it is very much the kind of reading which Nabokov had in mind when he wrote of Freudian criticism, and which plays a very significant role in the construction of *Lolita*. In fact, both *Pnin* and *Lolita* demand a quite detailed knowledge of Freud and contemporary psychoanalytic practice from the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s – a degree of knowledge which many Americans would have possessed, given the extent to which Freudian discourses had permeated the culture at this time. There is various evidence that Nabokov himself read widely among the works of Freud, including his own admission of “bookish familiarity” (*SO*,23) with the figure, as well as his wife’s comment, in a letter, that “he actually read *many* of Freud’s works.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Even so, Nabokov critics have generally avoided thinking seriously about how his work engages the structures and recurrent concerns of psychoanalysis, and in doing so have neglected probably the most important influence over his fiction from this period.[[9]](#endnote-9)

**II**

That references and parodies of Freudian psychoanalytic discourse are to be found throughout the pages of *Lolita* cannot be contested.[[10]](#endnote-10) That this same discourse underpins the deepest structural and ethical concerns of the novel remains unaccounted for in the voluminous scholarship dedicated to it. This trend can be traced as far back as F.W. Dupee, who in one of the most important early pieces of criticism on *Lolita*, went as far as to acknowledge Nabokov’s engagement with Freud but then to dismiss it as tangential to more pressing aesthetic issues. Along with another influential early reader of *Lolita*, Lionel Trilling, he assumed that the parodies of psychoanalysis are an end in themselves, just another element of Nabokov’s literary gamesmanship. His disavowal of Freud’s place in *Lolita* assumed that Humbert’s mockery of psychoanalysis excludes the possibility of genuine engagement with it:

Considering the weird shapes of sexuality that *Lolita* assumes, the novel might appear to invite Freudian interpretations of the usual kind. Fathers want to sleep with their daughters, daughters with their fathers. The reverse of any such intention is the burden of *Lolita*. By parading the theme of incest, with drums and banners, Mr. Nabokov makes it ridicule itself out of existence so far as *Lolita* is concerned; and the same holds for all the other evidences of popular Freudianism with which the tale is strewn.[[11]](#endnote-11)

For Dupee, as for so many critics of this period, the junction of psychoanalysis and fiction-writing involves importing mythical motifs and Oedipal anxieties into the novel at the level of plot. To have his narrator do this ironically, as Humbert does, is then to disarm Freudianism by turning it upon itself, to develop a consciousness of the unconscious, or, as Dupee writes, “make it ridicule itself out of existence.” This, essentially, has been the position assumed by the majority of critics writing on *Lolita*.[[12]](#endnote-12) It is easy to forget, however, that Freud also helped to birth the modernist unreliable narrator in his accounts of deceitful, manipulative and treacherous patients. If the dismissal of Freud is invited by Humbert’s sending up of Freudian symbolism (“we must remember that a pistol is the Freudian symbol of the Ur-father’s central forelimb” [216]), does that mean the reader should meekly submit to his authority? Is there not an obligation here, as elsewhere in *Lolita*, to attempt a resistant reading that probes Humbert’s motivations for speaking in the way he does, and interrogates his rhetoric?

In order to understand what Humbert may have to gain from appropriating psychoanalytic discourse we need to place *Lolita* within the context of popular Freudianism in the 1940s and 50s, and the public debates surrounding it. Among the many tourist sites which Humbert and Dolores visit on their first tour of the United States, sandwiched between “ante-bellum homes” (popularized, as Humbert makes clear, by the film of *Gone with the Wind*) and “a patch of beautifully eroded clay,” is “the Menninger Foundation, a psychiatric clinic, just for the heck of it” (156). As so often, Nabokov invites us to pass over the most revelatory details, and this particular throw-away provides an interesting link to Humbert’s deeper structural strategies. Karl Menninger was a name known to many Americans at the time *Lolita* was written, being one of the United States’ most prominent populizers of Freudian psychoanalysis.[[13]](#endnote-13) The Menninger Foundation was established in 1941 and the following year initiated a training program which had by 1946, when Humbert visits with his captive, become the largest in the world. The incongruity of this being included in the tourists’ itinerary, alongside national parks and dusty museums, is evaded by Humbert’s “for the heck of it” and yet having noted the way that his voice is saturated with the terminology of psychoanalysis throughout the novel, perhaps we should not be so surprised at this pilgrimage. We know, for instance, that the threat of having Dolores taken into such an establishment is one of the ways Humbert keeps her from telling the secrets of their life together: “In plainer words, if we two are found out, you will be analyzed and institutionalized, my pet, *c’est tout*” (151). However, the Menninger reference takes us even further than this sinister realization.

Menninger was best known for his then controversial views on the relationship between psychoanalysis and criminality, first outlined in *The Human Mind* (1930), which centered on his demands for many criminals to be treated sympathetically through psychoanalysis rather than punished as social outcasts.[[14]](#endnote-14) His idiosyncratic reading of Freud (whom he travelled to visit in 1934) helped him to forge a utopian vision of psychoanalysis’s humane mission. In a lecture delivered to the American Psychiatric Association in 1959 he gave a retrospective analysis of Freud’s influence on what he called “the new psychiatry,” which had achieved such success in the American post-war:

Freud’s great courage led him to look honestly at the evil in men’s nature. But he persisted in his researches to the bottom of the chest and discerned that potentially love is stronger than hate, that for all its core of malignancy, the nature of man can be transformed with the nurture and dispersion of love. This was the hope that Freud’s discoveries gave us. This was the spirit of the new psychiatry.[[15]](#endnote-15)

What better summary could there be of the reading of *Lolita* which ultimately places faith in Humbert’s claims at the end of the novel to have truly realized his love for Dolores, to have regretted his theft of her childhood, to have reformed himself? This “moral apotheosis” (5) as John Ray, Jr. calls it, has been taken seriously by a significant number of *Lolita*’s critics.[[16]](#endnote-16) My own argument is that this is Humbert’s last, sick joke on the reader, and that this structure of moral regeneration through narration, the “talking cure,” forms Nabokov’s response to a corrupt psychoanalytic practice as popularized in the United States after the war. The possibility that such practices were being exploited by criminals and their lawyers was repeatedly discussed in the press, and even articulated by Nabokov himself in a 1968 interview, in which he voiced his concern about the “dangerous ethical consequences” of psychoanalysis “such as when a filthy murderer with the brain of a tapeworm is given a lighter sentence because his mother spanked him too much or too little – it works both ways.”[[17]](#endnote-17) In 1956, Alfred Kazin wrote in an article on Freud for the *New York Times Magazine* of “people who have confused their urges with art, have learned in all moral crises to blame their upbringing rather than themselves.”[[18]](#endnote-18) This, presumably, was written before he had read (and reviewed) *Lolita*, and yet the idea of a man confusing art and desire, who attempts to shift responsibility for these desires onto a determining past, is uncannily apposite in its application to the novel. In *Lolita*, then, Humbert’s visit to the Menninger Foundation with Dolores signifies more than tourism, and indicates the importance of psychoanalysis to his rhetorical and narrative design of exculpation through recourse to the determining power of the past.

Freudianism, at the peak of its popularity in the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s, was conceived as harbinger of both social modernity and literary modernism. In addition though, psychoanalytic theory took the narrating of subjectivity, and the way those narratives are temporalized, as the primary object of its study. Rachel Bowlby has claimed that “after the uncomfortable birth of psychoanalysis, time was no longer what it had been” (76), and this adds a second sense to what Alfred Kazin called “the Freudian Revolution.”[[19]](#endnote-19) Psychological health, in the new thinking, became predicated on our relationship to time: “normality,” one commentator wrote in *The Saturday Review*, “is a vision of man freed from the haunting influence of the buried past which casts its shadow on the present.”[[20]](#endnote-20) In writing *Lolita*, Nabokov was responding partly to the way Freud has been positioned historically – his modernity – but he was also exploring this psychoanalytic model of subjective time which posits enormous doubts over the individual’s ability to control, rationalize or take possession of their own experience of the past.[[21]](#endnote-21) This way of thinking about time makes it very difficult to think about progress and the future. As Philip Weinstein has written, this dimension of Freudian time “is backwards orientated. Past contains the secret of present; psychoanalysis has only a thin sense of the future. Analysis gets underway in the conflicted now, working tirelessly backward. One could say that psychoanalysis does not begin until the premises fuelling the realist plot are bogged down in failure.”[[22]](#endnote-22) It is this “thin sense of the future,” its “backwards orientated” nature, which inform the narrative structures of *Lolita*, as well as its formidable ethical problems.

This “backwards orientated” Freudian temporality, both modern and modernist, is perhaps most crudely in evidence through the narrative mechanism which has Humbert’s desire for Dolores predicated upon his erotic experiences with Annabel Lee on the beach as a child. As he states on the very first page of the novel, Annabel was Dolores’s “precursor”: “In point of fact there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child” (9). This is Freudian narrative territory (childhood sexual trauma repeated as perverse sexual development in the adult), rehearsed in the two most famous of his case histories, of Dora and the Wolf Man. Inevitably, this transgression is consciously paraded by Humbert later in the novel:

The able psychiatrist who studies my case – and whom by now Dr. Humbert has plunged, I trust, into a state of leporine fascination – is no doubt anxious to have me take my Lolita to the seaside and have me find there, at last, the “gratification” of a lifetime urge, and release from the “subconscious” obsession of an incomplete childhood romance with the initial little Miss Lee.

Well, comrade, let me tell you that I *did* look for a beach, though I also have to confess that by the time we reached its mirage of gray water, so many delights had already been granted me by my traveling companion that the search for a Kingdom by the Sea, a Sublimated Riviera, or whatnot, far from being the impulse of the subconscious, had become the rational pursuit of as purely theoretical thrill. (167)

This appears to be an example of that act of disarming psychoanalytic theory, in which to become conscious of its application is to become free from its determining power. Such arguments about the distinction between conscious and subconscious knowledge may indeed prove crucial to the psychiatrist Humbert anticipates, or indeed the clumsy Freudian critics which Nabokov has in mind here. For our purposes, however, it is beside the point, for the temporal structure of compulsive repetition remains in place regardless (Humbert *does* look for the beach), and is in fact the governing structural principle for the entire novel. In this sense, while he nullifies the content of Freudian psychoanalysis through parody, he is simultaneously borrowing and exploiting its formal uses to the full. This, of course, is also what Nabokov’s detractors have always accused him of – a gratuitous formalism emptied of meaningful content.

At this point we can turn to Freud’s own writings in order to make a distinction which will become important for our reading of *Lolita*. This is between the time of the unconscious, about which he wrote briefly and yet directly, and the temporal structure of psychoanalytic theory which underpins all his writing. Freud’s key statement on the time of the unconscious is made in the important essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” in which he initiates the disassociation of time and human thought:

As a result of certain psycho-analytic discoveries we are to-day in a position to embark on a discussion of the Kantian theorem that time and space are “necessary forms of human thought.” We have learnt that unconscious mental processes are in themselves “timeless.” This means in the first place that they are not ordered temporally, that time does not change them in any way and that the idea of time cannot be applied to them. (*SE*,18:28)

We are by now familiar with this particular model, which finds an insulated location uncontaminated by temporality and therefore immune to its effects. It is, of course, Nabokov’s aesthetic ideal as well as Freud’s unconscious, and we can see how in both cases this space has an exclusively theoretical existence, being inaccessible to practical investigation. While for psychoanalysis the unconscious is only manifested through its temporal symptoms, similarly fiction is only manifest in text which is read, circulated and considered within time and history. To this extent, then, the integrity of both Freud and Nabokov is invested in the same structure, which always and inevitably opens up doubts about the mutual relationship between theory and practice. If we now bring *Lolita* back into consideration, it becomes clear that Humbert’s chief preoccupation is the attempt (and failure) to evade that disjunction between theory and practice, while ultimately displacing the timeless Freudian unconscious of cliché with the timeless aesthetics evoked in its final lines, “the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (309).

In temporal terms, Humbert performs his role as the typical pervert of psychoanalytic theory, as elucidated by Julia Kristeva: “the pervert plays with outside-time; reifying it in the part-objects that he ritualistically uses to respond to his sexual needs.”[[23]](#endnote-23) As he acknowledges himself, however, “time moves ahead of our fancies” (111). Our experience of Humbert can only be through his own narrative, and it is his mediation between pervert and narrator, his entrance into temporal discourse, which must concern us. This is the event which Kristeva describes as the moment when “the analysand is invited to do with words what the pervert is invited to do with things (and with people whom are reduced to mere things). He is invited to *stage* his unconscious.”[[24]](#endnote-24) This act of “staging” is nothing less than the novel itself. The special quality of *Lolita*’s narrator is that he remains both pervert and analysand, so Humbert’s attempts to reify words just as he wished to reify Dolores as nymphet, necessarily involve a critical tension between time and timelessness.

Humbert’s staging of his unconscious in this mock psychoanalytical case-study, his picking over of the past in order to resolve his own guilty anxieties, brings us to the second model of Freudian time – the temporal structure which underpins the whole of psychoanalytic theory as Freud formulated it. The key problem held in common by the theory and by Humbert is their inherent futurelessness. We have already seen how Freud firstly excludes the possibility of the future producing any kind of productive meaning in relation to the unconscious, since he claims that it is not subject to time at all. In a broader sense, though, in the descriptions of psychological processes and psychoanalytical treatment which make up so much of his work, he insists that the psychological present is always determined by the past. As Menninger summarized in *The Human Mind*, Freud “reaffirmed the law of *psychic determinism* – that is, nothing psychological happens by chance, but always and only as the result of pre-existing and determining factors, which may or may not be evident or discoverable.”[[25]](#endnote-25) *uHum*More explicitly relevant to our reading of Humbert’s discourse, Freud postulated that the defining moment in determining adult sexual behavior was “the play of influences which governs the evolution of infantile sexuality till its outcome in perversion, neurosis or normal sexual life” (*SE*,7:172). Furthermore, the treatment for such complexes took place through recourse to the past, and indeed often involved a repetition of it, to the extent that past and present entered into a strangely entangled series of relationships. Even the objective of psychoanalytic treatment was little more than an ability to continue bourgeois life while accommodating the past.

The work which most effectively foregrounds Freud’s problem with the future is *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which he addresses the fallacy of dreams being able to predict the future:

It would be truer to say instead that they give us knowledge of the past. For dreams are derived from the past in every sense. Nevertheless the ancient belief that dreams can foretell the future is not wholly devoid of truth. By picturing our wishes as fulfilled, dreams are after all leading us into the future. But this future, which the dreamer pictures as the present, has been moulded by his indestructible wish into the perfect likeness of the past. (*SE*,5:621)

As Malcolm Bowie writes in his commentary on this passage, “dreams cancel the future by seizing its desired contents and offering them up to an all-devouring ‘now.’ Dreams are guilty of serious temporal fraud.”[[26]](#endnote-26) This is Freud’s account of why, as far as psychoanalysis is concerned, the possibility of conceiving a dynamic future is always limited by its disabling dependence on the past. If we follow his equation of dreams with fantasy, a picture of “our wishes as fulfilled,” there emerges something resembling a creative failure that returns us to Humbert’s inability to imagine an authentic future for Dolores.[[27]](#endnote-27) He writes, at the end of his first description of his pedophilic desires, “let them play around me forever. Never grow up” (21), and this introduces a thread of fantasies of futurelessness interlacing the novel. When he first thinks of marrying Charlotte in order to seduce Dolores, he imagines that “upon a succession of balconies a succession of libertines, sparkling glass in hand, toasted the bliss of past and future nights” (71). The coupling of past and future is quite pointed here, since they are for Humbert as interchangeable as the faceless libertines on their infinite balconies. Similarly, his fantasies of fatherhood reveal a disturbing vision of replication:

the thought that with patience and luck I might have her produce eventually a nymphet with my blood in her exquisite veins, a Lolita the Second, who would be eight or nine around 1960, when I would still be *dans la force de l’âge*; indeed the telescopy of my mind, or un-mind, was strong enough to distinguish in the remoteness of time a *vieillard encore vert* – or was it green rot? – bizarre, tender, salivating Dr. Humbert, practicing on a supremely lovely Lolita the Third the art of being a granddad. (174)

It is hard to think of a clearer example of the Freudian process by which “the wish makes use of an occasion in the present to construct, on the pattern of the past, a picture of the future.”[[28]](#endnote-28) In this case it is useful to evoke Jacques Derrida’s distinction between “*futur*” and “*l’avenir*,” in which *futur* represents the planned, the foreseeable, the scheduled, while *l’avenir* indicates an authentic future which cannot be predicted or envisaged before its arrival.[[29]](#endnote-29) The common temporality of Freud and Humbert, I am suggesting, is incapable of openness to *l’avenir*, the indeterminate. Instead, Humbert uses *futur* as form of mind control over Dolores, as when “every morning, during our yearlong travels I had to devise some expectation, some special point in time and space for her to look forward to” (150). Humbert’s world, in which he also forces his captive to live, is then one in which the possibility of a dynamic, unforeseeable future has been erased, replaced by an endlessly homogenous serial time (of a type we are now familiar with from our reading of *Bend Sinister*). In the sense that childhood can be defined by a child’s inherent potentiality, Humbert’s crime against Dolores Haze is to rob her of her future selves, and thus of her identity.

By acknowledging the role of Freudian psychoanalytic discourse in *Lolita*’s structural and rhetorical strategies we are also opening up new approaches to the novel’s ethical problems. Since the publication of Ellen Pifer’s seminal *Nabokov and the Novel* in 1980, much of the most compelling critical work on *Lolita* has in some way addressed the ethics of the novel.[[30]](#endnote-30) Two related problems recur persistently in the attempts to construct a position on *Lolita*’s ethics. The first of these is deeply implicated in narrative temporality, for readers must make a judgment on the question of change in the novel, on the relationship between the Humbert who perpetrates his crimes and the one who claims to narrate them in repentance. The second problem involves the ways in which readers resist the seductive narrative voice, the position they assume in relation to it. Humbert often addresses the reader directly in *Lolita* (“Reader! *Bruder!*” [262]), making strenuous demands for identification with his eroticization of both text and girl: “I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay” (57). The fear of complicity has haunted all readers of *Lolita* since Lionel Trilling worried in 1958 that “in the course of reading the novel we have come virtually to condone the violation it presents.”[[31]](#endnote-31) The point I wish to make, though, is that these are also precisely the concerns of psychoanalytic discourse and treatment in its anxieties about the possibility of “cure” through mechanisms of repetition and working through, and about the relationship between analyst and analysand.

The starting point for Freud’s writing on repetition is his 1914 essay “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through,” where he introduced the notion of a distinction between the analysand remembering and acting out the past: “We may say that the patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory, but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing he is repeating it” (*SE*,12:150). We must remember that Humbert is not *subject* to Freudian discourse here, but appropriating it for his own means. His narration in *Lolita* is a simultaneous remembering *and* repeating of his seduction and loss of Dolores, which collapses the two into each other and undermines their temporal distance. This is the structure assumed by the formalist distinction between *fabula* and *siuzhet* in the novel. When Humbert writes, then, in narrating his time in Beardsley with Dolores, “I am anticipating a little, but I cannot help running my memory all over the keyboard of that school year” (191), he is giving us not only an example of narration-as-performance, or “acting-out,” but also a visceral sense of his own pleasure at doing so. This pleasure also applies, we must suspect, to the most tearfully tragic episodes in the novel. The narrative is itself full of deferrals, such as the many “slow motion” passages dwelling lyrically on Dolores’s body and movements, designed to prolong this pleasure to the extent that it begins to assume a teleology as fake as that of the road trip Humbert takes her on, in which “I did my best to give her the impression of ‘going places,’ of rolling on to some definite destination.” *Lolita*’s purported narrative destination, Humbert’s “moral apotheosis” (5) is fraudulent to core, and his final achievement is that in concluding he is always about to tell his story again, to enjoy both Dolores and *Lolita* one more time. This is, in Freudian terms, a “negative therapeutic reaction” in which the patient strategically evades successful treatment for the very reason that it would lead to recovery and the termination of symptoms demanded by the superego for its pleasure.[[32]](#endnote-32) The tradeoff between successful psychoanalytic treatment and successful novel is one brought up in John Ray, Jr.’s foreword when he remarks that “had our demented diarist gone, in the fateful summer of 1947, to a competent psychopathologist, there would have been no disaster; but then, neither would there have been this book” (5). Seen from this perspective, *Lolita*’s recursive success as aesthetic artifact is entirely dependent upon its failure as a talking cure. However, John Ray’s introduction fails to acknowledge how analysis itself, as Peter Brooks reminds us, is “inherently interminable, since the dynamics of resistance and the transference can always generate new beginnings in relation to any possible end.”[[33]](#endnote-33)

This brings us to the second problem, that of the role which the reader adopts in relation to Humbert’s performance. In this instance it will be useful to refer to one of Freud’s famous case-histories (one which provides a model for *Lolita* in a number of ways), “Fragments of an Analysis of Hysteria,” more commonly known by the name of its subject, Dora.[[34]](#endnote-34) In this essay, Freud outlines offers a definition of “transference,” a key term in his psychoanalytic vocabulary, through recourse to textual metaphors which position the analyst as reader, or bibliographer, of his patient’s text:

What are transferences? They are new editions or facsimiles of the impulses and phantasies which are aroused and made conscious during the progress of the analysis; but they have this peculiarity, which is characteristic for their species, that they replace some earlier person by the person of the physician. To put it another way: a whole series of psychological experiences are revived, not as belonging to the past, but as applying to the person of the physician at the present moment. Some of these transferences have a content which differs from that of their model in no respect whatever except for the substitution. These then – to keep to the same metaphor – are merely new impressions or reprints. Others are more ingeniously constructed; their content has been subjected to a moderating influence – to *sublimation*, as I call it – and they may even become conscious, by cleverly taking advantage of some real peculiarity in the physician’s person or circumstances and attaching themselves to that. These, then, will no longer be new impressions, but revised editions. (*SE*,7:116)

Such a passage, I think, forces us once again to confront the uncomfortable truth about Humbert’s voice in *Lolita*, that it constitutes a second attempt at seduction, not of Dolores, but of the reader.[[35]](#endnote-35) It has long been a source of contempt for Freud’s many critics and detractors that he flattered himself to assert the frequency of occasions when his patients fell in love with, desired, and tried to seduce him. Seen in this light, Humbert’s own sycophantic appeals to the “learned reader,” the extravagance of his “fancy prose style,” look much more like flirtation. We have already noted the strategic deferral of completion inherent in the novel’s narrative construction, but we can also add that, as Adam Phillips has suggested, flirtation itself carries with it an “implicit wish to sustain the life of desire” (xvii-xviii), a kind of playing for time (Humbert coyly pleads with the “Gentlewomen of the Jury”: “allow me to take just a tiny bit of your precious time!”).[[36]](#endnote-36) The passage from “Dora” also makes that crucial connection between transference and literariness which makes up part of my argument here. On one level Nabokov even seems to create a kind of literal joke out of Freud’s textual metaphor, as he has Humbert revise an edition of his own diaries, as well as Charlotte’s letter, for our literary consumption. More importantly, though, Freud’s textual metaphor, with its reprints and revised editions, reinforces the sense in which the analysand remains governed by the desire to reproduce an inaccessible original text.[[37]](#endnote-37) This, incidentally, is how Nabokov reads Proust’s *À la recherche*, as a copy of the ideal text which exists only in Marcel’s consciousness (*LL*, 211). In the same way, *Lolita* can only ever be an edition of Humbert’s ecstatic memories, in perpetual mourning for its lost original.

Nabokov will have been familiar with Freudian transference from his reading of Dora, if not elsewhere, but the fraught relationship between analyst and analysand, sexually charged by transference, was, by the time he wrote *Lolita*, one of the standard tropes of Hollywood cinema as well as pulp fiction. Transference, in other words, as well as being assumed in thousands of psychotherapy sessions throughout the nation, was also the common property of mass culture.[[38]](#endnote-38) The discourse of the analysand, it is useful to remember, was *expected* to be seductive, sexually explicit and deceitful. “At what point,” asks Adam Phillips, “in listening to a life-story, does he [the analyst] call the police?”[[39]](#endnote-39) Though this precise question was played out literally on several occasions in fiction and film of the 1940s and 50s, it is also the one which hangs over readers of *Lolita* up to the present day. There is, of course (and as Humbert reminds us quite early on), that other staple of sensationalism, the cold-blooded revenge murder, to look forward to at the novel’s conclusion. One might safely call the police then, without fear of losing the pleasure of the narrative. By the time Humbert has killed Quilty, however, it is far too late to help Dolores, whose childhood has already been destroyed. In *Lolita*, with both Humbert and Dolores dead as we begin the story, it’s always too late to call the police.

It is worth considering, then, what Freud himself says about the handling of transference, and the question of judgment: “We render the compulsion harmless, and indeed useful, by giving it the right to assert itself in a definite field. We admit it into the transference as a playground in which it is allowed to expand in almost complete freedom” (*SE*,12:154). There is a painful irony in the idea of allowing Humbert loose in the playground, especially given that it is Dolores’s very absence from it, “the absence of her voice from that concord” of children at play, that he uses in constructing his final bid for redemption on the last pages (308). And yet, in reading *Lolita*, in admiring the dazzling styles and the lyrical beauty of the work, are we not doing exactly as Freud recommended by granting it a degree of autonomy, or “the right to assert itself in a specific field”? Fiction, we can argue, is a “specific field,” securely sealed from the world of time, of cause and effect, and of real suffering. This is more or less what the popular Freudian Theodor Reik wrote about psychoanalysis in 1948 – “here time and space are unimportant, contradictions may coexist, the rigidity of logical thinking disappears. We are in the land of fantasy, of Prospero’s kingdom.”[[40]](#endnote-40) The distance between Prospero’s island of permissive incoherence and “the intangible island of entranced time where Lolita plays with her likes” is clearly a slight one.[[41]](#endnote-41) We are left, ultimately, with a responsibility as readers to resist *Lolita*’s demand for sovereignty and the suspension of judgment, the seduction of timelessness.[[42]](#endnote-42) Tolstoy’s prose in *Anna Karenina*, Nabokov told his students, “keeps pace with our pulses” (*LRL*, 142), but in this case there appear tremendous ethical costs associated with allowing our own temporal instincts to submit to the prose of *Lolita*. The challenge we face here is to disrupt the workings of the psychoanalytic relationship which Humbert is cultivating by beginning the critical work of uncovering the relationship between the temporality of a fictional playground and the social time of historical suffering.[[43]](#endnote-43)

**III**

An opportunity to build such interpretive links is offered by the strange and disturbing passage which follows Humbert’s loss of Dolores to Quilty in Elphinstone. He describes this event as “a side door crashing open in life’s full flight, and a rush of roaring black time drowning with its whipping wind the cry of lone disaster” (253-4), the moment at which his project of temporal containment is breached. The paragraph that follows suggests to us that this “roaring black time” is implicated both with Freudian psychoanalysis and with the Jewish Holocaust:

Singularly enough, I seldom if ever dreamed of Lolita as I remembered her – as I saw her constantly and obsessively in my conscious mind during my daymares and insomnias. More precisely: she did haunt my sleep but she appeared there in strange and ludicrous disguises as Valeria or Charlotte, or a cross between them. That complex ghost would come to me, shedding shift after shift, in an atmosphere of great melancholy and disgust, and would recline in dull invitation on some narrow board or hard settee, with flesh ajar like the rubber valve of a soccer ball’s bladder. I would find myself, dentures fractured or hopelessly mislaid, in horrible *chambres garnies* where I would be entertained at tedious vivisecting parties that generally ended with Charlotte or Valeria weeping in my bleeding arms and being tenderly kissed by my brotherly lips in a dream disorder of auctioneered Viennese bric-à-brac, pity, impotence and the brown wigs of tragic old women who had just been gassed. (254)

The difficulties faced by the reader of this passage seem almost insurmountable. As if it were not enough to deal, throughout the novel, with a deceitful, manipulative and seductive literary stylist as the sole source of authority, Humbert’s narration is here refracted through a recollected dream which simultaneously evokes and resists the kind of psychoanalytic interpretation he consistently derides. As in the cases of Dora and the Wolf Man, a dream from the patient’s past is re-presented years after its first occurrence, offering the tantalizing promise of a key to an even more distant past. Humbert knows all this of course, since, as he reminds us twenty pages later, “I was always a good little follower of the Viennese medicine man” (274). We have the chance, then, to dismiss that promise by moving on swiftly without dwelling on those uncomfortable details – the banal pornographic scenario, the human dismemberment, and the unmistakable allusion to the Nazi gas chambers. I would like to ask, though, what we stand to lose through adopting this approach.

If Humbert’s defense against being outflanked by Freudian hermeneutics is to consciously anticipate its maneuvers in advance, then it is also the very distinctions between active and passive, conscious and unconscious, subject and object which unravel in this passage. The loss of teeth in a dream is one of the great Freudian clichés, one of the four dreams he understood as “typical,” and was readily interpreted by him as symbolic of castration fears (*SE*,4:37; 5:387). Pity and impotence, Humbert assures us, are the dominant emotions here, just as passivity presides over his account of seduction by Dolores. What are we to make, though, of Humbert’s “bleeding arms”? Who is vivisecting whom here? We know of Humbert’s desire to penetrate to the very organs of Dolores Haze, to turn her “inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys” (165), and yet now we are invited to believe it is *him* bleeding as he tenderly bestows with “brotherly lips” kisses upon the women he has exploited, abused and wished dead. This dream exploits the psychoanalytic “dream-disorder of Freudian bric-à-brac” to suspend sense and position its dreamer as both reluctant, powerless voyeur and compassionate saint sharing the suffering of Holocaust victims in the Nazi death camps. The specter of guilty complicity re-emerges, only now we are in the historical realm and the stakes are much higher. Dolores is an absent presence here, “haunt[ing]” Humbert’s sleep by fading into the older figures of Charlotte and Valeria, and thus becoming divested of her nymphetry. No longer an exception, sealed off from adult womanhood, she is now ordinary – that is to say, from Nabokov’s perspective, subject to history.

Thanks to several illuminating articles written over the last fifteen years, we are now much more aware of what Susan Mizruchi has described as “the Holocaust subtext of *Lolita*.”[[44]](#endnote-44) The wigs of the gassed women from the passage we have just discussed is only the most explicit of an intricate network of images which, as Douglas Anderson writes, “seem directly drawn from the spectacle of Europe’s recently liberated extermination camps.”[[45]](#endnote-45) From the American hotels in which “the ashes of our predecessors still lingered in the ashtrays” through to the trains which he and Dolores hear crying in the night “mingling power and hysteria in one desperate scream,” Humbert’s whole narration is shadowed by unspoken knowledge of the Holocaust.[[46]](#endnote-46) This should be not be understood as an exception in Nabokov’s oeuvre, but rather a constant concern running through his fiction and autobiographical writing from 1945 at least as far as *Pnin* in 1957.[[47]](#endnote-47) *Lolita* is more covert about the theme, even if it is more pervasive here than in any other of Nabokov’s works. It is not enough, however, to acknowledge it and move on, in the mistaken assumption that the Holocaust is somehow relegated to temporal backdrop in Nabokov’s fiction (*Pnin*’s passage about Mira’s death alone is evidence enough), or to read it, as Anderson does, as “a new narrative coherence that humanizes the inhumane record” of the twentieth century.[[48]](#endnote-48) My argument is that Nabokov’s engagement with the Holocaust in *Lolita* is intimately bound up with his ethical critique of psychoanalysis, and that together they play a crucial role in the negotiation between historical and aesthetic temporalities. In the remainder of this chapter, then, I will map out briefly two ways in which this relationship between Freud and the Holocaust functions as a contact point between history and fiction: firstly by pursuing questions of historical and narrative determinism which were raised earlier in this chapter, and then by exploring further the notion of complicity.

One of the most painful moments in *Lolita* comes late in the novel, when Dolores makes an apparently innocuous comment about the milometer in Humbert’s car: “‘Oh, look, all the nines are changing into the next thousand. When I was a little kid,’ she continued unexpectedly, “I used to think they’d stop and go back to nines, if only my mother agreed to put the car in reverse” (219). This is connected to Nabokov’s fantasy of reversible time, in which it is possible to traverse time with the ease we normally associate with crossing space. In this case, though, given Dolores’s sexual abuse and captivity, the fantasy takes on additional freight. Despite being only thirteen years old, she is already looking back past her catastrophic encounter with Humbert to when she was “a little kid,” before the fall into time. The milometer is another version of the clock, which as we have seen in relation to *Bend Sinister*, is for Nabokov a tyrannical symbol of homogenous temporality endlessly reproducing itself. The nines becoming zeros here is thus the moment of uncanny return as well as the illusion of progress. Putting the car into reverse will not take us back in this narrative, with the opportunity to offer Dolores another future – perhaps the comfortingly bland one which Humbert briefly imagined for her when he picked her up from camp: “a sound education, a happy and healthy girlhood, a clean home . . .” (111). However, knowing as we do about *Lolita*’s self-conscious location after the Holocaust, we can hardly refrain from thinking about this moment historically too. *Lolita* mentions several gruesomely fatal car crashes, most obviously Dolores’s mother Charlotte, whose head is reduced to “a porridge of bone, brains, bronze hair and blood” (98).[[49]](#endnote-49) Modernity, in the form of the car, is the harbinger of bodily destruction and the digits on the milometer record its inexorable onset as well as the ungraspable escalation in the number of its dead.

Such considerations return us to the mutual failure of Humbert and Freud to imagine a future qualitatively different than the past, one unrepresentable by the steady accumulation of digits on a milometer or the hands of a clock. Adam Phillips summarizes this problem in Freudian temporality: “it is as though, from a psychoanalytic point of view, the future can only be described as, at best, a sophisticated replication of the past, the past in long trousers.”[[50]](#endnote-50) The problem, as Humbert patiently explains for us, is that for fictional characters as for the analysand, there is never any escape from the past, only an endless repetition of it. Thus never will we find Lear reunited with his daughters, and “never will Emma rally, revived by the sympathetic salts in Flaubert’s father’s timely tear” (265). Humbert is not content, however, to restrict his observations to fictional narrative. He goes on to add, “similarly, we expect our friends to follow this or that logical and conventional pattern we have fixed for them . . . Any deviation in the fates we have ordained for them would strike us as not only anomalous but unethical.” Humbert is not much given to discussions of ethics, so we may find this interjection surprising to say the least. If Dolores had followed the logical pattern he had ordained for her she would have been abused until discarded and replaced in his bed by their own daughter. This, of course, is Nabokov’s parody of the Freudian family romance, doomed to perpetuate itself eternally. However, the temporal structure finds correlatives in ideologies of historical time too.

For the clearest indication of this we have only to turn back to Nabokov’s 1947 dystopian novel, *Bend Sinister*, and a conversation between two professors at a meeting convened with the object of deciding whether or not to renounce academic authority to the totalitarian regime. The Professor of Modern history is found refuting an argument put to him by Professors of Economics and Divinity that the future can be predicted on the evidence of the past:

“My client never repeats herself. At least not when people are all agog to see the repetition coming. In fact it is only unconsciously that Clio can repeat herself. Because her memory is too short. As with so many phenomena of time, recurrent combinations are perceptible as such only when they cannot affect us any more – when they are imprisoned so to speak in the past, which *is* the past only because it is disinfected.” (44)

The notion of history repeating itself was, between the mid-forties and mid-fifties, when these two novels were written, an urgently terrifying prospect. Within less than half a decade two European wars had become World Wars, their consecutive numbering indicating how their relationship was conceived as repetition within linear time. If the first had brought with it previously inconceivable slaughter, the second exceeded the limits of the expressible. Partly this was related to the scale and methods employed in Nazi extermination camps, and much of the public discussion of the Holocaust in the years immediately following the war, surrounding the policy of “denazification” and indeed used in justifying the Nuremberg Trials, was the idea that such events must not be allowed to recur in the future. However, the exceeding of the conceivable was also due to the first aggressive use of the atom bomb in 1945, which introduced the possibility of complete annihilation to the popular American consciousness for the first time.[[51]](#endnote-51) World War Three, if the series continued on “that logical and conventional pattern,” would end history altogether. The future, during the immediate post-war, was a newly unstable and contested temporal category.

Looking closely at the *Bend Sinister* passage again, the Professor of History does not completely discount the possibility of history repeating itself at all, asserting that “it is only unconsciously that Clio can repeat itself.” In fact, this qualification turns out to be rather crucial, since his argument is a much humbler one -- that we cannot *predict* history: “to those who watch these events and would like to ward them, the past offers no clues, no *modus vivendi* – for the simple reason that it had none when toppling over the brink of the present into the vacuum it eventually filled” (45). History may indeed repeat itself without being conscious of it. It is virtually impossible that Nabokov could use the word *unconscious* in the 1940s without allusion to Freud and it is this anxiety over the existence of a historical unconscious which hangs over *Bend Sinister* just as it does *Lolita*. This moment conflates psychoanalysis and historical determinism as the two greatest threats to Nabokov’s artistic autonomy since, like his fiction, neither can tolerate contingency, the uncertainties of evolving time. The clues, “the recurrent combinations” necessarily exist, and yet it is too early to piece them together, so the promise of retrospective comprehension will always be proffered. Freud called this *Nachträglichkeit*, or deferred action, and made it central to the practice of psychoanalysis, explaining for example in his “Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psychoanalysis” that “it must not be forgotten that the things one hears are for the most part things whose meaning is only recognized later on” (*SE*, 12:112). The danger is that it will be too late, as is the case in *Lolita:*

I now warn the reader not to mock me and my mental daze. It is easy for him and me to decipher *now* a past destiny; but a destiny in the making is, believe me, not one of those honest mystery stories where all you have to do is keep an eye on the clues. In my youth I once read a French detective tale where the clues were actually in italics; but that is not McFate’s way – even if one does learn to recognize certain obscure indications. (211)

This denial of foreknowledge again invites us to think about our experience of living in time in relation to the temporality of reading. In fact, Humbert carefully stages for us his own moment of deferred realization about Quilty after the event, “with the express purpose of having the ripe fruit fall at the right moment” (272). Three chapters later he does the same without explicitly telling us, as poignant moments from his past with Dolores are resurrected in light of her suffering. These are moments cited by readers of the novel in support of his moral rehabilitation – Humbert’s retrospective realization that “there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate” (284). Taken together with the passage about the French detective story, the implications of all this are clear: responsibility for the future only comes once it has safely become the past.

For Nabokov, who lived with his ethnically Jewish wife through Hitler’s rise to power in Berlin in the 1930s, and whose pre-war Russian stories demonstrate his sensitivity to anti-Semitism as well as to casual brutality inflicted by “ordinary” Germans, the discovery of the extermination camps cannot have been a complete surprise. We can only conjecture what those “certain obscure indications” might have been for him. (Think, for example, of how, in writing *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in the winter of 1938/9, he has V notice “Death to the Jews” scrawled on a wall in a French town [155].) To consider this problem on a historical scale, however, is to evoke the agonizing possibility that signs should have been read earlier – that not only should the Holocaust never be permitted to happen again, but that it should not have been permitted to happen in the first place.

Complicity is one of the chief concerns of *Lolita* and its readers, taking the form of a guilty fear or anxiety which can neither be confirmed nor dispelled. As Naomi Mandel has argued, it is this particular quality of complicity which differentiates it from the charges of collaboration and culpability – while these are subject to judgment, complicity always exists prior to judgment, as the “condition of possibility.”[[52]](#endnote-52) We have already seen how Humbert’s rhetorical and formal designs, borrowed from Freudian psychoanalysis, constantly induce us into complicity with his aesthetics of timelessness and with his crime. In addition I have suggested that Humbert’s Freudian dream raises the specter of his own passive complicity in crimes beyond his abuse of Dolores. These structures of complicity evident everywhere in *Lolita* are deeply historical, for in the years following the end of World War Two and the liberation of the Nazi death camps by Allied troops one question loomed so large across the United States that it stifled public discussion of the Holocaust for several decades – that is, how far does responsibility for this crime reach?[[53]](#endnote-53) The retrospective apportioning of responsibility was a fraught and potentially endless task which occupied not only the courtrooms at the Nuremberg trials and the columns of the newspapers, but also surreptitiously pervaded American culture. While on one hand the easiest answers lay in the apportioning of absolute evil to Adolf Hitler, or at least to the Nazi hierarchy, there were also strong arguments advancing the thesis of culpability on the part of the entire German nation in the Holocaust.[[54]](#endnote-54) Even more disturbing, though, was the possibility that some degree of guilt reached across the Atlantic to the United States, where restrictionist policies on immigration, widespread passive anti-Semitism, and a popular reluctance to break isolationism to enter a European war could now be reviewed with painful hindsight.[[55]](#endnote-55) The implicit question posed by psychoanalysis, about when to call the police on a patient, echoed in another form across the nation – at what point does passivity and deferral shade into complicity?

For an illuminating correlative to Humbert’s narrative voice we can turn to the Nuremberg Trials, which provides one possible model for *Lolita*’s mode of discourse.[[56]](#endnote-56) This is not to claim that the trials provide any kind of master source for the novel, but to advance a more realistic argument about Nabokov’s fictional imagination: that as elsewhere in his works he sought to bring literary history into dialectic relation with contemporary history. The most important and widely reported of the Nuremberg Trials, which included notorious figures in the Nazi hierarchy, took place between 21 November 1945 and 1 October 1946 and dominated the American press. A well-known feature of the trial was the attendance of numerous psychiatrists. As Rebecca West reported, “all the Nazis . . . had been plagued by the attentions of the psychiatrists who haunted Nuremberg Jail, exercising a triple function of priest and doctor and warder, hard to approve. They visited the men in cells and offered themselves as confidants, but performed duties at the behest of the court authorities.”[[57]](#endnote-57)

Humbert’s voice, several critics have noted, finds echoes in Nabokov’s Russian novel *Despair* (*Otchaianie*,1934), as well as in the work of Dostoevsky.[[58]](#endnote-58) However, its characteristic hybridity, operating between florid psychoanalytic confession and legal defense, also finds deep resonance in the voices and circumstances of the Nuremberg Trials. It was one of the psychoanalytically-trained psychiatrists, G.M. Gilbert, who provided the most compelling and widely-read “insider’s” account of the events in his *Nuremberg Diary* (1948). This was later followed by *The Psychology of Dictatorship* (1950), based on the evidence he gathered from interviews with the Nazi leadership at Nuremberg, which sought to provide an explanation for the actions of the leading Nazis through recourse to their childhood experiences as well as performance in various psychiatric tests.

Humbert’s confession, combining abject remorse with self-congratulating performance, recalls striking features found in three of the defendants at Nuremberg: Hans Frank, Rudolf Hess and Hermann Goering. Hans Frank, Governor-General of Poland during the war, embodied Humbert’s claim that “poets never kill” (88). Gilbert describes Frank as a highly educated and literary man given to quoting Schiller and Goethe in his explanations for how the Holocaust could have taken place.[[59]](#endnote-59) Indeed co-defendant Baldur Von Shirach expressed his astonishment to Gilbert at how a man such as him, “who had such an amazing knowledge of art and music and literature . . . could make such statements of outright acquiescence in mass murder.”[[60]](#endnote-60) Frank was one of the few defendants to show remorse for his actions, giving eloquent confessions which nevertheless preserved room for conceited flirtation with his psychiatrist, asking for example “have you ever seen a specimen like me? Extraordinary am I not?”[[61]](#endnote-61) This process of flirtation was unambiguously interpreted by Gilbert as an act of “positive transference.”[[62]](#endnote-62) Furthermore, while Humbert claims that “it was she who seduced me,” and refers several times to the children he desires as “demons,” Frank’s admission of culpability was also mitigated by his insistence that he had been the victim of a Mephistophelean temptation: “Hitler was the devil. He seduced us all in that way.”[[63]](#endnote-63)

Even more striking, in relation to Humbert’s conscious exploitation of psychoanalysis as a means of exculpation and his admission of “an endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists” (34) is the case of Rudolf Hess, Hitler’s deputy in the Nazi party. Gilbert writes of how Hess, just like Humbert, admitted to feigning particular psychological symptoms in order to deceive his psychiatrists. Hess assumed the role of traumatized amnesiac in order to be excused from giving evidence in court, presumably in the hope of being found unaccountable for his actions. On coming clean to the court with a smile, Hess provoked in Von Shirach a comment which would no doubt have pleased Humbert: “well that’s the end of scientific psychology.” Gilbert reports Hess’s reaction: “in quite a cheerful mood, very pleased with himself for having ‘fooled’ everybody.”[[64]](#endnote-64)

Finally, Humbert’s narration also recalls elements of Goering’s trial, and in particular the narcissistic pleasure he gained from finding such an attentive captive audience (after his defense, Goering “made an outright bid for applause”[[65]](#endnote-65)). He also, like Humbert, enjoyed the opportunity to revisit moments from his past, such as the glories of Nazi history, including films of parades and speeches.[[66]](#endnote-66) Humbert, of course, does not have the opportunity to watch footage of Dolores but that does not stop him from wishing (232). Ultimately it is Goering’s appeals to his listener that bring him closest to Nabokov’s creation: “Can you conceive of me killing anybody? Now you are a psychologist. Tell me frankly, do any of us look like murderers?”[[67]](#endnote-67) Humbert similarly appeals to his “learned” readers: “We are unhappy, mild, dog-eyed gentlemen . . . Emphatically, no killers are we” (88).

From this perspective, *Lolita* forms an imaginary response to Ribbentrop’s despairing words at his sentence: “Death! Now I won’t be able to write my beautiful memoirs.”[[68]](#endnote-68) In spite of the remarkable congruences, however, Nabokov need not have read Gilbert or the reviews of his book which filled the American papers in 1948, as *Lolita* was beginning to take shape, in order to draw on the structures of Holocaust complicity. The United States, as he well knew, soon became home to large numbers of German and East European immigrants, whose ambiguous role in Nazi Germany and World War Two remained a constant source of attention and anxiety.[[69]](#endnote-69) Morton M. Hunt’s two-part article for *Nation* in 1949 indicates the kind of concerns which were circulating in public discourse at the time. Entitled “The Nazis Who Live Next Door,” it documents the questioning of German immigrants by the FBI about their involvement with the Nazi party. In a clear rehearsal of the Nuremberg defenses, interviewees expressed their ignorance of the extent of the Holocaust while placing responsibility for their Nazi affiliation with Hitler’s promises of economic recovery. The interviewer found it hard to judge one ex-SA member because he was “a lover of good music,” suggesting once again that culture can mitigate culpability.[[70]](#endnote-70) Such concerns were present in popular culture too, as in, for example, Orson Welles’s *The Stranger* (1946), about an ex-Nazi hiding in a Connecticut town. As Mizruchi has noted, “*Humbert*” is repeatedly confused in *Lolita* with German surnames, while Quilty mistakes him for a German refugee and assures him “this is a gentile’s house.”[[71]](#endnote-71) The inference is clear that Humbert is to be understood as in some sense complicit with the Holocaust.

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Nabokov first experimented with exploring Holocaust complicity in his short story “Conversation Piece, 1945,” a text which is rarely addressed in Nabokov scholarship and which provides an embarrassment to those determined to read the author as unconcerned with contemporary history. The narrator of the story, a writer, is haunted by his unwilling and unintended identification with anti-Semites, Nazi sympathizers and Holocaust deniers. His émigré double, who also bears his name, shadows him throughout Europe, demanding that he return a book of anti-Semitic propaganda. His is invited to a party by an apparently harmless middle-aged lady, but is forced to listen to a German émigré who argues to a sympathetic audience of American bourgeois women that Allied reports of the Holocaust are wildly exaggerated, and that German aggression to the Jews was in any case provoked and therefore understandable. He leaves the party in righteous indignation, but without realizing that he is wearing the man’s hat. The theme of “Conversation Piece, 1945,” is that of a nightmarish and inescapable complicity with the history and politics of tyranny and mass murder, despite every attempt to avoid it. *Lolita* rehearses not only some of its motifs (the malevolent double who, as in Poe’s “William Wilson,” follows the narrator in his international travels; the hospitality of the tasteless, bourgeois American woman) but, more importantly, its concern with the problem of complicity. We might remember how “after careful examination of my conscience” Nabokov broke relations with Roman Jakobson in 1957, after the latter had travelled to Moscow: “Frankly, I am unable to stomach your little trips to totalitarian countries, even if these trips are prompted merely by scientific considerations.” (*SL*,216). The specter of complicity also appears in the 1966 foreword to *The Waltz Invention*, where Nabokov claims that he would not have written the 1939 play in the sixties, during the anti-Vietnam movement, “lest any part of me, even my shadow, might seem thereby to join in those ‘peace’ demonstrations.”[[72]](#endnote-72) Complicity with acts in which we play no direct part was one of Nabokov’s deepest fears.

Most relevant to our discussion, though, is the comment he made in a 1966 interview that pulls together some of our chief concerns in this chapter. Nabokov described the phrase “we all share in Germany’s guilt” as an example of “poshlust,” or vulgar philistinism.[[73]](#endnote-73) Within this category of contemporary “poshlust” he went on to include “Freudian symbolism, moth-eaten mythologies, social comment, humanistic messages, political allegories, overconcern with class or race, and the journalistic generalities we all know” (*SO*, 101). Here the fear and denial of complicity are explicitly associated both with Holocaust guilt and with Freud. “Poshlust,” we must recognize, is not a marker of untruth but of cliché, and it functions as an aesthetic judgment that allows Nabokov to isolate himself from that which might threaten the purity of his own autonomous artistic status. Freudian psychoanalysis, then, not only provided a means by which the guilty could re-experience the pleasures of their crimes while evading responsibility. It also introduced to both modern history and modernist fiction the possibility that we may be guilty for acts of which we are not fully conscious. From a psychoanalytic perspective, there is no point at which we can safely extricate ourselves from guilt. The question *Lolita* poses to its readers as well as to its author, without ever answering, is then this – is the boundary between aesthetics and history, the boundary policed with Nabokov’s concept of “poshlust,” substantial enough to save you?

Turning to the intellectual contexts for *Lolita*’s composition, we do not have to look far to find instances of exactly this question of complicity and literary responsibility being posed in relation to the Holocaust. In three success issues of *Partisan Review* in 1949, a vigorous and at times heated debate was staged over the recent awarding of the Bollingen Prize to Ezra Pound for *The Pisan Cantos*, despite his public anti-Semitism. The committee which awarded the prize included T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, both of whom are subject to satiric allusion in *Lolita*, and Allen Tate, the champion and publisher of Nabokov’s first American novel, *Bend Sinister*. William Barrett, who began the debate with an article attacking the judges’ statement, drew attention to the undeniable relation of Pound’s views and “certain objective facts, like six million Jews dead in Europe, in crematory ovens or battles of extermination; and historical facts like these make it immensely more difficult to perform that necessary aesthetic judgment that separates matter from form in a poem.”[[74]](#endnote-74)

Barrett’s article repeatedly interrogated the position of the New Critics with whom he associated the award, in their “obsess[ion] with formal and technical questions” at the cost of the ethics of content, and ended with him issuing a challenge: “The Pound case enables us to put it to aestheticians in this definite way: How far is it possible, in a lyric poem, for technical embellishments to transform vicious and ugly subject matter into beautiful poetry?”[[75]](#endnote-75) This is of course the provocation to which Nabokov responds in *Lolita*, where calculated rape and child abuse are transformed into brilliant, often ecstatic prose, and where the shadow of the Holocaust falls over the attempt to extricate oneself, untainted, from the reading experience. There should be no doubt that the *Partisan Review* debate was followed by Nabokov as he wrote *Lolita*. In the issue immediately following Allen Tate’s defense of his judgment, in which he argued awkwardly that “I cannot suppose that the anti-Semitism of the cantos will be taken seriously by anyone other than liberal intellectuals,” Nabokov published the chapter “First Poem” from his ongoing biographical project.[[76]](#endnote-76) The fact that he approached the journal years later with the idea of serializing *Lolita* there suggests even more: that he understood the novel to be an extension of that very debate provoked by the Pound award over the possibility of maintaining the boundary between aesthetics and history.

For Adorno, famously, that boundary was not enough to save European culture after World War Two. His insistence, in *Negative Dialectics*, on post-Auschwitz culture being contaminated by “the things that happened without resistance in its own countryside” demands that we return to *Lolita* with a renewed resolve to read through Nabokov’s public ahistoricism.[[77]](#endnote-77) Adorno’s claim, that after Auschwitz “we cannot say any more that the immutable is truth, and that the mobile, transitory is appearance,” speaks directly to the novel’s readers.[[78]](#endnote-78) Nabokov’s position, though, despite his public professions to the contrary, was far from unambiguous. For his private meditations on that boundary sealing art from history, we have the opportunity to revisit an extraordinary passage he wrote in a letter to his sister in June 1946:

My dear, however one wants to hide in one’s ivory tower, there are things which wound one too deeply, for example German atrocities, the burning of children in ovens, – children who are just as ravishingly entertaining and loved as our children. I retreat into myself, but I find there such hatred for the German, and for the concentr. camp, for every tyrant, that as a refuge, *ce n’est pas grand chose*.[[79]](#endnote-79)

These words tells us much more than simply that we need to reconsider Dolores’s exclamation to Humbert on her departure from “camp” that “we baked in a reflector oven” (114). Nabokov’s ivory tower has been a constant subject of interrogation in this study. It is the place, following Flaubert, that he recommends in his lectures as a “fixed address” for the writer (*LL*, 371). In *Sebastian Knight*, Sebastian defends his right to parody another writer and “let him drop from the tower of my prose to the gutter below” (46). It is a place where artists can differentiate themselves from the social and transcend the historical (which, as Flaubert puts it to Turgenev, is the “tide of shit . . . beating at its walls”[[80]](#endnote-80)). In Nabokov’s letter, though, we find that the ivory tower “*n’est pas grand chose*,” when faced with history at its most brutal (and he had discovered the previous year that his brother had died in one of the concentration camps which so occupy his mind). This passage suggests to us that the move to the ivory tower is not, as its symbolic logic would suggest, upwards. Rather, it is a “retreat into myself,” a psychological journey inwards which discovers neither the pure timelessness of his aesthetic ideals, nor the timelessness of the unconscious, but the horror of a tyrannical historical temporality.

1. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* (London: Penguin, 1997), 112. Further references are given parenthetically in the text. For a discussion of the cruelty of *Pnin*’s narrator, see Michael Wood, “The Kindness of Cruelty, in *Transitional Nabokov*, ed. Will Norman and Duncan White (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009),238-244. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Adorno, *Prisms*, 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Pnin* was written partly as a way of raising income for the Nabokovs while they searched for a publisher for *Lolita*. Parts of it saw publication before *Lolita*, the first installment, for example, appearing in *The New Yorker* in 1953. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Peter Novick indicates that direct public discussion of the Holocaust remained unusual in the United States until the 1960s, and this sense of repressed recognition may provide one explanation for the covert ways in which it is dealt with in *Lolita*. *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 103. However, particularly after news of his brother’s death, Nabokov had personal reasons to follow what news and comment there was on the Holocaust. See, for example, Hannah Arendt’s 1948 piece for *Partisan Review*, a periodical Nabokov published in the following year. “The Concentration Camps,” *Partisan Review* 15.7 (1948): 743-763. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Nathan G. Hale, Jr., *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans, 1917-1985* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 276. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Leland de la Durantaye devotes some discussion to this question, concluding that “what psychoanalysis shares with Bolshevism is a totalitarian tendency to neglect the rich singular instance in favor of a dangerously hollow generality.” *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For a survey of Nabokov’s public denunciations of Freud, see Jenefer Shute, “Nabokov and Freud: The Play of Power,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 30.4 (1984): 637-650. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Véra Nabokov, quoted in de la Durantaye, *Style is Matter*, 120. David Cohen has also demonstrated that Nabokov makes allusions to specific details in Freud’s works in *Pale Fire*. “My Potential Patients: Origins, Detection and Transference in *Pale Fire* and Freud’s *Case of the Wolf-Man*,” *Zembla*, http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/cohen1.htm. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The most important exception here is Shute, “Nabokov and Freud.” Shute’s analysis of the “territorial struggle” between Freud and Nabokov still provides the most sophisticated commentary on the subject. Others to have written on Freud and Nabokov include: Jeffrey Berman, *The Talking Cure: Literary Representations of Psychoanalysis* (New York: New York University Press, 1985), 212-235; Geoffrey Green, *Freud and Nabokov* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988); Straumann, *Nabokov and Hitchcock*, 201-219. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For a survey of Humbert’s many allusions to Freud, see Berman, *Talking Cure*, 223-34. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. F.W. Dupee, “A Preface to *Lolita*,” *Anchor Review* 2, June 1957: 1-13. Repr. in Page, *Literary Heritage*,90-91. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Wood dissents from this position when he briefly claims that, in parodying Freud, Humbert “really is saying what he pretends he is only pretending to say.” *Magician’s Doubts*, 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Menninger’s first and most famous book, *The Human Mind* (1930), had gone through three editions by the time Nabokov began to write *Lolita* in the late 1940s.*u7masnH* [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Menninger asserted that “ultimately there will be no important administrative difference between ‘asylums’ and ‘jails.’” *The Human Mind* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1937), 451. Menninger was only one of a number of psychiatrists advocating psychoanalytic treatment for criminals. David Abrahamsen explicitly recommended the psychoanalysis of sex offenders while asserting that consensual sex with an underage girl should not be punished. *Crime and the Human Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 198-99. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Karl Menninger, *Sparks*, ed.Lucy Freeman (New York: Crowell, 1973), 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See, for example, Nomi Tamir-Ghez, “The Art of Persuasion in Nabokov’s *Lolita*,” *Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita: A Casebook*, ed. Ellen Pifer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 17-38; Ellen Pifer, *Nabokov and the Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980),165-6; Alexander Dolinin, “Nabokov’s Time Doubling: From *The Gift* to *Lolita*,” *Nabokov Studies* 2 (1995): 37; Maurice Couturier, *Nabokov, ou la cruauté du désir: Lecture psychalanytique* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2004), 244; de la Durantaye, *Style is Matter*, 90. For readings which cast doubt on the sincerity of Humbert’s moral regeneration, see Michael Long, *Marvell, Nabokov: Childhood and Arcadia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 150; Leona Toker, *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989): 208-9; Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *SO*, 116. For a summary of arguments about exploiting psychoanalysis for the purposes of exculpation, see Richard Peters, “Freud and Responsibility,” *Nation*, 185.16 (November 16, 1957): 356. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Alfred Kazin, “The Freudian Revolution Analyzed,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 6, 1956: 37 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Rachel Bowlby, *Shopping with Freud* (London: Routledge, 1993), 76; Kazin, “The Freudian Revolution,” 22. Kazin’s article was part of the flurry of interest in Freud occurring around his centenary and the publication of the first volume of Ernest Jones’ biography. Kazin, like many other journalists at this time, explores Freud’s influence over both modern literature and psychology. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Lawrence Kubie, “Freud and Human Freedom: A Secret Tyranny Unmasked,” *The Saturday Review*, May 5, 1956: 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Articles from the centenary year on the importance of Freud to modernism include: Donald Barr, “Freud and Fiction,” *The Saturday Review*, May 5, 1956: 36; John Ciardi, “Freud and Modern Poetry,” *The Saturday Review*, May 5, 1956: 8. A decade years earlier, Frederick J. Hoffman had established Freud as the most important influence on modern literary aesthetics. *Freudianism and the Literary Mind* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1945).

    Kazin wrote that it was “impossible to think of the greatest names in modern literature and art . . . without realizing our debt to Freud.” “The Freudian Revolution,” 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Philip Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Julia Kristeva, “Freudian Time,” in *The Portable Kristeva*,ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 129. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 129-30 [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Menninger, *The Human Mind*,269 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Malcolm Bowie, *Psychoanalysis and the Future of Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993),18. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Mark Edmundson describes how Freud’s conceptualization of change endorsed imitation and sublimation rather than creative agency. *Towards Reading Freud: Self-Creation in Milton, Wordsworth, Emerson and Sigmund Freud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 48-49. He also argues that “Freud’s thought cannot encompass something new, something not definingly and directly related to the repressed past.” *The Death of Sigmund Freud: Fascism, Psychoanalysis and the Rise of Fundamentalism* (London, Bloomsbury, 2007), 147-48. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. *SE*, 10:148. Anderson cites this passage as an example of “‘past destiny’: a future which we have already witnessed.” “Holocausts in *Lolita*,” 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. One of the clearest explanations of this distinction is given in Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret,* trans. Giacomo Donis, ed. Giacomo Donis and David Webb (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2001), 19-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Some of the most important and influential readers of *Lolita*’s ethics have included: Toker, *Mystery of Literary Structures*, 198-227; Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 141-68; Michael Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, 104-42; de la Durantaye, *Style is Matter*; Ronald Bush, “Tennis by the Book: *Lolita* and the Game of Modernist Fiction,” Norman and White, *Transitional Nabokov*, 265-84. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Lionel Trilling, review of *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, *Encounter*, October 1958. Repr. in Page, *Critical Heritage*, 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *SE*, 19:49-50; 22:109-110. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 109. On Freud’s own doubts about the possibility of a satisfactory termination to analysis, see *SE*,23:216-53. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Both texts focus specifically on the sexual relationship between a young girl and an older man, with both Freud and Humbert assuming a high degree of agency of the part of the female child. Freud’s introduction, in which he acknowledges that “certain doctors . . . would choose to read a case history of this kind not as a contribution to the psychopathology of neuroses, but as a *roman-à clef* written for their own amusement” (*SE*,7:9) foregrounds the generic slippage between case history and novel in *Lolita* as well as providing a model for John Ray, Jr. Several of Humbert’s defenses of his abuse of Dolores find direct correlatives in “Dora,” including the suggestion that the acceptability of “perverted” sexuality is historically and culturally determined (both, for example, cite the widespread practice of perverted acts in the classical world [*SE*,7:50; *Lo*,19]), as well as the foundational assumption of both writers that children desire sexual attention from adults. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Two early readers of *Lolita*, Lionel Trilling and Wayne Booth, both use cognates of the word “seduction” in their descriptions of Humbert’s relationship to the reader. See Trilling, in Page, *Critical Heritage*, 94; Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 390.More recent criticism has tended to deploy different terms, such as “entrapment.” See, for example, Toker, *Mystery of Literary Structures*, 203. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (London: Faber, 1994), xvii-xviii; *Lo*, 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. On Humbert’s anxieties about literary originality and his rewriting of Poe with regard to repetition, see Norman, “*Lolita*’s Time-leaks.” [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. See, for example, two high-profile films of the period: Hitchcock’s *Spellbound* (1945) and Latvia’s *The Snake Pit* (1948). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Phillips, *On Flirtation*, 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Theodor Reik, quoted in Hale, *Rise and Crisis*,131. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. *Lo*, 17.Compare also Humbert’s response to Dolores in bed at The Enchanter Hunters hotel: “The odd sense of living in a brand new, mad new dream world, where everything was permissible, came over me as I realized what she was suggesting” (133). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Note that Freud endorses yielding to the “timeless” quality of the patient’s discourse: “I can only say in favour of the physician’s standpoint that he must be as ‘timeless’ in his approach as the unconscious itself if he wants to learn or achieve anything” (*SE*, 17:10-11). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. *Lolita* has attracted a much wider range of critical attention than any of Nabokov’s other works, with the result that there is a cluster of historicist criticism on the novel. In particular I am building here on two articles which present convincing evidence for the importance of the Holocaust to the novel: Mizruchi, “*Lolita* in History”; Anderson, “Holocausts in *Lolita.*” Others who have recently adopted a more historicist approach to *Lolita* include Paul Giles, “Virtual Eden: *Lolita*, Pornography, and the Perversions of American Studies,” *Journal of American Studies* 34.1 (2000): 41–66; Steven Belletto, “Of Pickaninnies of Nymphets: Race in *Lolita*,” *Nabokov Studies* 9 (2005), 1-17; Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War: From 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009),74-106. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Mizruchi, “*Lolita* in History,” 631. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Anderson, “Holocausts in *Lolita*,” 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. For a survey of such images see ibid., 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. While *Bend Sinister, Lolita* and *Pnin* all make reference to the Holocaust, it is also either alluded to directly, or implicitly acknowledged in the short stories “A Conversation Piece, 1945,” “That in Aleppo Once ...,” and “Signs and Symbols.” As I have discussed in chapter 3, it is also important in *Conclusive Evidence* (1951). See also Maxim Shrayer, “Jewish questions in Nabokov’s art and life,” Connolly, *Nabokov and His Fiction*, 73-91. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Anderson, “Holocausts in *Lolita*,” 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. See, in addition to Charlotte’s death, the photos of head-on collisions studied by Dolores (165); Humbert and Dolores staring at “some smashed, blood-bespattered car with a young woman’s shoe in a ditch” (174); the feigned car crash in which Edward Grammer attempted to conceal the murder of his wife (287-8). Note also that Frank Lasalle, who kidnapped and raped Sally Horner in 1948, was a car mechanic (289). [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Phillips, *On Flirtation*, 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. *Lolita* also conceals a covert nuclear subtext with a pattern of allusions to uranium mining and nuclear testing. See Anderson, “Holocausts in *Lolita*”; Piette, *The Literary Cold War*, 74-106. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Naomi Mandel, *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust and Slavery in America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006),217. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. As Novick has argued, “by the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, talk of the Holocaust was something of an embarrassment in American public life.” Novick, *Holocaust and Collective Memory*,85. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. See Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*,trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Dial Press, 1947). This book, widely reviewed in the American press, is perhaps the best known example of an early intervention on this question. For a recent survey of responses to Holocaust complicity see Victoria Barnett, *Conscience and Complicity During the Holocaust* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. For more on United States immigration policy and its potential indirect culpability for the death of thousands of European Jews see Friedman, *No Haven*; Wyman, *Abandonment of the Jews*. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Mizruchi was the first to suggest connections between the Nuremberg Trials and *Lolita*, arguing for three points of continuity: “Humbert’s fascination with scientific experiments, his obsession with recording his actions, and his ongoing effort to transform the transgressive into the conventional.” “*Lolita* in History,” 640. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Rebecca West, *A Train of Powder* (London: MacMillan, 1955), 73. West’s reports on Nuremberg originally appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1946. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. See Julian Connolly, “Nabokov’s Dialogue with Dostoevsky: *Lolita* and “The Gentle Creature,” *Nabokov Studies* 4 (1997): 15-36; Thomas Karshan, *Nabokov and the Art of Play* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 175-77. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. For evidence of Frank’s literariness, see G.M. Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1948), 13, 84, 93. In *Pnin* Nabokov reminds us of the proximity between Buchenwald concentration camp and the countryside where Goethe and Schiller used to walk (100). [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid., 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. G.M. Gilbert, *The Psychology of Dictatorship: Based on an Examination of the Leaders of Nazi Germany* (New York: Ronald Press, 1950),142-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary*, 84.See *Lo*, 132, 17, 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid., 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Ibid., 40-42. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid., 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid., 272. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Novick documents Jewish-American opposition to US government policy in the post-war of allowing Latvian and Estonian ex-SS members into the country. *Holocaust and Collective Memory*, 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Morton M. Hunt, “The Nazis Who Live Next Door,” *Nation* 169.3, July 16, 1949: 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Mizruchi, “*Lolita* in History,” 633, 639. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Vladimir Nabokov, Foreword to *The Waltz Invention* by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Pocket Books, 1967), 6-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. See chapter 4, note 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. William Barrett, “Comment,” *Partisan Review* 16.4 (1949): 346. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Ibid., 347. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Allen Tate, “Further Remarks on the Pound Award,” *Partisan Review* 16.5 (1949): 668. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2005),367. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Ibid., 361. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Vladimir Nabokov, *Perepiska s sestroi*, ed. Elena Sikorski (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985), 41. My translation, French phrase included in the original. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Flaubert, *Letters*, 572. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)