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Lolita's 'Time Leaks' and transatlantic decadence

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Abstract

In this article, I investigate the matrix of transatlantic literary exchange in Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita (1955) in order to suggest how the novel's rehabilitation of an international decadent aesthetics constitutes a radical challenge to the American literary establishment in the post-war. I begin by identifying the figures of Edgar Allen Poe, Charles Baudelaire and Algernon Swinburne as the key constellation for Nabokov in his plotting of Lolita's ambivalent engagement with the ethics of temporality and artistic autonomy. I then go on to situate Lolita's composition within debates current in the American academy from the late 1930s to the early 1950s over the value of decadent aesthetics within the modernist project and anxieties over Poe's place within American national literary culture. Read alongside the critical writings of T.S. Eliot, Allen Tate and the New Criticism, Lolita emerges as the risky reinstatement of a transatlantic decadent tradition, in which the failure of temporal and ethical containment disrupts a dominant narrative of modernism's history in American letters.

Keywords

Nabokov, Vladimir
Lolita
transatlanticism
time
decadence
modernism

Introduction

That *Lolita* is in large part a novel 'about time' in Paul Ricoeur's sense of the term is perhaps so obvious that we need reminding of it.¹ Nabokov's 1955 novel is narrated by Humbert Humbert, an European literary scholar, who tells of his childhood love for a girl named Annabel Lee and of his attempts to re-capture that love as an adult through his sexual relationship with a 12-year-old American named Dolores Haze, or Lolita. Attempting to explain his particular attraction to girl-children, he writes that 'the idea of time plays such a magic part in the matter' (Nabokov 1995: 17). This essay revisits *Lolita's* temporalities in order to address their centrality not only to its internalized qualities of form, but also to the novel's negotiations of literary history and geography. First, it argues that Nabokov's temporal aesthetics in *Lolita*, engaging in constant dialogue with a transatlantic constellation of literary decadence, cannot be separated from its ambivalent ethics.² Second, it seeks to restore to the novel its location within historical time – that is to say within the contexts of debates current in American letters during the 1940s and 1950s. This renewed encounter between *Lolita* and its temporalities leads us to realize how Nabokov sought to orientate himself dialectically in relation to the

1 Paul Ricoeur (1985: 101) distinguishes between 'tales of time', which includes all narrative, since it inevitably unfolds within time, and 'tales about time', which dwell on time as a means of structural transformation, as in his example, *Mrs Dalloway*, by Virginia Woolf. If we need reminding of *Lolita's* temporal operations it is because so much of the most compelling criticism of this novel from the last twenty five years has sought to untangle the complex and urgent ethical questions it poses. While early

critics of the novel, such as Page Stegner (1966), paid close attention to what Julian Moynahan later called 'Humbert's time problem' (1971: 35), the 1980s and 90s saw a number of radical readings of *Lolita* by scholars wishing to address the ethics of reading and writing the novel which had been elided in the formalist approaches adopted by Nabokov's early acolytes (see, for example, Pifer 1980; Kauffman 1989). Meanwhile, those writing about time in *Lolita* often restricted their investigations to the relationship between the novel's complex chronology and plot (for a survey of this problematic issue, see Boyd 1995). For two more recent assessments of time in *Lolita* see Hasty (2004) and Hustis (2007).

2 Olga Hasty (2004) has presented a reading of *Lolita* in which, as in much of the early criticism, temporality is addressed only at the cost of relegating the ethics of the novel to a secondary concern, outweighed by Nabokov's formal mastery and triumph over time. Most recently, however, Harriet Hustis' article on rereading *Lolita* (2007) has also argued that the novel's ethical ambivalence is inextricable from its representation of time.

3 The precise meaning of the term 'decadent' remains contested in

New Critical discourse then seeking to contain, limit and control the volatile legacy of transatlantic decadence.

Humbert's encounter with Annabel Lee takes place on an 'enchanted island of time' (p. 20), and her surrogate, Dolores, is said to play on a similar 'intangible island of entranced time' (p. 18). This clearly is not time as we conventionally understand it, either in the Bergsonian sense of organic evolution and change or in the sense of chronology. This, rather, is a fantasized, closed temporality of endless repetitions and recyclings. Humbert's impossible objective, like so many of Nabokov's narrators, is apparently to abolish time altogether, and *Lolita* is in part the story of his failure to achieve this. Dolores inexorably ages beyond Humbert's temporal definition of the nymphet, eventually escaping him to become a woman and to die in childbirth. This summary tells only half of the story; however, for it is precisely Humbert's failure to achieve his possession of Dolores which enables him to write his novel, and to re-experience his desire endlessly, forever on the brink of fulfilment. This means that time's inexorable progress is feared and yet absolutely necessary for the strategic pursuit of Humbert's aesthetic goals. He realizes this himself, late in the novel, when he admits that his 'wild delight' is 'perfect, just because the vision was just out of reach, with no possibility of attainment to spoil it' (p. 264). This writing, in other words, both desires and evades its own fulfilment in time and therefore, exists in a continual state of crisis. This is the paradox of what David Weir describes as 'ongoing ending' (1995: 17), the state which characterizes decadent temporality.³ As we shall see, its eroticized ambivalence suffuses not only *Lolita* but also a tradition of decadent writers including writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire – writers whose texts reach for, and hover at, the point of extinction, yet stubbornly persist. Decadent temporality demands and revels in this static crisis, with what Vyachelslav Ivanov, the Russian decadent writer (himself a translator of Poe and Baudelaire, as well as a point of reference for Nabokov) described as 'the feeling, at once oppressive and exhilarating, of being the last in a series' (Poggioli 1968: 170).

In what follows, then, *Lolita's* decadent temporality serves as an interface between its own aesthetic practice and its place in literary history. This is an operation which the novel itself foregrounds on several occasions as it simultaneously thematizes reified time and the oppressive burden of its literary ancestors. This passage comes late in the novel, as Humbert describes the three *Lolita*-less years he spends between her abduction by Quilty and their reunion at Graystar:

This book is about *Lolita*; and now I have reached the part which (had I not been forestalled by another internal combustion martyr) might be called "*Dolorès Disparue*," there would be little sense in analyzing the three empty years that followed. While a few pertinent points have to be marked, the general impression I desire to convey is of 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. (pp. 253–254)

This black, silencing temporality is clearly differentiated from the ‘entranced’ or ‘enchanted’ time in which Humbert’s idealized Lolita endlessly plays. Rather, this passage figures contingency as a car-crash, in which the resumption of linear temporality occurs as a disastrous intrusion into the safely sealed lives of the lovers speeding through the night. Despite his wishes, however, Humbert’s temporal fantasies do not exist in a vacuum, for along with the rush of time which violates his hermetic existence comes a fragment of literary history. The allusion to part 6 of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time, The Captive (Albertine disparue, 1925)*, operates for the reader in several ways. As well as participating in the ongoing theme of Humbert’s erudition, it also creates a thematic parallel which positions Nabokov’s narrator alongside Proust’s, in his failed efforts to remove his child-like love from time, and in the slippage between sexual and textual desire. Finally though, this passage invites us to understand the intrusion of time and the intrusion of literary history as functioning in similar ways, as unwanted but unavoidable constituents of those sexual and textual desires. Humbert’s ‘forestalling’ by Proust is easily assimilated into the familiar problems associated with literary decadence – of the impossibility of originality, the inevitability of arriving too late, and the necessity of recycling old forms. These problems, however, also take us back into the heart of Humbert’s own recyclings of Annabel Lee, and his frustrated quest to recapture uniquely his own original (it is not for nothing that Nabokov’s last, unfinished novel is entitled *The Original of Laura*). That literary history and plot engage in this kind of formal mimicry indicates what is at stake here – a temporal structure which operates on several levels and which therefore demands that we think about *Lolita* dialectically, considering the interplay of its internalized qualities of form and content with its deeply self-conscious positioning within an internationalized American literature of the mid – twentieth century.

Late in their relationship, Humbert is troubled by his inability to secure complete surveillance of Dolores as she resumes her education at Beardsley: ‘no matter how closely I controlled her leisure, there would constantly occur unaccounted-for time leaks with over-elaborate explanations to stop them up in retrospect’ (p. 186). The surveillance and control which Humbert attempts here speak not only to Nabokov’s experiences of Fascist Berlin in the mid 1930s, but also to the containment culture of the early Cold War and paranoid concerns about hostile espionage (five years after *Lolita*’s publication Nabokov sent Alfred Hitchcock a pitch for a spy thriller involving red agents infiltrating America). What particularly interests me here though is the way in which terms conventionally associated in this context with spatial containment – the breach of United States borders – are temporalized, as if to suggest that there are reasons for securing temporal boundaries too. *Lolita*’s time leaks are those moments at which the borders of Humbert’s enchanted island are breached, but they also mark Nabokov’s strategic infiltration of American literary history too – by a transatlantic tradition including Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, Algernon Swinburne and Marcel Proust.

academic writing (see Weir 1995: 1–21 for a useful survey of attempts at definition). Decadence has been understood by some as a particular literary movement originating as a reaction against Romanticism in *fin-de-siècle* France, and is often associated with a preference for the artificial over the natural, and with the aestheticizing of death and decay. In this essay though, decadence is defined precisely by its paradoxical temporal structure. This meaning can be traced back to the term’s early applications to classical civilisations in their late stage, in which culture fed parasitically on the sense of its own impending decline and dissolution. In the examples used here, from Poe through to Nabokov, this temporal structure is wilfully abstracted by the writer from its historical content, but aesthetic value continues to depend upon its ambivalent relation to the idea of ends and ending.

4 The allusion is to Swinburne's 1866 poem, 'Dolores (Notre Dame des Sept Douleurs)'. This conscious inter-textual link is confirmed in the screenplay, in which Quilty's association of Dolores' name with 'the tears and the roses' (1996: 718) clearly recalls the poem, in which 'tears' and 'roses' recur severally.

Poe, Baudelaire and *Lolita's* ambivalent temporalities

Poe's legacy in literary history has always been a contentious one, particularly in the United States, where his sensationalism, politics and scepticism excluded him from the canonical development of nineteenth-century transcendentalism. As we will see, there have also been numerous anxieties about how 'American' Poe was, anxieties heightened by the esteem in which his reputation has been held in Europe, and especially in France. There Poe was discovered, translated and promoted by Charles Baudelaire, before finding avid readers in *fin-de-siècle* French Symbolists such as Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Valéry, and eventually in Marcel Proust. In Britain, Algernon Swinburne found Poe through his friend and correspondent Baudelaire, and wrote to Sara Sigourney Rice in 1875 of how 'the genius of Edgar Allan Poe has won on this side of the Atlantic such a wide and warm recognition' (Carlson 1966: 62–63). This international matrix within early decadence was not lost on Nabokov, who gave Humbert Humbert a part-French father and an English mother, and an American lover. It is no secret that all three of these writers are alluded to numerous times in *Lolita*, along with many others. However, when Nabokov wrote the screenplay for *Lolita* in 1960, despite having to sacrifice the densely allusive texture of the novel, he took special care to create new ways for Poe, Baudelaire and Swinburne to be assimilated into script, indicating the centrality of this literary grouping to his vision. Together, these writers constitute crucial though ambivalent sources for *Lolita's* temporal aesthetics, and, through that, for Nabokov's ideal of aesthetic autonomy as expressed in his famous essay 'On a Book Entitled *Lolita*'.

Nabokov originally intended his novel to be named 'Ginny', after Virginia Clemm, Poe's child-wife (Nabokov 1995: 358n). The eventual choice of Dolores and its diminutive, Lolita, as names for Humbert's desired nymphet, and the novel respectively, signals a conscious accommodation of Swinburne too.⁴ Nevertheless, Humbert's encounter with Annabel Leigh, derived from Poe's well-known poem, 'Annabel Lee', remains the decisive event in his life, and that which drives the mechanics of the plot (as well as reproducing Swinburne's own evolution out of Poe's writing). Alfred Appel, Jr., in his annotated edition of *Lolita*, notes more than twenty allusions to Poe or 'Annabel Lee', more by far than for any other writer (Nabokov 1995: 330n). Humbert often plays with Poe in his name, calling himself 'Edgar H. Humbert' (pp. 75, 118, 189), and he likens his relationship with Dolores to Poe's with the young Virginia several times (pp. 43, 107). On this level, it is with Poe's notorious marriage and with his popular poem that the most obvious connections lay. These simple allusions operate as red-herrings, however, diverting attention from *Lolita's* far more profound debts to Poe. It is the short stories, and in particular the set dealing with the premature deaths of the refined narrator's lovers, which provide the most interesting resonances. When Humbert calls Annabel his 'dead bride' he is referring to more than simply the poem which provided her name – he is also signalling a covert association with the eponymous heroines of 'Morella', 'Berenice' and 'Ligeia'.

To suggest the extent of Nabokov's serious engagement with Poe's aesthetics, and with the ethical problematics which constantly accompany them, we can begin with one of the most commonly-discussed and controversial moments in the novel. This is the passage after Humbert successfully brings himself to sexual climax with an apparently ignorant Dolores on his lap. He then congratulates himself on preserving her innocence:

What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita – perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness – indeed, no life of her own. (p. 62)

The echoes of Poe's narrator in 'Berenice', as he meditates on his own abstraction of the ideal from the material is certainly not coincidental:

I had seen her—not as the living and breathing Berenice, but as the Berenice of a dream—not as a being of the earth, earthy, but as the abstraction of such a being—not as a thing to admire, but to analyze—not as an object of love, but as the theme of a most abstruse although desultory speculation.

(Poe 1984b: 229)

It is not too much to say that the roots of *Lolita's* concern with the ethical costs of divorcing the ideal from the material lie in Poe's own aesthetics. The challenge posed by Nabokov's novel, as several critics have argued, lies in the necessity of restoring the material suffering of Dolores, in spite of Humbert's abstraction, or to see the difference between Dolores Haze, the schoolgirl, and Lolita, the nymphet.⁵ In Poe's tale, the material Berenice comes back to haunt the narrator with some degree of vengeance, in the form of her teeth, hacked out from the corpse. Nabokov adopts a riskier strategy which places responsibility firmly in the hands of his readers, who have to return the repressed by themselves.

'Berenice', 'Morella' and 'Ligeia' are the tales which W.H. Auden, writing an introduction to a 1950 edition of Poe's selected prose (part of the surge of interest in Poe by late modernist figures which we will discuss later), called 'stories of wilful being', because of the obsessional consciousnesses which narrate them, and are often described in them (1950: vi). In his discussion, Auden is particularly interested in Poe's need to exclude the historical from these stories, suggesting that 'this kind of hero has no history because he refuses to change with time' (1950: vii). The narrators themselves, as Auden argues, resist time by replacing it with aesthetics – the contemplation of beauty. While the books they read remain obediently timeless, however, the eponymous heroines of 'Berenice', 'Ligeia' and 'Morella' require the intervention of premature death in order to remove them from the dominion of natural time. In each instance though, some form of preservation or resurrection brings about the perseverance of these women within the stagnant, decadent time of their lover / narrator.

5 See Pifer (1980), Rorty (1989: 141–168).

Berenice, mistakenly buried due to the death-like nature of her epileptic fits, is dug up by her narrator; Ligeia, after succumbing to disease, is reincarnated in the body of her narrator's second wife; Morella, dying in childbirth, murmurs the paradox of decadent time – 'I am dying, yet shall I live' – before inhabiting the body of her own daughter (Poe 1984b: 236).

The point of death – its temporal location – such as it is in these stories, makes very little difference to the narrative, for the difference between living and dead states is negligible. What I am calling the *ambivalence* of decadent temporality is given full expression by the curious intermingling of horror and desire directed at the female objects of temporal arrest. The hysterical conclusion of 'Ligeia', for instance, offers no clue as to which emotion predominates:

Here then, at last,' I shrieked aloud, 'can I never – can I never be mistaken – these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes – of my lost love – of the lady – of the LADY LIGEIA!'

(Poe 1984b: 277)

Similarly, in 'Berenice', the beloved heroine's survival of an epileptic fit ('still breathing, still palpitating, *still alive!*' [1984b: 232]) is accompanied by horror at the realization by the narrator that he, in a daze of his own, had dug up her grave and removed her teeth. 'Morella', finally, has its narrator issue an ambiguous 'long and bitter laugh' as he finds the grave of his dead wife empty (1984b: 239). These endings tell us why it is that these tales could never have assumed any form other than the short story, for the narrators themselves forbid narrative progression, existing only in a state in which 'years rolled away' without change in their situation, or as the narrator of 'Berenice' does, 'muse for long unwearied hours, with my attention riveted to some frivolous device on the margin or in the typography of a book' (1984b: 227). The only possible climax then, is the realization of their own ambivalence to decadent temporality; the mixture of fear and desire which always accompanies it. Each ending is an exorcism which rehearses those emotions for the narrator, in the hope of laying them to rest, even as he relishes their endless repetition as text.

The narrative mechanism in *Lolita*, which has Humbert's lust for Dolores predicated on attempts to repeat his childhood affair with Annabel Leigh, leaves itself open, in the first instance, to a crude Freudian explanation based on traumatic repetition. This, arguably, is one of Humbert's strategies of exculpation. From the perspective, though, of Poe's decadent temporality, Humbert is transfixed within his 'island of enchanted time', unable to *conceive* of temporal progression. Humbert's obsessive repetitions, which fill the novel, function most obviously in the many *Lolitas* in the text: aside from the obvious Annabel Leigh, precursors include Monique and Valeria (the latter another victim of Humbert's violence and callousness), while successors include Rita and a little girl, a 'golden-skinned, brown-haired nymphet of nine or ten', who moves into Charlotte's house in Ramsdale after her death, with whom Humbert flirts immediately after his supposed

moral apotheosis (p. 288). Even Charlotte herself stands in for Dolores as 'Lottelita, Lolitchen' (p. 76).

An essential component of Poe's stories is the parallel perpetuation of decadent temporality both within the tale's content and its frenzied retelling, which accounts for the slippage between textual and sexual desire. Nabokov's novel also accommodates this temporal doubling, which superimposes the chronologies of the tale and its telling. This provides one argument against the case for Humbert's moral rehabilitation – for how can we take his moral epiphany seriously when he then goes on to re-experience, textually, that seduction again, and with such relish alongside the shame? Bearing in mind the frenzied, ambivalent descriptions of the living dead which conclude Poe's stories, how are we to read the last words of *Lolita*: 'I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my *Lolita*?' (p. 309)? Both 'Morella' and 'Ligeia' end with their heroine's names on the lips of their narrators too, enacting their continued life. In *Lolita* though, immortality purports to come not through corporeal persistence, but its literary counterpart. As we finish the novel, Humbert's conceit (and he is an expert on Poe) is that he is always about to retell it, about to possess his young nymphet once more. In interview, Nabokov admitted that he had 'relished' Poe between the ages of 10 and 15 but that the American later lost his 'glamor and thrill' (Nabokov 1990: 42–43). We must admit then, that in allowing Humbert this final decadent flourish, an ending that is not one, Nabokov has not entirely left behind this persistent Poe.

In the novel *Lolita*, Humbert works on a 'comparative history of French literature for English-speaking students' (p. 32). In the screenplay, in addition to his recurrent affinity for Poe, the theme of Humbert's interest in French literature is developed in a very specific direction: Charles Baudelaire.⁶ Even more particularly, Humbert is found lecturing on Baudelaire and Poe together (Nabokov 1996: 728). The question of literary inheritance is precisely what is at stake in Nabokov's engagement with decadent temporality, and in this case the trajectory between Poe and Baudelaire is in clear relief. If Poe gave fullest expression to his horror of linear temporality in 'The Pit and the Pendulum', in which time, to quote Nabokov's friend Harry Levin on this tale, is 'the sword of Damocles, which hangs over every man' (1972: 153), then Baudelaire continues this tradition of sinister chronophobia in poems such as 'The Clock' (L'Horloge). In *Lolita: A Screenplay*, Humbert's first action is to shoot a grandfather clock in Quilty's Usher-like mansion. Baudelaire however, emphasizes the omnipotence of the time-piece: '*Souviens-toi que le Temps est un joueur avide / Qui gagne sans tricher, à tout coup! c'est la loi!*' (1975: I, 81).⁷ In his personification, Baudelaire characterizes time as the great thief relentlessly attending the individual:

Le Plaisir vapoureux fuira vers l'horizon
Ainsi qu'une sylphide au fond de la coulisse;

- 6 Nabokov's own intense interest in Baudelaire is evidenced by his early translations of him, and the numerous allusions to the French poet scattered throughout his works (see Beaujour 1995: 714; Foster 1993: 39; Nabokov 1995: 393).
- 7 Waldrop's translation: 'Remember that Time is an avid gambler who wins every time without cheating! That's the law' (Baudelaire 2006: 108).

8 Waldrop's translation: 'nebulous Pleasure will flee towards the horizon like a sylphide into the wings; each instant devour a morsel of your delight, which each man is allotted in his season' (Baudelaire 2006: 108).

Chaque instant te dévore un morceau du délice
À chaque homme accordé pour toute sa saison. (1975: I, 81)⁸

A 'sylphide' is a nymph of the woods, here played in a theatre, disappearing into the wings, as Dolores does both in her performance of 'The Enchanted Hunters' and from the narrative itself after her abduction by Quilty.

This theatrical motif shows how both Nabokov and Baudelaire evoke a form of pleasure which combines aesthetic and erotic stimulation, and which is threatened by chronological time. There is also evidence for this in one of Humbert's three allusions to Baudelaire in the novel *Lolita*. One of his observations of a nymphet is described in terms borrowed from one of Nabokov's favourites of Baudelaire's poems, 'Morning Twilight' (Le Crépuscule du matin)⁹:

9 Nabokov was particularly familiar with this poem, quoting it in a letter to Edmund Wilson in 1946 (Nabokov 2001: 196).

I would find the former [Dolores], *les yeux perdus*, dipping and kicking her long-toed feet in the water on the stone edge of which she lolled, while, on either side of her, there crouched a *brun adolescent* whom her russet beauty and the quicksilver in the baby folds of her stomach were sure to cause to *se tordre* – oh Baudelaire! – in recurrent dreams for months to come. (p. 162)

10 Waldrop's translation: 'Hour when swarms of evil dreams set dark adolescents writhing on their pillows' (Baudelaire 2006: 135).

11 Waldrop's translation: 'gave their death-rattle in uneven gasps' and 'The debauched went home, broken by their exertions' (Baudelaire 2006: 135).

There is a temporal and erotic network to disentangle in this allusion, which displays the paradoxical characteristics of decadent temporality. First, Humbert's use of 'would', his equivalent of the French *imparfait* favoured by Proust, is a tool which helps him to elide temporal precision, suggestive of repetitions without disclosing exactly how many. Despite his attempts to endow his erotic vision with temporal elasticity however, the very details of the images, from Dolores' toes to the folds of her stomach, betray their singularity. Baudelaire's poem also captures a fleeting instant, the momentary passing of night into day, when chronological time and the humdrum exigencies of daily life reassert themselves, and attempts to transform it into the permanence of the text. The lines providing the source of the allusion run: 'C'était l'heure où l'essaim des rêves mal-faisants / Tord sur leurs oreillers les bruns adolescents' (1975: I, 103).¹⁰ Innocent enough, but for Humbert's aesthetic sensibility, which finds in Baudelaire's poetry a means by which to revive the ecstasy of his erotic vision as textual pleasure – 'Oh Baudelaire!' Humbert's appropriation of 'Morning Twilight' is a misreading though, for his wilful eroticizing of its opening neglects the resumption of linear time which marks its development. Here we find, as day breaks on Paris, women suffering the pains of childbirth, which is to be the cause of Dolores' own death. The dying in the hospices 'poussaient leur dernier râle en hoquets inégaux' and 'Les débauchés, renaient brisés par leurs travaux' (1975: I, 104).¹¹ Baudelaire's sensitivity to the inevitable costs of decadent temporality contains within it a prophecy of Humbert's own fate and that of his victim.

Having suggested these ways in which Nabokov draws on Baudelaire in connection to decadent temporality, we can now turn to the French

poet's well-known essay, 'The Painter of Modern Life' ('Le Peintre de la vie moderne', 1863) in order to appreciate the extent to which they held certain ideas about time and literature in common. Here, Baudelaire's description of the *flâneur* sheds some valuable light on *Lolita's* temporal aesthetics: 'he is the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity it contains' (Baudelaire 1964: 5). The crucial element of this definition is the conjunction 'and', for Baudelaire's *flânerie* is a double maneuver, which requires the observer to both depict time passing and to isolate the aesthetic object from its temporal context in order to distil its essence. One might even suggest that time itself constitutes a second aesthetic object for the *flâneur*, one which might steal the show. With this in mind, we can be sure that, if time does steal the show in *Lolita* (in that novel, as in 'The Clock', the clock wins every round without cheating), it is certainly in spite of Humbert's efforts. As the allusion I discussed above demonstrates, Humbert's emphasis is upon the process of distillation with which he attempts to remove the dross and refuse of time from the immutable essence of his object, at the cost of blindness to the possibility of fugitive beauty. Baudelaire further elaborates his argument by offering us a definition of beauty itself, 'always and inevitably of a double composition':

an eternal, invariable element, whose quantity it is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element . . . the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions. (1964: 3)

In Baudelaire, then, we find one source for the way that Nabokov ironizes Humbert's cultural elitism, expressed through his contempt for the contemporary. In *Lolita*, the relentless cataloguing of American consumer and pop culture of the late 1940s and early 1950s is more than either realist period detail or (as some early critics believed) a sign of Dolores' own vulgarity. It is rather another of the ways in which time can be understood to leak into Humbert's hermetically sealed world, for although Dolores' immersion in popular culture provides an important component in his fetishization of her, that second element of Baudelaire's formula, the aesthetics of mutability in trends, fashions and fads remain firmly beyond his control.

We have seen then that the ambivalence inherent in the structure of decadent temporality is reproduced at the level of Nabokov's engagement with it and the writers he associates with it. There is always an element of critique in Nabokov's use of decadent literary history, and yet it is apparent that there is also a compulsive need for it manifested in the aesthetic forces which drive the novel – the desire for, and failure to achieve, autonomy through temporal control; the resulting disorientation; the inviolable necessity of repetition and recycling. It also becomes clear from reading Poe and Baudelaire that they conceived of the attempt to master time as not only a desperate struggle against a superior power, but also one they were obliged to fight in order to retain integrity as autonomous artists. For

- 12 David Andrews (1999: 16–24) discusses Poe’s ‘heresy of *The Didactic*’ in his study of *Lolita* and aestheticism, but prefers to read Poe alongside Nabokov as another aesthete, rather than, as I do, examining how Nabokov appropriates and rewrites Poe’s legacy.
- 13 See Rorty (1989: 141–168); de la Durantaye (2006: 311–328).
- 14 My translation from the French. For a detailed analysis of Baudelaire’s reception of Poe, and in particular Poe’s views on artistic autonomy, see Gilman (1942: 58–109).

Baudelaire, the resistance to temporal exigency is inseparable from the idea of his vocation, as another comment from the *Intimate Journals (Journaux Intimes, 1887)* indicates: ‘Every minute we are crushed by the idea and sense of time. There are only two methods of escaping from this nightmare, of forgetting it: physical pleasure, and work. Pleasure wears us out. Work strengthens us. Let us make our choice’ (Baudelaire 1995: 70–71). This perspective, which effectively locates artistic autonomy as the alternative to oblivion in the struggle against time, opens up a second intertextual dimension to *Lolita* which draws on a slightly different aspect of decadent aesthetics – what Poe referred to in ‘The Poetic Principle’ as ‘the heresy of *The Didactic*’ (1984a: 75).

If the parallel between Poe and Humbert is stressed, even laboured, throughout *Lolita*, Poe’s presence within Nabokov’s own persona in ‘On a Book Entitled *Lolita*’ is less often commented on.¹² ‘I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction, and, despite John Ray’s assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow’, Nabokov protested in that essay (1995: 314). These words have been a focal point for a number of interesting debates about the ethical implications of the novel.¹³ What is usually neglected though, is the extent to which they, and indeed the whole essay, consciously recapitulate a legacy of rhetorical defences against social and political conformism by decadent writers, from Poe, through Baudelaire and Swinburne to include, obliquely, Proust. Poe himself identified ‘the heresy of the didactic’ – the prioritizing of any moral or social ‘message’ above the purely aesthetic quality of the poem – and confirmed this as an absolute principle to be adhered to, even at the cost of deviation from truth. Rather than submit to transient socio-political pressures, the poet must ‘struggle, by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time, to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone’ (1984a: 77). In his essays on Poe, Baudelaire strongly endorsed this autonomous position, and wrote in his letter to Swinburne a statement which even more closely prefigures Nabokov’s own in *Lolita*: ‘I believe simply that . . . all poems, every piece of well-made art, suggest naturally and necessarily a moral. It’s the reader’s affair. I myself strongly dislike any intentionally expressed moral in a poem’ (Swinburne 1959: I, 88).¹⁴ That *Lolita* does carry a moral charge, inherent in Nabokov’s aesthetics, but requiring the active participation of the reader, is an argument made convincingly by Richard Rorty, and more recently by Leland de la Durantaye. It hinges on the words ‘in tow’, with which Nabokov qualifies his statement, for according to this argument, the moral dimension of the work is absolutely inseparable from its purely aesthetic objectives. Nabokov’s way of explaining this has become probably his most well-known comment on *Lolita*:

For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. (Nabokov 1995: 314–315)

Despite the familiarity of these words, critics (with one exception¹⁵) have not taken account of the fact that what has become one of Nabokov's definitive statements on his aesthetics is in fact an instance of allusion; an engagement with literary history referring to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, which in turn reaches directly to Poe's reflections in 'The Poetic Principle'. The passage in question is a meditation on the death of the aesthete and writer Bergotte, a friend of the narrator. Marcel wonders at the motivations for selfless acts of kindness, or for the time and effort spent by artists on their work, reasoning that these 'seem to belong to a different world, a world based on kindness, scrupulousness, self-sacrifice, a world entirely different from this one and which we leave in order to be born again on this earth, before returning there to live once again' (1996: V, 208). Like Poe's assertions, Proust's passage makes the connection between artistic commitment and the futile but necessary struggle against time, arguing that only the obligations contracted in a ideal artistic (and timeless) world can account for the 'atheist artist', who 'begin[s] over again a score of times a piece of work the admiration aroused by which will matter little to his worm-eaten body' (1996: V, 208).

Despite the important ways in which Nabokov inflects and modifies his allusion to Proust, Nabokov's gestures towards literary history at the crucial moment of his justificatory polemic should not be underestimated. In *Lolita*, he reaches for decadent temporal aesthetics not just in his creation of the novel's protagonist and the essential plot, nor only in the structural principles which organize it, but also in his ethical justification of it. Any account of *Lolita* which cites Nabokov's engagement with decadence as either a condemnation of its aesthetic premises, or as an endorsement of them, has not realized the ambivalence which resides there. The novel gives expression to decadent temporality, offering the potential for its critique at the same time as it relies upon its seductive principles for inducing pleasure in the reader. It evokes Poe and Baudelaire as complicit in the satisfaction of Humbert's perverted sexual desires at the same time as it recruits them to the defence of the novel's ethical integrity. It proclaims decadence to be stuck in a reductive cycle of repetition and cliché and at the same time hauls it out of the nineteenth century to renovate it, becoming one of the century's most popular and critically acclaimed fictions. It constitutes a demand for the reader to re-enter the debate about the value of decadent temporal aesthetics after Eliot and the New Criticism pronounced it closed.

***Lolita* and the new critical response to decadence**

During the 1940s and early 1950s, in the years immediately following Nabokov's arrival in the United States in 1941, there was a marked period of interest within the American literary academy in Edgar Allan Poe. This was noticeable across a range of critics, many of whom, such as Harry Levin, Edmund Wilson, Yvor Winters and Allen Tate, were known personally to Nabokov. There are several common strands to be discerned in these

15 Maddox (1983: 76–78) draws attention to the allusive subtext in 'On a Book Entitled *Lolita*', remarking on echoes of Keats, Proust and Poe which 'suggest that the ultimate source of aesthetic desire and aesthetic pleasure is located outside the boundaries of mortal experience' (p. 77).

texts which deal with Poe, converging on an anxiety over where to place him within the canons of modernism and American literature. On one hand, there was confusion over whether to place Poe within the context of American literary history, as Edmund Wilson (1942) and, earlier, William Carlos Williams suggested (1966: 216–233), or within a European tradition culminating in Valéry, as Eliot argued (1965: 27–42). New Critical attempts at delineating an American canon capable of mounting a challenge to their nation's unique conditions of social modernity were confounded by Poe's resolute cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, Poe was the focus of a concern with the possibility and desirability of artistic autonomy, couched in terms of the 'purity' or 'impurity' of poetry. In this sense, Poe was the ground over which American critics negotiated the definitions of literary modernism and its relationship to society. Finally, fear of influence was implicit in much of the writing about Poe; the apparently troubling possibility that an element of Poe's aesthetics may have filtered down into the artist's own practice, without their full consciousness. These, as I have suggested, are all concerns which are addressed by Nabokov in *Lolita*, which although taking the form of a novel, performs a job of criticism for its author, allowing him to express the complexity and ambivalence of his own perspective on decadence in literary history and evolution in a way he never could in any other medium. In what follows I suggest that foundational notions of literature's relationship to time and to politics are at stake in this ideological nexus developing around Poe and decadence in mid-twentieth century America. The uncertain possibility of literary progress and development within time which vexed decadent aesthetics was still (perhaps most?) in evidence in this period, haunting the remnants of the modernist project.

Yvor Winters, with whom Nabokov socialized several times in the early 1940s (Boyd 1991: 33), wrote an essay entitled 'Edgar Allan Poe: A Crisis in the History of American Obscurantism' for *American Literature* in 1937, which constituted a sustained attack on the very idea of taking Poe seriously. The discourse of security and breach is immediately apparent in the essay, as Winters worries that the American literary establishment has failed in its job to safeguard the purity of the canon:

Poe has long passed casually with me and with most of my friends as a bad writer accidentally and temporarily popular; the fact of the matter is, of course, that that he has been pretty effectually established as a great writer while we have been sleeping. (Carlson 1966: 176–177)

The fear here is of a leak in time, which has permitted Poe to escape the supposedly safe confines of his historically-specific popularity to infiltrate the present. This is a concern that Winters shares with Allen Tate, and which Nabokov exploits in *Lolita* by locating Poe at the very centre of his aesthetic strategies.

Allen Tate was one the first American champions of Nabokov's work, and was responsible for the publication of *Bend Sinister* (1947), his first

American novel. In 1949 and 1951, he wrote 'Our Cousin Mr. Poe' and 'The Angelic Imagination', two essays in which one of the leading figures of the conservative New Critical establishment addressed the vexed question of Poe's legacy. The most striking aspect of these essays is Tate's anxiety over what to *do* with Poe, as if his persistence within critical debate and poetic practice was an embarrassment which needed explaining away: 'For Americans, as perhaps for most modern men, he is with us like a dejected cousin: we may 'place' him but we may not exclude him from our board' (Tate 1955: 134). An admission of literary kinship then but not a direct one. It is with a reluctant act of inclusion, Tate suggests, that Poe may be admitted to the current 'board' of the literary elite. In an essay saturated with ambivalence, that phrase 'as perhaps for most modern men' is particularly telling, for Tate's Poe exists in a 'peculiar place', an intersection of Southern American regionalism with the beginnings of a transnational modernist tradition of high literary culture, and it is partly this geographical indeterminism which makes him the object of such anxiety. This is not simply a matter of spatial location; however, for Tate's way of justifying his castrating acceptance of his 'dejected cousin' Poe is primarily temporal. In 'The Angelic Imagination' he writes that 'Poe is the transitional figure in modern literature because he discovered our great subject, the disintegration of personality, but kept it in a language that had developed in a tradition of unity and order' (1955: 118–119). The problem here is the relationship of the past to the present, and Poe's only value is that he happened upon '*our* great subject' [my emphasis], so although he can be assimilated into Tate's literary historical narrative there is a very strong sense of the authority of the present acting upon and ordering the past rather than the other way round. The only way that Poe can assert himself upon the present is through his refusal to grant relief by disappearing.

It is hardly coincidental that Nabokov reproduces the tension between American regionalism and modernist cosmopolitanism in his own 'Edgar H. Humbert', as the European aesthete embarks on his road-trip with Dolores, around the 'crazy quilt of forty-eight states' (p. 152) from New England to the South West, California and, of course, Dixie. Temporally though, Nabokov, like Tate, is sensitive to Poe's persistence, to the extent that Annabel Lee / Leigh haunts both his own and Humbert's consciousness after their formative experiences in youth. The notion of transition across time then is very important in their dealings with Poe. However, while Tate excuses Poe's shortcomings through a historicizing perspective – right ideas, wrong period – Nabokov's text positions *itself* as the dynamic historical agent, importing Poe wholesale (from caricature through to complex literary intellectual) into the present and facilitating his critique in the hands of the reader. In doing this, he assimilates him into the novel with the attendant contradictions and uncertainties intact. Nabokov, in other words, rescues Poe from his languishing condition in history, where Tate has securely positioned him, and brings him into the present to occupy centre stage in the unstable late modernist drama.

16 See Warren and Brooks (1943: 204–205; 1976: 546).

This is a drama that not only Tate, but also Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, had tried to exclude Poe from.¹⁶ The idea that Poe was overly concerned with the sound of his poetry, and was consequently negligent to the meaning of the words, allowing them to develop an existence independent to ‘reality’, was an argument familiar to the New Critics from Eliot’s critique in ‘Swinburne as Poet’ (1920), in which he claimed that language and its object

are identified in the verse of Swinburne solely because the object had ceased to exist, because the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning, because language, uprooted, has adapted itself to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment.

(Eliot 1932: 313)

Eliot goes on to make a similar attack on Poe in his later essay, ‘From Poe to Valéry’, claiming that ‘an irresponsibility towards the meaning of words is not infrequent with Poe’ (Eliot 1965: 32). Meanwhile, Brooks and Penn Warren follow up their critique of Poe by charging Swinburne, and specifically ‘Dolores’ with the same fault (1976: 547).

We can begin to discern here a conflict which Nabokov was very much involved with, over the possibility of, and costs of, aesthetic autonomy. We have already seen how *Lolita*’s engagement with decadent temporality through Poe and Baudelaire was fundamentally concerned with this conflict. It is also worth noting that the criticisms levelled at Swinburne and Poe by Eliot and the New Critics are repeatedly placed at the centre of the ongoing debate about the ethical dimension of *Lolita*. Kingsely Amis, in one of the most interesting of the early reviews, wrote that ‘there comes a point where the atrophy of moral sense, evident throughout the book, finally leads to dullness, fatuity and *unreality*’ (Page 1982: 105, my emphasis). In more recent reassessments, in particular Pifer’s and Rorty’s, it is precisely the reader’s realization of the unreality of Humbert’s solipsistic textual world, leading its (to use Eliot’s description of Swinburne) ‘independent life of atmospheric nourishment’ which opens the door for them into an ethical reading, by demanding a reconstruction of the ‘real’ Dolores and her suffering. Yvor Winters claimed of Poe that ‘the region in which human experience is understood in moral terms and emotion . . . appears to have been closed to Poe’, and that the exaltation of Poe’s efforts to approach beauty ‘is not a moral exaltation, not the result of the intelligence and of character, but is the result of manipulation and of trickery’ (Carlson 1966: 184–185, 196). One way of reading *Lolita*, then, is as a response to this understanding of literature’s obligations, a challenge directed at the reader to access that same region of ethics which seemed so distant to the artist. To achieve this is to read *through* Humbert’s own manipulation and trickery.

At this point, reading Eliot’s essays on Baudelaire and on Poe’s legacy will help to clarify exactly how Nabokov’s response to the modernist critique

of decadence is predicated on his reading of decadent temporality. Despite Nabokov's professed indifference to Eliot (Nabokov 1990: 43), nothing could be further than the truth. He wrote to Edmund Wilson in April 1950, just as he was beginning to compose *Lolita*, that he had 'been looking through Eliot's various works and reading that collection of critical articles about him and am now more certain than ever that he is a fraud and a fake' (Nabokov 2001: 263). Nabokov was compulsively drawn to Eliot during his American years, despite the strong dislike he expressed towards him. It is worth noting that Eliot is the poet Humbert most resembles in his style, being parodied several times in Humbert's own verse.¹⁷ Nabokov continually engages with Eliot in all his major American fiction through allusion and parody, but also through offering a model of literary history, and of late modernist aesthetics, which seems to consciously offer an alternative to the figure he mockingly nicknamed 'Rev. Eliot' (Nabokov 2001: 240).¹⁸

In 'Baudelaire', likely one of the essays which Nabokov had read in 1950, Eliot dwells at length on the French poet's relationship to time and history. First though, Eliot is keen to remove him from the context in which he came to be known in Britain: 'in England he had what is in a way the misfortune to be first and extravagantly advertised by Swinburne, and taken up by the followers of Swinburne' (Eliot 1932: 367). Like Tate, Eliot prefers to anchor decadence to its historical moment, and bar its intrusion into the present. This tendency is confirmed explicitly by what follows:

Baudelaire was in some ways far in advance of the point of view of his own time, and yet was very much of it, very largely partook of its limited merits, faults and fashions. . . . He was universal, and yet at the same time confined by a fashion which he himself helped to create. (1932: 367)

There is another parallel here with Tate's treatment of Poe, in which the poet is forced into submission to his historical moment, and congratulated only on his ability to anticipate, as best he can, the ideological assumptions of Eliot's modernism, or the conservative New Critical project which Tate participated in. Although Baudelaire had 'anticipated many of the problems, both on the aesthetic and on the moral plane, in which the fate of modern poetry is still concerned', he still 'belongs to a definite place in time', which requires the critic to 'disassociate the permanent from the temporary' (1932: 367, 368, 372). We can see then that Eliot's and Nabokov's engagements with Baudelaire converge on a very similar set of concerns about temporality. I have argued that in *Lolita* Nabokov demonstrates his sensitivity to Baudelaire's 'double composition' of beauty, which relies on the interplay of 'a relative, circumstantial element' and 'the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions . . . the amusing, enticing, appetizing icing on the divine cake' without which the first element would be impossible to discern (Baudelaire 1964: 3). This duality, which underpins both *The Flowers of Evil* and *Lolita*, is the very thing Eliot finds disquieting in his essay, and a threat to his ordering impulse. On the question of temporality,

17 Humbert spends some time in Paris as a young man, sitting 'with uranists in the Deux Magots', publishing 'torturous essays in obscure journals' and composing pastiches, one of which resembles Eliot's 'Gerontion' (Nabokov 1995: 16). The poem Humbert has prepared to read to Quilty before murdering him parodies Eliot's structural use of the word 'because' in 'Ash Wednesday' (pp. 299–300).

18 For a discussion of allusions to Eliot in *Lolita*, see Hyde (1977: 118–122). For a treatment of the parodies of Eliot in Nabokov's 1962 novel, *Pale Fire*, see Boyd (1999: 193–206).

his perspective, which sees Baudelaire disabled by his attention to the fugitive beauty of the passing moment, is aligned with that of Humbert, who is determined to distill the eternal in his *Lolita*. Nabokov, in reproducing the contradictory ambivalence of decadent temporal aesthetics, therefore presents an alternative to Eliot's dismissive handling of the decadent legacy, one which sees literary history interrogating the present rather than the other way around.

'From Poe to Valéry' was a lecture delivered by Eliot at the Library of Congress in 1948 and reproduced twice the next year, in *The Hudson Review* and as a short monograph. Eliot's choice of subject at this time is significant. It participated in the wave of critical attention given to Poe during the period, particularly by the New Critics, and addressed the same concerns that they voiced about Poe's place in the canon, and about what to do with his lingering presence in American letters. Like Tate, Eliot is anxious about the possibility of Poe's hold over his own practice, admitting that 'one cannot be sure that one's own writing has *not* been influenced by Poe' (Eliot 1965: 27). The essay deals with more than just Poe though – its subject is the tradition he gave rise to. Like Nabokov, and Harry Levin in *The Power of Blackness* (1958, repr. 1972), Eliot proposes a transatlantic context for Poe. His argument asserts a sequence running from Poe through Baudelaire and Mallarmé to Valéry, a variation on Nabokov's, which seems to include Baudelaire and Mallarmé but replace Valéry with Verlaine, and perhaps find a place for Swinburne. Like Brooks and Penn Warren he associates Poe and his legacy with the problematic notion of '*la poésie pure*'. The central contention of the essay though, concerns a crisis faced by modernist aesthetics in the late modernist period, from the mid 1930s through World War Two into the immediate postwar. The tradition which Eliot delineates is founded on a false teleology:

This process of increasing self-consciousness – or, we may say, of increasing consciousness of language – has as its theoretical goal what we may call *la poésie pure*. I believe it to be a goal that can never be reached. (1965: 39)

Having digested Eliot's argument, there seems room for a reading of Nabokov's attempts to revive exactly the tradition which Eliot wishes to abort. If *Lolita* reinstates Poe, Baudelaire, and the aesthetics of *poésie pure* on the agenda of late modernism, without shirking any of the accompanying moral and artistic costs, Eliot simply calls for this strain of literature to be pronounced dead. In doing so, he submits to one side of the decadent temporal dichotomy – the seductive narrative of degeneration and termination epitomized in Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher'.

Approaching *Lolita* as a novel responding to anxieties about the state of high culture and its inheritance in the postwar United States, we recover some of *Lolita's* important and neglected implications and gain a clearer picture of why Nabokov was forced to go to France to find a publisher for it. As Jonathan Elmer has written, 'Poe might thus be seen as the

symbol of all that America must repress in order to become, or remain America' (1995: 26). Elmer is here referring to Poe's dual status as simultaneously progenitor (via Baudelaire and Mallarmé) of a strand of high modernism, and icon of mass-cultural sensationalism and detective fiction. *Lolita* occupies a comparable location. On one hand, it has spawned two successful Hollywood adaptations and has been sold as pornography alongside other Olympia Press publications such as *Until She Screams* and *The Sexual Life of Robinson Crusoe* (Appel 1995: xxxiv). On the other, it proclaims its own canonicity and status as high art from the opening page. In this sense, rather than attempting to transcend mass culture through parody, *Lolita* performs a more ambiguous maneuver which, like Poe's, refuses categorization and acknowledges the debts which high art owes to mass forms and affect.

More than this though, Nabokov's recognition of Poe's persistence revives a number of facets of American cultural history which many wished to see buried in the late 1940s and 1950s. Toni Morrison, for instance, has pointed out the immensely important precedent which Poe set in establishing the dimensions of what she calls 'American Africanism', the logic by which American literature has engaged with, and repressed, the African elements in its identity (1992: 32). In 'On a Book Entitled *Lolita*', Nabokov himself brings attention to the taboos still surrounding race, such as a 'Negro-White marriage' which American publishers regarded as unapproachable (Nabokov 1995: 314). *Lolita* makes numerous references to subservient black characters such as Charlotte's maid, which are subtly introduced and then repressed from the narrative, as if to enact their social marginality. As Steven Belletto has argued, what he describes as Humbert's 'racially charged language' suggests his covert complicity with the oppression of America's black population, just as his creation of Lolita as slave-child rehearses guilty swathes of American history (2005: 8). If E.O. Matthiessen famously rejected Poe from his configuration of the American Renaissance on the grounds that he was 'bitterly hostile to democracy' (1941: xii), then Nabokov's reinscription of Poe's legacy in America carries with it an implicit social critique addressed to the nation's supposed democratic ideals. Here the road-trip, the emblem of postwar American existential freedom chosen by Jack Kerouac for his 1957 novel *On the Road*, is placed at the service of the decadent motifs of cruelty, compulsion, domination and suspicion. Nabokov wrote that his novel was inspired by a caged ape in Paris, which immediately brings echoes not only of Poe's 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', in which an escaped ape causes mayhem on the Parisian streets, but also of his recurring nightmares of confinement. Humbert, meanwhile, finds himself incarcerated by both the state and his obsessions; Lolita's escape from his enslavement is only at the cost of reducing herself to Quilty's pornographic object. Poe wrote: 'that an American should confine himself to American themes, or even prefer them, is rather a political than a literary idea – and at best a questionable point . . . a foreign theme is, in a strict literary sense, to be preferred' (1845: 199). Nabokov's

19 Paul Giles (2000) also discusses the ways that *Lolita* destabilises national boundaries, arguing that its 'virtualization of American Studies . . . foregrounds the contingent status' of the nation-state's values and social markers (p. 41).

final, surreptitious undermining of American ideals comes through his transgression on the borders of national identity.¹⁹ Decadence is indifferent to the formation of national canons, and it is most fitting, then, that *Lolita* was first published not in New York, but in Paris. In staging the infiltration of a robust postwar America by rarefied European perversions of sexual and aesthetic types, Nabokov stages his final, untimely tribute to Poe and Baudelaire.

Lolita's time leaks provide a way of conceptualizing not only the internal ethical and aesthetic logic of the novel but also Nabokov's self-conscious challenge to the monolithic modernism being established retrospectively by Eliot and the New Criticism in the postwar period. In restoring Poe and his European legacy to its American origins, a repressed chapter of literary history is permitted to seep across the normative borders of both ethics and nation. In this sense, what Peter Nicholls has elsewhere described as decadence's 'persistent ghosting of modernism' (1997: 24) adopts a particularly transatlantic flavour. *Lolita* joins American works such as William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* (1934) which assimilate themes of incest and sexual pathology into their decadent aesthetics, with the effect of bringing European temporalities into conflict with American social modernity.

Finally, *Lolita's* own 'ghosting' of modernism is a resistance to the very idea of limit, whether spatial boundary or temporal terminus. Eliot wrote early on in his career that 'it is essential that . . . an artist should consciously or unconsciously draw a circle beyond which he does not trespass' (1932: 111). While much American literary criticism in the 1940s and 1950s sought to contain and control the influence of decadence on the canon and literary practice, Nabokov took the principle of decadent temporality itself and transformed it from hackneyed dead-end into a living tradition. In this context, Humbert's remark that 'every limit presupposes something beyond it' becomes particularly pertinent, for if Ivanov insisted on decadence being 'the feeling, at once oppressive and exalting, of being the last in a series' (Poggioli 1968: 170), then *Lolita* tells us that the series never concludes, that every writer is always the last.

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