

## 20 Fancy Prose

FANCY PROSE

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.

She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning; standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita.

Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child. In a princedom by the sea. Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer. You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV *Lolita* (1955)

THE GOLDEN RULE of fictional prose is that there are no rules – except the ones that each writer sets for him or herself. Repetition and simplicity worked (usually) for Hemingway's artistic purposes. Variation and decoration worked for Nabokov's, especially in *Lolita*. This novel takes the form of a brilliant piece of special pleading by a man whose attraction to a certain type of pubescent girl, whom he calls a "nymphet", leads him to commit evil deeds. The book aroused controversy on its first publication, and still disturbs,

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because it gives a seductive eloquence to a child-abuser and murderer. As Humbert Humbert himself says, "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style."

There is of course plenty of repetition in the opening passage of the novel, but it isn't lexical repetition, such as we encountered in the Hemingway passage discussed in the previous section. It is a matter of parallel syntactical structures and similar sounds – just the kind of repetition, in fact, that you expect to find in poetry. (Another term for fancy prose is poetic prose.) There's a veritable fireworks display of alliteration, for instance, in the first paragraph, "P's and "r's exploding brilliantly in rapturous celebration of the beloved's name: *light, life, loins, tip, tongue, trip. Lo. Lee. Ta.*

Each of the four paragraphs exhibits a different type of discourse. This first one is a lyrical outburst, a series of exclamations, without finite verbs. Its opening salvo of metaphors is extravagant and faintly archaic in diction: *light of my life, fire of my loins, my sin, my soul* (more alliteration there). The next metaphor, of the tongue tripping down the palate to tap on the teeth, is more homely and humorous, but it draws attention to an organ used in the service of both eloquence and lust, never far apart in this character.

The second paragraph is tenderly reminiscent. A series of identically structured clauses lists the variant names of the beloved like a profane litany: *She was Lo . . . She was Lola . . . She was Dolly . . . She was Dolores . . . But in my arms she was always Lolita.* You could set it to music. (There was in fact an ill-fated stage musical of *Lolita*: "a nice little flop," Nabokov drily noted in his diary.) And of course, if we didn't know already, this paragraph gives us the first inkling that Lolita was an under-age object of desire, in the references to her height, sock and school.

The third paragraph takes yet another tack. It is more conversational, answering implied questions from an unspecified interlocutor, in the manner of a dramatic monologue: "Did she have a precursor?" The affirmative answer is given with poetic redundancy: "She did, she did." The forensic phrase, "In point of fact," prepares us for the explicit evocation of a court-room context in the last paragraph. (Humbert is supposed to be writing his apologia while awaiting trial.) "Oh when?" The riddling, roundabout answer

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to that question foregrounds the disparity of age between Humbert and Lolita.

In this paragraph narrative interest begins, with the raising of questions about cause-and-effect ("there might have been . . . had I not . . .") and about the identity of the "initial girl-child". Heightening the poetic quality of this prose is an allusion to a well-known poem, Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee":

I was a child and *she* was a child,  
In this kingdom by the sea,  
But we loved with a love that was more than love –  
I and my ANNABEL LEE –  
With a love that the winged seraphs of heaven  
Coveted her and me.

Humbert's explanation of, and excuse for, his erotic fixation on young girls is that an adolescent sweetheart called Annabel died before they could consummate their love. Poe's poem is a morbidly sentimental threnody on the same theme: the speaker blames the envious angels for taking his beloved from this world, and finds solace in lying beside her grave. Humbert, however, unscrupulously seeks nymphet surrogates for his Annabel. There is a diabolic sneer in the epithets he applies to the seraphs, "misformed, simple, noble-winged," and a blasphemous hint that his own suffering is to be compared to the crown of thorns. (This kind of gesturing of one text to another is known as intertextuality, and deserves a section to itself – see p. 98.)

Nabokov's virtuosity in a language that was not his mother-tongue never ceases to amaze; but perhaps it was this very fact that allowed him to discover the full resources of English prose, and to use them with uninhibited delight.

One of the earliest exponents of "fancy prose" in English fiction – indeed, one might risk calling him the first – was the Elizabethan writer John Lyly, whose *Euphues: the Anatomy of Wit* (1578) was a very fashionable book in its day, and gave to the language the word "euphuism" and the adjective "euphuistic" (not to be confused with euphemism/euphemistic). Here is a specimen:

The freshest colors soonest fade, the keenest razor soonest turneth his edge, the finest cloth is soonest eaten with moths, and the cambric sooner stained than the coarse canvas. Which appeared well in this Euphues, whose wit being, like wax, apt to receive any impression, and bearing the head in his own hand, either to use the rein or the spur, disdaining counsel, leaving his country, loathing his old acquaintance, thought either by wit to obtain some conquest or by shame to abide some conflict; who, preferring fancy before friends and his present humour before honor to come, laid reason in water, being too salt for his taste, and followed unbridled affection, most pleasant for his tooth.

It's clever, and amusing in short extracts, but after a few pages it is apt to weary the modern reader by the *sameness* of its stylistic exhibitionism. The same patterns of syntax and sound are used again and again, and used by all the characters as well as the authorial voice. It is a kind of prose that is exclusively literary, belonging entirely to the written word. What is missing, what entered into the prose of English fiction between *Euphues* and *Lolita*, is the sound of the human voice, or many voices, speaking in a variety of accents, rhythms and registers, animating and modifying the formal patterns of literary rhetoric. More will be said about this under the heading of "Telling in Different Voices" (Section 27). But first: intertextuality.