

Staging *Lolita* (and ‘Saving’ Humbert): Nabokov, Shchedrin and the Art of Adaptation

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I dream of simple tender things:
a moonlit road and tinkling bells.
Ah, drearily the coachboy sings,
but sadness into beauty swells...
(Vladimir Sirine)¹

Introduction

Recalling the arduous composition and publication history of *Lolita* (1955), Vladimir Nabokov wrote that his ‘famous and infamous novel’ had been ‘a painful birth, a difficult baby’.² The same might have been said almost forty years on from *Lolita*’s first publication, in 1993, when Rodion Shchedrin, one of Russia’s leading composers and former head of the Union of Russian Composers, was completing work on an operatic adaptation of that same novel. Initially beset by an array of troubles ranging from the

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¹ Vladimir Sirine [Nabokov], ‘The Russian Song’, in Vladimir Nabokov, *Carrousel*, Aartswood, 1987, p. 25.

² Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, London, 2000, p. 53.

procurement of performance rights, to critics' censure and even public protest, Shchedrin's opera has not been without its own problems: the result has been a dearth of stage productions and, consequently, a general absence of critical engagement with the work. Little has been done to investigate how Shchedrin's work, which comes in a long Russian tradition of literary adaptations for the operatic stage, interprets, adapts and recasts Nabokov in music, and less still on what the respective (de)merits of this process reveal about the essence of Nabokov's art. These are the primary issues that this article aims to address.

The field of Nabokov scholarship is particularly rich, and indeed *Lolita* has received more critical attention than any of the author's other works. Growing out of Alfred Appel, Jr.'s *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* (1974), a corpus of criticism investigating the intermedial possibilities of Nabokov's work, principally cinematic, has emerged. Latterly, works such as Barbara Wyllie's *Nabokov at the Movies* (2003) and Ewa Mazierska's *Nabokov's Cinematic Afterlife* (2011) have provided valuable insight into the cinematic modes of Nabokov's art as well as its adaptive potential; however, other media employed by adaptors of Nabokov's work, such as drama and opera, have yet to be the focus of any analogous critical appraisal. Turning to Shchedrin, since the late 1970s Russian musicologists such as Likhacheva (1977) and Tarakanov (1980) have published a steady flow of monographs on the composer, several of which provide detailed analyses of his many Soviet-period adaptations of literary works; among recent criticism, however, Baeva (2007) and Kholopova (2007) are the only scholars to have engaged with Shchedrin's operatic adaptation of *Lolita*, focusing their attention predominantly on the opera's musicological and technical aspects, while eschewing the broader discourses of Nabokov scholarship and offering little to aid our understanding of the actual process of adaptation.³

³ See Alfred Appel, Jr., *Nabokov's Dark Cinema*, New York, 1974; Barbara Wyllie, *Nabokov at the Movies*, Jefferson, NC, 2003; Ewa Mazierska, *Nabokov's Cinematic Afterlife*, Jefferson, NC, 2011; Irina Vladimirovna Likhacheva, *Muzykal'nyi teatr Rodiona Shchedrina*, Moscow, 1977; Mikhail Tarakanov, *Tvorchestvo Rodiona Shchedrina*, Moscow, 1980; Alla Baeva, 'Opernyi teatr Rodiona Shchedrina: ot 60-kh k 90-m godam XX veka', in E. S. Vlasova (ed.), *Rodion Shchedrin: materialy k tvorcheskoi biografii: uchebnoe posobie*, Moscow, 2007, pp. 320–41; Valentina Nikolaevna Kholopova, *Put' po tsentru: kompozitor Rodion Shchedrin*, Moscow, 2007. Other musical adaptations of Nabokov's major works include Ib Nørholm's opera, *Invitation til skafottet* (*Invitation to a Beheading*, 1965), Roland Petit's ballet, *Camera obscura* (1994), and Tage Nielsen's opera, *Latter i mørket* (*Laughter in the Dark*, 1995). Andrea Tompa has gone some way to addressing the lacuna in her study on post-Soviet Russian dramatic adaptations of Nabokov; however, the various musical adaptations in particular await critical attention. See Andrea Tompa, 'Staging Nabokov',

Taking into account recent advances made by Halliwell (2005) and Rochlitz (2012) in the adaptation of literary texts for the operatic medium, this article will examine *Lolita* through close readings of both Nabokov's and Shchedrin's 'texts' (Shchedrin was both librettist and composer) to reveal how the novel is adapted and transformed in textual, dramaturgical and musical terms. This analysis of Shchedrin's opera will assess its impact on aspects such as narrative focus and character portraiture, and a discussion of the music's technical features, including orchestration, tonality, the deployment of leitmotifs and musical quotation, will be included where relevant. In so doing, this article will consider Shchedrin's opera not only in relation to Nabokov's text and its surrounding scholarship, but also in its own right, as an independent work of art.

Background

Shchedrin's opera comes in a long line of attempts to adapt Nabokov's work to other media. To date *Lolita* alone has given rise to two films (directed by Stanley Kubrick [1962] and Adrian Lyne [1997]), several dramatic adaptations, the principal of which is Edward Albee's adaptation for Broadway (1981), and even a musical, *Lolita, My Love* (1971), by John Barry and Alan Jay Lerner.⁴ With the exception of Kubrick's film — the only adaptation in which Nabokov had any hand (although most of his screenplay would ultimately go unused) — these various attempts at adaptation have been regarded broadly as failures, in terms of box-office returns and critical appraisal alike.⁵ While granting Kubrick's unrivalled success among these adaptations, Pifer nevertheless maintains that screen adaptation 'testifies [...] to the difficulties of trying to turn an intricately wrought universe of words into a winning combination of visual images and dramatic actions'.⁶ In considering the stage productions' shortcomings,

NOJ, 2, 2008 <http://www.nabokovonline.com/uploads/2/3/7/7/23779748/v2_o9_tompa.pdf> [accessed 16 August 2015].

⁴ A detailed overview of these adaptations and their critical reception falls outside the scope of this article; however, interested readers may consult: Tompa, 'Staging Nabokov'; Ellen Pifer, '*Lolita*', in Vladimir E. Alexandrov (ed.), *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, New York, 1995, pp. 305–21 (esp. pp. 305–06); Barbara Wyllie, 'Nabokov and Cinema', in Julian Connolly (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, Cambridge and New York, 2005, pp. 215–31; Erik Martiny (ed.), *Lolita: From Nabokov to Kubrick and Lyne*, Paris, 2009.

⁵ Of its \$62 million budget, Lyne's film recouped only \$1.4 million at the box office. *Lolita, My Love* never opened on Broadway, closing in Boston while on tour and, despite its all-star cast including Donald Sutherland, Clive Revill and Ian Richardson, Albee's play closed after thirty-one previews and only twelve performances.

⁶ Pifer, '*Lolita*', p. 306.

she further posits that they ‘empt[ied] the characters of emotional and moral complexity [...] producing no sense, as the novel does so poignantly, of human loss’.⁷ Indeed, these two criticisms encapsulate the principal difficulties that have plagued would-be adaptors of Nabokov: first, the notion that the primary concern of *Lolita* is linguistic (tending towards aesthetics over ethics), and thus also raising questions regarding the limits of visual and dramatic representation; and second, how to externalize and transform the richness and psychological complexity of Humbert’s solipsistic narrative into a viable dramaturgical framework without reducing the work to a ‘vulgar simulacrum’.⁸ Thus, in our consideration of Shchedrin’s adaptation of *Lolita*, we must consider to what extent the specificities of opera are able (or not) to mediate these pitfalls.

The commission for Shchedrin’s opera originated from Mstislav Rostropovich, who in 1992 had been offered the post of artistic director at Opéra Bastille in Paris. Acting on instruction from the French Ministry of Culture, Rostropovich approached Shchedrin, who by this point had already made eight adaptations of literary texts for music and stage, to ‘think up two or three Russian subjects for an opera which [would] be attractive to the French public’.⁹ Shchedrin’s proposal to adapt *Lolita* met with enthusiasm not only from Rostropovich, but also from Pierre Bergé and Jack Lang, the French Minister of Culture, and so work on the opera began in earnest.¹⁰ Upon completion of the score, however, when faced with the prospect of staging *Lolita*, Georges-François Hirsch, the then-incumbent director of the Paris theatres, was, according to Shchedrin, ‘on the frigid side of cool’,¹¹ and so, after a series of delays and postponements, Rostropovich and the composer were forced to find an alternative venue. This was eventually found in Stockholm’s Kungliga Teatern, where the work received its premiere in December 1994. However, the first production, too,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. Trubikhina similarly identifies this as Nabokov’s greatest challenge in completing the screenplay for Kubrick: ‘The important challenge for Nabokov [...] was to externalize Humbert, to translate Humbert’s intense and perverse inner world into the external vision of both his perversity and intensity, Humbert as seen by the other.’ Julia Trubikhina, ‘Struggle for the Narrative: Nabokov and Kubrick’s Collaboration on the *Lolita* Screenplay’, *Ulbundus*, 10, 2007, pp. 149–72 (p. 162).

⁹ Rodion Shchedrin, *Autobiographical Memories*, trans. Anthony Phillips, Mainz, 2012, p. 181.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. It is possible that Hirsch’s unfavourable reaction was at least in part occasioned by a clash with Opéra de Paris’s 1994 production of *Camera obscura*, a ballet inspired by the Nabokov novel, *Laughter in the Dark*, with choreography by Roland Petit and music by Arnold Schönberg.

was a less than straightforward affair: it came to light that the Nabokov Estate had signed performance rights to *Lolita* until 1997 to a Hollywood production company (the same one that was already preparing to make the Adrian Lyne picture), embargoing any other production of *Lolita* in a 'major' world language; to accommodate this agreement the opera had to be translated and performed in Swedish.¹² The premiere itself was further beset by protest over the perceived 'immorality' of the work, so much so that Eskil Hemberg, the theatre's artistic director, was forced to appear on Swedish national television to defend the production, pointing out that such accusations of 'immorality' might equally be levelled against other staples of operatic repertoire, such as Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* or indeed Bizet's *Carmen*.¹³

Later, with the release of Adrian Lyne's film, the prohibitions against performing *Lolita* expired, and so the Russian version of the opera could finally be staged: its Russian (and Russian-language) premiere was given at the Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre in 2003, and the production was revived a year later at Novaya Opera in Moscow. Since then, the only full-length production of Shchedrin's opera has been the German-language one that was staged in 2011 at the Hessisches Staatstheater as part of the Internationale Maifestspiele Wiesbaden. This infrequency of revivals may be accounted for, at least in part, by the broadly lukewarm critical reception of the opera, particularly in Perm' and Wiesbaden. Far from the universal, 'better than the book',¹⁴ adulation that Shchedrin claimed after the Stockholm premiere, critics of later productions were quick to take quarrel with the opera on musical grounds, most frequently alluding to the 'monotony' of Shchedrin's scoring as its main downfall.¹⁵ While lines such as 'more worthy than worthwhile'¹⁶ may have captured an initial reaction

¹² Shchedrin, *Autobiographical Memories*, p. 186.

¹³ See *ibid.*, pp. 186–87; Kholopova, *Put' po tsentru*, pp. 208–09.

¹⁴ Shchedrin, *Autobiographical Memories*, p. 187.

¹⁵ Michael Walsh, for example, described Shchedrin's score as 'lazy, impotent [...] loutish when it is not downright sullen'. See Michael Walsh, 'Lulu's Erotic Little Sister', *Time*, 13 February 1995 <<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,982502,00.html>> [accessed 17 August 2015]. See also, Peter P. Pachel, 'In ungewöhnlicher Dichte: Deutsche Erstaufführung von Shchedrins "Lolita" in Wiesbaden', *nmz*, 1 May 2011 <<http://www.nmz.de/online/in-ungewoehnlicher-dichte-deutsche-erstauffuehrung-von-shchedrins-lolita-in-wiesbaden>> [accessed 20 August 2015]; Gerhard Rohde, 'Es war einmal ein Skandal', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 May 2011, p. 30; Jörn Florian Fuchs, 'Lolita stirbt bei den Maifestspielen', *Wiener Zeitung*, 5 May 2011 <http://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/kultur/buehnenarchiv/46476_Lolita-stirbt-bei-den-Maifestspielen.html?em_cnt=46476&em_cnt=46476> [accessed 20 August 2015].

¹⁶ Neil McGowan, 'Perm Opera on the Stage of Novaya Opera: *Lolita* by R. Shchedrin',

to Shchedrin's opera, they are perhaps unjust. Indeed, as our analysis of the opera bears out, it is in many respects a highly sensitive, nuanced adaptation.

'A farrago of error and improvisation': Nabokov and adaptation

Writing in *The New York Review of Books* in 1969, Nabokov described the process of adaptation as 'a farrago of error and improvisation'.¹⁷ 'What', he asked, 'is there especially adaptive or adaptational in an obvious travesty? [...] "Adapted" to what? To the needs of an idiot audience? To the demands of good taste? To the level of one's own genius?'¹⁸ Time and again throughout his life Nabokov would return to a discussion of the shortcomings of adaptation, and particularly the limitations of dramaturgy.¹⁹ Setting aside the problems of narrative transposition from one medium to another, from the page to the stage, the erstwhile playwright's quarrel principally has to do with the loss of artistic autonomy over a work that necessarily arises during stage adaptation and performance. In the foreword to his screenplay for *Lolita*, Nabokov cautions that this loss has the potential to debase a work:

If I had given myself as much to the stage or the screen as I have to the kind of writing that serves a triumphant life sentence between the covers of a book, I would have advocated and applied a system of total tyranny, directing the play or the picture myself, choosing setting and costumes, terrorizing the actors, mingling with them in the bit part of guest, or ghost, prompting them, and, in a word, pervading the entire show with the will and art of one individual — for there is nothing in the world that I loathe more than group activity, that communal bath where the hairy and slippery mix in a multiplication of mediocrity.²⁰

Expat.Ru, 8 April 2004 <<http://www.expat.ru/culturereviews.php?cid=48>> [accessed 1 July 2015].

¹⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, 'On Adaptation', *The New York Review of Books*, 4 December 1969, pp. 50–51 (p. 50).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ See further Nabokov's two main treatises on dramaturgy, 'Playwriting' and 'The Tragedy of Tragedy', both of which are included in Vladimir Nabokov, *The Man from the USSR and Other Plays*, translated with an introduction by Dmitri Nabokov, San Diego, CA, 1985, pp. 315–22 and 323–42, respectively.

²⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *Plays: Lolita: A Screenplay; The Tragedy of Mister Morn*, London, 2012, pp. 8–9. Interestingly, Humbert Humbert shares Nabokov's aversion: 'I detest the theatre as being a primitive and putrid form, historically speaking; a form that smacks of stone-age rites and communal nonsense'. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, London, 2000, p. 200.

It is this desire that accounts for Nabokov's partiality to Kubrick, in whom he found 'an artist', and whose methods he hoped would produce a 'plausible *Lolita*'.²¹ Even when mediated by an *auteurish* mode of direction such as this, however, all dramatic arts, including opera, are by their very nature an ensemble performance with infinite possibility for variation, and so the 'communal bath' is ultimately unavoidable. For Nabokov, this is set in direct opposition to the stability and 'permanence of the printed text'.²² Moreover, since dramatic arts are fundamentally interpretive, a tension will always exist between the precise intent of the author-*auteur* and the actual performance of the player. Indeed, if, as Frye notes, 'drama is marked by the concealment of the author from his audience',²³ then an opera based on a work of literature has the propensity to conceal the author of its literary forerunner many times over: from author, to librettist, to composer, to performer, each step reinterpreting the preceding one, distancing the adaptation from the original text.²⁴ While in Nabokov's view this process is understood as an adulterating and limiting consequence, depriving the author-cum-primogenitor of his authority over a work and of his direct engagement with the reader, we should not forget that the interpretive and performative potentials of art also hold the power to cast new light on a work through their ability to foreground and interrogate selected elements. Indeed, such is the case with Shchedrin's adaptation.

Let us first make some general remarks about the process of literary adaptation for the operatic stage. The two greatest challenges to the librettist consist in the following: first, the condensation of the literary text into the 'confined' dramatic form of the libretto; second, the transformation of the literary text's narrative structure into a workable dramatic framework, upon which the composer can fashion his music.²⁵ With respect to the former, while a libretto is a dramatic text written for the stage, the requirement of music is such that more time is taken to convey meaning than were it the spoken word. It is important therefore to note first the textual disparity between Shchedrin's adaptation and Nabokov's original: the standard English edition of Nabokov's *Lolita*

²¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, New York, 1990, p. 7.

²² Siggy Frank, *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination*, Cambridge and New York, 2012, p. 50. For a detailed commentary on Nabokov's attitude towards stage performance, see *ibid.*, esp. pp. 48–54.

²³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton, NJ, 1957, p. 249.

²⁴ Hanna Rochlitz, *Sea-Changes: Melville – Forster – Britten: The Story of 'Billy Budd' and Its Operatic Adaptation*, Göttingen, 2012, p. 34.

²⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 32; Michael Halliwell, *Opera and the Novel: The Case of Henry James*, Amsterdam, 2005, p. 195.

runs to over three hundred pages, most Russian editions to around four hundred, while the published text of Shchedrin's Russian libretto is a mere seventeen pages long.²⁶ Despite this, Shchedrin's libretto still manages to generate a performance time of around three hours. The means by which Shchedrin has wrought this compression of Nabokov's text, as well as his recasting of the narrative framework and the motivations underlying his own interpolations into the text, will shape the first part of our analysis.

'All thorn, but cousin to your rose': From American Lolita to operatic Lolita, via Russian

With the exception of *Carmen Suite* (1967), all Shchedrin's works for the stage draw directly on Russia's established national literary canon. It is interesting to note, then, that in selecting *Lolita*, the 'émigré' author's ostensibly most 'American' work, Shchedrin should claim to identify 'much in [it] that reflects a profoundly Russian spirit', despite its American *topos*.²⁷ This is an intriguing statement and also an enlightening one, for not only does it suggest the ability of Nabokov's writing to defy simplistic linguistic-national-cultural categorization, but also it brings us to consider an earlier 'adaptation' that took place many years before Shchedrin began work on the libretto: Nabokov's own translation of *Lolita* into Russian.

In 1964, already at work on his Russian translation of *Lolita* in Montreux, Nabokov confessed in an interview with *Playboy*:

I imagined that in some distant future somebody might produce a Russian version of *Lolita*. I trained my inner telescope upon that particular point in the distant future and I saw that every paragraph, pockmarked as it is with pitfalls, could lend itself to hideous mistranslation. In the hands of a harmful drudge, the Russian version of *Lolita* would be entirely degraded and botched by vulgar paraphrases or blunders.²⁸

In an attempt to avert this outcome, Nabokov's own Russian translation of *Lolita* was completed in 1965,²⁹ and published by the New York-based Phaedra in 1967. Nabokov's writing was officially banned in the Soviet Union until 1986, and the first authorized Russian edition of *Lolita* was published by *Izvestiia* only in 1989; however, samizdat copies are known to

²⁶ See Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, London, 2000; Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, St Petersburg, 2014; E. S. Vlasova (ed.), *Rodion Shchedrin: materialy k tvorcheskoi biografii: uchebnoe posobie*, Moscow, 2007, pp. 224–41.

²⁷ 'Rodion Schedrin and *Lolita*', press release from Kungliga Teatern, Stockholm, n.d.

²⁸ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 38.

²⁹ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, Princeton, NJ, 1990, p. 501.

have been in circulation since at least the early 1960s, some even pre-dating Nabokov's translation.³⁰ At some point in the 1960s one such copy fell into the hands of Shchedrin, in the apartment of Lilia Brik, muse of Vladimir Maiakovskii and elder sister of the émigré writer Elsa Triolet (née Ella Kagan).³¹ Whether his initial encounter with *Lolita* was through Nabokov's translation or another's is difficult to say with certainty; however, the version on which he would later base his opera is undoubtedly Nabokov's.

Responding to earlier scholars' claims that Nabokov's Russian *Lolita* was a 'fairly close'³² rendering of its English precursor, Gennady Barabtarlo has convincingly demonstrated that the Russian text in fact differs substantially from the English original.³³ Most notable here are the plentiful examples of Nabokov's 'Russianizing' devices, trading Shakespeare's *Macbeth* for Pushkin's *Onegin*, and inserting references to Blok, Tiutchev, Tolstoi and many others.³⁴ Significantly, these alterations do not limit themselves to a Russianizing of Humbert Humbert, but even permeate Quilty's speech too. The overall effect of this is so profound and thoroughgoing that Barabtarlo concludes: '[T]he sophistication of many hermetically Russian realia that both Humbert and Quilty juggle with in the Russian version is so ostentatious as to make the exclusively Western literary setting of the original look perfectly portable and interchangeable.'³⁵ This observation provides our first indication as to why Shchedrin might have found so much 'profoundly Russian' in *Lolita*: he was in fact dealing with a version of the text already one stage removed from its 'American' original, albeit one over which the author had maintained his artistic autonomy.

Critical appraisal of Nabokov's language in the Russian *Lolita* nevertheless remains a point of acute disagreement. Lack of consensus over the quality of Nabokov's late Russian even led at least one publisher in Russia to consider reprinting a 'superior' samizdat translation of

³⁰ Nabokov himself was aware of such translations, deeming their results 'execrable'. See Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 47.

³¹ See 'Rodion Schedrin and *Lolita*'; 'Alles, was vor mir war, ist mein: Katrin Dietrich im Gespräch mit Rodion Shchedrin', *Deutsche und Deutschsprachige Erstaufführung. Lolita: Oper von Rodion Shchedrin*, Wiesbaden, 2011, p. 41.

³² Jane Grayson, *Nabokov Translated*, Oxford, 1977, p. 10. See also Boyd's curious claim that 'Nabokov's translation of *Lolita* is as literal as any of his other translations'. Boyd, *The American Years*, p. 489.

³³ Gennady Barabtarlo, 'Onus probandi: On the Russian *Lolita*', *Russian Review*, 47, 1988, 3, pp. 237–52 (p. 238).

³⁴ See, specifically, *ibid.*, pp. 238–39; Alexander Dolinin, 'Lolita in Russian', in Alexandrov (ed.), *The Garland Companion*, pp. 305–21 (pp. 322–23).

³⁵ Barabtarlo, 'Onus probandi', p. 242.

Lolita.³⁶ Nevertheless Barabtarlo dubs Nabokov's Russian text 'an ultimate masterpiece of Russian prose' in its own right.³⁷ Yet such a claim ostensibly goes against Nabokov's own assessment in his postscript to the Russian edition: no longer speaking of his 'infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue',³⁸ the author would now bemoan his 'rusty Russian strings', lamenting that in his translation 'everything relating to mechanics, fashions, sport, natural sciences and unnatural passions — came out in Russian clumsy, prolix, and often repugnant in terms of style and rhythm'.³⁹ This statement is of significance because it underscores Nabokov's preoccupation with maintaining the specifically 'musical' aesthetics of his prose in translation, what he would later term the 'rhythmic patterns, the music of precise phrasing, the beat of thought rendered by recurrent peculiarities of idiom and intonation'.⁴⁰ While Boyd sides with Grayson, judging that Nabokov ultimately fails to do this ('He opts for sense over sound'),⁴¹ Shchedrin seems to align himself instead with Barabtarlo's appraisal. Indeed, the composer recalled having been struck immediately by what he termed the 'pure poetry' of Nabokov's Russian.⁴² That so much of the libretto should then be transcribed verbatim from Nabokov's translation, as we shall presently observe, is evidence of Shchedrin's high regard for the author's Russian prose, lending further support to Barabtarlo's side of the argument.

Shchedrin's libretto

Writing of the libretto, Kholopova notes that 'text is exceptionally important' in Shchedrin's *Lolita*.⁴³ Shchedrin's opera is written in two acts, with an introduction, prologue and epilogue, broadly mirroring Nabokov's two-part hourglass structure. Analysis of the libretto reveals four basic methods of textual adaptation from Nabokov's Russian *Lolita*:

1. *Verbatim transcription*: Whereby dialogue or narrative prose is lifted directly from the Russian text without modification and inserted into the libretto.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 15.

³⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii amerikanskogo perioda v piati tomakh*, St Petersburg, 1997, vol. 2, p. 387 (author's translation).

⁴⁰ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 44.

⁴¹ Boyd, *The American Years*, p. 489.

⁴² 'Alles, was vor mir war, ist mein', p. 41.

⁴³ Kholopova, *Put' po tsentru*, p. 211.

2. *Vocalized narrative text*: Whereby narrative text is adapted grammatically and syntactically into singable lines;
3. *Glossing*: Whereby the libretto maintains the general sense of narrative prose or dialogue, but uses different words;
4. *Interpolation*: Whereby new material that has no textual basis in Nabokov's novel is inserted into the libretto.

Shchedrin's libretto frequently employs a combination of these methods within a single number; however, of all the techniques, verbatim transcription from Nabokov's Russian text is by far the most prominent, accounting for more than half of the libretto. While verbatim transcription may be seen to imply a heightened fidelity to the libretto's literary precursor, it is important to bear in mind that Shchedrin often employs this device compositely: that is, lifting dialogue or narrative prose from disparate parts of Nabokov's novel, even from different chapters, and recombining them in new amalgamations, sometimes ascribing the lines to different characters. To illustrate the above, let us take as a representative example Shchedrin's libretto for the 'Prologue' (No. 2).

PRIZRAK KUIL'TI (*krik*): Ia mogu vam ustroit' prisutstvie na kazniakh... Ne vsiakii znaet, chto elektricheskii stul pokrashen v zheltyi...

(*ishezaet*)

GUMBERT (*v luche belogo sveta*): Gospoda moi sud'i. Ia protiv smertnoi kazni... Da, ia zasluzhil sorok let tiur'my za rastlenie, i opravdal by za ubiistvo tvari.

SUD'I (*v kontrsvete na dal'nem plane*): Vashe poslednee slovo, Gumbert Gumbert!

GUMBERT (*vospominaia*): Ia rodilsia v Parizhe... Moi otets... ia ros schastlivym... uchilsia v russkoi shkole... Lolita, svet moei zhizni, grekh moi... bednaia zamuchennaia devochka, grekh moi, Lolita, grekh moi... Kogda eto bylo, gospoda moi sud'i?

(*temnota*)

(L_S 11–18)⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Although a distinction between the Russian and English versions of *Lolita* is central to the argument, for the readers' ease quotations are taken from the English edition where the translation coincides literally. Throughout this article, quotations from the English *Lolita* are bracketed in the body of text, marked 'L_E', referring to Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, London, 2000; Russian quotations are correspondingly marked 'L_R', referring to the Russian edition found at Vladimir Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii amerikanskogo perioda*, 1999, vol. 2. Likewise, page references to Shchedrin's score are bracketed in the text marked 'L_S', referring to Rodion Shchedrin, *Lolita*, Mainz, 2006.

Quilty's lines that open the opera are taken verbatim from his dissertation to Humbert in Part 2, Chapter 35, immediately before Humbert shoots him (*L_R* 368) — the on-stage 'disappearance' indicated in the libretto recalling his 'disappearance' from life following the crime for which Humbert is awaiting trial.⁴⁵ Humbert's first line is a modified quotation from his envoi in Part 2, Chapter 36: cf. Nabokov's text: 'ia protiv smertnoi kazni [...] ia by prigovoril sebia k tridsati piati godam tiur'my za rastlenie i opravdal by sebia v ostal'nom' (*L_R* 375). Here Shchedrin alters Nabokov's text, simplifying the syntax for brevity and so to communicate the sense more clearly within the sung musical phrase. Even Shchedrin's stage direction here is taken from Humbert's 'statement' before the jury in Part 1, Chapter 17, in which he explains his decision to marry Charlotte Haze and avert the notion that he planned to murder her (cf. 'v luche bezzhalostno belogo sveta' [*L_R* 90]). The judges' interjection is an interpolation of Shchedrin's own, without textual precedent, as they are subsequently throughout the opera. Humbert's final lines are drawn from Part 1, Chapters 1 and 2 ('ia rodilsia v 1910-om godu v Parizhe. Moi otets [...] [*L_R* 17], 'ia ros schastlivym' [*L_R* 19], 'Ia uchilsia v angliiskoi shkole' [*L_R* 19], 'Lolita, svet moei zhizni [...] Grekh moi' [*L_R* 17]), and Part 2, Chapter 32 ('O moia bednaia, zamuchennaia devochka' [*L_R* 348]). Within this brief excerpt we see in microcosm the variety of techniques employed by Shchedrin in adapting Nabokov's text to the libretto; what becomes immediately apparent is that in constructing the libretto Shchedrin has taken significant liberties to use as much of Nabokov's text as possible, refashioning it jigsaw-like if not adhering strictly to its order. It is particularly telling that Shchedrin often goes to the same lengths in composing the stage directions; in this way, he imbues the libretto with a close adherence to Nabokov's text on multiple levels simultaneously, even on those that typically lie beyond the audience's awareness.

Such textual reverence notwithstanding, it must be conceded that in effecting the compression of *Lolita* into seventeen pages of libretto Shchedrin is forced to sacrifice several of the text's more literary-aesthetic functions. Most notable among these are the many lyrical descriptions of the changing American landscape and the pervading humour that is one of *Lolita*'s hallmark characteristics; the libretto retains, for example, very few, if any, of Humbert's intricate linguistic games. Such omissions, however,

⁴⁵ Although scored for 'Quilty's ghost', the role is not disembodied off-stage, suggesting that Shchedrin's aim is rather to circumvent the logical necessity for Quilty to be dead within the temporal scope of the diegesis. Nevertheless, as an embodied projection of Humbert's own imagination, it neatly underscores the ambiguous psychological associations between Humbert and Quilty as, quite literally, an 'alter ego'.

are typical within operatic adaptation, given that this particular element of a text is traditionally seen to lend itself poorly to musical adaptation.⁴⁶

'Imaginary torture, perhaps, but all the more horrible': Adapting Nabokov's narrative structure

Textual compression aside, another major challenge to the dramatist-librettist is the means by which to recast the narrative structure for the stage: in *Lolita's* case, arguably the greatest challenge is how to 'externalize' Humbert's solipsism. On account of practical constraints such as budget, running time and staging, Shchedrin has opted to fragment and condense Nabokov's text, selecting key scenes that act as episodes from Humbert's memory — episodes that are then intruded upon by visions of his trial born of his own imagination.⁴⁷ Discussing *Lolita's* narrative framework, Boyd concludes: '*Lolita* begins as [Humbert's] statement for his trial, and [...] also remains a brilliant case for the defense.'⁴⁸ Shchedrin responds to this dramaturgical challenge by setting the opera during Humbert's period of incarceration prior to his trial; in so doing, he shifts the emphasis of *Lolita* from picaresque, anti-detective novel ('not a whodunit but a "whocoppedit"'),⁴⁹ or any of its many other interpretations, firmly onto an exploration of guilt and morality. The opera opens with Humbert in prison, awaiting trial for the murder of Quilty. Replacing Humbert's 'Confession of a White Widowed Male' (*L_E* 3), penned during his aforementioned period of confinement, Shchedrin's opera is projected onto the stage of Humbert's mind, presenting Humbert's retrospective obsession with his own history and psyche.

The opening scenes (Nos. 1–3) set the action in prison, showing Humbert confronted by Quilty's ghost, hinting at the prospect of an execution and causing Humbert to appeal to the judges in his imagination. This number segues via a 'Chorale' (No. 3) into the following scenes (Nos. 4–6) depicting Humbert's arrival in Ramsdale at the Hazes's house, his first impressions of Lolita, Charlotte's love letter and his reasons for marrying her, again with the ultimate encroachment of Quilty's ghost and the reappearance of the

⁴⁶ On the necessity and processes of paring the literary text for the libretto see, for example, Nassim Winnie Balestrini, *From Fiction to Libretto: Irving, Hawthorne, and James as Opera*, Frankfurt am Main, 2005, pp. 25–28 (esp. pp. 26–27); Sandra Corse, *Opera and the Uses of Language*, London, 1987, pp. 13–17.

⁴⁷ Much of the novel's prominent road-trip *topos*, for example, is omitted in the opera, most likely because of the considerable difficulties that would be involved in staging this within realistic technical and financial constraints.

⁴⁸ Boyd, *The American Years*, pp. 229–30.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

courtroom to interrogate his motives. Following an advertising interlude (No. 7), we then see a variety of scenes from Humbert's life in Ramsdale: his attempted 'seduction' of Lolita (No. 8), 'Supper on the Veranda' with Charlotte and Mr and Mrs Chatfield (No. 10), and Humbert's monologue, in which he recalls telling Charlotte not to go rummaging in his writing desk. After an 'Advertisement for Door Locks' (No. 12), Humbert dreams of killing Charlotte (No. 13), which is followed by her untimely demise (No. 14). Numbers 16–21 conclude the first act, showing Humbert collecting Lolita from Camp Q (No. 16) and following the pair's journey to The Enchanted Hunters (No. 17), a scene which includes Humbert's notorious first spat with Quilty ('Kak ty ee dostal?...' [*L*_S 154–59]), culminating in 'Humbert's Sin' (No. 20), the first time he possesses Lolita. This act adheres closely to the sequence and structure of Nabokov's narrative, encompassing the majority of action taking place in Part 1, although omitting much of Humbert's background (notably the back stories of Annabel Leigh and Monique), dispensing with a number of secondary characters (the McCoos and the Farlows) and cutting or compressing several scenes (the Hourglass Lake strand, for example), all of which may be accounted for by the time constraints of the libretto.

Act Two, by contrast, paints in broader strokes, covering more material in less time.⁵⁰ While time constraints certainly remain an important factor in Shchedrin's choice of cuts in this act, the staging of sequences such as the road trips presents a far greater challenge in technical and financial terms, resulting in an extreme degree of compression, and often complete omission, of this material. In order to transfer Part Two of Nabokov's novel to the stage, Shchedrin compresses much of the Beardsley scenes into a single number (No. 23, 'Life in Beardsley'), while completely expunging plot elements such as Lolita's participation in Quilty's play, *The Enchanted Hunters*, and even the final hospital scenes. Within the short space of six numbers (Nos. 22–27), we witness Humbert and Lolita drift from motel to motel, settle in Beardsley, leave Beardsley, set out on the road again, only for Lolita to disappear during the interlude after Humbert slaps her in No. 27 and forces her back into the car. Lolita's letter and their meeting after three years constitute one number apiece (Nos. 29 and 30), following which Quilty's murder (No. 32) forms the final scene from Humbert's memory, transitioning into the dream sequence that is the final 'Lullaby' (No. 33).

⁵⁰ While Part Two of Nabokov's *Lolita* is longer than the first, operatic convention usually demands that the second half of a two-act opera be shorter than the first.

Interceding to save Humbert? Christianity, American kitsch and Russian 'poshlost'

While Shchedrin's libretto engages with several of Nabokov's aesthetic-linguistic concerns via its textual composition, the realization and foregrounding of such substantive interpolations as the judges shifts the opera's dramaturgical focus towards an interrogation of morality and Humbert's guilt. Such issues have been a focal point of critical discussion since the novel's publication. In a 1962 BBC interview with Peter Duval-Smith and Christopher Burstall, Nabokov claimed that there was 'no social purpose, no moral message' contained in the novel, that his specific aim was to compose a riddle with an elegant solution.⁵¹ Since then, the argument of morality versus aesthetics in *Lolita* has continued without reaching any accord, save perhaps for an admission that while the novel is a supremely moral one, it arguably lacks any particular 'moral' in a didactic, purposive sense.⁵² It is curious, then, that having adapted the work to foreground dramaturgically Humbert's guilt, Shchedrin should profess to align himself with Nabokov's focus on the work's aesthetic qualities: 'It has much more to do with ideals and their destruction — it is a poetic story [...] not a moral one.'⁵³ We have already discussed the ways in which Shchedrin's libretto partially preserves Nabokov's aesthetics through its adherence to the 'rhythmic patterns, the music of precise phrasing' in Nabokov's text; yet in practice such a claim to ignore the moral aspects of Nabokov's story is a much thornier issue, as analysis of Shchedrin's three major interpolations bears out. Indeed, Shchedrin's claim to eschew any moralizing in the opera even hearkens to Nabokov's own obfuscations put forward in interviews such as that mentioned above and in his postscript, 'On a Book Entitled *Lolita*'.

Shchedrin's three major insertions into the libretto — those without *direct* textual precedent — consist of the following: 1) a chorus of judges, 2) a children's choir and 3) two advertising girls. In this section we shall demonstrate that these at first seemingly disparate additions to Shchedrin's opera are in fact thematically interlinked and, taken together, represent a coherent trinity that is very much in keeping with Shchedrin's dramaturgical focus on Humbert's guilt, while at the same time offering a thematic extemporization on the possibility of his redemption.

⁵¹ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 16.

⁵² See, for example, Leland de la Durantaye, *Style Is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, Ithaca, NY, 2007, esp. pp. 189–91.

⁵³ Stefan Schickhaus, 'Lolita als Lollipop', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 2 May 2011, p. 22.

Of the three interpolations, the chorus of judges has the most solid basis in the fabric of Nabokov's novel. Humbert's frequent addresses and asides to the jury not only provide us with an almost rhythmical reminder of his purpose in writing this 'confession', but also, as his own imaginary audience, hold a distorted mirror to his psyche, tracking his various admissions and elusions of guilt. Shchedrin's chorus of judges, as with Quilty's ghost, is born of Humbert's overwrought imagination as he awaits trial. Intruding at key moments in Humbert's narrative — i.e. the fragmented scenes that constitute his memories, and thus his testimony — the judges over the course of the opera stage Humbert's trial, asking for his plea ('Vashe poslednee slovo...' [L_S 14]), reading the charges laid against him ('vy obviniaetes' v rastlenii, v razvrate i v zlom umysle v prinuzhdenii...' [L_S 144–45]), interrogating and cross-examining his actions and motivations ('Sud prosit dat' opisanie marshruta s nesovershennoletnei Dolores Geiz...' [L_S 221]), ultimately finding him guilty of perversion and debauchery ('Vy svershili razvratnoe i liubostrastnoe sozhitel'stvo' [L_S 220–21]), and repeatedly dubbing him a 'beast' (*mrav'*) [L_S 222]). Since these accusations along with the final verdict are sprung from Humbert's own mind, we must consequently infer them to be his own conclusions, given form by Shchedrin. Indeed, the crime of which the judges ultimately find Humbert guilty is that of having corrupted Lolita, not of murdering Quilty. Reinforcing the protagonist's 'split moral conscience',⁵⁴ the judges represent Humbert's recognition of his guilt in accordance with Nabokov's text; Shchedrin's subsequent two additions then extend this admission of guilt by positing two opposing frameworks for his ostensible 'redemption'.

The children's choir appears at various points throughout the opera, on each occasion singing an excerpt from the Marian litany, 'Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis'. There is no textual precedent for the litany within Nabokov's novel; however, we may observe the genesis of a children's 'chorus' in the final pages of Humbert's envoi:

Reader! What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic — one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter [...] and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord. (L_E 308)

⁵⁴ Baeva, 'Opernyi teatr Rodiona Shchedrina', p. 334.

Religion is an aspect that is conspicuously obscured in Nabokov's novel; we learn little of Humbert's own attitude towards God. During Charlotte's 'interview', Humbert obfuscates: 'I could have answered that on that score [i.e. religion] my mind was open' (*L_E* 74), although he later reveals 'a Protestant's drab atheism' (*L_E* 282) that is tempered by 'metaphysical curiosity' (*L_E* 282). This would-be agnosticism notwithstanding, Humbert also reveals to us at the very end of his confession: 'I thought I would use these notes in toto at my trial, to save not my head, of course, but my soul' (*L_E* 308). These statements support at least the metaphysical concern, if not any strictly religious one, and Shchedrin's treatment of this is in the opera fittingly ambiguous: the children's choir does not interact with any other element of the diegesis, but seems rather to float in Humbert's imagination, remaining for the audience 'divinely enigmatic'. This staged vision of childish innocence and piety — an ethereal blend of treble and alto voices, offset by the clear Latin diction of a descant solo — contrasts Lolita's lost innocence, while the Marian litany simultaneously evokes the notion of religious intercession for the pardon and absolution of sin. Because of the choir's detachment from the narrative in all but conceptual terms, the audience is invited to speculate to what degree this is a viable or even appropriate framework for Humbert's *soi-disant* redemption: could absolution of sin ever truly save the soul of this 'beast'?

The advertising girls, Shchedrin's third interpolation and his nod towards the kitsch Americana that so fascinated Nabokov, provide a contrasting secular framework to the children's choir. Kholopova has written that the advertising girls' numbers are inserted into the opera much like commercial breaks, to provide moments of pause during the heavy programme.⁵⁵ Indeed, Shchedrin's advertising girls do undoubtedly give moments of light relief, yet far from constitute an 'entirely separate thread [...] which unexpectedly interrupts the action with [...] sonorous singing about trivial things'.⁵⁶ It is our contention that the advertising girls serve a far more integrated function within the opera, engaging the themes of kitsch and *poshlust* that so preoccupied Nabokov.

Nabokov's fascination with *poshlust* — his punning transliteration of the Russian *poshlost'*, or 'philistinism' — is one of his *oeuvre's* most recurring and enduring themes, permeating his creative output and informing much of his criticism.⁵⁷ In his essay, 'Philistines and

⁵⁵ See Kholopova, *Put' po tsentru*, p. 211.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ For an overview of this theme in Nabokov's writing, see Sergej Davydov, 'Poshlost'', in Alexandrov (ed.), *The Garland Companion*, pp. 628–32. See also, Rachel Bowlby,

Philistinism', Nabokov explores the links between *poshlust* and, among other things, the 'rich philistinism emanating from advertisements'.⁵⁸ The essay includes a commentary on a 1950s American advertisement for silverware (fig. 1), prepared by Nabokov to illustrate the concept of *poshlust* and titled 'Adoration of Spoons'. Recalling the Adoration of the Magi, Nabokov compares this sham, philistine adoration — the veneration of material goods — to quasi-religious worship, presenting this image of material desire raised to the level of a beatific vision.



Fig. 1. 'Adoration of Spoons'.

'Lolita and the Poetry of Advertising', in Ellen Pifer (ed.), *Vladimir Nabokov's 'Lolita': A Casebook*, Oxford, 2003, pp. 155–79.

⁵⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, 'Philistines and Philistinism', in id., *Lectures on Russian Literature*, New York, 1981, pp. 309–14 (p. 313).

While it is unlikely that Shchedrin would have been aware of this particular comparison of Nabokov's (the first Russian edition of *Lectures on Russian Literature*, including the essay in question, did not appear until 1999), his advertising girls nevertheless do perform a parallel role when paired with the children's choir, offering Humbert more quotidian, profane modes of 'salvation' — attempts to save his head rather than his soul. The first advertisement (No. 7), for example, is for condoms. Inserted just after Humbert describes how he made love to Charlotte, imagining her to be Lolita's sister, the duet sings in English of how its condoms will 'save you both' (*L_S* 45) when you 'take the peak, unison' (*L_S* 46). Their subsequent appearance, in an advertisement for locks (No. 12), follows Humbert's conversation with Charlotte, in which she asks why his writing desk is locked: 'love letters' (*L_S* 89), he claims. With this fresh in the audience's mind, the advertisement appears to be addressed almost directly to Humbert, for the girls advise: 'Lock the door, lock the box, save yourself with our help' (*L_S* 91–92), and further, 'Draw the bolt, keep the peace' (*L_S* 93).⁵⁹ Surely enough, it is precisely Charlotte's later determination to break into Humbert's desk that hastens her demise and enables Humbert to embark on his journey to abduct Lolita from Camp Q. The 'lock' theme significantly recurs just before Lolita's disappearance, when Humbert threatens to lock her up ('*Ia zapru tebia!*' [*L_S* 225]). In the final advertisement, for the Dromedary cigarettes endorsed by Quilty, the girls obliquely warn Humbert about his doppelgänger, cautioning that while the cigarettes' 'Quilty taste' (*L_S* 256) may afford 'extra pleasure' (*L_S* 257), they 'can be dangerous' (*L_S* 257). This final warning is repeated in the last number (No. 33) with the modified line 'smoke can be dangerous' (*L_S* 320), recalling the very literal smoking gun that only moments ago has killed Quilty and condemned Humbert to the very jail from which he is now reliving these memories. It is of note that this final recapitulation is scored to overlap with the judges' sentencing and the choir of children's prayer, uniting all three of Shchedrin's interpolations musically, conceptually and physically on stage. More than a lyrical *coup de grâce* on Shchedrin's part, however, this device clearly demonstrates the practical advantage of the stage, and of opera in particular, in drawing together different thematic and aesthetic elements simultaneously in ways that a text cannot.

⁵⁹ The lock-key/door-bolt imagery of the ads — linked here to Humbert's illicit erotic desire — is also an overt parody of the Freudian symbols so mercilessly mocked by Nabokov in *Lolita* and his *oeuvre* at large.

While taking such great efforts to preserve as much of Nabokov's language as possible, and thereby speaking to the author's own preferred emphasis on the text's aesthetics, Shchedrin's adaptation of *Lolita* ultimately engages both the aesthetic and moral aspects of the novel through its refashioning of the narrative structure and the insertion of the librettist's own interpolations. In this way, Shchedrin's libretto invites us to assess the interaction of style and substance in the opera; however, its dramaturgical privileging of Humbert's trial does ultimately tip the novel's equilibrium between aesthetics and morals, between artifice and edifice, towards the latter.

'She was musical and apple-sweet': The soundscape of Lolita

Nabokov's attitude to music was a notoriously oppositional one. In 1962, the author would go so far as to list 'soft music' among his loathings, on a par with stupidity, oppression, crime and cruelty.⁶⁰ Two years later, in an interview with Alvin Toffler for *Playboy*, he would lament bitterly that he had 'no ear for music', citing the fact of his opera-singer son as a cause of acute regret in this regard.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the musically averse author would concede 'the many parallels between the art forms of music and those of literature', and, as critics have often noted, the musical allusiveness of Nabokov's *oeuvre* is surprisingly rich.⁶² Yet significant criticism has been levelled against Shchedrin's opera, particularly in terms of its lack of musical variety: the scoring and orchestration, for example, have been deemed 'monotonous' by critics, and several of opera's more crowd-pleasing musical structures are intriguingly absent. To understand Shchedrin's rationale and his approach to the music's composition — one that eschews bombastic shocks in favour of a more subdued intellectualism — a close reading based not only on the novel's allusiveness to music per se, but also on its broader musical landscape will be instructive. Indeed, Shchedrin's

⁶⁰ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35. Dmitri Nabokov himself is in fact known to have performed several musical adaptations of his father's work, including at least one of his own composition. See Mel Gussow, 'Toasting (and Analysing) Nabokov', *New York Times*, 15 September 1998, 'The Arts' (supplement), pp. 1 and 6 (p. 6).

⁶² Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 35. See also, Nassim W. Balestrini, 'Art and Marriage in Vladimir Nabokov's "Music" and Lev Tolstoy's "The Kreutzer Sonata"', in Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin (eds), *Torpid Smoke: The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA, 2000, pp. 53–73; Nora Bukhs, 'Sur la structure du roman de Vl. Nabokov *Roi, Dame, Valet*', *Revue des études slaves*, 59, 1987, 4, pp. 799–810; Barbara Wyllie, 'Popular Music in Nabokov's *Lolita*, or *Frankie and Johnny*: A New Key to *Lolita*?', *Revue des études slaves*, 72, 2000, 3–4, pp. 443–52; Lisa Zunshine (ed.), *Nabokov at the Limits: Redrawing Critical Boundaries*, New York and London, 1999, *passim*.

loyalty to the realism of Nabokov's sound world has confounded the expectations of many opera critics, yet it is this staunchness on his part to represent some of the novel's more aesthetic sensibilities that lends the score its finer nuances; thus it is also able to provide a counterbalance to the moralizing bias of the dramaturgical structure.

Nabokov provides an impressive range of material in *Lolita* for a composer to work with. His description of characters' voices frequently has recourse to ekphrastic techniques. While showing the Ramsdale house to Humbert, for instance, we hear how 'there came from the upper landing the contralto voice of Mrs. Haze' (*L_E* 37).⁶³ In his attempt to convince the reader of the reasons that Lolita should find him so attractive, Humbert lists among other qualities his 'deep sonorous voice', adding the suggestive comment that he is 'said to resemble some crooner [...] on whom Lo has a crush' (*L_E* 43). We also learn that Lolita has a proclivity to speak in 'dove-dull, long-drawn tones' (*L_E* 122), and in his chase to discover the identity of the anonymous telephone caller from Beardsley, Humbert even fashions his mental line of self-enquiry as a musical ensemble: 'A quartet of propositions gradually became audible: soprano, there was no such number in Beardsley; alto, Miss Pratt was on her way to England; tenor, Beardsley School had not telephoned; bass, they could not have done so, since nobody knew I was, that particular day, in Champion, Colo.' (*L_E* 235). The auditory world of Nabokov's characters is also evoked with particular care: the text is punctuated throughout by the intrusion of telephones, radios, jukeboxes and car horns, and we periodically hear snatches of ditties and advertising jingles, children's rhymes and popular song. Seldom, if ever, has the nocturnal soundscape of the American motel been rendered in such acute, painstaking detail, with the 'banging and booming' of the elevator, and 'gurgle and gush' of the 'deep-throated toilet' (*L_E* 130).⁶⁴ Such are the vivid auditory impressions that Shchedrin opts to foreground in his score, in contrast to the 'monotony' of the musical background, fashioning the music directly from Nabokov's text where possible (see figs 2 and 3).

⁶³ Despite Shchedrin's formidable adherence to Nabokov's text, he ultimately favours operatic convention in this instance, scoring the role of Charlotte for mezzo-soprano.

⁶⁴ Among the motel passages the lengthy description of the nocturnal soundscape of *The Enchanted Hunters* (*L_E* 129–30) merits special mention.



Fig. 2. 'Car horn'.

Fig. 3. 'Telephone'.

Critics' indictments of atonal monotony in Shchedrin's score may perhaps be better understood in terms of the opera's monostylism.⁶⁵ Prior to *Lolita*, the composer's last operatic offering, written some twenty years previously, was his adaptation of Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* (*Mertvye dushi*, 1842); the music for this opera is particularly notable for its rich polystylism, which blends Russian folk idiom, 'white sound' vocal technique and atonalism. If it is clearly within Shchedrin's ability to compose a rich and varied operatic score, why then should the music for *Lolita*, a work famous for its rich, sensuous aesthetics, be so monostylistic in Shchedrin's rendering? The answer is consistent with the composer's approach to the overarching dramaturgical framework: the opera is staged, as it were, through the eyes and ears of Humbert Humbert, well noted for his forbidding monomania.⁶⁶ In a work so peppered with allusions

⁶⁵ The term is Kholopova's. See *Put' po tsentru*, p. 213.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Thomas R. Frosch, 'Parody and Authenticity in *Lolita*', in Pifer (ed.), *Vladimir Nabokov's 'Lolita'*, pp. 39–56 (p. 44); David Andrews, *Aestheticism, Nabokov and 'Lolita'*, Lewiston, NY, 1999, p. 105.

to music — popular music, radio jingles, grand opera — it may at first seem odd that Shchedrin's offering reflects so very little of this in its scoring. However, Nabokov's novel reveals Humbert to be curiously and consistently insensitive to contemporary music; his consciousness is either prone to drifting off when extraneous music appears, or else, as in the following example, is incapable of distinguishing the music entirely:

The Lord knows how many nickels I fed to the gorgeous music boxes that came with every meal we had! I still hear the nasal voices of those invisibles serenading her, people with names like Sammy and Jo and Eddy and Tony and Peggy and Guy and Patty and Rex, and sentimental song hits, all of them as similar to my ear as her various candies were to my palate. (*L_E* 148)

Humbert is more sensible to the world of sound around him than he is to music per se, a feature that is astutely reflected in Shchedrin's score.⁶⁷ While not necessarily affording the audience the particular pleasure of stylistic variety, Shchedrin's score is in many respects more illustrative and faithful to the soundscape that Nabokov creates, perceived as it is in Humbert's monomaniacal mind; in this sense it is the conceptual twin and aesthetic counterpart to the opera's dramaturgical framework.

Shchedrin's music

The opera is scored for a large concert orchestra, including harp, harpsichord, celesta and an extensive percussion section. Despite this, however, Shchedrin's orchestration remains uniformly light, generating an intimate atmosphere through a predominance of *dolce*, *pianissimo* dynamics throughout. Indeed, the music itself is so monostylistic as to eschew genre almost entirely; we see none of the dances, marches or set pieces ordinarily associated with opera, but rather an elegant stream of consciousness, intruded upon by orchestral illustrations of realistic elements.⁶⁸ On the one hand, this lightness of touch means that the music never overpowers the 'text', creating an expansive mental space for the audience to absorb and reflect on the language of the libretto which the composer is at such pains to preserve. Yet this should in no way suggest that the music itself is devoid of content. While one may be tempted to view

⁶⁷ Julian Connolly similarly notes Humbert's insensibility to music and melody, concluding that this is what ultimately leads him to seek 'atonement and redemption in a different artistic medium — that of verbal art'. Connolly, 'The Quest for a Natural Melody', p. 80.

⁶⁸ Kholopova, *Put' po tsentru*, p. 213.

Shchedrin's methodological approach as providing a mere accompaniment to the libretto, his music is in fact full of characterization and leitmotivic associations, deployed in a manner reminiscent of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* and Berg's *Lulu*, providing an additional layer of psychological commentary to the libretto.

Humbert and Lolita's musical portraiture begins even before either character has a chance to sing. The 'Introduction' directly establishes the leitmotif associated with the titular character, a slow rising *dolcissimo* arpeggio on a dominant eleventh chord (fig. 4), recalling the novel's opening paean to the sensual aural quality of her name.

Moderato
 (♩ = 56-54) (poco rubato)
 Archi flag., Arpa
 pp dolcissimo
 (Picc.)
 Red.

Fig. 4. 'Lolita theme'.

The motif is repeated with chromatic and rhythmic variation, introducing not only discord but also a sense of impetuosity as the notes hurry higher. This musical statement is followed by a trio of flutes, which play an interweaving atonal fragment in the treble register, using a variety of complex cross-rhythms and dynamically varying between *pianissimo* and *mezzo piano* (fig. 5). The fragment is then taken over in the bass register by a trio of cellos (fig. 6). The mirroring of instrumentation is significant, for the sharp difference in timbre and register reflects the disparity between Lolita and Humbert. Shchedrin's choice of flutes to evoke Lolita in this section also vividly realizes Nabokov's description of Lolita's voice early in the novel as having a 'melodious silvery precision' (*L_E* 21), and when the flutes join the cellos (fig. 7), the full incongruity of this instrumental pairing becomes ever more apparent as the music swells to *fortissimo* before dying away.

The 'Introduction' is also significant because it establishes the use of tritones as a major feature of the opera's musical make-up (see figs 5-7).

1 Lento assai (♩ = ca 40) (poch. rit.)

Fl. *p dolcissimo* (poch. rit.)

dolcissimo

Fl. *p dolcissimo*

Figure 5 shows three staves of music. The top staff is for Flute (Fl.) and contains a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes and a dynamic marking of *p dolcissimo*. The middle staff is for another Flute part, also with a triplet of eighth notes and a dynamic marking of *dolcissimo*. The bottom staff is for a third Flute part, featuring a quintuplet of eighth notes and a dynamic marking of *p dolcissimo*. The tempo is marked 'Lento assai' with a quarter note equal to approximately 40 beats per minute, and there is a 'poch. rit.' (poco ritardando) instruction.

Fig. 5

3 Ve. soli

p legato

p legato

Figure 6 shows three staves of music for three Violins soli. The top staff has a dynamic marking of *p legato* and a quintuplet of eighth notes. The middle staff also has a dynamic marking of *p legato* and a triplet of eighth notes. The bottom staff has a dynamic marking of *p legato* and a quintuplet of eighth notes. The tempo is marked 'Lento assai'.

Fig. 6

3 Fl. *f espress.*

f espress.

Fl. alto *f espress.*

Figure 7 shows three staves of music. The top staff is for three Flutes (3 Fl.) and contains a melodic line with a septuplet of eighth notes and a dynamic marking of *f espress.*. The middle staff is for another Flute part, also with a septuplet of eighth notes and a dynamic marking of *f espress.*. The bottom staff is for Flute alto (Fl. alto) and contains a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes and a dynamic marking of *f espress.*. The tempo is marked 'Lento assai'.

Fig. 7

Denoting an augmented fourth (in terms of diatonic harmony, the farthest removed two notes can be), the tritone is traditionally referred to as the 'Devil's interval' and is regarded as a discordant, unnatural, abrasive combination — the significance of which is plain to see in the apposition of Humbert and Lolita.⁶⁹ This tritone system grows throughout the opera as an integral, organic part of the music, recurring most prominently at key moments, on words marking Humbert's moral depravity, such as 'execution', 'sin', 'orgies', 'seduced', 'ruin', and even his very name (e.g. figs 8–11).

Hum - bert Hum - bert!
Гум - берт Гум - берт!

Fig. 8

and of kid - nar - - - - - ping. _____
в при - нуж - де - ни _____ и. _____

Fig. 9

Hum.
Гум.
222
guil - ty. _____
- туп - ник... _____
Coro
bassi
- ту! _____
- ник!... _____

Fig. 10

(*)
and or - gies, too...
и ор - ги - и...

Fig. 11

⁶⁹ This demonic association originates as far back as the medieval period, when the interval was considered the aural and moral antithesis to the perfect consonance of the octave. See Barrie Jones (ed.), *Concise Dictionary of Music*, Oxford, 1998, p. 679.

A tritone interval also notably occurs in the recurring leitmotif for the judges' entry (fig. 12) and in the opening bars of 'Humbert's Sin' (No. 20) (fig. 13). This device, which brings musical representation to the unnaturalness of Humbert's actions and desires, is then contrasted against the 'pure' perfect fourths and octaves of the children's choir with its repeated invocation of the 'Sancta Maria' figure (fig. 14). In this way, the tonality of Shchedrin's musical portraiture is able to reinforce the paradigms of guilt and saviour that we have observed in the libretto.

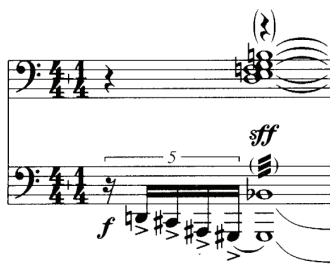


Fig. 12. 'Judges' entry'



Fig. 13. 'Humbert's sin'.



Fig. 14. 'Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis'.

Shchedrin's vocal scoring reveals a significant adherence to Nabokov's text, while being mediated in some respects by operatic convention. The part of Lolita is scored for a lyric coloratura soprano, hinting at Lolita's youthful, playful nature; the many trills, runs and jumps the singer is required to perform, while attesting to the vivacious plasticity of the character, nevertheless demand an impressive vocal technique on the part of the singer, requiring a formidable musical memory combined with perfect pitch to cope with Shchedrin's challenging atonal scoring.⁷⁰ Humbert's 'deep sonorous voice' is scored accordingly for baritone; as with Lolita, the role requires an equivalently strong musical memory and, although not overly demanding in terms of vocal range, it does require exceptional stamina on the part of the singer, who is seldom off stage throughout the entire duration of the three-hour performance. That both of the lead roles should require such extraordinary musical memory is largely on account of the fact that Shchedrin's opera makes such little use of repetition or classical forms where these vocal parts are concerned, favouring instead continuous, sustained thematic development through the use of leitmotifs.⁷¹

While Quilty is often identified as Humbert's doppelgänger, Shchedrin opts to distinguish the two men vocally. Scored for a high lyric tenor, Quilty's lines are located mainly in the upper reaches of the singer's vocal range and exhibit frequent recourse to accented *sforzando* dynamics. With the requirement for the tenorino to reach D₅ while singing *subito fortississimo, con tutta forza*, this vocal part exhibits the most demanding tessitura of the entire opera — 'punishing', as one reviewer described it.⁷² The high-pitched, hysterical scoring, perhaps drawing inspiration in terms of pitch from Quilty's admission of his own impotence ('No v sushchnosti ia impotent' [L_S 77]), provides a musical means for Shchedrin to underscore musically the unnaturalness of Quilty's depraved erotic desires ('Ia sam poliubil mal'chishek i orgii' [L_S 76]).

The scoring for Shchedrin's three major interpolations is very much complementary: each element provides an elegant counterweight to the others in terms of both musical and textual content. The judges consist of

⁷⁰ It was precisely for this reason that Shchedrin was so impressed with the nineteen-year-old Lisa Gustafsson, who played the title role in the Stockholm premiere and even in rehearsals 'sang not a single note out of tune'. See Shchedrin, *Autobiographical Memories*, p. 184.

⁷¹ The only repeat markings in the opera are the optional *ad lib.* repeats that occur at the end of the 'Chorale' (No. 3) and during Lolita's 'Bronksovoe ura!' figure (No. 8).

⁷² McGowan, 'Perm Opera on the Stage of Novaya Opera'.

a bass choir, their low, sustained notes recalling the austerity of Gregorian chant and Russian Orthodox choral singing, which imparts a distinct religious association to their legal proceedings. The children's choir, by contrast, is composed of trebles and altos, with the occasional addition of descant solos; formed solely of boys, the grouping is indicative of the Western choral tradition rather than the Russian Orthodox one, which is in keeping with Shchedrin's libretto (and Nabokov's text). Providing not only an auditory counterweight to the deep basses of the judges' choir, the boys' choir also suggests a thematic 'spiritual' correspondence with the judges, as both serve to comment on or evaluate the action.⁷³ The advertising duet, by contrast, is formed of a soprano and a mezzo soprano; these female voices provide a counterbalance to the two other groups not only in terms of vocal quality, but also through the contrastive secularity of their libretto. This structure of aesthetic equilibrium between the three groups also lends further support to our earlier assessment that they must also be considered as thematically interlinked.

'Plotting in Basque, or Zemfiran': Lolita and operatic intertextuality

During an interview for the Wiesbaden production, Shchedrin commented that he had been influenced by an 'operatic accent' in Nabokov's *Lolita*.⁷⁴ Thus, it is revealing that we should find in Shchedrin's opera several intertextual allusions to other operas, significantly in themselves adaptations from other literary works. Shchedrin's staging of Charlotte's artless love letter to Humbert (No. 6), for example, immediately recalls Chaikovskii's version of Tat'iana's letter to Onegin, with the nanny's singing of her youth and marriage grotesquely metamorphosed into Louise's singing of the dead animal she has found in the basement.⁷⁵ Kholopova similarly marks echoes of Chaikovskii's *The Queen of Spades* when Humbert takes aim at Quilty in the opera's final scenes.⁷⁶ Yet the opera that features most prominently in Shchedrin's adaptation is Bizet's *Carmen*. It is necessary to bear in mind, however, that where Nabokov is concerned, such textual allusions are not to the works of Chaikovskii (whose 'hideous and insulting' libretti

⁷³ For more on the links between both choirs and their functionality as a 'Greek chorus' in the opera, see Baeva, 'Opernyi teatr Rodiona Shchedrina', p. 339.

⁷⁴ 'Alles, was vor mir war, ist mein', p. 42.

⁷⁵ Observing other points of contact between the two works, several scholars have in fact attempted to read *Lolita* as an 'adaptation' of Pushkin's *Evgenii Onegin*. See Barabtarlo, 'Onus probandi', p. 238, n. 7.

⁷⁶ Kholopova, *Put' po tsentru*, p. 212.

the author abhorred)⁷⁷ or Bizet, but to their literary precursors, Pushkin and Mérimée. Nevertheless, while the vast majority of Nabokov's allusions to *Carmen* are drawn directly from Mérimée's novella of 1845, there are a number of significant correspondences that can be drawn from the 'double-barrelled' Nabokov-Mérimée/Shchedrin-Bizet configuration.⁷⁸

Throughout *Lolita* Nabokov inserts many overt and oblique references to Mérimée's *Carmen*, most notably as an intertextual marker intended to evoke associations of passion, jealousy and murder in the reader's mind, giving the reader to suppose that the identity of Humbert's murder victim will be none other than Lolita herself.⁷⁹ Pushkin's narrative poem *The Gypsies* (*Tsygany*, 1824) is often reputed to be *Carmen*'s literary precursor, although Mérimée's acquaintance with Pushkin's poem at the time of writing is still a point of scholarly debate. Aspects of Bizet's libretto, written by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, have nonetheless been shown to derive from Pushkin's poem.⁸⁰ Indeed, in Nabokov's own commentary to his translation of *Eugene Onegin*, on which he was working at the same time as *Lolita*'s composition, the author points out that *Carmen*'s line in Bizet's opera, 'Coupe-moi, brûle-moi', in fact derives from Zemfira's song, 'Rezh' menia, zhgi menia', for which there is no equivalent in Mérimée's text.⁸¹ Hinting at these multiple sources for *Carmen*'s operatic incarnation, Humbert himself makes a conscious link between the two heroines and his nymph:

Est-ce que tu ne m'aimes plus, ma Carmen? She never had. At that moment I knew my love was as hopeless as ever — and I also knew the two girls were conspirators, plotting in Basque, or Zemfiran, against my hopeless love. (L_E 243)

During 'The Seduction' (No. 8), Shchedrin once again returns to *Carmen*, quoting the 'L'amour est enfant de bohème' motif from the 'Habanera' (fig. 15). Refashioning Nabokov's 'Carmen-barmen ditty' (L_E 60), Shchedrin not

⁷⁷ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 266. See also, Charles Nicol, 'Music in the Theater of the Mind: Opera and Vladimir Nabokov', in Zunshine (ed.), *Nabokov at the Limits*, pp. 21–42 (pp. 29–31).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

⁷⁹ Note also in this regard that Nabokov is at pains to emphasize the Spanish origin of Lolita's name, a conscious association with Mérimée's heroine.

⁸⁰ See David A. Lowe, 'Pushkin and Carmen', *19th-Century Music*, 20, 1996, 1, pp. 72–76.

⁸¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Eugene Onegin*, 2 vols, Princeton, NJ, 1990, vol. 2, 'Commentary to *Eugene Onegin*: Part 2', p. 156. The line does, however, appear later, in Mérimée's 1852 prose translation of 'The Gypsies'.

only references Bizet and Mérimée, but also Pushkin again — the quoted ‘bohème’ theme referring directly to the title of Pushkin’s poem (in French, ‘Les Bohémiens’). When Humbert begins singing the melody, the opening interval, which in Bizet’s rendition is a perfect fifth, is grotesquely distorted, chromatically compressed into a tritone (cf. figs. 15 and 16); however, once Humbert has established the theme, Lolita picks it up, beginning an augmented canon that opens with a corrected perfect fifth (fig. 17).



Fig. 15. ‘Habenera’.



Fig. 16. ‘Carmen’ theme (Humbert).

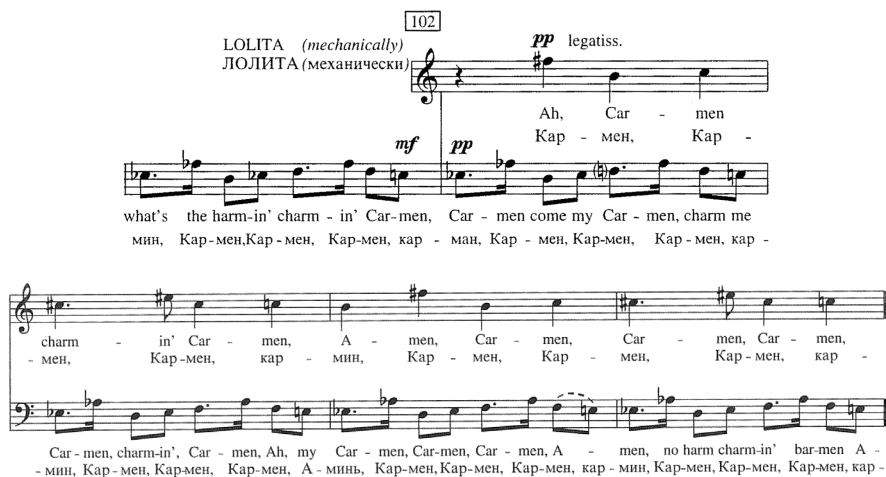


Fig. 17. ‘Carmen’ theme (Lolita).

This scoring almost perfectly recalls Nabokov's description of the selfsame scene in Chapter 13: 'The stars that sparkled, and the cars that parkled, and the bars, and the barmen, were presently taken over by her; her voice stole and corrected the tune I had been mutilating' (*L_E* 59). Thus, we see again how Shchedrin is careful to follow the precise details of Nabokov's sound world. Moreover, his decision to employ a tritone for Humbert's 'mutilation' of the melody adds yet another subtle layer of meaning, hinting at the 'demonic' perversion and moral bankruptcy in his mind.

That Shchedrin should return to a beloved source of artistic inspiration is unsurprising;⁸² in this case, *Lolita* provided the composer with an excellent means to demonstrate the novel's literary and musical allusiveness. In so doing, Shchedrin mixes the literary intertextuality of Nabokov's novel with the musical tradition of Bizet's opera; yet the complexities and the playfulness of the staging and music allow the composer to remain faithful to the artistic specificity of Nabokov's novel, drawing not only on Mérimée's text (albeit through the prism of Bizet's adaptation), but also on Pushkin's 'The Gypsies'. In this way, Shchedrin is able to tease out the multilayered intertextuality of the novel's 'Carmen' theme — from Pushkin to Nabokov, via Bizet, Meilhac and Halévy — developing it further through his own addition of the tritone–perfect fifth opposition that is musically and thematically one of the most fundamental motifs permeating his adaptation.

'And the rest is rust and stardust': L'envoi

Despite the vast disparity in media, Shchedrin's opera is in many respects an artistically sensitive adaptation of Nabokov's novel. While the very nature of intermedial adaptation is such that numerous aspects of an author's work will inevitably be lost, what is apparent from this analysis of Shchedrin's opera is that his adaptation presents a close reading of Nabokov's work in textual and musical terms, as well as a keen responsiveness to the aesthetic–moral dichotomy at the centre of the work. That Shchedrin opts so prominently to foreground Nabokov's language in the opera, and that in bringing the novel's sound world to life he looks so much to the literary text itself, is testament to the degree of musical potential he perceived woven into the very text of *Lolita*. Shchedrin's admiration for the 'pure poetry' of Nabokov's Russian is in evidence throughout the libretto, and his scoring

⁸² The 'Habanera' motif appears to be the most significant for Shchedrin among all those in *Carmen*, appearing as it does in the opening bars of his *Carmen Suite*. See [Georges] Bizet–[Rodion] Shchedrin, *Karmen-Siuita*, Moscow, 1969, p. 3, bb. 1–2.

not only allows the audience scope to focus on the text, privileging the author's language, but also introduces additional layers of suggestiveness through its leitmotivic and allusive musical framework. The dramaturgical framework of the opera has been wrought to foreground paradigms of guilt and saviour by inserting novel interpolations that, while not finding strict textual precedent in *Lolita*, are nonetheless derived from or inspired by its broader thematic preoccupations.

Moreover, the opera challenges the commonplace notion of Nabokov's 'unadaptability'. While throughout his life the author would rail against the questionable nature and results of adaptation, Shchedrin's opera deftly and intelligently demonstrates the diversity of creative paths that a sensitive adaptation can take. It is therefore all the more striking when in his envoi Humbert Humbert confesses that even his own *chef-d'oeuvre* had to be 'adapted' during its composition: while his aim throughout has purportedly been to provide 'a brilliant case for the defense', he ultimately reveals to the reader that he 'could not parade living Lolita' (*L_E* 308) before the world in such a fashion. Thus in the novel's closing pages Humbert's prose turns from testimony to testament: by instructing that the manuscript remain unpublished until Lolita's death, the narrator's ultimate purpose in writing is revealed not to exonerate himself, but to immortalize his beloved Lolita in art. Shchedrin's opera is but one further stage in this 'posthumous immortalization', tending as it does towards death in the final bars: *morendo al fine*.