Mandeville's English tongue: better than perfect


Dr. Humbert

With Nabokov’s fingers flying over the keyboard of our language in Lolita, we find it hard to believe that English wasn't his native tongue. "Had I not been such a fool—or such an intuitive genius—to preserve that journal, fluids produced by vindictive anger and hot shame would not have blinded Charlotte in her dash to the mailbox. But even if they had blinded her, still nothing might have happened, had not precise fate, that synchronizing phantom, mixed within its alembic the car and the dog and the sun and the shade and the wet and the weak and the strong and the stone." For the Napoleonic Humbert Humbert even incriminating evidence is blessed by fate, as, indeed, his free play with words results in sentences better than even he could have planned. Convinced that everything is permitted him, Humbert Humbert stands in the tradition of Raskolnikov and the child-rapist Stavrogin, though his musical English obscures this bloodline. We are enchanted with his confessions and, somewhat like Lolita, imprisoned in his solipsism. Passages like the one just cited attest, therefore, not only to Nabokov's undoubted virtuosity but to the narrator's skill in distracting our gaze from his sheer criminality and inducing us to join in his admiration of himself.

Nabokov wasn't the first foreigner to write better than perfect English alive with intonation and playful effects and to carry it off with an appearance of ease. Two hundred years and more before Lolita Bernard Mandeville, having moved to London from the Netherlands, held up the inverting mirror of satire to the nascent consumer society in his Fable of the Bees. As if an outsider who laughed at more polite interpretations of the national greatness had entered their coffeehouses, the Fable of the Bees makes the case that the vices of the English are the foundation of their wealth and power.

“To say, that if all Men were truly Virtuous, they might, without any regard to themselves, consume as much out of Zeal to serve their Neighbours and promote the Publick Good, as they do now out of Self-Love and Emulation, is a miserable Shift and an unreasonable Supposition. As there have been good People in all Ages, so, without doubt, we are not destitute of them in this; but let us enquire of the Perriwig-makers and Tailors, in what Gentlemen, even of the greatest Wealth and highest Quality, they ever could discover such publick-spirited Views... If it be urg'd, that if there are not, it is possible that there might be such People; I answer, that it is as possible that Cats, instead of killing Rats and Mice, should feed them, and go about the House to suckle and nurse their young ones.”

The Dutchman too has perfect pitch. Delivered in serio-comic prose calculated both to offend and delight, Mandeville’s argument contains many insights later purged of their roguery and reduced to reputable maxims—his dismissal of the fantasy of public spirit, for example, becoming Adam Smith's "It is not from the benevolence of the

1 From Remark M in Bernard Mandeville, The Fable of the Bees.
butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner." Mandeville's language is racier than Smith's, freer, more caught up with other voices, closer to common speech, the coffeehouse, and the pamphlet. And this instrument proves equal to the analysis of the first consumer society on earth. In the continual expansion of wants and needs Mandeville identified the mechanism of consumer society as it exists even now. (The new slogan of Vietnam, "Rich people, strong nation," carries a distant echo of Mandeville's notorious "Private vices, public benefits.") Few writers have better expounded the essential dizziness of a way of life that mobilizes desire as an economic force. Perhaps, too, it took an outsider to advance such a thoroughly ironic interpretation of the might of eighteenth-century England. "We all look above ourselves, and, as fast as we can, strive to imitate those, that in some way or other are superior to us," and on this rat race of Emulation a million employments depend. Had Mandeville lived another six decades, he would have relished the spectacle of Wedgwood using the nobility of Europe as endorsers of his goods—models for Emulation—in effect reducing the great to mannequins and thereby exposing their nothingness, but without the rhetoric and violence of the French Revolution.

In his vivid study of eighteenth-century English society, Roy Porter remarks on the "buzz of activity" in Georgian England, a phrase that picks up the bee metaphor of Mandeville's fable, just as his analysis of the consumer way of life reads like Mandeville minus the cynical note. Especially cynical is Mandeville's argument that the more vice-ridden the citizenry, the more flourishing the commonwealth. As the ideology of progress took shape over the course of the eighteenth century, it came to be said that commerce does not simply enrich a commonwealth but improves it, making its members more polite, sociable, civil. Mandeville wanted nothing to do with such varnish. Progress as he defines it refers to the advance of wealth and luxury as needs become more elaborate and as luxury itself, a word once loaded with connotations of degeneracy, becomes our second nature. By writing a second language as if it were his mother tongue, he himself offers a striking instance of cultural acquisitions becoming second nature.

Such is Mandeville's mastery of his adopted tongue that his prose has something of the natural flow of speech, as his way of baiting critics and pre-empting objections also mimics speech. There is a vocal quality in Humbert Humbert's narration as well, for all its high-art effects; from time to time he pretends to address a jury. Also richly colloquial is the speech-prose of Marlow, Conrad's deputy and the teller of the tale in Heart of Darkness. So supple and expressive is Marlow's language that we can hardly credit what we know full well to be true, that the author's mother tongue was Polish:

> You can't understand. How could you?—with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums—how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammeled feet may take him into by way of solitude—utter solitude

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2 From Remark M in Bernard Mandeville, The Fable of the Bees.
without a policeman—by way of silence—utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion?

In Georgian times it was said that commerce not only builds up the wealth of nations but polishes rudeness, civilizes. The kind neighbours Marlow has in mind are sufficiently persuaded of their own supremacy in the scale of things that they dream of civilizing the world's rude; not realizing the depravity to which a missionary like Kurtz can sink once convinced that in the name of his mission everything is permitted.

According to Adam Smith, the butcher's trade is "a brutal and an odious business," though "the most detestable of all employments" belongs to the executioner. To this exalted company Marlow adds the policeman. Underwriting his black humor here and elsewhere is a sardonic gloom about human prospects that defies the ideology of progress which, in England at least, had been in the ascendant for a hundred and fifty years. As in the case of Mandeville, maybe only a foreigner could have subjected such a compelling master-narrative to such mordant irony. There is not much of a tradition of profound pessimism in English letters. Though Johnson has a dark, melancholy streak, he subscribes by and large to the narrative of progress; Smith was a table companion. Carlyle has his Everlasting Yea. Dickens has Swift's satiric energy but not his misanthropy. Mill somehow qualifies his concerns about the waning of character and virtue with a belief in progress. Even Hardy doesn't so much refute the expectation of progress as set his fiction in a corner of the world that hasn't yet acquired it. None brings to bear on the expectation of progress a skepticism as corrosive as Conrad's.

It seems to me that like the other naturalized citizens\textsuperscript{3} of the English language cited here, though more indirectly, Nabokov mocks a narrative of progress in Lolita. The narrative in question says that through some kind of therapy the human psyche itself can be at once tamed and liberated, much as the modernizing influence of commerce was once said to moderate the more dangerous passions and release humanity from the dark reign of the archaic. The mass marketing of the therapy myth—a quasi-medical and therefore especially potent variant of the story-line of progress—accelerated during the post-war surge of prosperity when Lolita was published. That prosperity is personified in Lolita herself, "the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster," as Humbert Humbert describes her. Joyce Brothers received her Ph.D. in psychology from Columbia in 1953. In 1960, five years after Lolita, Philip Rieff noted in his "Reflections on Psychological Man in America" that nowadays "the patient comes armed with Freud's own jargon, and may even bring along his own diagnosis." Commercial and psychological breakthrough coincide.

The transmutation of the traditionally deplored passion of avarice into self-interest in the eighteenth century was inspired by the hope that by "harnessing the passions, instead of simply repressing them," as Albert O. Hirschman puts it, civil society would be the gainer. Civil society represents a breakthrough both commercial and psychological. Hirschman quotes Vico as marvelling at the Providence that transforms the passions of men entirely occupied with private concerns into "a civil

\textsuperscript{3} [Mandeville kept his Dutch nationality.]
order which permits men to live in human society." As Providence brings forth from men's pursuits a higher end than they have in view, it points (says Hirschman) toward "the Freudian concept of sublimation."

While Nabokov himself detested Freudianism ("Let me say at once," he stipulates in the opening lines of his autobiography, "that I reject completely the vulgar, shabby, fundamentally medieval world of Freud, with its crankish quest for sexual symbols... and its bitter little embryos spying, from their natural nooks, upon the love life of their parents"), psychiatric allusions and traces of the therapeutic idiom are as conspicuous in Lolita as the signs of consumer culture. Humbert Humbert spent "more than a year" in a sanatorium, after which, so he alleges, he served in an expedition to the Canadian far north as a "recorder of psychic reactions." He also claims to have "dabbled in psychiatry and social work." In the middle of his tale, anticipating the psychiatrists he imagines even when they're not there, he remarks.

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

Poetically, Dr. Humbert is locked in a love-hate relationship with psychology itself. He drops references to Freud, plants his narrative with something like witting Freudian slips, and after composing an ode to Dolores Haze dotted with allusions to movies, cars, and jukeboxes, promptly psychoanalyzes it.

Peering characteristically into the reflecting pool of his poem, he pronounces it "a maniac's masterpiece" and notes its "stark, stiff, lurid rhymes." In actuality the rhymes in question, like "scarlet" and "starlet" or "hardest" and "stardust," seem happy strokes of genius, like all the rest of the narrator's word-tricks. They are the product of the same mentality that gave us "the wet and the weak and the strong and the stone." Effects like these suggest a mind in love with its coinages, lost in an enchanted forest of its own making. Humbert Humbert's play with words represents a kind of free association that leads nowhere, certainly not to any transforming insight. "My accursed nature could not change." Like the patient armed with Freud's own jargon, he knows the language game of psychotherapy inside out, but in accordance with the logic of satire, that institution is his disease, not his cure. At one point the rapist professes himself "therapist" of Lolita.

Perhaps the reason Lolita, while a brilliant novel, is nevertheless not a deeply interesting one (or else interesting mainly as a kind of verbal chess problem) is that it allows for only one voice and one mind, the narrator's. Not even the nominal heroine is really granted an independent existence. The novel's subject and object, its entirety, is its own teller. While some sharp moments do occur when Lolita's rude voice breaks in on the poetry of Dr. Humbert's reveries, these never really come to much. Nabokov's countryman Bakhtin taught US to esteem the novel as a dialogical form. Lolita is a monologue in which the therapeutic rituals of introspection and confession serve only to feed a moral autism. Dr. Humbert's language is self-reflexive—playing on its own sounds, a maze of echoes and doublings—because he
himself is so. A theoretically ideal patient, highly intelligent, well versed in the
conventions of psychiatry, willing to tell all, an anthology of symptoms, is revealed as
both ruthless and incurable. "I was always a good little follower of the Viennese
medicine man," he says as he fingers his gun. The same radical detachment from the
world of others that makes Humbert Humbert as cold-blooded as he is—that
underwrites his description of tears as fluids—also makes him a rapt historian of
himself

Martin Amis is right: Lolita is a study in tyranny. It is ironic, though consistent with the
Nabokovian conception of art as "a game of intricate enchantment and deception,"
that such a study allows us to misread it as an elegy to love. Ironically, too, the
supposedly liberating influence of psychiatry figures in Lolita as the tyrant's toy. Just
as Nabokov uses the English language with a skill that seems beyond the
possibilities available to us who are born into it, so does he treat what remains of one
of our dearest fables—the emancipation of humanity through the unlocking of the
psyche—with an irony beyond anything familiar to us.

ACJ: Footnotes added.