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# Baudelaire, Melmoth and Laughter

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## BAUDELAIRE, MELMOTH AND LAUGHTER

Humbert Humbert refers to his car as a “Dream Blue Melmoth” (*Annotated Lolita* 227). Near the end of the novel, Humbert draws further attention to the name of this car by parenthetically saying hello to it from the text: “Hi, Melmoth, thanks a lot, old fellow” (307). Why Melmoth? *The Annotated Lolita* explains that “Melmoth” is a reference to both Charles Robert Maturin’s large Gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* and to Oscar Wilde’s “post-prison pseudonym” Sebastian Melmoth. Nabokov playfully adds another reference: “Melmoth may come from Mellonella Moth (which breeds in beehives) or, more likely, from Meal Moth (which breeds in grain)” (416-417). These three possibilities do not really have great resonance within the novel. They do not quite explain why Nabokov (or Humbert) would choose the name Melmoth. In fact, the name seems to have greater resonance in yet another source, Charles Baudelaire’s essay “On the Essence of Laughter” (ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne, 147-165 [New York: Phaidon, 1964]).

Baudelaire’s analysis of laughter contains ideas that can be connected to Humbert and to some themes of *Lolita*. Baudelaire describes the laughter of the man who lives with a sense of his own superiority: “this laughter ... is—you must understand—the necessary resultant of his own double nature, which is infinitely great in relation to man, and infinitely vile and base in relation to absolute Truth and Justice. Melmoth is a living contradiction” (153). Here we have one of Nabokov’s favorite themes, the double—a theme that is clearly expressed by Humbert’s double name. More specifically, we have a sense of Humbert’s character, a man who feels superior to others and, at the same time, commits actions that are “vile and base.” Brian Boyd describes Humbert’s doubleness: “Humbert might wish to introduce Lolita to Baudelaire or Shakespeare, but his false relationship to her, his breach of her mother’s trust, and his crushing of her freedom mean he can only stunt her growth” (*Vladimir Nabokov, The American Years*, 1991, 6). In fact, this doubleness—or as Baudelaire states, this “living contradiction”—can in part explain the moral difficulty that many readers have with this novel. A number of scholars have discussed this theme of the double, often focusing on Humbert’s apparent doppelgänger Quilty; reading with Baudelaire’s thoughts in mind (and Boyd’s), one can see the double within Humbert alone.

Baudelaire goes on to describe the “satanic” laughter of Melmoth, in a sentence that could be read as an insightful analysis of Humbert’s text: “And thus the laughter of Melmoth, which is the highest expression of pride, is for ever performing its function as it lacerates and scorches the lips of the laugher for whose sins there can be no remission” (153). Humbert, too, has a pride that lacerates, an arrogance that is thoroughly bound up in his sense of guilt. His “sin” is his “soul”(9). An essay on laughter might seem an odd place to find insight into Humbert, a man who is not prone to great laughter. Nabokov sees Baudelaire’s essential ideas, keeps the point about a sense of superiority and removes the actual laughter—that is, unless one senses some disturbing laughter coming from the entirety of Humbert’s text.

The locale of Humbert’s writing also has some resonance in Baudelaire’s essay. Humbert begins writing this text “in the psychopathic ward,” and he remains in an ambiguous “legal captivity” (308, 3). Baudelaire writes, “[I]t is a notorious fact that all

madmen in asylums have an excessively overdeveloped idea of their own superiority: I hardly know of any who suffer from the madness of humility” (152). This too could be seen as a Baudelairean reading of Humbert, who in a previous “bout with insanity” had found “an endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists” (34). Note Baudelaire’s description of “Satanic” laughter: “Laughter, they say, comes from a sense of superiority. I should not be surprised if, on making this discovery, the physiologist had burst out laughing himself at the thought of his own superiority” (152). Humbert Humbert shares this sense of superiority as well as the self-awareness; Baudelaire sees something Satanic in that sense of superiority, and he also connects this to Melmoth, who he refers to as “that great satanic creation of the Reverend Maturin” (153).

It would be appropriate to Humbert, the author of a “comparative history of French literature for English-speaking students” (32), to think of Baudelaire when using the name Melmoth and comically (or madly) saying hello to his car. In addition, Nabokov apparently had little respect for Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer*, stating that “Maturin used up all the platitudes of Satanism, while remaining on the side of the conventional angels” (*EO*, II, 352). (This comes from Nabokov’s note on “Melmoth” in his annotations of *Eugene Onegin*. Nabokov quotes Baudelaire’s praise of Maturin’s novel toward the end of that note, as though he associates Melmoth with Baudelaire.) Any reference to Oscar Wilde would be less relevant to this novel (and to Humbert) than the presence of Baudelaire. And the idea that the name has to do with a real moth (or two) is most likely some misleading information planted by Nabokov. Appel’s annotations state the “Melmoth” is “a triple allusion” (416), but he does not explain how any of these three allusions (Maturin, Wilde, or moths) add to the texture of the novel. Baudelaire’s sense of Melmoth is more suited to *Lolita*.

Of course, Nabokov refers to Baudelaire in other works as well. Baudelaire’s *L’Invitations au voyage* is directly referenced in the title of Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*, and elsewhere in the novel, as Gavriel Shapiro and other scholars have pointed out. There is a telling moment in Baudelaire’s “On the Essence of Laughter” that may have been in Nabokov’s mind when writing the conclusion of his *Invitation*. Baudelaire describes a scene in which “the English Pierrot” is beheaded:

His head was severed from his neck—a great red and white head, which rolled noisily to rest in front of the prompter’s box, showing the bleeding disk of the neck, the split vertebrae and all the details of a piece of butcher’s meat just dressed for the counter. And then, all of a sudden, the decapitated trunk, moved by its irresistible obsession with theft, jumped to its feet, triumphantly ‘lifted’ its own head as though it was a ham or a bottle of wine...(161)

Nabokov adds a metaphysical dimension to the scene where Cincinnatus arises from his decapitation. Cincinnatus moves toward his double, toward a place that may have a greater sense of “Truth and Justice,” and away from the “base and vile” prison in which he had existed (to use Baudelaire’s terms in describing the double, quoted above). Cincinnatus leaves his head behind. Again, Nabokov removes the direct sense of laughter, and adds a dimension that is not present in Baudelaire’s description. Nonetheless, Nabokov seems to have read Baudelaire’s essay attentively.

This is certainly true when one reads Baudelaire's thoughts on the laughter of children: "the laughter of children...is altogether different, even as a physical expression, even as a form...from the terrible laughter of Melmoth—of Melmoth, the outcast of society, wandering somewhere between the last boundaries of the territory of mankind and the frontiers of the higher life" (156). Here we have that final scene of *Lolita*, where Humbert rests high on a mountain road and listens to the sounds of children at play, which includes "an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter" (308). Baudelaire continues: "For the laughter of children is like the blossoming of a flower. It is the joy of receiving, the joy of breathing, the joy of contemplating, of living, of growing." This is exactly what Humbert hears ("the melody of children at play"), and exactly, he realizes, what Lolita has been absent from. Baudelaire writes, "Joy is a unity"; Humbert writes, "[T]hese sounds were of one nature." Nabokov also adds a Baudelairean exclamation aimed at the reader during this scene: "Reader!" (308). *The Annotated Lolita* explains in an earlier note that this direct appeal to the reader "echo[es] the last line of *Au Lecteur*, the prefatory poem in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*" (436).

Interestingly, Humbert keeps this moment pure. Many readers have used this as evidence of Humbert's knowledge of his crime, perhaps of his sense of guilt or his transformation toward love. Some have gone so far as to judge Humbert with less contempt because of this moment (although one should note that this scene does not happen at the end of the story: Humbert only places it at the end, perhaps to manipulate the reader into being more lenient). Baudelaire, however, does not think of this laughter as so pure: "the laughter of children...is not entirely exempt from ambition, as is only proper to little scraps of men—that is, to budding Satans" (156). Baudelaire seems more cynical than Humbert here, as he sees budding Humberts—budding Melmoths—in that laughter. Humbert, on the other hand, depicts such laughter as something entirely separate from himself.

There is plenty of evidence of Nabokov's interest in Baudelaire, as explained by scholars not mentioned in this brief article, such as John Burt Foster, Jr., and Robert Alter. My purpose is merely to offer a small addition to that work. There is certainly some affinity between Nabokov's work and Baudelaire's "On the Essence of Laughter." Jorge Luis Borges writes that we create our own precursors: one who knows Nabokov cannot read "On the Essence of Laughter" without seeing some Nabokovian ideas. In a more chronological sense, Baudelaire's essay may have inspired the name of a car.

— David Rutledge, New Orleans