



**Nick Cave, Nabokov, and the legacy of *Lolita***

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“A Man’s work is nothing but his slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great images in whose presence his heart first opened.”

- Albert Camus

## Abstract

This article locates in the prose and poetry of Nick Cave, the intersections with, and influences of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Taking cues from previous studies of both *Lolita* and Cave's artistic repertoire, the article illuminates some of the ways in which readers might read echoes of Nabokov into Cave's work. The first chapter delves into literary archetypes before offering a reading of Cave's work as a development of themes and characters in *Lolita*. The second chapter offers a guided tour across concepts related to the road novel. Taking account of Cave's long and winding career, this article takes cues from music, pop culture, and literature to create a new map of the circumstances of Cave's literary imagination in a post-*Lolita* society.

## List of Abbreviations

Works by Nick Cave:

*Ass* – *And the Ass Saw the Angel*

*BM* – *The Death of Bunny Munro*

*FMW* – “The Flesh Made Word”

*Lyrics* – *The Complete Lyrics: 1978-2013*

## Introduction

It seems that, whenever Cave turns to matters of language and literature, Nabokov makes an appearance. Whether in the shape of a lepidopterist, a controversial author or a scholar writing at a lectern, in his socks; whenever Cave thinks of writing, Nabokov is somewhere nearby in Cave's mind.

Perhaps now, at the age of 58, Cave has not only become the mirror image of his father, but of Nabokov as well (cf. Cave, *Lyrics*, 5-6). The similarities between Cave Sr. and Nabokov are plenty. Both were teachers, lecturing on English literature (among others) from the perspective of a relative outsider. They were not exactly contemporaries, but Colin Cave was 29 when *Lolita* was first published, and likely to have already been teaching at that point.

Nick Cave's relation with his father, and the latter's death when Cave was only nineteen, have been widely documented as a formative experience and an essential impetus to Cave's literary endeavors, if not his artistic career as a whole (Cave, *Lyrics*, 6). Considering the source of Cave's encounter with Nabokov and the manner of its delivery, one can imagine the potential impact of such an encounter on the creative mind.

So how does Nabokov feature as a tangible influence in Cave's work as an author/prose writer? How does Cave build on the themes of *Lolita*, and how does his approach reflect the different circumstances (social and cultural) of Cave's authorship, 60 years after *Lolita*'s publication?

This essay will look at the way Cave interacts with *Lolita* both as literary forebear and as pop-cultural heritage, inviting an analysis of Cave's novels, as well as several of his lyrics and other artistic choices made by Cave while conveying his literary imagination to his audience.

What inspired Cave to look to Nabokov for inspiration, then? Well, the artist himself has made the most eloquent statement on his first encounter with *Lolita*:

As I grew older and entered my teens, my now deceased father decided it was time to pass on to his son certain information. Here I was, thirteen years old, and he would usher me into his study, lock the door, and begin reciting great bloody slabs from Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, or the murder scene from *Crime and Punishment*, or whole chapters from Nabokov's *Lolita*. My father would wave his arms about, then point at me and say, "This, my boy, is literature." And I could tell by the way it empowered him that he felt he was passing on forbidden knowledge. I would sit and listen to all these mad words pouring from his mouth, happy to be invited into his strange, anomalous world. (Cave, FMW)

The talks and lectures Cave gave in the mid- to late nineties have become central to Cave-exegesis in recent years. Cave's tie to Nabokov becomes apparent not just as superficial reference. I propose that Nabokov's work and ideas are engrained within Cave's literary output.

In "Love Song", Cave captures the dichotomy of Beauty and the Abject in his songs. In a way, his songs are infused with what his father passed down to him as "forbidden knowledge"; Cave seems to mimic the choices of his father. The texts Cave mentions in "The Flesh Made Word" are part of a literary tradition of dark literature.

The three texts mentioned above are among the most powerful portrayals of rape, murder and insanity in literary history. Colin Cave's selected stories were also considered a danger to the established order of things: *Lolita* was met with disdain by conservative critics, (cf. Pifer, "The *Lolita* Phenomenon", 185); *Titus Andronicus* was shunned by Victorian audiences for its violence (Stanavage & Hehmeyer, 1); Nabokov himself is a fierce critic of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. From his *Lectures on Russian Literature*:



“Dostoevski’s lack of taste, his monotonous dealings with persons suffering with pre-Freudian complexes, the way he has of wallowing in the tragic misadventures of human dignity – all this is difficult to admire.” (104). However, you cannot blame thirteen-year old Nick Cave of Warracknabeal for not picking up on Nabokov’s complex criticism. Meanwhile, Cave, both as a performer and a (song)writer, has had accusations of misogyny on several occasions (cf. Baker, 3), though the “pervasive clichés about Cave as a Gothic ‘doom merchant’” are now considered “nonsensical” (Welberry & Dalziell, 5).

Nabokov makes a conspicuous appearance in Cave’s lyrics as well. In “There She Goes My Beautiful World” one of the key songs from 2004’s *Abattoir Blues*, Cave recalls the particular workflows of a variety of authors:

John Wilmot penned his poetry riddled with the pox,  
 Nabukov wrote on index cards, at a lectern, in his socks,  
 St John of the Cross did his best stuff imprisoned in a box,  
 And Johnny Thunders was half alive when he wrote ‘Chinese Rocks’

(Cave, *Lyrics*, 392)

There are a number of significant, odd (oddly significant) tropes coming together here. First of all, the mixing of fake and real. Cave deliberately misspells Nabokov’s name. Johnny Thunders infamously put his name in the songwriting credits for “Chinese Rocks” but never added anything to the song<sup>1</sup> (McNeil & McCain, 214). John Wilmot is another odd naming; he is known to the world by his noble title, the Earl of Rochester. Wilmot never suffered from

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<sup>1</sup> It was actually written by DeeDee Ramone with some help from Thunders’ bandmate Richard Hell. (McNeil & McCain, 214)

smallpox, but his poetry was, indeed, riddled with the pox.<sup>2</sup> St John of the Cross is named and referenced correctly, to my knowledge.

But there is something else at play as well: Rochester/Wilmot is known as much for his poetry as for his sexual debauchery at court. Thunders had a well-documented abusive affair with the sixteen-year old groupie Sable Starr while he was in the New York Dolls, of which Starr has said: “After I was with him, I just wasn’t Sable Starr anymore. He really destroyed the Sable Starr thing.” (McNeil & McCain, 153) St John of the Cross, meanwhile, is perhaps best known for his treatise *Dark Night of the Soul*, which refers to a spiritual crisis of desolation on a (Christian’s) path to union with the Love of God. (cf. Coe, 295) In Cave’s lyric, like in the passage of “The Flesh Made Word” before it, Nabukov/Nabokov finds himself in the company of transgressive characters who knew a thing or two about evil but were equally drawn to the esthetics of art.

And then there is this particular passage from “The Secret Life of the Love Song”, the second of two lectures Cave presented in the 1990s. Besides talking about the essential duality of love songs (another dichotomy), he characterizes himself as an author: “Words endure, flesh does not. The poet will always have the upper hand. Me, I’m a soul-catcher for God. Here I come with my butterfly-net of words. Here I catch the chrysalis. Here I blow life into bodies and hurl them fluttering to the stars and the care of God” (Cave, *Lyrics*, 15). To my knowledge, there is only one famous writer who is also a lepidopterist. His name is Vladimir Nabokov.

Finally, there is a short video of Cave on *Youtube* from the World Book Night at Trafalgar Square, London in 2014. Dressed impeccably in a three-piece suit, his voice gritty and booming, he reads from the first chapter of *Lolita*. In a single instant, he is a conduit for

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<sup>2</sup> Smallpox occurs, among others, in Rochester’s poetry in an elegy to Mary, daughter of the queen-mother Henrietta Maria, written during his stay in university (ca. 1660). (*Poetryfoundation.org*)

his father, the famous rock 'n roll performer and the increasingly well-regarded writer of prose fiction.

Assuming Cave's statements are correct, he may have first heard of *Lolita* and Nabokov as early as the fall of 1970. Almost 45 years later, it still resonates with him, as we can see from the World Book Night and from *20,000 Days on Earth*. The fictionalized documentary on Cave released in the same year includes a segment shot in Cave's personal archive. Here a weathered pocket edition of *Lolita* makes an appearance. He talks about his favorite novel in a scene with a psychologist as well, mimicking in a sense his comments in "The Flesh Made Word". In a sense, *20,000 Days on Earth* is a bricolage of earlier autobiographical comments by Cave, stylistic nods to his writings and movies, and behind-the-scenes stuff from the recording studio (cf. Lynch). Serving as a kind of 'best of' Cave's autobiographical comments throughout the years, the inclusion of this thumbed pocket novel gains further significance.

In view of Cave's rise to prominence in multiple fields of art and culture, academics have responded by composing a modest body of critical investigation into Cave's life and work. With the release of *The Proposition* in 2005, his novel *The Death of Bunny Munro* in 2009 and mock-documentary *20,000 Days on Earth* in 2014, it seems his artistic output has been expanding in an increasing diversity of directions over the past ten years. This has triggered new academic work on Cave's relation with cinema (Danks, Verrone), as well as renewed attention to his qualities as a writer (Hart, Van Elferen).

Despite the wide-ranging references to Nabokov in Cave's work, the relationship between the two has not been explored from an academic angle before (at least, to my knowledge). Why this has not happened before is anyone's guess. It does feel like an odd void in Cave studies. In light of the existing body of work on both Nabokov and Cave, I will use Nabokov and Cave as different points in a larger continuum of literary history; working at

different times and from different angles, but focusing on similar themes and concerns. These concerns are intimately connected to the dichotomy of beauty and evil mentioned above, as well as to a number of other literary, philosophical and pop-cultural phenomena.

The first chapter will look at characters in both Cave novels as (increasingly) contemporary realizations in the continuum of literary archetypes, dating back to Shakespeare and Marlowe, and ending with the impact of the *Lolita* phenomenon in pop culture. The second chapter is a virtual round trip to the various concepts, structural and philosophical, of the road novel and the way these are realized in *Lolita* and *The Death of Bunny Munro* in particular. But, like the novels it discusses, this paper is prone to detours and (literary) sight-seeing, hopefully paying tribute to the literary richness these writers exhibit in their work.

## Creating a Monster

### Or: Looking for *Lolita* in the art of Nick Cave

At first glance, *Lolita* and *And the Ass Saw the Angel* have little in common. Cave's debut novel is "a slow, awful journey into the heartland of a tragic town and a man doomed to be denied love and tenderness before he was even born." (Wishart, 211). There is nothing in terms of setting (time, place, movement) that would tolerate a comparative analysis between the maddening inertia of the Ukulore valley<sup>3</sup> and Nabokov's America-from-the-car-windshield. A closer look, however, might be revealing.

This chapter aims to shed light on the intersections between the two novels by comparing criticism on both novels and by giving a new analysis of characters and agency in both novels. The argument made below is that Euchrid Eucrow and Humbert Humbert function in much the same way, as do Beth and Lolita. Having established this, the chapter then traces the development of these characters as prototypes in later works by Nick Cave, shedding light on Cave's often discussed 'late period' (an ongoing period, starting with the release of the first Grinderman album in 2007).

Drawing a comparison between Euchrid and Humbert may feel a little awkward, initially. What does a perverted European intellectual have in common with a piece of degenerate mute trailer trash?

I would argue that both characters have evolved, to some degree, from the same template. Humbert and Euchrid are linked by their literary forebears, Prospero and Caliban. Samuel Schuman notes that "Nabokov seems to hint, to suggest a relationship between his

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<sup>3</sup> The name Ukulore Valley is another slice of Cavean ambiguity; it is both fictitious and real. Ukulore Valley is located in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, not all that far from Cave's birthplace of Yarrawonga. Pictures show a place which undeniably bears a lot of similarity to the Ukulore Valley of Cave's novel... except that Cave's valley is set in the southern United States.

novel and Shakespeare's drama of exile, enchanted island, father and daughter, art-making magician, and lustful monster." (5) Schuman directly relates Humbert to Caliban, the monstrous creature coveting Prospero's teenage daughter: Humbert, like Caliban, is "enchanted." Like Caliban he lusts for an "innocent" young human girl. Like Caliban's, this lust is psychologically but not biologically incestuous." (2)

While the comparison makes sense, Humbert is not simply analogue to Caliban, but a conflation of both the animal and its 'civilized' master, Prospero. Shakespeare created two characters whose layers are slowly uncovered, shifting the moral balance between them. In Prospero we see a precursor to Humbert's cunning side; both seem to hold the keys to control over their 'subjects'. Humbert's magic is in his money, the keys to the car, and adulthood. Lolita, by extension, has a bit of Ariel in her. With her tomboyish, pre-adolescent appearance, she could be described in terms analog to Ariel:

He is male, the asexual boy to Caliban's libidinous man, but (in keeping with his status as a boy actor) all the roles he plays at Prospero's command are female: sea nymph, harpy, Ceres. Though his relation to his master includes a good deal of obvious affection, he is no more a willing servant than Caliban, and Prospero keeps him in bondage only by a mixture of promises, threats, and appeals to his gratitude." (Orgel, 27)

Part of the irony in Humbert Humbert is the conjunction of his roots with his vices. Old-world, romantic literary mind Humbert, the dreamer, simultaneously is the predator, a man of beastly desires and zero moral integrity. Humbert and Lolita, then, are achieving a dialogistic play, invoking different relationships in *The Tempest* in various instants throughout *Lolita*. Sometimes they echo Caliban and Miranda, sometimes Prospero and Ariel.

A significant portion of the antipathy in *The Tempest* stems from Prospero's failure to see beyond his own event horizon, an attitude to the world which is left totally uninformed by unbiased contact with the island's indigenous inhabitants, such as Caliban and Ariel. The constitution of the latter as animals and servants is wholly inspired by Prospero's inherent solipsism. Only at the *denouement* of the play, as he prepares to leave the island, Prospero comes to terms with the nature and nurture of his (former) servants, especially Caliban:

These three have robbed me, and this demi-devil –

For he's a bastard one- had plotted with them

To take my life. Two of these fellows you

Must know and own; this thing of darkness I

Acknowledge mine.

(Shakespeare, V.i.272-276)

Humbert could be chastised for the same kind of solipsism, the inventor of the “nymphet”, a mechanism which shifts blame for his own transgressions to the object(s) of his desire. Humbert's actions create Lolita while destroying Dolores Haze, or at least negating her existence. <sup>4</sup>Here we come at an important intersection between Cave and Nabokov: Cave's preference for “Beautiful, evil things” (cf. Pattie, 64), his assertion that “God is the imagination taken flight” (Cave, FMW) and his attitude towards love songs: “The Love Song must be borne into the realm of the irrational, the absurd, the distracted, the melancholic, the obsessive and the insane, for the Love Song is the clamour of love itself, and love is, of course, a form of madness.” (Cave, *Lyrics*, 10-11)

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<sup>4</sup> See for a larger discussion of creative imagination and solipsism in *Lolita* and, interestingly, *Frankenstein*, Ellen Pifer's “Her Monster, His Nymphet: Nabokov and Mary Shelley”

The character template created by Shakespeare applies to Euchrid Eucrow as well. Euchrid is a most eloquent storyteller, but no one in his world knows. Born a mute, the reader is the only one privy to his stories. He is a ghastly sight, full of scabs and scrapes, a product of self-mutilation. Shunned by the town and mistreated by his mother, unloved and unwanted, he retreats into his own world, building his own refuge, places of autonomy and comfort, first in a barrel, then a sanctuary in a swamp, and finally, his own island, DOGHEAD.

Euchrid cobbles together a world view from silently witnessing the inhabitants of Ukulore valley. The only approximation of affection he ever experiences is from the town prostitute, Cosey Mo, while his other formative experience is witnessing the mad ravings of self-appointed preacher Abie Poe, who takes aim at Cosey Mo as the source of the town's sinfulness. The maiming of Mo triggers a series of events which are witnessed and misconstrued by both the town and by Euchrid – the orphanage of Cosey Mo's daughter Beth, which coincides with the stopping of a torrential rain of four years and leads the town to worship Beth as a savior of sorts; the witnessing of said orphanage by Euchrid, the only one who knows the true origin of the bratty little girl.

Euchrid is cut off from sharing his thoughts with his fellow human beings. He is born an outcast, and has no means to change the way people think about him. Lacking the means to exchange ideas with others, Euchrid weaves his childhood experiences – seeing his father perched atop a water tower watching wild animals claw at each other, Cosey Mo's business endeavors, Abie Poe's ravings, his father murdering his mother- into a ill-conceived story of Godly appointment, justifying the 'divine rule' of his kingdom and, eventually, the murder of Beth as well.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> One might include 'rape' here as well, and the sex certainly was based on a misconception by Beth, but the novel remains fairly ambiguous on this particular point.



Solipsism could be defined, in a loose way, as the imagination of one person in a prolonged state of isolation. His lack of communicative competency also defines his relationship with the townsfolk. Their opinion of him stays the same, because Euchrid has no way of changing their perception. To the Ukulites, Euchrid is something closer to animal than man. He is both solipsist and solipsized.

Euchrid Eucrow is a misunderstood monster based on physical appearance and his lack of words, Beth is the Lolita-goddess<sup>6</sup> that is revered by the Ukulites despite being the bastard child to any and all of Cosey Mo's customers, and who, in turn, sees Euchrid as a god instead of monster. It is the central playful element in *And the Ass Saw the Angel*, and it is reflected in the playful use of the novel's title phrase. Sometimes the ass means the mute Euchrid, sometimes the actual mule, and sometimes it is unclear who is the ass or the angel. In fact, it might be considered the central question in the relationship between Beth and Euchrid.

In *And the Ass Saw the Angel*, Cave draws out a continuity between opposite appraisals of Beth: the delusional, obsessive take of Euchrid, and the false gospel of the townsfolk, deifying Beth as an agent of divine salvation. Not to mention Beth's similarly delusional, conditioned view of Euchrid as God. These interrelated interpretations are the cause of all the action in the novel, and most of the grief.

Central to Beth and Euchrid's misunderstanding is the fact that the imagined image of each other is flawed without a chance of repair. Beth has been effectively brainwashed by the Ukulites to believe herself some kind of savior, but the how and why remains a mystery to her. Her misinformed vision of Euchrid originates in the story the Ukulites have created for

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<sup>6</sup> The imagery of Beth in 'one white ankle sock' (Cave, *Ass*, 156) is actually a direct reference to Humbert's opening incantation in *Lolita* (Nabokov, 7)

her. After Euchrid first appearance at Beth's windowsill, she asks her father, Sardus Swift, "does God breathe funny?" (Cave, *Ass*, 156). It continues:

'Why do you think it was God?' asked Sardus, unable to suppress a tremor of rage in his voice, for he knew well the reason why.

'Well, because God is coming to visit me. That's what Mrs Baxter says, and Miss Sarah Blume. And I know I musn't be afraid. Did I scare God away? Will He be angry and punish us again?'

(Cave, *Ass*, 156)

Beth is willing to follow blindly whatever great expectations the Ukulites have for her, even if her father tries to warn her for naiveté. More evidence for this indoctrination is found in Beth's (love)letters to Euchrid: "Every day they look at me to see if it has happened. They ask me if I have been good and pure. Yesterday Mrs Barlow said that I must have been shaming the Prophet." (Cave, *Ass*, 211) Euchrid simply becomes a vessel for the encounter Beth is told to expect.

There is an echo here, however faint, of Lolita's early fascination with Humbert. A follower of all things celebrity, Dolly seems to look upon Humbert in a way that seems similarly informed as Beth's, albeit by vastly different beliefs.

[F]or now she was not really looking at my scribble, but waiting with curiosity and composure –oh, my limpid nymphet! –for the glamorous lodger to do what he was dying to do. A modern child, an avid reader of movie magazines, an expert in dream-slow close ups, might not think it too strange, I guessed, if a handsome, intensely virile grown-up friend –too late. (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 53)

Obviously, this is Humbert's account, not Lo's. Dolores Haze never gets a voice in the novel. However, the proposition that an impressionable young girl might be deceived by the appearance of a Cary Grant-type romantic movie character, is a commonly accepted parental nightmare.

Unlike *Lolita*, the creative imagination in *And the Ass Saw the Angel* is not limited to one man, but to many. Prospero, Frankenstein and Humbert are in the unique position to do God's work, to depose him as it were, and create life in their own self-interested image. The inhabitants of Ukulore Valley seem to play a very similar game. As a religious sect, separated from the wider world and shepherded into self-justification by the sect's founder, Jonas Ukulore, the Ukulites have all the means at their disposal to ignite a kind of communal solipsism, an 'us against the world' attitude.<sup>7</sup>

In an attempt to purge themselves of the perceived sin that caused 'the rain', they turn away from reason and walk the path of superstition. They are willing to follow a false preacher, to exact vengeance on Cosey Mo, and subsequently worship Beth because the town needs a story to latch onto. This mimics something Pifer says for *Lolita*: "Insofar as human consciousness itself is creative, each individual is engaged in the essentially *artistic* process of creating or recreating, out of the raw materials or elements of existence, the particular shape and meaning of the world he inhabits" (Pifer, "Lolita", 307)

All that happens in the town becomes the subject of the Ukulites' creative process; to make sense of their world. Thus, Euchrid is an animal, while Beth becomes canonized for simply being in the right place at the right time. They are eager to ignore her pedigree (of which only Euchrid is aware), and shower her with their religious devotion, creating, in the

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<sup>7</sup> As a matter of fact, Cave has stated that the Ukulites are based on the Morrisites, a sect that separated from the Church of Latter Day Saints in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and which, upon excommunication, took up residence in an old fort in the Weber River Valley in Utah. (Smith)

process, a wholly different kind of monster. Beth turns into a pampered, bratty child, as isolated and inhuman as Euchrid. Their disjoint from all the ‘normal’ people is what brings them together in a shambolic, yokel version of *Romeo and Juliet* ... if only Euchrid was able to express himself.

This was Cave’s intention all along. In “The Flesh Made Word”, his talk on his religious influences, Cave comments: “Christ, the man, who abhorred the concept of a spiritual elite, spoke to every man. He came with a gift of language, of love, of imagination. Said Jesus in the Gospel of John: ‘The words I speak unto you, they are the Spirit, and they are the life.’” Cave then goes on to discuss Euchrid in similar terms:

The story, set in the American South and told through the voice (or non-voice) of Euchrid Eucrow, was written in a kind of hyper-poetic thought-speak not meant to be spoken, a mongrel language that was part Biblical, part Deep South dialect, part gutter slang, at times obscenely reverent and at others reverently obscene. Throughout the story, God fills the mute boy with information, loads him up with bad ideas, "hate inspiration straight from God," as he puts it. But with no one to talk to, and no way to talk, Euchrid, like a blocked pipe, bursts. For me, Euchrid is Jesus struck dumb, he is the blocked artist, he is internalized imagination become madness. (Cave, FMW)

This actually leads me to consider another point which ties Humbert and Euchrid together: their language.<sup>8</sup> Eloquence is the great disguise that Humbert cloaks his dark desires with. His plea or play for the reader’s understanding is one of the most captivating aspects of *Lolita*.

Likewise,

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<sup>8</sup> For Cave, language is actually a means to both create and destroy the setting of *And the Ass Saw the Angel*: “These are romantic notions I've had as somebody who's never been to the deep South. I don't see my songs as being Southern. It would be wrong and a bit stupid to think that they were. It's just a mythological territory I've devised as a stage where a lot of my songs and this book operate. There's Australia in there. It's a composite world.” (Smith)

Cave's capacity in *The Ass Saw The Angel* to draw the reader into the emotional life of its strange narrator leads me onto the third aspect of duende for Lorca. It is something that Maurer, in his introduction to Lorca, describes as 'an inexplicable power of attraction, the ability, on rare occasions, to send waves of emotion through those watching and listening.' (Lorca qtd. in Wishart)". (Wishart 211)

This ties yet another central tenet of Cave's creative philosophy to *Lolita*.

The concepts of creative imagination and solipsism, the themes of monstrosity and beauty, are part of a literary thread, or a mesh of threads, which runs from Shakespeare to Nabokov and ultimately to Cave. It was Nabokov, however, who created in *Lolita* a particular image which reverberated throughout society, especially with the advent of mass media. From high art to low, from the image of Sue Lyon in the 1962 adaptation of *Lolita* by Stanley Kubrick to "hundreds of pornography sites on the World Wide Web" (Stringer-Hye, 155). As Stringer-Hye suggests,

The interplay between Humbert's romantic invention, "Lolita" and the criminality of his actions towards Dolores Haze portrays the competing demands of the aesthetic impulse and the responsibility of the dreamer to differentiate other from self. These complexities are still being negotiated within the culture, provoking debates about gender, fashion, pornography, and art. Whenever these issues arise, the Lolita icon is inevitably brought into play. (155-156)

This, then, is the iconography that informs Cave's writings, including those on Beth and Elisa Day, and by extension also his ruminations on female pop stars: Miley Cyrus (on "Higgs Boson Blues"), Avril Lavigne (in *Bunny Munro*) and, most explicitly, Kylie Minogue.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Stringer-Hye actually deals in more depth with *Lolita's* pop-cultural legacy than space allows for here, including some great remarks on the influence of cinematography on Nabokov and vice-versa.

Cave's 'professional obsession' with Minogue is well-documented. They collaborated on "Where the Wild Roses Grow", Cave's only hit-song and –video. Minogue makes an appearance in *Bunny Munro* and appears on the backseat of Cave's car in *20.000 Days on Earth*, a ghostly apparition from his past, reminiscing their collaboration. Like most Australians, Cave must have first laid eyes on Kylie Minogue in the Australian soap opera *Neighbours*, where she played "tomboy mechanic" Charlene Robinson.

Pictures from the era show Minogue at 18 years old, with frizzy hair, but otherwise a pretty good match for fellow actress Sue Lyon at the same age. Sue Lyon, in turn, debuted at 16, playing Dolores Haze in the Kubrick adaptation of *Lolita*. There is no proof that Cave saw a likeness between Lyon and Minogue. Besides, Minogue was 28 by the time she sang on "Where the Wild Roses Grow". Consider, however, the song's narrative: A young schoolgirl is seduced by an older man who brings her roses, only to kill her on the second date. Cave, here is, the devilish figure that Minogue's character Eliza Day is infatuated with. Eliza Day, like *Lolita*, is the portrayal of innocence stolen, youth corrupted and paradise lost.

Minogue's place in Cave's literary world is emblematic in multiple ways. She is the example of a pure pop artist, as polished and produced as anything, who allows the devil to enter her lyrics and to allow love to be both beautiful and evil. Case in point: Minogue's 1989 single, "Better the Devil You Know", which Cave uses as an example in "The Secret Life of the Love Song" (*Lyrics*, 1-19). Minogue acts out the part of spouse to an abusive man<sup>10</sup>, to whom she claims: "I'll forgive and forget/ If you say you'll never go/ 'Cos its true what they say/ It's better the devil you know". (Stock, Aitken & Waterman). The beauty of love and fidelity is put in a macabre light.

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<sup>10</sup> This is perhaps contentious. The man's vices are never mentioned explicitly.

Minogue is Eliza and Charlene, the angel to Cave's devil, the Lolita to his Humbert. She is the ghostly apparition and the myth of the Golden Hotpants in that wicked song "Spinning Around", which is as much revered by the gay community as Grace Jones' "Pull Up to the Bumper", while elegantly sidestepping banality. At least, to normal people. Not to Bunny Munro, who is adamant about the fact that "Spinning Around" is about anal sex. (cf. Sheffield)

The co-opting of the Lolita icon by male media culture has been most pervasive, and it understandably ignited a fierce backlash. Feminism in the 60s was huge, and it originated such gritty responses to masculine malice as Valerie Solanas's amazing *SCUM Manifesto*, whose definition of man can be paraphrased as "half-dead blobs somewhere between a human and an ape, incapable of relating to anything but its own sensations and incapable of mental passion or sensitivity or any of those sorts of things." (Medd qtd. in Botting, 273)<sup>11</sup> Cave has mentioned Solanas as one of his prime inspirations for *The Death of Bunny Munro*, thus planting the novel firmly in the current discussion. The assertion that "Every man, deep down, knows he's a worthless piece of shit," (Solanas, 13) is not simply an assertion of a state of being for men around the world, but also for a state of mind. A state of mind that coincides in Caliban, in Humbert, and in Bunny Munro as well.

Bunny, an oversexed and undercooked door-to-door salesman of beauty products, is a doomed devil being haunted by another, and who flees the scene of his wife's suicide, taking his son Bunny Jr. on an ill-conceived road trip across the English southern coastal region. He could be considered the most banal character Cave has ever put unto paper. He is also, perhaps, the most ordinary. A failed Adonis who objectifies and reduces women to their

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<sup>11</sup> Fred Botting's article in *The Art of Nick Cave* is a must-read for those interested in exploring the theme of sexuality in Cave's literature and lyrics, especially with regards to *The Death of Bunny Munro*. As it stands, I am only grazing the surface of this enticing topic. I am happy to scavenge upon his inspired work.

genitals and sense of vanity, Bunny has a good deal of beast-like qualities, and a matching name. He is also, Cave seems to say, a mirror of a great deal of men, perhaps one with a thinner veneer of civility, but a mirror nonetheless. His obvious character flaws come into play in a situation which is a test of any man's constitution.

Lolita becomes *Lolitas*, Humbert becomes Every Man. Nick Cave, in the course of his thirty-five years of songwriting, progressed from the overt sexual aggression of "6-inch Gold Blade" to the determinist vision of "Loverman"<sup>12</sup> to the thwarted-rockstarism of "No Pussy Blues". (cf. Botting, 272; O'Hagan) In his literature, exceptional individuals in exceptional circumstances in *And the Ass Saw the Angel* were succeeded by the mundane banality and perversion of *The Death of Bunny Munro*.

This shift in latter-day, post-*Grinderman* Cave has been noted before. The real news, then, is the apparent layer of continuity in his work. The discussion above reads into Cave's work a consistent, prolonged engagement with a literary tradition that goes back to Elizabethan times, and takes a giant leap into the public mind's eye with the rise of *Lolita*. Cave, in turn, plays around with these traditions, with genres and forms. He pours into them all his craftsmanship and all his passion for the art. The threads of creative imagination and solipsism, and the conjunction of beautiful, evil things in Cave's work is just one way to relate him to Nabokov. The zeal and playfulness they exhibit, however, might be the strongest connection between them.

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<sup>12</sup> "Cause I am what I am what I am what I am" (Cave, *Lyrics*, 218)



### America (Slight Detour)

By now, it may be evident that whenever we talk of *Lolita*, and in many cases when we talk about Cave's literary imagination, America enters into the discussion, like a child careening down the stairs on its birthday, demanding to be front and center of attention.<sup>1</sup> Greil Marcus is onto something when he discusses "the myth of rock 'n roll as an agent of social or even revolutionary transformation". ("All this Useless Beauty", 20) He equates this myth to an observation of Americanness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the historian Robert Cantwell: "these are the true carriers of the myth of equality, down through the decades: not lawbreakers, exactly, but surely a line of moral outlaws, all of them in some fine manner uncivilizable. They scorn all differences and all claims to superiority; they are the unromantic, the resentful, the heroic or petty outsider Americans who are nevertheless the only Americans." (qtd. in Marcus, "All this Useless Beauty", 21)

Rock and Roll, however, is not just about transgressive teenagers. This myth of equality came about in the United States because of a coming together of technological developments which were made available to the general audience. The radio was one, vinyl was another, but more than anything, the car became intimately connected to Rock and Roll, and America in general. These were the instruments that gave young people their agency, access to their own music, and the means to go places.

No icon is more emblematic of the various narrative strands of Rock and Roll than Elvis Presley. Widmer notes that

[W]hen he began singing, Presley was driving trucks for the Crown Electric Company, and his lifetime fascination with automobiles paralleled that of an entire underclass for

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<sup>1</sup> Discussions on Nabokov in relation to American culture can be found in Susan Elizabeth Sweeney's contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, and the chapters on Cultural Contacts from *Discourse and Ideology in Nabokov's Prose*.

whom more expensive luxuries, such as larger houses (although Presley later acquired plenty of those), were simply impossible to fantasize about.” (70)

For Elvis, “the supreme emblem of his liberation from poverty was a pink Cadillac” (Widmer, 70), an image that youth culture in America appropriated, like they appropriated everything related to Elvis as their own. Interestingly, Elvis is also the prototype of the infamous Rock and Roll loverman. Elvis started frolicking with Priscilla, ten years his junior, when she was just fourteen years old, and supplied her with drugs. (Williamson, 108) But according to Williamson’s biography, Elvis and Priscilla were never ‘caught in the act’ to any penalizing results (109).<sup>2</sup>

For Cave, Presley’s great appeal is not just his iconic status, but also his very public disintegration during the late days of his career. (cf. Wiseman-Trowse, 162) Cave’s use of images and excerpts from Presley’s life is another example of his playful inversion of stereotypes, characters and genres. It is evident in the allusion to Cave’s hairdo in Bunny’s lovelock, and echoes in the inversion of the rock star image in “No Pussy Blues”.

In an enticing reading of *And the Ass Saw the Angel*, Wiseman-Trowse actually reads into Euchrid an inversion of the Elvis myth. In this reading, Cave transplants “Presley’s birthstory into Euchrid’s clapboard shack” (155), conflating the King with the Messiah, and playing on their respective rises and falls to further complicate Euchrid’s character. Wiseman-Trowse concludes that, “By taking the biographical details of Presley’s life, and connecting them with a wider Biblical discourse, he is capable of tapping into an archetypal vein that connects both religion and popular culture, both through Presley and his own work”. (164)

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<sup>2</sup> More on this subject can be found in Joel Williamson’s biography *Elvis Presley: A Southern Life*. A critical history of Priscilla Presley can be found in Suzanne Finsted’s *Child Bride: The Untold Story of Priscilla Beaulieu Presley*.

Rock and Roll does not have the same bearing on Nabokov as it has on Cave, but Nabokov's fascination has definitely been noted. He was an avid cinema-goer, and has travelled the United States extensively, with Vera, on lepidotery excursions. And while Humbert's comments on Lolita's cultural preferences are somewhat mocking, their mention and inclusion by the author might be an argument that Nabokov was not as elitist as the protagonist of his most famous novel. At the very least, Nabokov exhibits some awareness of popular culture in his portrayal of Lolita.

Another, somewhat less acute connection between Rock and Roll on the one hand and Cave and Nabokov on the other, is the way that both speak from an outside perspective. In the 50s and early 60s, youth culture was highly counter-cultural. For the first time, young people were finding that they had a voice, and could speak their minds publicly and loudly. *Lolita* was not written by someone young, but it gave young people something to talk about. The transgression and taboo-breaking done by Nabokov could be read as *very* Rock and Roll (see also the implications of *Lolita* for pop culture discussed above). Cave, arriving at a fully formed global rock scene in the seventies, sought to transgress as well, bringing new violence and physicality to the stage which expands on the appeal of a young Elvis.

Elvis and Rock and Roll might not have the bearing on Nabokov it does on Cave, but it is the locus, the hub of the various strands of America, popular culture and myth discussed in this thesis. There are other strands, other outings, which could be included in this discussion (film noir is certainly one). It would be a mistake, however, not to acknowledge that Presley's pink Cadillac, like his music, is always somewhere out there, in any literary conception of the post-war American highway.



The Devil and Other Passengers

*Lolita, The Death of Bunny Munro, and the Great American Road Novel.*

‘We are gonna get as far away from this place as possible,’ he says.

The boy yawns deep and shudders.

‘Are we going home now, Dad?’

‘Shit, no!’ says Bunny, checking his rear-view mirror. ‘We’re on the road!’

(Cave, *BM*, 148)

In today’s information-driven society, there are easy ways to find out just how much asphalt and white paint is needed to pave America’s roads. But in the imagination of a 1950s audience, America’s open road is simply an expansive vastness. To quote one delightfully awful Dutch 90s pop song: “The road ahead is empty/ It’s paved with miles of the unknown” (Van der Meer & De Roos), a perfectly bland but accurate description.

Before there was the road, and everyone owned a car, most of America was wilderness. The road connected America’s inhabitants to infinite directions of transference. There’s always a road leading into a new town, a new opportunity, a new life. There’s always an escape route. And in the 50s and 60s, not everyone or everything could be tracked. In between, there is only road.

The development of commercial airlines has had a major role in diminishing the imaginative scale of the world to the public, especially in the United States. Flying cross-country from New York to San Francisco takes little over six hours of airtime. Cave is a frequent flyer during his North-American tour with The Bad Seeds, as covered in *The Sick Bag Song*. Cave, always the romantic, will not let the mundanity of modern touring life distort his experience of being ‘on the road’.

As a musician, Cave's travels are as much occupational hazard as intrinsic motivation. For Nabokov, it was his love of lepidoptery that took him on the road, as well as inspiration, supposedly. Nabokov's journeys, his doctrine of 'mapping' novels, of exploration and charter, gave him the template for Humbert and Lolita's journey in *Lolita*. For Cave, the surroundings of his adopted home of Brighton inspired him both in writing *The Death of Bunny Munro* and concurrently, the backdrop for his visitations by 'ghosts' of the past in *20.000 Days on Earth*. "Jubilee Street" is a central shopping street in Brighton.

Enter *The Sick Bag Song*. Cave's latest literary offering started as scribbles on airline sickbags during a North-American tour with the Bad Seeds. The Sick Bag is not just a piece of paper, though. It is Cave's butterfly net, in which he catches all his ruminations and observations from touring vans, airports and hotel lobbies. Or, as Cave says in "The Secret Life of the Love Song": "Here I come with my butterfly net of words" (Cave, *Lyrics*, 15). Another example of Cave's style: the interplay between the nasty and the elegant.

At the most basic level, cars are moving containers of people and things. The people are visible, but their words are not. The means of getting out are limited while driving, meaning that most people are stuck until any conversation is resolved, or the destination of their drive is reached. As such, it provides a beautiful platform for relatively focused and uninterrupted dialogue.

But a car is not just a container, it is also an emblem, it says something about the person driving it. Humbert's automobile becomes "a worn but dependable coconspirator, the mechano-organic headquarters of his fugitive relationship with Lolita." (Vickers, 98) Bunny's Fiat Punto, on the other hand, is more like a cruel joke in the vein of "No Pussy Blues". It is an inversion of Bunny's Lothario-ness, perhaps pointing towards the car as a reflection of Bunny's real aural quality, instead of his self-image. It is yellow. A yellow Fiat Punto. (Cave, *BM*, 18). Not quite the vintage Jaguar Cave drives around in *20000 Days on Earth*.

So a car is *mise en scène*, and emblematic of the owner. In both *Lolita* and *Bunny Munro*, the car is also the closest thing to a safe haven that the passengers have at their disposal: “Controlling Humbert and fractious Lolita seem to be at home only in their car, which is the one constant environment they enjoy, if that is the word. In it they can fight and argue and bargain and make up with one another in their grotesque simulacrum of family life”. (Vickers, 98). Similarly, the Punto is where Bunny passes on his sales gospel, the place where he can compose himself as a lackadaisical father figure and where he, reciprocally, receives some love from the one source available to him; his son.

In Bunny’s case, the car stereo has an added significance. Right after being told off by his mother-in-law at his wife’s funeral, he hops in the Punto with Bunny Junior, only to find “Spinning Around” playing on the radio, “and all the aggrieving rage hisses out of Bunny like a leaky valve, the boiling heat drains from his face and he turns to his son, knuckles his head and says, ‘Whoever said that there isn’t a God is full of shit!’” (Cave, *BM*, 68)

The success of any road trip, whether as real life exploit or as literary tragedy, is in large part dependent on the passengers driving the car. *On the Road*’s Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty are bound by friendship, kindred spirits. Theirs is considered the default condition of classic road trip companions, next to, perhaps, Bonnie and Clyde.

Humbert and Lolita make for quite different companions. Solipsistic, perverted Humbert and ‘nymphet’ Lolita are trapped on the road together: “As Lolita’s self-appointed jailer, Humbert is in his own way as much a prisoner of their odyssey as she is.” (Vickers, 94) Similarly, Junior is both witness and victim of his father’s flight from their shared apartment, the crime scene of a suicide that Bunny, at same level, feels to blame for. It is made abundantly clear throughout the novel that Junior’s coming into the family is what drove Bunny away from faithful husbandry. Junior however, is his father’s greatest believer, his apostle. By contrast, Bunny appoints his son the position of navigator, indicating Bunny has

lost his way and defers knowledge of the path to transcendence to his nine-year old child. But Junior is also a painful reminder, a living testament to Bunny's lethal infidelity and his failure as a parent.

But there are more passengers to these two road-trips than the one driving and the one in the shotgun seat. Bunny and Junior are both visited by the spectral appearance of Libby, or so they think. For Humbert, the trip feeds his "paranoia about retributive authorities in the shape of an ever-shifting cast of prying policemen, probing motel proprietors, and worryingly inquisitive strangers." (Vickers, 94) Bunny adheres to a similar paranoia after being visited by two social workers (Cave, *BM*, 47-50), inquiring after his plans for Junior.

Another tenet of Cave's road philosophy can be found in his 2013 song "Higgs Boson Blues", from *Push the Sky Away*. In it, the protagonist is driving to Geneva<sup>15</sup>, supposedly to CERN, with the ghostly apparitions of Robert Johnson and The Devil in the backseat. This is where Cave's investment in myths, be they of *olde*, of modern literary, or of a pop-cultural denomination, and his wandering, on-the-road state of mind melt into a single train of thought. Cave's juxtaposition of the Higgs Boson particle with Robert Johnson and the Devil is perhaps not clear-cut at first sight, but may illuminate some particulars of Cave's philosophy of the road.

Robert Johnson, as Greil Marcus explains in *The History of Rock and Roll in Ten Songs*, was a Mississippi blues musician who grew up listening to Son House, among others. We have no pictures of Johnson, just recordings, and half-confirmed second hand stories. The myth is that at one point, Johnson, at the time a relative nobody, disappeared for a year, only to return as a brilliant blues-guitarist. Rumor was that Johnson sold his soul to the devil in return for his blues guitar chops. (Marcus, *History*, 147-148). Johnson's first recording, not-

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<sup>15</sup> I'll leave it to the readers to ponder if any significance should be awarded to the fact that Geneva is just a lake away from Montreux, Nabokov's final resting place...



quite coincidentally, is of “Terraplane Blues”; a song that Widmer characterizes as “probably the most important car-related song of the [pre-1950s] period” (66).

The wonderful thing about Cave bringing together the two, is that this combination brings to mind an unnamed third: Marlowe’s epic Elizabethan play *Dr. Faustus*, about a man whose thirst for knowledge and power leads him to make a pact with Lucifer. Faustus gets a daemon, Mephistopheles, at his beckoning call, providing him with all-encompassing knowledge and power, and the means to travel anywhere in the world in an instant. Instead of using these powers constructively, Faustus plays pranks on the people he visits, neglecting the chance to do anything meaningful with his bargained powers. The line “Robert Johnson and the Devil man, don’t know who’s gonna rip off who” (Cave, *Lyrics*, 513), suddenly comes clearly into focus.

Having assembled all the means to undertake the road trip (except, perhaps, a few snacks), it is worth discussing the ignition for every road trip. The drive as movement, as transference, and the drive as the ignition, the spark which brings the trip into motion.

For Jack Kerouac, the road is a destination unto itself. To quote Graham Vickers: “*On the Road* expressed in loose, spontaneous prose all the excitement and adventure inherent in breaking the taboos of the day through a series of wild automobile trips dedicated to unrestrained indulgence in sex, drugs, and experimental spirituality.” (97) Cave and Nabokov apply slightly different ideas to the design of their road trips, resulting in passages of awkwardness and comedy, exhilaration and tragedy.

“You must take the first step alone” is one of the recurring mantras in *The Sick Bag Song*. (7, 11, a.o.) The choice to drive off, to flee the scene, always entails some kind of confession of guilt, and both Humbert and Bunny clearly share a guilty conscience. As David Pascoe notes, in a discussion of road movies, “what has doubly vanished here is innocence,

the human quality the road always consigns to oblivion.” (78) Both Humbert and Bunny take to the road to escape scrutiny over deceased wives, while Humbert’s desires can only be satisfied in transit, away from the stability of static society. Taking to the road in these novels is as much a moral play as it is anything else, a step towards both transgression and transcendence which the drive opens up a space for.

Jean Baudrillard, himself a veteran of the all-American road trip, theorizes the effect of speed on the experience of the road:

Speed creates pure objects. It is itself a pure object, since it cancels out the ground and territorial reference-points, since it runs ahead of time to annul time itself, since it moves more quickly than its own cause and obliterates that cause by outstripping it. Speed is the triumph of effect over cause, the triumph of instantaneity over time as depth, the triumph of the surface and pure objectality over the profundity of desire. Speed creates a space of initiation, which may be lethal; its only rule is to leave no trace behind. (Baudrillard, 7)

Putting Baudrillard’s theory in more colloquial terms: Driving off unto the horizon is a form of escapism. Drive fast enough, and that movement might be experienced as a complete release of self into the acceleration of the drive.

Baudrillard also points out that “driving is a spectacular form of amnesia. Everything is to be discovered, everything to be obliterated.” (10). In many ways, Bunny’s road trip is an attempt to forget the past, Humbert is trying to forget about societal restrictions, while the protagonist in “Higgs Boson Blues”, “can’t remember anything at all” (Cave, *Lyrics*, 513) indicating that he may have succeeded, on some level, at achieving that oblivion.

The work of Paul Virilio, a contemporary and one-time associate of Baudrillard’s, provides another inroad into thinking about drive, here conceived as acceleration. Virilio

positions acceleration as the prime objective of technology, a trajectory of (post)modernity which he defines as the dream of “flying into the unknown” (Armitage, 37). This could be explained as a critique of culture, which aims to find more and more technical prostheses to extend our vision, but ultimately “inexorably imposes the extermination of innate human sensations” (Armitage, 35).

According to Virilio, this is a two-pronged assault, or two-stage rocket if you will: On the one hand, technical prostheses that increase our acceleration create a side-effect of loss of information of place and time, up to the point of there being no place or time. On the other hand, there are now technical prostheses (in terms of cinema and cyberspace) which bring a vision of the world into our living rooms. This development lifts the requirement of experience to go out into the world and see (and hear) things. It motivates people into stasis, locked into a room full of screens. In essence, what Virilio tries to show is that it breeds increasing picnolepsy; lapses of awareness.

With regards to the concept of the road trip, we find echoes of Pascoe’s innocence-in-oblivion, and of Baudrillard’s leave-no-trace concept. But the implications of Virilio’s ideas reach further than this; they are apocalyptic. As mentioned before, the car could be seen as a container. Virilio argues that this container also shapes our view of the world outside, removing us from actual society to create a certain stasis. The transient nature of the drive means that no new connections to the outside world can be created, no roots can be put in the ground. This is exactly the proposition which appeals to escapists such as Humbert and Bunny, and by extension to every noir-character ever created. Similarly, the roadside motels of choice for Humbert and Bunny are similar containers of transient beings. They are blank spaces, untouched by the investment of humans into their surroundings, into the process of home-making. Unlike hotels such as *The Enchanted Hunters* – where escapists might run into

a conversation with a Quilty-type character, they are lonely, anonymous spaces. Places, indeed, worthy of a lapse in consciousness.

Meanwhile, Virilio's concept of picnolepsy makes for an interesting comparison to Euchrid's deadtime. Deadtime, like death itself, is basically a huge lapse of awareness, the other side of Virilio's project. Towards the end, these lapses in *And the Ass Saw the Angel* become longer, but also more decisive. In this respect, deadtime is not about the life not lived, but the life not recorded. The question is, what is the accelerator which breeds these lapses of awareness in Euchrid? A growing brain tumor has an acceleration of sorts. In Cave's words, it is more about the pressure building up in Euchrid as a result of his lack of language. Language, the foremost human community-building quality, that which the God of Christianity passed on through his Son, could be construed as the social antithesis to Virilio's negative horizon.

Considering the above, we could further illuminate the odd place of CERN in a Nick Cave song. CERN is a particle accelerator, whose scientific achievement has given access to a world of particles so miniscule they could previously only be seen by God itself. It might even be said that we have accelerated God's work to such an extent that God himself has ended in oblivion. It is the kind of scientific achievement of Faustus' dreams, one that in the Elizabethan age only Lucifer could realize. Similarly, off-setting Robert Johnson, perhaps one of the last mythical figures, with Miley Cyrus, the over-exposed child starlet whose every achievement, every step, every transgression, has happened in the public eye, could be construed as the nail in the coffin of myth in the modern world. Everything is illuminated.

Bunny & Junior's "road trip" is portrayed in the novel as a series of stops (McDonald's, Empress Hotel, the homes of prospective customers for Bunny's door-to-door sales gig) and starts, consistently starting with Bunny swerving the Punto into traffic. There is little discussion in *Bunny Munro* of the road itself, no attention to the Southern English

seaside they cruise past, or any of the towns. What is left are descriptions of the houses Bunny visits on his tour-de-sales: Boring but plentiful, always with attention to the TV.

Humbert & Lolita's journey has been the source of a great deal of analytical effort and a healthy dose of conjecture. It is clear that by the end of their first, year-long trip, they've traversed much of the United States. But despite this "giddy kaleidoscope of sightseeing gone mad" (Vickers, 103), there is not much of the surroundings they take in.

We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night - every night, every night - the moment I feigned sleep (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 199)

Humbert's road for transcendence would ideally lead to Mexico, but he never gets there. In preparation of that second, fateful road trip, "Humbert becomes bolder and begins toying with the idea of discreetly crossing that Mexican border, away from the past and into a Lolitaland well away from the gaze of U.S. law." (Vickers, 99). Cross the border and no-one will look twice at his pre-pubescent girl-bride, "[b]ut in the end he never takes that outlaw trail and lives to regret it." (Vickers, 99)

Bunny develops a similar destination, albeit a less exotic one, as the road trip progresses: Butlins Holiday Camp, a holiday destination in England where Bunny's father used to take him. It is "the best fucking place in the world," according to Bunny, and the scene of his first romantic encounter, at twelve years old, with a girl of the same age named Penny Charade.

The scene seems a direct homage to Humbert's childhood tragedy with Annabel in the Riviera:

And she was smiling at me... watching me... and smiling at me and, Bunny Boy, I got to tell you, she had the most beautiful eyes I'd ever seen and she wore a tiny yellow polka-dot bikini and she was all caramel-coloured from the sun... with these violet eyes... and something came over me, I don't know what, but all the bloody emptiness I felt as a kid seemed to evaporate and I filled with something... a kind of power. I felt like a bloody machine." (Cave, *BM*, 158-159)

Like Humbert, Bunny seems formed by a particular childhood memory which is as close to plagiarism of *Lolita* as the story will allow for.

Moreover, the name of Bunny's childhood romantic interest is another poignant one. It is reminiscent of not one, but *two* Cary Grant flicks, *Penny Serenade* and *Charade*. Cary Grant, of course, is exactly the kind of romantic movie star that *Lolita* might have taken a liking to. It also signals that Bunny, as it were, was not born an unhinged Lothario. The mid-century Hollywood romanticism of a Cary Grant is the exact opposite of Bunny. There is a sense of innocence in the scene that is now lost on Bunny, but is still tentatively available to Junior. Perhaps we find here the significance of the plastic Darth Vader figurine in Junior's Happy Meal, a question-mark as to how the son will develop in relation the father.

Humbert and Bunny obviously never reach these Arcadia-like destinations. The end of the road is visible from the start, and it is grim. Bunny's thoughts of transcendence, of making nice with all his victims, are delightfully ironic and contradictory to his frequent premonitions of doom. Humbert, by contrast, is considered to be aware of the limited longevity of his course of action: "Roadrunner Humbert is only seeking to stretch the period of his dominion over *Lolita* into weeks and months, not years," Vickers comments, conceiting that there is a "realist behind the dreamer who knows his luck must run out." (96) This also extends to Eucharid Eucrow, and to Elisa Day, if only because "All beauty must die". (Cave, *Lyrics*, 251)

Predestination seems to be the key. Consider the first line of *The Death of Bunny Munro*: “‘I am damned,’ thinks Bunny Munro in a sudden moment of self-awareness reserved for those who are soon to die.” (Cave, *BM*, 3). Moments like these litter the pages of Cave’s novel, clear reminders that we are heading to an end that is certain death. Likewise, the fictional preface to *Lolita* already contains the news of the death of both Humbert and Dolores.

In this sense, both novels adhere to a characterization of the American novel by Leslie Fiedler: “American literature is distinguished by the number of dangerous and disturbing books in its canon,” (11) and locates within American literature a “failure [...] to deal with adult heterosexual love and [a] consequent obsession with death, incest and innocent homosexuality.” (12)

Cave has mentioned in interviews that *The Death of Bunny Munro* was inspired by the *Gospel of St. Mark*. In an introduction he wrote for an edition of this particular book of the bible, Cave writes:

The rite of baptism - the dying of one's old self to be born anew - like so many of the events in Christ's life is already flavoured metaphorically by Christ's death and it is His death on the cross that is such a powerful and haunting force, especially in Mark. His preoccupation with it is all the more obvious, if only because of the brevity with which Mark deals with the events of His life. It seems that virtually everything that Christ does in Mark's narrative is in some way a preparation for His death - His frustration with His disciples and His fear that they have not comprehended the full significance of His actions; the constant taunting of the church officials; the stirring up of the crowds; His miracle-making so that witnesses will remember the extent of His divine power. Clearly, Mark is concerned primarily with the death of Christ to such an

extent that Christ appears consumed by His imminent demise, thoroughly shaped by His death. (Cave, “An Introduction to the Gospel according to Mark”, 3)

Death is not only the metaphorical end of the road; there is a physical dimension here as well. Humbert’s second trip is thwarted as Dolores Haze escapes her abductor in the town of Elphinstone. Nabokov subsequently creates a parody of a film noir chase scene in which Humbert, with increasing paranoia, tries to find Lolita’s helper, but to no avail. He is relegated to acting out his dream with some second rate mature imitation of Lolita.

While *Bunny Munro* is obviously a road novel of sorts, it is also formed by its setting: The road is not that of America, but of England, a tiny island by comparison. This puts a strain on any road to transcendence. The road ends where the sea begins. Pascoe, talking of the difference between European and American road movies, notes of European varieties: “Whenever such films have been attempted, the road is never depicted as continuous like an unrolling reel; instead, it is depicted as a medium of discontinuity and disruption, of accident and blockage.” (78) The way the road is portrayed in *Bunny Munro* then, puts it squarely in a tradition of European road movies, which do not glide but trudge, their effect more one of resistance than of fluidity or speed.

Here we might also find the significance of the Horned Killer: There is no escaping him. The TV sets in motel lounges, McDonalds restaurants and suburban living rooms bring this menace to the forefront of the public mind’s eye. The news reports extend him to become a specter, a ghost that might show up at any time, any place. For every screen, a new imagined foe is put into the mind of the viewer. Bunny imagines this daemon moving north to south until he will finally reach the Jurassic coast. By extension, Bunny will become prey.

Obviously, what kills him has been around the entire novel, every time Bunny takes to the road, going unnoticed by him, but not the reader. The maroon Dudman cement-mixing



truck is the real premonition to the Horned Killer's mediatized red herring. Bunny's imagination has taken flight in the face of the multitude of TV news and the papers, and in his imagination, the Horned Killer is the purest form of *Angstgegner*. Clare Quilty, like the horned killer, is dangerous, in some respect, to Humbert. However, the imagined threat is far larger and more disconcerting. In the end, neither adversary proves to be fatal, even if Bunny and Humbert believe them to be when left unchecked.

Bunny's road trip is cut short by the firing of a Chekov's gun. Bunny Junior, [... ] thinks there is something about the way his dad moves through the world that is truly impressive. Cars screech to a halt, drivers shake their fists and stick their heads out the windows and curse and blow their horns and Bunny walks on as if radiating some super-human force field, like he has walked off the pages of some comic book. The world can't touch him." (Cave, *BM*, 97-98)

Throughout the novel, there is always a maroon concrete mixing truck close at hand, reading 'Dudman' – a dud being “applied to contemptuously to any useless or inefficient person or thing.” (*OED*)- whenever Bunny veers into traffic. As it stands, Bunny becomes the “rabbit in your headlights”, or some morbid, ghoulish take on the classic “why did the chicken cross the road?” joke. There is no other purpose to the Dudman trucks in the novel than as a smoking gun, coming back to take Bunny into the afterlife. Roadkill, indeed.

The trick of letting the novel go ahead in Bunny's imagined afterlife without mention of the changed circumstances, is bittersweet. Bunny does actually reach his Eden, Butlins Holiday Camp, addressing his victims and making amends. But, Cave seems to say, that dream is something that does not materialize in the world of the living.

For Humbert, there are other concerns. What he will never outrun is time. His Lolita is bound to grow up, escape from this island of time where nymphets roam, first into plump

adolescence, then into boring adulthood. In a sense, Humbert seeking out and killing Quilty is an afterthought, but also the thing which brings him to his knees. As he flees the scene, he runs his car in a ditch, wrecking his car and snapping his precarious mental balance. He is a broken man, for whom there is nothing left than awaiting his death and writing his memoirs. Humbert is truly at the end of his (sic) road.

## Conclusion

My face is finished, my body's gone.

And I can't help but think standin' up here

in all this applause and gazin' down

at all the young and the beautiful.

With their questioning eyes.

That I must above all things love myself.

(Cave, *Lyrics*, 435)

Surveying the above pages, this feeble attempt to link these two intriguing artists, I must admit to its limitations. This is but the beginning of an investigation, the outline, not the end. While the above suggests that certain ties between Cave's literary output and his favorite book exists, I do not pretend there is any finality to any of these claims. Anyone who finds convincing arguments or satisfying avenues in this text I give thanks; I welcome the feedback of any unimpressed readers in equal measure.

I set out to investigate a relatively unexplored aspect in the work of Nick Cave: Its relationship to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. The lack of previous studies meant that from the outset, the present study was going to be explorative in nature. Best case scenario, the above inspires others to trace the connections between the two even further. The study presented above makes the case that this existence is not limited to lip service, provided by Cave in interviews, but in his literary output as well.

The presence of American culture in both their works has been discussed in previous research, and proved to be an even bigger overarching theme than was to be expected. The

comparative analysis of their work puts in a new light the intricate connections between these writers and the United States as an object of their respective literary imagination. Hopefully, this re-framing will serve as a reinvigoration of the excellent cultural criticism of these writers that has come before.

As it stands, many of the intricate connections and possible readings of Cave's work through the prism of Nabokov are left unexplored. In part, this is thanks to Cave's increasingly productive streak since 2007: Two Grinderman albums, two with the Bad Seeds with a third, *Skeleton Tree*, on the verge of release. Cave published his second novel, an epic poem cum tour diary, a mock-documentary, and there's another one on the way as a companion piece to the upcoming album. Cave is as prolific as he has ever been, and has thankfully not been arrested in his artistry by the tragedy which occurred last year.

New artistic output will ensure new academic inquiry, but even considering the current catalogue of Cave, the well of interpretation has not run dry. Far from it, there are plenty of suggestions to be made.

One direction which looks promising is the investigation of Nick Cave's autobiographical character, that is to say, the Nick Cave of *20000 Days on Earth* and *The Sick Bag Song*. With every new appearance, Cave's persona seems to develop more and more into a literary character, a clearly defined artistic construct, with no more than a single foot planted in reality, the other in the creative imagination of the author. Nabokov's memoirs, *Invitation of a Beheading*, could provide another inroad into the hinterland of Cave's artistic process.

An obvious limitation of my inquiry is the focus on just the one quintessential Nabokov novel. Besides *Lolita*, people might well find certain overlaps with others. *Invitation of a Beheading* or *Invitation of a Beheading* might well warrant a comparison to Cave's work. I do not claim to have any clues at this point whether any connection exists at all; so please note the firm disclaimer.

It is an invitation to look for revelations in uncertain places. I find these to be the most worthwhile quests.

Another interesting direction might be to expand on the respective roles of these writers in terms of transnationalism and émigré literature. I have insufficiently touched on the “outsider perspective” of Cave and Nabokov, and the way that both, in a sense, “invent America (sic)”. (cf. Nabokov, 354) Likewise, there is certainly a space for comparative analysis to be found in the area of film noir. This would likely be a great place to include Cave’s screenplays. Verrone’s article on *The Proposition* (a western based on a screenplay by Cave), and Wyllie’s “Nabokov and Cinema” might provide a basis for this.

Finally, there is an implicit presence in this thesis that cannot go unmentioned. It concerns way Cave and Nabokov build bridges between the images of their youth, in the words of Camus’ epigraph to this thesis, and the way these images are transplanted onto literary works set in America. Camus’s remark echoes throughout these pages, in both the story of the authors and their characters: Colin Cave’s study in Warracknabeal; Humbert’s “princedom by the sea” (Nabokov, *Lolita*, 7); Butlins Holiday Camp; 18-year old Kylie Minogue making her debut on a soap opera.

I feel fairly certain that Cave and Nabokov, like so many artists, and so many people, are shaped by their heritage, the circumstances of their youth and the way these experiences have rematerialized in their art. These are the stories worth repeating, in song or prose, in some way or other, for a lifetime or more.



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