Jacqueline Hamrit. "Trauma and Free Will in *Lolita*." *LATCH* 2 (2009): 136-145.

Trauma and Free Will in *Lolita*

Jacqueline Hamrit
University of Lille 3 (France)

Essay

In this paper, I intend to first deal with the diverse definitions of trauma and more particularly with Freud's theory of traumatism. I will then test the theory on Humbert's narrative in Nabokov's *Lolita*. The last part of the essay will be devoted to the issues of responsibility as related to the effect of trauma as well as the degree of free will that one may experience under trauma.

Before turning to Freud's theory on traumatism, I therefore first propose to sketch the different defining characteristics of trauma. Trauma is indeed first a wound, whether it be physical or not. From a psychic perspective, it is an unexpected shock of great intensity which entails fright and suffering and which reappears in the subject's mind in repetitive nightmares and uncontrollable re-enactments. According to Sandor Ferenczi, a Hungarian psychoanalyst of the early twentieth century, a subject who is faced with a traumatic event is first submerged by fright, anguish, and suffering. He is cleft between a part of himself that feels displeasure but does not understand it and a part that understands but feels almost nothing. He is then forced to re-enact the event and, for Ferenczi, this repetition of the event is useful as it helps to transform the trauma from a passive, unresolved experience to an active, mastered one. This transformation is done through abreaction, i.e. "an emotional discharge through which a subject frees him/herself from the affect related to the memory of a traumatic event" (Laplanche and Pontalis 1).[1]

[1]Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, in the French original version of *Vocabulary of Psychoanalysis*, i.e. *Vocabulaire de la Psychanalyse*, define the word as follows: "décharge émotionnelle par laquelle un sujet se libère de l'affect attaché au souvenir d'un événement traumatique, lui permettant ainsi de ne pas devenir ou rester pathogène. L'abréaction, qui peut être

In her book devoted to trauma, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth explains how trauma is an event experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known. It is therefore a missed experience—Lacan had talked of a "missed encounter"[2] —which entails a belated understanding. She writes,

> The breach in the mind—the conscious awareness of the threat to life—is not caused by a pure quantity of stimulus, Freud suggests, but by "fright", the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly. It is not simply, that is, the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognized as such by the mind *one moment too late*. The shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced *in time,* it has not yet been fully known.
>
> (Caruth 62)

It is precisely this notion of belatedness, or, to use the Freudian concept, *Nachträglichkeit*, that is at the core of traumatism for Freud. To explain his theory, Freud resorted to two case studies, Emma's

---

provoquée au cours de la psychothérapie, notamment sous hypnose, et produire un effet de catharsis, peut aussi survenir de manière spontanée, séparée du traumatisme initial par un intervalle plus ou moins long." ("An emotional discharge through which a subject frees himself or herself from the affect related to the memory of a traumatic event, enabling it thereby to not become or remain pathogenic. Abreaction, which may be provoked during psychotherapy, notably under hypnosis, produces an effect of catharsis and can also occur in a spontaneous way and be separated from the initial traumatism by a more or less long interval.")

[2]He writes: "La fonction de la *tuché*, du réel comme rencontre—la rencontre en tant qu'elle peut être manquée, qu'essentiellement elle est la rencontre manquée—s'est d'abord présentée dans l'histoire de la psychanalyse sous une forme qui, à elle seule , suffit déjà à éveiller notre attention—celle du traumatisme" (Lacan 54). ("The function of *tuché*, of the real as an encounter—the encounter as it can be missed, as it is essentially the missed encounter—was first presented in the history of psychoanalysis under a form which is by itself sufficient to arouse our attention—that of traumatism.")

case and the case of the Wolfman. In the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, published in 1895, Freud relates the case of one of his patients, Emma, in these words:

> Emma is subject at the present time to a compulsion of not being able to go to shops *alone*. As a reason for this, [she produced] a memory from the time when she was twelve years old (shortly after puberty). She went into a shop to buy something, saw the two shop-assistants (one of whom she can remember) laughing together, and ran away in some kind of *affect of fright*. [. . .] Further investigation now revealed a second memory [. . .]. On two occasions when she was a child of eight she had gone into a small shop to buy some sweets, and the shopkeeper had grabbed her at her genitals through her clothes.
>
> (353-354)

Freud sums up the situation, saying there are indeed two scenes, the first being the one with the shop assistant, the second the one with the shopkeeper. A connecting link between the two scenes is laughter. The other common point is that the girl was alone. Then Freud goes on writing:

> Together with the [memory of the] shopkeeper she remembered his grabbing through her clothes; but since then she had reached puberty. The memory aroused what it was certainly not able to be at the time, a *sexual release*, which was transformed into anxiety. With this anxiety, she was afraid that the shop-assistants might repeat the assault, and she ran away.
>
> (356)

And Freud concludes as follows

> Now this is typical of repression in hysteria. We invariably find that a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma by *deferred action*. The cause of this state of things is the retardation of puberty as compared with the rest of the individual's development.
>
> (356)

Thus, for Freud, traumatism supposes the existence of two events as it is the memory of the first event which produces the deferred traumatism. The memory arouses an affect which had not been prompted at the time of the incident. This delayed impact (the second event of trauma) is exemplified in Emma's case. The girl was too young to realise the sexual impact of the incident, and the arrival of puberty alone made possible a new understanding of the recollected facts.

Jean Laplanche, in his *Vocabulary of Psychoanalysis,* points out the presence of what he calls "une théorie du trauma en deux temps" (49), or "a theory of trauma in two times." He, too, underlines the fact that when Freud says the memory becomes a trauma by deferred action, it is the only passage of the text where the word *nachträglich* ("deferred action") is used. For something to happen by a deferred action, a connection between the two scenes is necessary. Scene 2, when Emma is eight, is premature: the child is not mature to receive a sexual excitation. Scene 1, when she is thirteen, awakens the remembrance of scene 2. The biological maturation gives the child the ability to understand what has happened. We also notice that Freud numbers the scenes in the reverse order of chronological time as his temporal landmark is that of the treatment, not the historical occurrence of the events.

When the term of *nachträglich* reappears in the Wolfman, it is also associated to the notion of traumatism and the presence of two, or even three, scenes. When we talk of the "Wolfman," we refer to the account made by Freud of the analysis of one of his patients—a Russian man named Serguei Patrov-Pankieff, born in 1887. During his therapy, the patient told about a dream which was to reappear many times. When he was four, he had dreamed that six or seven white wolves with fox-like tails and ears pricked like those of dogs were sitting motionless on the branches of a walnut tree, situated in front of the window of his room. The wolves were staring at him. The child had then woken up, in a state of great fright. According to Freud, the dream was linked to a previous scene. Apparently when Serguei was about one and a half years old, sleeping in his parents' bedroom, he must have witnessed "the primitive scene" of his parents making love in a particular way, i.e. having vaginal intercourse from the rear. The wolves in the dream

represented his parents. Therefore, there is the primitive scene when Serguei is one year and a half, the dream on Christmas Eve when he is four, and finally the recounting of the dream during the time of therapy. The first "deferred action" (when he is four) corresponds to the understanding and the elaboration of the primitive scene. The second "deferred action" (when he is twenty-four) occurs when he puts his experience into words. When he was one and a half, Serguei the toddler received an impression to which he could not react sufficiently. When four, he relived the scene, and when twenty-four, he became conscious of its psychological impact. It is clear to see that from his work with Emma and the Wolfman, Freud postulated that trauma requires two periods to exist and is inseparable from the notion of "deferred action." What comes afterward gives meaning to what happened beforehand.

I now wish to turn to Nabokov's novel *Lolita* to see how the above definitions may help to understand the eventual role of trauma in Humbert's sexual deviation, i.e. paedophilia. *Lolita* is the story of a middle-aged man Humbert Humbert who falls in love with a young preadolescent American girl, aged twelve, Dolores Haze, nicknamed Lolita. To approach Lolita, Humbert marries her mother Charlotte Haze who dies in an accident few months after the wedding. Humbert leaves then to fetch Lolita in the camp where she is on holidays. They become lovers and do a long trip across the United States. However Lolita runs away with a playwright, Clare Quilty, who is also a paedophile. Her new lover abandons her but Lolita does not join back with Humbert. After long years in search of Quilty, Humbert finds him and kills him. He dies a few weeks later in prison.

The narrative is definitely one of a sexual deviation and is made up of the written confession of the protagonist Humbert when he is in prison awaiting his trial. He tells us the story of his life and of his passion for Lolita, and his text appears as an attempt to justify his criminal deeds. He puts forward as a reason to explain his attraction for very young girls the relationship he had with his first love Annabel when he and she were both thirteen.

Would there have been a trauma in this past relationship? That is what Humbert seems to imply when he writes:

> I leaf again and again through these miserable memories, and keep asking myself, was it then, in the glitter of that

> remote summer, that the rift in my life began; or was my excessive desire for that child only the first evidence of an inherent singularity?
>
> (Nabokov 13)

Now, in *Lolita*, we are confronted with two scenes. The first scene corresponds to the interrupted first sexual experience of Humbert, who relates it as follows:

> I was on my knees, and on the point of possessing my darling [Annabel] when two bearded bathers, the old man of the sea and his brother, came out of the sea with exclamations of ribald encouragement, and four months later she died of typhus in Corfu.
>
> (Nabokov 13)

The second episode is still more striking as it stages Lolita's first appearance. Whereas Humbert has just looked over Charlotte Haze's room for hire, he follows his landlady in the garden where Lolita is. He writes:

> I was still walking behind Mrs Haze through the dining room when, beyond it, there came a sudden burst of greenery—"the piazza," sang out my leader, and then, without the least warning, a blue sea-wave swelled under my heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses.
>
> It was the *same* child—the *same* frail, honey-hued shoulders, the *same* silky supple bare back, the *same* chestnut head of hair. [. . .] The twenty-five years I had lived since then, tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished. [. . .] Everything between the two events was but a series of gropings and blunders, and false rudiments of joy. Everything they shared made one of them.
>
> (Nabokov 39-40, italics mine)

We find here indeed two scenes, a memory and a connecting link between the two visions. The portrait of Lolita shows that

Humbert's eyes see beyond what he can see, in a time of recognition. Humbert remembers his childhood love, Annabel, and his vision is divided, split between past and present, superimposing in a repeated time the images of the present nymphet and those of the teenager of his past.

For Ferenczi, repetition is useful for resolution of the traumatism. For Freud, it may even be a source of pleasure, as given evidence in the Fort/Da game of the child through the sudden appearances and disappearances of the toy and/or the mother. But for Derrida, repetition creates something new as "iter" in "iterability", a concept he prefers to use to "repetition," comes from the Sanskrit "itare" which means "other." As for Humbert, Lolita's apparition is a sudden, unexpected experience which reminds him of Annabel ("his Riviera love"), but, instead of re-enacting a past event, of elaborating and making his past sexual drive into a new mature desire, he remains fixed to the stage of his memory, and Lolita's body is used as the reincarnation of the child he had known.

For Derrida, repetition allows a mental elaboration of an event, but Humbert fails to relive it and renounce the object of his past desire. Deaf and blind to his traumatic event, he does not reach knowledge and consciousness, since he does nor integrate it, work through it. Lacan's concept of "forclusion,"[3] i.e. "foreclosure" in English, may help to characterize Humbert's reaction as he refuses to speak about the traumatic event, denying it, refraining from suffering and thereby transforming his trauma into perversion.

To what extent may Humbert be held responsible for his acts, as a legal entity or as a subject? Humbert has indeed transgressed

[3]The French philosopher Christian Godin defines the Lacanian use of "forclusion" as follows: "Terme utilisé par J. Lacan (1901-1981) pour traduire le mot allemand *Verwerfung* ("rejet") employé par Freud (1856-1939) pour désigner l'expulsion d'un signifiant fondamental hors du champ symbolique du sujet. Distinct du déni propre au refoulement (générateur de névrose), ce mécanisme signale la psychose" (515). ("A term used by J. Lacan (1901-1981) to translate the German word *Verwerfung* ('repudiation') used by Freud (1856-1939) to refer to the throwing of a fundamental signifier out of the symbolic area of the subject. Distinct from mere denial specific to repression (at the origin of neurosis), this mechanism signals psychosis.")

the law. He has sexually abused a young girl under age and has moreover not refrained from using psychological violence and menace. One must bear in mind that a paedophile who acts through seduction—as Humbert did—and even with the consent of the child is not exonerated from his acts. Humbert is therefore a genuine psychopath, and he has the personality of a psychopath: he ratiocinates, he manipulates, he conceals, he acts out, he considers that his *jouissance*—which, according to Lacan, is beyond mere sexual pleasure—is extraordinary, which is in fact deceptive as his *jouissance* is very poor. Besides, by preferring to make Lolita suffer instead of suffering himself, he has chosen evil. From a legal point of view, a criminal is held irresponsible if his or her judgement was completely absent, overpowered by passion or psychosis, at the time of the crime, but punishable if his judgement was only altered but still functional, as evidenced by the act of premeditation or reflection.

As for Humbert, he wavers in his discourse as to his responsibility. Sometimes he recognizes his crime, but he also tries to vindicate himself in different ways. First, he enumerates the laws concerning the age when a girl becomes a woman, questioning therefore the validity of the law. For him, his crime becomes relative since he writes: "It was all a question of attitude" (Nabokov 18-19). Second, since a criminal might see his crime attenuated because of mitigating circumstances, Humbert tries to seek an alibi by presenting his attraction to young girls as the effect of an attachment to his first love, pretending thereby that his deviancy has been determined by the traumatic event of his youth.

Was Humbert free of his choices and decisions? Could he have freed himself from the uncontrollable forces of his trauma or was he doomed to replicate the previous scene at the French Riviera, i.e. making love with a young teenager.[4] The concept of freedom seems therefore to be at the core of the problem. Derrida has often talked about his difficulty to use the word because he does not believe in the existence of "a free and responsible person," a

[4]Fiction here is related to real life in that sometimes paedophiles have themselves been abused when children. Separating clearly between explaining, understanding the crime, and exonerating it allows the criminal to be at the same time the object of empathy and yet be held responsible. This is indeed the only way to reach atonement and obtain curing.

voluntary, intentional, conscious and mainly autonomous subject who may say: "I do what I want to do, I decide, I choose, I am sovereign." For him, as for Levinas, responsibility precedes freedom. I am responsible for the other and it is because I am responsible that I am free. Freedom is therefore without any limit or measure. It is a pre-subjective force which exists before mere subjectivity. This is the reason why Humbert cannot be exempted from his responsibility towards the Other that Lolita embodies.

Lolita is in fact *the* victim: *she* has gone through a traumatic event and she exemplifies what, in psychological terms, we call "resilience," which is the behavioural aspect of the psychoanalytical term "sublimation." Resilience is characterized by the fact that the subject not only copes with the unfavourable circumstances he or she meets but he or she also knows how to benefit from them. It is therefore mostly a capacity and a process, a way to resist and react to a psychic traumatism. Although Lolita first lapsed into the replication of her previous experience with Humbert by fleeing with the other paedophile Clare Quilty, she finally manages to evolve and free herself from the deterministic forces of trauma and its pessimistic, negative, destructive automatism of repetition by transforming her suffering and becoming the agent of her own identity as she gets married, becomes pregnant, ready to give birth to new life. Yet the novel refrains from a mere humanistic and over excessive poetic justice. It remains indecisive and indeterminate because it has Lolita die as she gives birth to a stillborn girl. Even survivors die because of suffering.

Works Cited

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History.* Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Derrida, Jacques. *Limited Inc.* Paris: Galilée, 1990.

Freud, Sigmund. *Project for a Scientific Psychology I* (1895) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud.* Volume 1 (1886-1899) London: The Hogarth Press, 1966.

Godin, Christian. *Dictionnaire de Philosophie.* Paris: Fayard/Editions du Temps, 2004.

Lacan, Jacques. ' Tuché et automaton, ' *Le Séminaire Livre XI. Les*

quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse. Paris : Seuil, 1973.

Laplanche, Jean. *Problématiques VI . L'Après-coup*. Parsi : PUF, 2006.

Laplanche, Jean, and J.B. Pontalis. *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, dir Daniel Lagache . Paris : PUF, 1967.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. 1955 New York: Vintage Books, 1970.