

Maramzin's *Two-Toned Blond* and Nabokov's *Lolita*

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Vladimir Maramzin's novella *The Two-Toned Blond* (1975)¹ invites discussion in a variety of contexts, including, among others, *samizdat* (Russian writing published and circulated clandestinely in the USSR during the Brezhnev era), *tamizdat* (Russian writing published abroad during the Brezhnev era), Russian ornamental prose (the tradition associated with such writers as Nikolay Gogol and Andrew Bely), and "the other literature" (contemporary nonideological literature). But against any of these backgrounds *The Two-Toned Blond* stands out as a most unusual work, calling attention to itself by virtue of both style and content. As almost everyone who has written about Maramzin in general and *The Two-Toned Blond* in particular has pointed out, Maramzin's use of language shows him to be working within and at the same time going beyond the *skaz* traditions of Mikhail Zoshchenko and Andrey Platonov.² The story that *The Two-Toned Blond* has to tell, however, reveals Maramzin's overt debt to a quite different writer, Vladimir Nabokov. It is this Nabokovian connection, an extremely rare one for contemporary Russian literature,³ that I propose to explore in the present article.⁴

The Two-Toned Blond opens with a preface by Nikolay, one of the major protagonists in the tale. He makes no effort to conceal a link between *Lolita* and the incidents described in the novella: "And the novel about Dolly Haze really appeared in our story most inappropriately—well, what would it have cost the great American Russian to write it a dozen years later! . . . Our story is just a caricature of the *Lolita*-Humbertian drama."⁵ In an article on *The Two-Toned Blond*, N. Rubinshtein considers the parody of Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri* at work in the novella more crucial than that of *Lolita*.⁶ Certainly Maramzin draws on

¹ Vladimir Maramzin, *Blondin obeego tsveta* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1975).

² See, for instance, Deming Brown, *Soviet Russian Literature since Stalin* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 372; Edward Brown, *Russian Literature since the Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982) 386; L. Lifshits, "Proza Ivana Petrovicha," *Kontinent* 10 (1976): 392; Yury Maltsev, *Volnaia russkaia literatura* (Frankfurt/Main: Possev, 1976) 110-11; Donald Fanger, "Maramzin," *Columbia Dictionary of Modern European Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) 510; and Gisela Lindemann, "Wladimir Kornilow und Wladimir Maramsin," *Sowjetliteratur heute* (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1979) 204.

³ The novelist Andrey Bitov is the only other Russian author who readily comes to mind in this Nabokovian regard.

⁴ The connections between Nabokov and Maramzin are not limited to matters of literary influence. Following Maramzin's arrest in July 1974 on charges of disseminating anti-Soviet propaganda, Nabokov was prevailed upon to participate in a telegram campaign in Maramzin's defense. At that point Nabokov could not have known that one of the items confiscated during the search and arrest was a copy of *Lolita*. The archives of Ardis Publishers contain a copy of Nabokov's telegram and other materials relating to the official Soviet harassment of Maramzin in 1974 and 1975.

⁵ Vladimir Maramzin, *The Two-Toned Blond*, in *The Barsukov Triangle, The Two-Toned Blond, and Other Stories*, ed. C.R. Proffer and E. Proffer, trans. David Lowe (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1984) 78-79. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

⁶ N. Rubinshtein, "Zametki o povesti V. Maramzina 'Blondin obeego tsveta,'" *Grani* 100 (1976): 495-504.

Pushkin's "little tragedy," too, but his parody of *Lolita* operates at nearly every level of *The Two-Toned Blond*.

The elliptical and sometimes elusive style in which most of *The Two-Toned Blond* is narrated makes it unlikely that any two readers will ever agree entirely about what transpires in the course of the novella. To sum up what is beyond dispute, however, let us start with the fact that the main narrator, the Blond, enjoys a successful career as a conformist Soviet artist. Perhaps not coincidentally, he belongs to the Party. In addition, the Blond is gay, a fact hinted at by a purposeful but untranslatable grammatical error in the novella's Russian title.⁷ Our narrator falls hopelessly in love with the other main protagonist in the story, Nikolay the Painter. The Blond's opposite number in virtually every way, Nikolay is a non-Party, avant-garde artist who languishes in official nonrecognition in the USSR. Nikolay is also decidedly heterosexual and prone to violence, especially in response to the Blond's advances. Desperate and frustrated in his passion, the Blond vacuums up Nikolay's milieu, including his students, daughter, and wife. Nikolay's wife and daughter in fact move in with the Blond. The wife later dies, under mysterious circumstances, and the Blond makes off with Nikolay's daughter.

A bald plot summary does not make the connection between *The Two-Toned Blond* and *Lolita* obvious, but the compositional pattern of Maramzin's tale recalls that of *Lolita*, and the work as a whole abounds in allusions to Nabokov's novel and parallels with it. To begin with, a three-part structure involving literary mystification underlies both works. The opening section of *The Two-Toned Blond* bears the title "The Disintegration of Russian Consciousness (By Way of an Introduction)." Ostensibly written by Nikolay the Painter, this first part explains how Nikolay has come into possession of the Blond's notes. This otherwise shopworn device makes for an explicit parallel with "Confessions of a White Widowed Male," the foreword to *Lolita* allegedly by John Ray, Jr., Ph.D. There Dr. Ray explains that Clarence Choate Clark, Esq., Humbert Humbert's lawyer, asked him to edit H.H.'s manuscript.

The opening sections of *The Two-Toned Blond* and *Lolita* rely on similar strategies in preparing readers to meet the main protagonists of the two tales. In his introduction, Dr. Ray excoriates Humbert Humbert (henceforth H.H.) as a personality but praises his literary style: "A desperate honesty that throbs through his confession does not absolve him from sins of diabolical cunning. He is not a gentleman. But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!"⁸ Likewise, Nikolay the painter argues that although the Blond is a pathetic case, his language redeems him: "From this point of view, we have simplicity, even utmost bareness. We, with our grammatical phrases, express ourselves much more poorly. For all the insanity of the contents of that head, one can't help admiring the brevity, the arriving at the essence in three words or so, and sometimes fewer"

⁷ The title in Russian, *Blondin obeego tsveta*, literally means "a male blond of both colors," but Maramzin violates Russian grammar by using the feminine form "obeego" to modify the masculine noun "tsvet." In proper Russian a masculine form is required, and the title would read *Blondin oboego tsveta*.

⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Vintage, 1989) 5. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

(79). Thus, the opening sections of both *Lolita* and *The Two-Toned Blond* offer an aesthetic defense of their respective heroes. Unlike Dr. Ray, however, Nikolay the Painter ventures a moral defense of his subject as well: "And one needn't play the hypocrite: it's hardly likely that he's any worse than any of the rest of us" (81).

Part Two of *The Two-Toned Blond*, "The Notes of the Blond Himself," parallels H.H.'s notes, which likewise comprise the bulk of Nabokov's novel. The use of very short chapters links the two narratives, as does the fact that the two heroes almost immediately launch into an explication and investigation of the origins of their sexual proclivities. H.H. fairly shivers with delight as he traces the history of his attraction to nymphets. The Blond seeks the root of his attraction to men, locating it in the loss of his father at an early age and in a lack of roughness in his personality: "Coarseness is a secondary sign of a sexual male, alas, I couldn't envy, my feelings too tender" (83). The Blond goes on to describe attempts to find fulfillment in crowded busses: "Seek—and they'll give it to you, said a philosopher of ancient Greekhood. On a bus I immediately made my way to the back, there crowded together substitute men of excitement" (84). The description of such behavior reveals an allusion to *Lolita*, where H.H. writes: "After all, I had had *some* experience in my life of pederosis . . . had wedged my wary and bestial way into the hottest, most crowded corner of a city bus full of strap-hanging schoolchildren" (55-56). One incident on a streetcar leads the Blond into what H.H. would call a "one-sided romance . . . with a rich flavor of hell" (126): "Once I held a half hour, and know what? Turned out to be a woman with her head shaved, a dump-truck driver, which still doesn't give her the right to become a full-fledged man, all by herself, had to accompany her home and she didn't let go until morning: a lover of big hickey kisses of mine" (87). H.H. describes equally disheartening adventures involving mistaken sexual identity: "It happened for instance that from my balcony I would notice a lighted window across the street and what looked like a nymphet in the act of undressing before a cooperative mirror. . . . But abruptly, fiendishly, the tender pattern of nudity I had adored would be transformed into the disgusting map-lit bare arm of a man in his underclothes" (20).

Both the Blond and H.H. appeal to history in defense of their preferred sexual practices. The Blond writes in this regard: "I can't understand at all why it's been forbidden. People of different nationalities, in ancient Grecian Rome, lived in their caracallas by it and it alone, it was a rule not to refuse any citizen . . ." (88). H.H. reminds his readers that "Dante fell madly in love with his Beatrice when she was nine, a sparkling girleen. . . . And when Petrarch fell madly in love with his Laureen, she was a fair-haired nymphet of twelve running in the wind" (19).

When unable to attain the object of his desire, Maramzin's hero follows basically the same pattern of behavior as Nabokov's H.H. Specifically, the Blond takes up with Nikolay's wife because that is as close as he can come to sexual contact with Nikolay himself. The Blond writes: "He always participates with us during the tender bed—like a spirit between organs! I can't allow myself coarseness of the bed, not well brought up in childhood, but I always ask her to tell me how he could: a lovely reminiscence, which is exactly what I hold for" (97). This passage calls to mind the classic Soviet joke in which a wife relies on the slogan "Lenin Is Always With Us" to explain to her husband the presence of a third party, a male, in their bed. More to the point, however, the Blond's vicarious sex parallels H.H.'s

love life with Charlotte Haze. H.H. explains: "We had highballs before turning in, and with their help, I would manage to evoke the child while caressing the mother. . . . I kept telling myself . . . that biologically this was the nearest I could get to Lolita" (76). As laid out by him, the Blond's entire plan of action is an extreme version of H.H.'s tactics: "Finally I achieved everything that I planned, I'll describe it right now: (1) the era of universal togetherness! (2) the city of togetherness [Leningrad]. . . . (3) the students of togetherness of the continuation of the course [the Blond lures Nikolay's students away from him]! (4) a wife and daughter of togetherness too! only one is left: that inaccessible man of togetherness" (101).

What H.H. and the Blond have in common is an erotic obsession expressed in erotic despotism masquerading as love. The Blond claims to love Nikolay: "I know that the skirtchaser of a passing erotic muse [Nikolay] doesn't know where to pour in the energy of feeling, but he can't loan his temporary muscle to a colleague of lifelong gratitude of his talent, even though he sees that I love immortally his hefty body and technique" (101). Similarly, H.H. speaks of his love for Lolita: "I loved you. I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you. I was despicable and brutal, and turpid, and everything, *mais je t'aimes, je t'aimes!*" (284).

The passion that Nabokov's and Maramzin's protagonists trumpet is really a betrayal of love, and it is no accident that treachery figures as a constant motif in both *Lolita* and *The Two-Toned Blond*. H.H. often lies sleepless from worry that Lolita will deceive him with every grease monkey that comes along. Nikolay and the Blond both feel that their "common wife" is betraying them. Thus, in their notes both H.H. and the Blond end up incriminating themselves even as they imagine they are writing a self-defense. The love that the heterosexual H.H. and gay Blond proclaim in their notes turns out to be a totalitarian eros bearing the same relationship to love as rape does to the act of love.

The compositional parallels between *Lolita* and *The Two-Toned Blond* extend to the third parts of the two works. Part Three of Maramzin's tale, "Afterword," bears the author's own signature. Similarly, later editions of *Lolita* include a short piece by Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*." Thus, in both works an introduction from the pen of a fictional author and an afterword signed by the real author frame the main, first-person narrative.

Maramzin's "Afterword" features an extended description of a shower in a bathroom and an accompanying philosophical treatise. The author notes that in the bathhouse shower each bather adjusts the faucet knob in his stall and thereby imagines himself to be regulating the temperature of the stream of water pouring over him. In fact, however, the temperature changes constantly, because it depends on the actions of all the other bathers as well, all of whom also think that by twirling the knobs in their stalls they are controlling the temperature of the water for themselves and themselves alone (107-08).

Through the passage about the shower Maramzin implies that the Blond suffers from a delusion if he believes that the manipulation going on in the tale he has told is unilateral, that is, that his story is all about how he has manipulated Nikolay. On the contrary, as the digression on the bathhouse suggests, the Blond has been as much manipulated himself, by both Nikolay and their "common wife." In

essence, the "Afterword" reduces Tolstoy's calculus of history to a question of plumbing. If we imagine the world we live in as a huge bathhouse with an excruciatingly sensitive plumbing system, then it turns out that each of us has limited control over the water temperature in our individual shower stalls: other people are controlling it as well, but in ways beyond our knowledge or calculation.

As with so much of Maramzin's tale, the treatise on showers has its origins in *Lolita* too. Writing of the motels in which he and Lolita stayed, H.H. observes: "The baths were mostly tiled showers, with an endless variety of spouting mechanisms, but with one definitely non-Laodicean characteristic in common, a propensity, while in use, to turn instantly beastly hot or blindingly cold upon you, depending on whether your neighbor turned on his cold or his hot to deprive you of a necessary complement in the shower you had so carefully blended" (146).

Nabokov's "Afterword" contains another passage relevant to *The Two-Toned Blond*. In describing various publishers' reactions to the manuscript of *Lolita*, Nabokov notes: "Some of the reactions were very amusing: one reader suggested that his firm might consider publication if I turned my Lolita into a twelve-year-old lad and had him seduced by Humbert, a farmer, in a barn, amidst gaunt and dried surroundings, all this set forth in short, strong, 'realistic' sentences" (314). In other words, Nabokov's reader proposes a gay version of *Lolita*, which, in a sense, Maramzin has provided. For in the final analysis, *The Two-Toned Blond* is perhaps not so much a parody of *Lolita* as an inversion of it.