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“LOLITA, LIGHT OF MY LIFE. MY SIN, MY SOUL”
AND PSALM 38

Whenever I have returned to *Lolita*, I have found I cannot now ignore what had seemed, on first reading, a tedious prefatory detail: “Mrs. “Richard F. Schiller” died in childbed.”¹ When the silent rebus reveals its solution in the closing chapters of the novel, one of Nabokov’s most known subtleties takes effect, disarming the reader, placing him in a perpetual disillusionment. While pursuing an entirely different vein of research, I was alerted to the possibility of at least a second instance of this kind. Admittedly, this ‘marker’ is more obscure (complicated as it is by metaphor and allusion), but there is something to be said for its suggestive strength, which may pass unnoticed while yet having a powerful effect on a still ‘naïve’ reader. After all, complex allusive phrases – even those ‘unnecessary’ for a basic grasp of the text, and which come to matter more upon re-reading than on first reading – are not alien to Nabokov’s style. I hope to illustrate that a reading of Psalm 38 of the King James Bible may help uncover such a marker in the words: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul.”²

Lars Lönnroth drew my attention to a medieval metaphorical usage derived from Psalm 38 (37, as Lönnroth correctly notes, in the Vulgate) whereby the Biblical phrase ‘the light of my eyes is gone from me’ is adopted by bereaved parents (mostly in hagiographies) to speak of the deceased son or daughter.³ He cites the apocryphal *Book of Tobit* (10.4-5), alongside the psalm,

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. New York: Vintage, 1997. p. 4.

² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³ The key phrase in Hebrew: וְאִוֵּר עֵינַי גַּם הֵם אֵין אֶתִּי ; in Biblical Russian: “ибо **чресла мои** полны воспалениями, и

as source-material for the metaphor in *Njáls Saga* (122) and, to name but one other further example, the Anglo-Saxon poem *Juliana* (ll. 33-6), attributed to Cynewulf.⁴

Though the hagiographic context resonates strongly with the Edgar Allan Poe references in the opening chapters,⁵ the medieval usage is not something of which Nabokov necessarily needed to be aware of as, even without this knowledge, the resemblances between the psalm and *Lolita* remain two-fold: they are lexical and ‘psychological’. Furthermore, they are psychological in a similarly ambiguous way, in the sense that the psalm is a) presenting a psychological state (of David’s *aporia*) and b) a source-text for one of Nabokov’s many quips on what he perceived to be pseudo-medical definitions of psychological states.⁶ If the psalm is considered in a desacralized context, phrases like “loathsome disease” become nearly parodistic in their moral sentiment, and I would suggest that Nabokov, who disliked organized religion and the study of psychology, may very well be appropriating the text in this second fashion, as well as in the first – i.e. he is taking scripture both at its word, and at his own word.⁷

In the passage from the psalm below, I have used bold to emphasize lexical echoes, and underlined the most psychologically relevant phrases.⁸

Psalm 38⁹

A psalm of David, to bring remembrance.

- 1 O LORD, rebuke me not in thy wrath:
neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure.
- 2 For thine arrows stick fast in me,

нет целого места в плоти моей <...> и свет очей моих, – и того нет у меня” (Orthodox official version, Псалом 37). Also, for comparison, here is the opening sentence of *Lolita* in Nabokov’s own Russian translation: “Лолита, свет моей жизни, огонь моих чресел”.

⁴ Lönnroth, Lars. *Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, pp. 113-114.

⁵ Humbert Humbert makes use of vocabulary and also a number of phrases from Poe’s poem “Annabel Lee” to characterize his first love, and to colour the story of their sea-side romance (Nabokov originally intended to give the title “Kingdom by the Sea” to *Lolita*, which is also a phrase borrowed from the poem, one that finds a place in *Lolita* as “princedom by the sea”). Many critics have noted connections, for more one might turn to Brian Boyd’s essay on *Speak, Memory* in the Vladimir Nabokov Centennial, published online by Random House, and which is freely accessible at <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/nabokov/speak.html>. The intertextual references are all catalogued in the seminal work, *The Annotated Lolita* (edited by Alfred Appel Jr.).

⁶ In a number of his works, and not least in the ‘Foreword’ to *Lolita*, a number of ‘asides’ are made with regard to the profession and jargon of psychology, the coldness of which Nabokov famously detested.

⁷ For relevant discussion of Nabokov’s use of the Biblical text in his prose, see Yuri Leving’s “Authorship and Divine Creation” in *Keys to The Gift. A Guide to Vladimir Nabokov’s Novel*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011, pp. 223-231.

⁸ Many more lines and words could be underlined or emphasized, but I have tried to be conservative.

⁹ Taken from the Authorized (King James) Version. A number of critics have already shown that *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* share affinities with the King James, so I have chosen this version to illustrate my point (Italics in original).

and thy hand presseth me sore.
3 *There is* no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger;
neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin.
4 For mine iniquities are gone over mine head:
as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me.
5 My wounds stink *and* are corrupt
because of my foolishness.
6 I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly;
I go mourning all the day long.
7 For **my loins** are filled with a loathsome disease:
and *there is* no soundness in my flesh.
8 I am feeble and sore broken:
I have roared by reason of the disquietness of my heart.
9 Lord, all my desire is before thee;
and my groaning is not hid from thee.
10 My heart panteth, my strength faileth me:
as for the **light of mine eyes**, it also is gone from me.
11 My lovers and my friends stand aloof from my sore;
and my kinsmen stand afar off.
12 They also that seek after my life lay snares *for me:*
and they that seek my hurt speak mischievous things,
and imagine deceits all the day long.

[...]

The tenth verse ties most directly to the opening sentences of *Lolita*, and its metaphorical value would presage Lolita's death in a manner not dissimilar to the rebus in the 'Foreword'. In opening his recollection with this metaphor, spoken in an elegiac tone, Humbert is implying what is explicit in verse 10's dependent clause.

To demonstrate how the psychological resonance might relate the two texts, we need only look at the fourth verse of the psalm; it could be said to typify a set of paradoxical moments in which Humbert seems to be aware of the possibility of his madness, and (simultaneously, and herein lies the paradox) the possibility of his madness remains remote. Though he utters the phrases, "the dimmest of my pollutive dreams was a thousand times more dazzling than all the adultery the most virile writer of genius or the most talented impotent might imagine," and "had I not been such a fool – or such an intuitive genius – to preserve that journal," Humbert will –

perhaps without realizing, or making much of it – resolve to attribute his deviance to ‘genius’. This kind of a statement makes evident what we might call his trend of self-deception (whether conscious or unconscious is irrelevant to our purposes) in the early chapters of the novel (these examples are taken from chapters 5 and 23, respectively). That, therefore, Humbert’s “iniquities are gone over [his] head,” and that (for example) his state of desolation might be matched by the words of verse 11, contribute to connecting the psalm’s description of a psychological state to Humbert’s own paradigm.

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