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Humbert Humbert's Use of Catullus 58 in *Lolita*

GARY R. DYER

Five times in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* the narrator, Humbert Humbert, uses a particular poetic phrasing in evoking his "nymphet," Dolores "Lolita" Haze.¹ After Humbert describes first meeting Dolores, his landlady's daughter, he tells the reader that "this *nouvelle*, this Lolita, *my* Lolita, was to eclipse completely her prototype [Humbert's childhood love 'Annabel Lee']" (p. 42). In his diary he writes, "she, *this* Lolita, *my* Lolita, has individualized the writer's ancient lust . . ." (p. 47). When Humbert knows that Lolita soon will leave for summer camp, he describes the nymphet and comments that when she matures "*that* Lolita, *my* Lolita, poor Catullus would lose forever" (pp. 67-68). After her mother dies, Humbert and the orphan begin an affair, and he warns Lolita that if he goes to jail for statutory rape "*my* Lolita, *this* Lolita will leave her Catullus and go [to a correctional school or reformatory], as the wayward girl you are" (p. 153). At the climax of the book, his confrontation with the married Lolita when he finally reveals the depth of his feelings for her, he writes, "I insist the world know how much I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita . . ." (p. 280).

While Alfred Appel notes simply that Humbert is echoing "Catullus's evocation of his enchanting Lesbia,"² the reference in each of the five instances above is specifically to the first line-and-a-half of Catullus 58, a poem that records the degradation of the Roman poet's former love, Lesbia:

Caeli, Lesbia nostra, Lesbia illa,
illa, Lesbia, quam Catullus unam
plus quam se atque suos amavit omnes,
nunc in quadriviis et angiportis
glubit magnanimos Remi nepotes.³

Caelius, my Lesbia, that Lesbia,
that Lesbia, the one whom Catullus
loved more than himself or all his people,
now on street-corners and in alleys
is masturbating the noble-minded heirs of Remus.

(Humbert uses italics to mimic Catullus' emphatic placement of the second demonstrative *illa*, "that.") Appel writes that Humbert "sees himself in a line descending from the great Latin love poets," Catullus and his successors, Propertius, Tibullus, and Horace.⁴ In addition to the five imitations of the phrasing of "Lesbia nostra, Lesbia illa, / illa Lesbia," Humbert uses the phrase "my Lolita," or a variation of it, thirty-five times in *Lolita*, and the book ends with him writing that "the refuge of art" is "the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita" (p. 311).⁵

Lolita proclaims its own fictionality by giving the reader hints of things outside its own fictional world—for example, the name of Clare Quilty's collaborator, "Vivian Darkbloom," is an anagram of "Vladimir Nabokov." Nevertheless the novel insists on making the reader suspend disbelief; the work while mocking naturalistic conventions uses them toward an end, and *Lolita* is Nabokov's most naturalistic novel. By putting aside the matter of the book's self-conscious artifice and taking Humbert's account at face value, we can by illuminating the narrative illuminate the novel.

Humbert's use of Catullus 58, and of the traditions of its ancient genre, is an important and hitherto neglected component of *Lolita*. Critics have studied at length some of Humbert's other literary comparisons for *Lolita*, the most pervasive of which are to the title characters of Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee" and Prosper Mérimée's *Carmen*. Catullus is referred to in *Lolita* more often than any other author except Poe, Mérimée, Shakespeare, Joyce, and Proust; the Latin poet is more visible than Keats, Cervantes, Dante, Flaubert, Rimbaud, Carroll, Eliot, Stevenson, Baudelaire; Maeterlinck, Browning, Verlaine, or Housman.⁶ Humbert also compares his desire for Dolores Haze to that of Dante for Beatrice, Petrarch for Laura, Poe for his thirteen-year-old wife Virginia, and Proust's narrator Marcel for Albertine (Humbert the writer reads literature as history, confusing the poetic speaker with the historical poet, and we reading Humbert must risk this fallacy of viewing Catullus' or Petrarch's verse as a trustworthy literal account of the poet's life). Catullus is nearly the most ancient writer to whom Humbert alludes, and Lesbia is the earliest literary precursor of *Lolita* mentioned.

I believe that Catullus 58 is more important to *Lolita* than any other

work except "Annabel Lee," and I am arguing in the following pages for two interrelated assertions about the role of Catullus' poem in Humbert's account: first, that Humbert's Catullan phrasing, simply as an echo of a Latin love poem, is a clue to the pattern behind the names "Dolores" and "Lolita," names that are both pseudonyms; and, second, that the Catullus allusions, taken with regard to the poem's context in the Roman poet's story of love and disillusionment, constitute one of several ironic comparisons Humbert makes to Lolita, and are a key to Humbert's purpose in writing, making "this Lolita," who is far more worthy than Lesbia, live forever through literary art.

"I have camouflaged everything, my love," Humbert writes (p. 269), and throughout his memoir he uses pseudonyms for characters, pseudonyms that have significant connotations in the story. When he tells his readers at the book's end that "I have camouflaged what I could so as not to hurt people," he then writes, "And I have toyed with many pseudonyms for myself before I hit on a particularly apt one" (p. 310); the suggestion is that by camouflage Humbert means, in most cases, appropriate pseudonyms, usually one with thematically relevant associations. For himself he chooses the pseudonym that "expresses the nastiness best" (p. 310); the "double rumble" of "Humbert Humbert" to Nabokov is "hateful" and "kingly," suggesting "a royal vibration for Humbert the Fierce and Humbert the Humble."⁷ The associations of place names, such as "Camp Q" 's suggestion of Humbert's rival, playwright Quilty, are also important.

A clue to the nature of Humbert's pseudonyms for the object of his love lies in a convention of Latin amatory poetry that apparently Catullus initiated. The Roman poets used pseudonyms in writing about real women in their love verse: Catullus' "Lesbia" was really named Clodia; Tibullus' "Delia" was named Plania; Propertius' "Cynthia" was really one Hostia. As Richard Bentley was the first to point out, each pseudonym has the same number of syllables and the same metrical pattern as the woman's real name. In his notes on Horace, Odes 2.12.13, Bentley comments that Roman poets, including Catullus, Propertius, and Tibullus, "did the same thing that *Acron* charges upon *Horace*, by changing Names, only observing the *Number*, and also *Quantity* of the Syllables, so as to make them alike."⁸

"Lolita," the nickname that dominates Humbert's narrative, is similar metrically to "Dolores," the girl's formal given name. The similarity is more striking if we follow Nabokov and pronounce "Lolita" with "the first syllable . . . as in 'lollipop,' the 'L' liquid and delicate, the 'lee' not too sharp"⁹—note also that Humbert rhymes the name with the

French "alita" (p. 258). Humbert is following the Latin poetic practice in using the amphibrachic names "Lolita" and "Dolores." The great advantage of such pseudonyms for the Roman poets, we can suppose, was that one could write using the real name and substitute the pseudonym later. Because Humbert is writing in prose he has no such considerations of metrical convenience (only one metrical poem in the book contains the name Lolita), but rather he uses the metrical code because he is drawing on poetic tradition and affecting poetic style. We do know of another poetic disguise in the book: "Haze" rhymes with Lolita's real surname, according to John Ray, Jr., who has edited Humbert's manuscript for the press (pp. 5-6). The lyric nature of much of his account is unquestionable, and Humbert assumes explicitly the Catullan poetic role: he calls himself a poet (pp. 33, 90), reproduces several of his poems in the text (pp. 18, 63-64, 257-59, 265, 301-02), and depicts himself in his verse "sentence" for Quilty wearing a Roman "flavid toga" as Catullus might (p. 302).

"Lolita" is Humbert's "real" nickname for the girl, and not simply a name he devises when he writes. Editor Ray tells us that the girl's "first name" appears, unchanged, in the published text: it "is too closely interwound with the inmost fiber of the book to allow one to alter it, nor (as the reader will perceive for himself) is there any practical necessity to do so" (p. 6). Twice Appel comments that this "first name" is "Dolores," but it is "Lolita" and not "Dolores" that dominates the book, and clearly the only name that can remain undisguised is the girl's nickname, the name that cannot point to the real girl because no one who knows it remains alive when the book is published.¹⁰ Only Humbert uses the name "Lolita" in the book—Charlotte Haze prefers "Lo" (see pp. 40, 42, 48, 52, and 65) while others, including Quilty (p. 300), use "Dolly," and Humbert refers to her as "Dolores," "Dolly," "Lola" (pp. 11, 52, 72), and "Lo" both in conversation and in his narrative as is appropriate, although, he notes, "in my arms she was always Lolita" (p. 11). Ray has changed "a few tenacious details that despite 'H. H.' 's own effort still subsisted in his text as signposts and tombstones" of the real people (p. 5). If "Dolores" were the girl's real name that Humbert leaves untouched in his manuscript, the name certainly would have been changed by Ray, so "Dolores" must be a pseudonym Humbert uses to replace the real name. Humbert has made a "formal agreement with the so-called authorities" (p. 282) that the book will not be published until Lolita is dead (as, just to be sure, he repeats [pp. 310-11]), and his only reason is that he "realized [he] could not parade living Lolita" (p. 310).

Humbert's pseudonyms are meant to protect people, and twice he gets revenge by revealing names. In anger he refers to their neighbor to the east in Beardsley, "prude and prurient Miss East—or to explode her incognito, Miss Fenton Lebone" (p. 208). Humbert tells us that all the names of Lolita's Beardsley friends are approximations except one (p. 192), and Appel interprets this to refer to Lolita's schoolmate Mona Dahl: "Because she was Lolita's accomplice in deceit . . . H. H. takes his vengeance by revealing Mona's name to the world"¹¹—although Ray (out of ignorance?) puts Mona's name in quotation marks in his foreword (p. 6). "Clare Quilty" is almost certainly a pseudonym, and Humbert expresses no desire to immortalize the man's guilt and punishment (the newspapers have already proclaimed this famous playwright's murder, as Ray notes [p. 6]). Humbert goes to awkward lengths to conceal even place names: Quilty's car is from the state "one adjacent to the state Beardsley was in" (p. 228); of her address, "General Delivery, Coalmont," he writes that it was "not 'Va.,' not 'Pa.,' not 'Tenn.'—and not Coalmont, anyway" (p. 269).

The derivation of the name "Lolita" from "Dolores" through "Dolly" and "Lola" is clear in the book (see p. 11), so it seems odd that Lolita is the real nickname and Dolores not the real formal name. Perhaps Humbert, in writing, works back from his lilting endearment "Lolita," which perhaps is metrically similar to her real amphibrachic name, to the formal name "Dolores," suggesting *dolor*, sadness. Thus Humbert gives the girl two poetic alternative names, etymologically related as well as similar metrically to each other, and possibly Lolita's real first name is accentually similar to these two pseudonyms Humbert has devised. These two names are useful for his literary effects as are the other pseudonyms in the book; Humbert's hint at the sadness of Lolita's story in the *dolor* of "Dolores" is as important as the Sapphic connotations of "Lesbia" (and, as Appel notes, "'Dolly' is an appropriate diminutive," suggesting a doll).¹²

The intricate argument given above is consistent with what Ray and Humbert tell us, and it is probably the best account possible of the nature and relation of the names "Lolita" and "Dolores." That Nabokov had such a connection in mind seems to be supported by the scansion of his original name for Lolita, "Juanita Dark."¹³ Erudite Humbert may know Bentley's original comment about the major Roman love poets, but if he does not he still easily can have learned in school or on his own the simple metrical code with which Catullus derives "Lesbia" from "Clodia." Humbert gives great emphasis to the name "Lolita": it is the first and the last word of his memoir, and when he breaks down in the

"tombal jail" where he is writing, he asks the printer to "Repeat [her name] till the page is full," as though only the repetition of "Lolita" can represent his obsession. The Catullan rhetoric figures not just in the five echoes of "Lesbia mea, Lesbia illa, / illa Lesbia" but in the thirty-five other repetitions and permutations of the phrase "my Lolita," and if the name itself is the product of a poetic disguise as I have argued, then the Catullus references include as well all the many occurrences of this name that is so "closely interwound with the inmost fiber of the book." Catullus is evoked throughout Humbert's memoir, and Catullus is central to what Humbert is trying to tell us, his readers.

What is the function of this specific Latin love poem, Catullus 58, in *Lolita*? Clearly Humbert, by comparing himself to Catullus, is placing himself in a tradition of love poetry that runs from the Roman poet to Marvell. Lolita is being compared with Lesbia, but what is the nature and extent of this comparison? Strict biographical parallels between the two women fail at the start, as the aristocrat Clodia Metelli, traditionally recognized as Catullus' Lesbia, was perhaps ten years older than the poet.¹⁴ Apparently the noble son of Rome who first took Clodia from Catullus was his dissolute friend Marcus Caelius Rufus, and it is in connection with Caelius that we have Cicero's description of Clodia Metelli as "Clodia, muliere non solum nobili verum etiam nota" ("a woman not only of nobility but of notoriety").¹⁵

Other, stronger comparisons come to mind: Lolita, who deserts Humbert for his "brother" Quilty (p. 251), in turn leaves him, much as Lesbia leaves Catullus and then Caelius; the Veronan Catullus loses his beloved to "magnanimos Remi nepotes," corrupted men of good Roman families, and the Frenchman Humbert loses Lolita to two Americans: first to artistically corrupt Quilty, who is "practically impotent" not just sexually (p. 300) but as a playwright, then to physically corrupt Dick Schiller—a partially deaf war veteran (with a bad complexion, a "large and hairy" Adam's apple, and "black and broken" fingernails [p. 276]) who pulls Lolita down several social classes. The strongest similarity between Catullus 58 and *Lolita* is in the evocation of the loss of a woman, while the most interesting differences lie in how the two speakers, Catullus and Humbert, perceive the characters of the women involved and in how they deal with their loss.

Certainly the echo of Catullus' passage "Lesbia nostra, Lesbia illa, / illa Lesbia" that stays in the reader's mind occurs in Humbert's final meeting with Lolita. After she has told Humbert how she left him for Quilty, only to be abandoned by the playwright, Humbert realizes that he loves her "more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth

or hoped for anywhere else" (p. 279)—just as Catullus loved Lesbia "plus quam se atque suos amavit omnes" ("more than himself or all his people"). Humbert addresses his audience, the "ladies and gentlemen of the jury":

You may jeer at me, and threaten to clear the court, but until I am gagged and half-throttled, I will shout my poor truth. I insist the world know how much I loved my Lolita, *this* Lolita, pale and polluted, and big with another's child, but still grey-eyed, still sooty-lashed, still auburn and almond, still Carmencita, still mine. . . . No matter, even if those eyes of hers would fade to myopic fish, and her nipples swell and crack, and her lovely young velvety delicate delta be tainted and torn—even then I would go mad with tenderness at the mere sight of your dear wan face, at the mere sound of your raucous young voice, my Lolita. (p. 280)

While Humbert's evocation of the girl echoes Catullus' lines on Lesbia, this effusive expression in writing of undying love is a break with the ancient model. Humbert's literary allusions often mislead us, making us expect the bitter endings of the works involved, such as Mérimée's novel, in which José kills Carmen after losing her to Lucas the picador.¹⁶ Both Lesbia and Lolita are lost to sexual servitude to another, but Humbert redeems his love for Lolita as Catullus does not with Lesbia—the final picture we get of Lesbia in the poems is one of degradation.

Each woman is associated with sexual promiscuity after she has left her lover, but Lolita refuses to do what Lesbia does. In Catullus 58 the poet seems disgusted by the Lesbia who "nunc in quadreviis et angiporis / glubuit magnanimos Remi nepotes" ("now on street-corners and in alleys is masturbating the noble-minded sons of Remus"). Humbert feels similar distaste for what Quilty asked Lolita to do to the "beastly boys" in his movie. She was living with Quilty and his friends at the Duk Duk ranch ("Duk Duk" is an oriental term for copulation)¹⁷ when he gathered "two girls and two boys, and three or four men, and the idea was for all of us to tangle in the nude while an old woman took movie pictures" (p. 278). Humbert presses for details, and she says that Quilty demanded

"Crazy things, filthy things. I said no, I'm just not going to [she used, in all insouciance really, a disgusting slang term which, in a literal French translation, would be *souffler*] your beastly boys, because I want only you. Well, he kicked me out." (p. 279; the bracketed paraphrase is Humbert's)

Humbert, with characteristic verbal decorum, avoids reproducing the word "blow." "She refused to take part because she loved him," he writes, "and he threw her out" (p. 278).

To Catullus Lesbia is unfaithful and dishonest. When she tells him she would rather marry him than Jupiter, he comments, in *Carmen* 70:

dicit: sed mulier cupido quod dicit amanti,
in vento et rapida scribere oportet aqua
(lines 3–4)

So she says; but what a woman tells a lustful lover
merits being written in the wind and running water.

Her infidelities and lying lead him to dislike her even as he desires her, he writes in *Carmen* 72:

quod amantem iniuria talis
cogit amare magis, sed bene velle minus.
(lines 7–8)

such wrongs force a lover
to love more, but to like less.

Her behavior, stemming from an apparent lack of personal ethics, is the crucial factor in Catullus' estrangement from her.

Lolita does lie to Humbert, deceiving him to meet with Quilty, but her personal similarity to Lesbia does not go very far. Indeed, a reading of Catullus suggests how ironic is Humbert's comparison of Lolita to Lesbia; what more striking contrast could there be than between this orphaned pubescent girl and a mature, corrupt aristocrat? Carl Proffer writes that "Lolita's literary antecedents . . . may be divided into two groups, the demonic and the angelic. . . . On the heavenly side are Beatrice, Laureen, Annabel Lee, Pippa, and perhaps Juliet. On the hellish side are Lilith, Rahab, the Vampire, Zemfira, Carmen, and [Swinburne's] Dolores."¹⁸ Lesbia falls into the demonic group, but the association is largely ironic (as are all of the evocations of evil seductresses), properly depending not on Lolita the girl but on her being a nymphet, which Humbert calls from the first "demoniac" (p. 18). Another such predecessor for Lolita comes from Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci," in which the speaker is warned, "La Belle Dame sans Merci / Hath thee in thrall"; Humbert writes, "my school-girl nymphet had me in thrall" (p. 185). Juxtaposing "my school-girl nymphet" with "La Belle Dame" is as ironic as the Lesbia references. Nymphetsy is not in a girl's nature as Humbert claims early in the book, but is imposed on her by men like Quilty and himself, and it is only temporary, as he is all too aware. Lolita's deceit, her sordidness, is part of a role into which she is pushed—a role requiring the cynicism of a Lesbia, and one she at last

rejects. In her final meeting with Humbert, when she is married and pregnant, she tells the whole story, honestly.

In *Lolita* the threat of corruption and crime, of the sort of degradation that claims Lesbia, follows Lolita. The novel is set in a time with more rigid (though vaguely stated) sexual standards than today, and we as readers ought to remember that in the United States in 1952 fellatio, under the vague blanket term "sodomy," was a crime, although seldom enforced, and the Mann Act (to which Humbert refers, nervously, on page 152) still forbade taking women across state lines for immoral purposes. Any sexual activity for an unmarried woman was a fall from grace; indeed, for the social historian *Lolita* can provide some insight into the age's underside of ambiguous sexual taboos and resulting fear and guilt. During Humbert and Lolita's first trip, their year-long ramble around the country, he warns her that "if we two are found out, you will be analyzed and institutionalized"; when he tells her that "*my* Lolita, *this* Lolita will leave her Catullus and go there, as the wayward girl you are" (p. 153), he is allowing part of the blame for their illicit affair to fall on her, and despite her bravado she is more afraid of the law than he is (as Humbert records [p. 173]). Deceit and prostitution are both drawn into Humbert's impressions of Lolita. After their arrival in Beardsley he notes "a definite drop in Lolita's morals," marked by her increasing insistence on pecuniary rewards for her sexual favors (pp. 185–86). Later Humbert tells us, "By permitting Lolita to study acting I had . . . suffered her to cultivate deceit" (p. 231). She becomes friends with Mona Dahl, an "elegant, cold, lascivious, experienced young female" (p. 193)—Humbert's memories of Mona involve not only corruption but maturity, that great enemy of nymphetsy.

At this point in the story Humbert's imagery for Lolita suffers a marked decline: he imagines her working in "the foul kitchen of a diner (Help Wanted) in a dismal ex-prairie state" (p. 187); Lolita may be "playing the pimp" for Mona (p. 194), who is one of "those little harlots" (p. 205); Lolita's "wenchy smell" and badly applied lipstick remind him of a repulsive prostitute in France (p. 206); Lolita has a "diabolical glow" (p. 216) that, as Appel observes, comes from Quilty;¹⁹ Mona's cryptic letter to Lolita is her "witchery" (p. 225); and when Humbert sees Lolita with Quilty she is a "vile and beloved slut" (p. 239).

Later Humbert comes to associate this feeling of sin and criminality, which he sees surrounding Lolita, with his rival, Quilty. When he first approaches Quilty's house, "Pavor Manor," he envisions "the inside of that festive and ramshackle castle in terms of 'Troubled Teens,' a story in one of [Lolita's] magazines, vague 'orgies,' a sinister

adult with penile cigar, drugs, bodyguards" (pp. 294–95). Humbert in his memoir often portrays Quilty as his double or "brother," and the criminal guilt reflects on himself as well as on Quilty: Humbert believes that the man following them during their second trip is a detective (pp. 218–19), and so he reminds Lolita that "You know perfectly well what will happen and where you will go if the police find out about things" (p. 220). Humbert even imagines himself on a "wanted" poster (p. 224). Of course, he has committed real crimes, and three times Lolita says to him that he raped her (pp. 143, 204, and 207), which legally is the truth. He suspects Lolita may have told Mona Dahl her "secrets" (pp. 192–93), and events make his paranoia seem justified. Quilty knows how to play on Humbert's guilt in harassing him: he dons a Dick Tracy mask and surprises Humbert in the middle of the night (p. 219).²⁰

By assuring Lolita that he wants to protect her from "the horrors that happen to little girls in coal sheds and alley ways" (p. 151) Humbert is protecting himself, but since her mother's death he indeed has begun to feel responsible for the girl. When he warns her about what will happen when she is taken by the police, the reader knows that the "policeman" following them is Quilty and Humbert ought to warn Lolita about him—in so doing, Humbert the father also is alerting her, if we substitute the original for the double, about his own threat to her.

In Humbert's account there are in effect two narrators, with two distinct mental points of view: the Humbert who calls Dolores Haze Lesbia, and the one who knows how she is not. Occasionally Humbert distinguishes the voice of "the artist," who now seems "false and brutal" to him, from that of "the gentleman" (p. 73), and although when Humbert writes of his earlier actions he usually assumes the viewpoint of an earnest pursuer of nymphets, he occasionally gives us a glimpse of his present disposition. He tells how five years before he was at the Enchanted Hunters hotel, holding the key to the room where Lolita lay asleep:

Jurors! If my happiness could have talked, it would have filled that genteel hotel with a deafening roar. And my only regret today is that I did not quietly deposit key "342" at the office, and leave the town, the country, the continent, the hemisphere,—indeed, the globe—that very same night. (p. 125)

The next night, after Lolita learned her mother was dead, she "came sobbing into [his room]," because, "you see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go" (p. 144). Humbert, as he sits in jail writing, leaves the reader these hints along the way, but for the most part he waits until late in his narrative, until after his last meeting with Lolita, to tell us how he failed

her, because he wants us to perceive as slowly as he did that he loves this Lolita, a girl left to the peculiar desires of her stepfather. Before he kills Quilty he remembers the moments that betrayed orphaned Lolita's helplessness: how he heard her "sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep" (p. 178). He remembers

the day when having withdrawn the functional promise I had made her on the eve . . . I happened to glimpse from the bathroom, through a chance combination of mirror aslant and door ajar, a look on her face . . . an expression of helplessness so perfect that it seemed to grade into one of rather comfortable inanity just because this was the very limit of injustice and frustration. . . . (p. 285)

Humbert remembers, with regret, "It was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita's states of mind while comforting my own base self," and knows that "even the most miserable of family lives was better than the parody of incest, which, in the long run, was the best I could offer the waif" (p. 289). Humbert's concern is not only moral but paternal, and his relations with her offend him as much as do her subsequent activities, such as the business of Quilty and the Duk Duk ranch. He is her "protector" (pp. 123, 302), but more: when Quilty asks why he mentions Lolita, he can reply, "I am her father" (p. 298).

At the end of Catullus' relations with Lesbia all that remains are his distaste at her promiscuity and his wonder at his past emotions, as we see in Carmen 58 and Carmen 37, which details the "lost" Lesbia's relations with men in a "salax taberna" ("lust-filled tavern"):

puella nam mi, quae meo sinu fugit,
amata tantum quantum amabitur nulla,
pro qua mihi sunt magna bella pugnata,
consedit istic. hanc boni beatique
omnes amatis, et quidem, quod indignum est,
omnes pusilli et semitarii moechi.
(lines 11–16)

For my girl, who has fled from my lap,
who was loved more than anyone else will be loved,
for whom I fought great wars,
fucks here. All you good and noble ones
make love to her, and so too, disgracefully,
do all the puny lechers of the street.

At the end of *Lolita* the nymphet has left Humbert forever, but she is not "lost," sunk to the promiscuity that Catullus finds so distasteful in

Lesbia, promiscuity that Humbert, who resorts to a translation to mask Lolita's coarse terminology, would not want for the woman he loves.

By telling his story Humbert tries to transcend not only the loss of the nymphet to maturity and marriage, but her death, and his own death. He writes that his memoir may be published only after Lolita has died:

Thus, neither of us is alive when the reader opens this book. But while the blood still throbs through my writing hand, you are still as much part of blessed matter as I am, and I can still talk to you from here to Alaska. Be true to your Dick. . . . And do not pity C. Q. One had to choose between him and H. H., and one wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita. (p. 311)

The sad irony of this passage is that Lolita dies not "in the first years of 2000 A.D.," as Humbert hopes (p. 301), but on Christmas Day, 1952, one month and nine days after his death (pp. 5–6). Humbert's only possible victory is to make Lolita "live in the minds of later generations," his "American sweet immortal dead love"—"for," he adds, "she is dead and immortal if you are reading this" (p. 282). The theme of victory over death through art unites Humbert's allusions to Catullus with those in Poe's poem of love surviving death, "Annabel Lee."

By drawing on an ancient source, one older than "prophetic sonnets" or almost all of his other literary sources, Humbert is conveying to his readers the immortality he wants for Lolita. It is not by accident that the five times Humbert recalls Catullus 58's "Lesbia mea, Lesbia illa, / illa Lesbia" are moments of loss and of remembrance: he tells us that Lolita will eclipse Annabel in his memory; he confides that Lolita realizes his "ancient lust"; he mourns his anticipated loss of the nymphet to adolescence; he threatens her with what will happen when she leaves "her Catullus"; and he proclaims at last to us, who are reading his story in the twentieth, twenty-first, twenty-second century, that we must know how he once loved this girl who, though she is as lost to us as she is to him, can live for us through Humbert's language. He seems to envision for her a life span longer than the 2000 years that unworthy Lesbia has had through Catullus' verse.

Humbert writes so that the world may know "how much I love my Lolita, *this* Lolita," and his past tense, like the third person Catullus uses ("quam Catullus unam / . . . amavit"), evokes the distancing that is

essential to turning experience into art. At the end of Humbert's narrative, he, too, breaks into the third person ("one wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple of months longer . . .") as though the work is becoming independent of him and his mortality. Humbert's "memoir" is artistic, not journalistic; when his account is published no one, even in Ramsdale or Beardsley, will know with certainty that it concerns that particular girl, for he has disguised everything in the manner of Catullus and the Roman love poets, leaving for his readers only the art.

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Putnam's, 1958); all references are given parenthetically in the text. Page numbers in *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), conform to those of the Putnam's edition.

² Appel, *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 364. Appel is the only writer I have found commenting on Humbert's Catullus references; Carl R. Proffer, in *Keys to Lolita* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), p. 22, lists Catullus as one of the many writers to whom Humbert alludes, but he gives no more information or commentary. Appel, in his note (p. 357) for the occurrence on p. 47, lists additional examples on pp. 42, 67-68, 153, 279, 280, and 295, but the exclamation on p. 279 and p. 295 (each simply "My Lolita!") do not mimic the whole phrase as do the other five examples Appel cites. Appel writes, again without identifying Catullus 58 by name, that "the intonational stresses of 'this Lolita, my Lolita,' are borrowed from a donnish translation of a Latin poem" (p. 357), but I cannot find a scholarly English translation that clearly has influenced Humbert, nor do I think it likely the French Humbert might have such a work in mind. At another point Appel writes that Humbert is echoing not only the original Catullus poem but also "imitations such as 'My Sweetest Lesbia' (1601), by Thomas Campion (1567-1620), English poet" (p. 364). Campion's poem imitates Catullus' Carmen 5, which also was used as a model for poems by Ben Jonson (1606, in *Volpone*), Richard Crashaw (ca. 1635), and others. The sentiment expressed in that Catullus poem ("Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus . . .") is quite unlike the disillusionment of Carmen 58. There is no indication that Humbert here has the English Catullan tradition in mind directly, although he must be familiar with it. Certainly Humbert's memoir more generally has important ties to the love poetry of Jonson, Campion, and particularly Andrew Marvell; I should mention in this regard Michael Long, *Marvell, Nabokov: Childhood and Arcadia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

³ My Catullus quotations follow *C. Valerii Catulli Carmina*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), except that I have changed each consonant "u" to the more recognizable "v," and, furthermore, I have followed Brian Atkins (*Liverpool Classical Monthly*, 2 [1977], 237-38) and given "magnanimos" in line five instead of Vossius' emendation "magnanimi"; thus the poem reads "noble-minded heirs of Remus" rather than "heirs of noble-minded Remus." Humbert may have read either version.

⁴ Appel, *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 357. Humbert quotes one other Latin love poem, from Ovid's *Amores* (on p. 221); see Proffer, *Keys to Lolita*, pp. 31–32.

⁵ I find occurrences of the phrase on pp. 34, 44, 46, 55, 68, 75, 81, 82, 94, 113 (two), 117, 130, 136, 156, 168, 169, 178, 192, 194, 200, 201, 209, 233, 243, 249, 269, 279, 280, 285, 286, 287, 289, 295, and 311. See Appel (*The Annotated Lolita*, p. 394), who correctly terms the phrase “a succinct ‘Latin’ locution.”

⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 331. Shakespeare and Joyce each make about ten appearances, Proust five, and Rimbaud four. Proffer, *Keys to Lolita*, pp. 34–53, deals at length with the references to “Annabel Lee” and *Carmen*. “Her bi-iliac garland still as brief as a lad’s” (p. 177) echoes (with a change of sex) lines 27–28 of A. E. Housman’s “To an Athlete Dying Young”: “And find unwithered on its curls / The garland briefer than a girl’s” (*The Collected Poems of A. E. Housman* [New York: Holt, 1965], p. 33).

⁷ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 26. Appel notes other suggestions in the name (*The Annotated Lolita*, pp. 321–23). For Humbert as king, see *Lolita*, p. 43 and p. 277.

⁸ Richard Bentley, *The Odes of Horace in Latin and English; With a Translation of Dr. Bentley’s Notes* (London, 1712), Part IX, 18–19.

⁹ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 25. In Nabokov’s *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 39, Ada pronounces her own name “the Russian way with two deep, dark ‘a’s, making it sound rather like ‘ardor’”—that is, the “ardor” of the book’s subtitle. I am not addressing in my argument the distinction between classical quantitative meter and modern English accentual meter. When we say that “Lesbia” is metrically similar to “Clodia” we are scanning the names according to the lengths of their syllables; when I term “Lolita” and “Dolores” metrically similar it is to be understood that I am referring to accentuation (although if we pronounce “Lolita” as Nabokov suggests the similarity to “Dolores” does hold true for vowel length as well).

¹⁰ Appel, *The Annotated Lolita*, pp. 323, 334. James L. McDonald writes, in “John Ray, Jr., Critic and Artist: The Foreword to *Lolita*,” *Studies in the Novel*, 5 (Fall 1973), 356, that “Ray actually credits Humbert only with his own ‘bizarre cognomen’ and the surname ‘Haze’ which is ‘too closely interwound with the inmost fiber of the book to allow one to alter it’ [emphasis McDonald’s]. One might infer that Ray’s alterations are considerable, perhaps even substantial. . . .” Putting aside McDonald’s misreading of the text (Ray writes that the “first name,” not the surname, is unchanged), it is clear Humbert must be responsible for more than his own pseudonym and the name “Haze.” If Humbert is not the source of the name “Lolita,” much of the point of his account and the coherence of the novel are lost. The other names, including the ones with literary or historical associations and those pertaining to Quilty (“Camp Q”), point out themes suited to Humbert’s viewpoint, not that of Ray.

¹¹ Appel, *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 393.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 334. For more associations of “Lolita” and “Dolores,” see Proffer, *Keys to Lolita*, pp. 26–31.

¹³ Dmitri Nabokov, “On a Book Entitled *The Enchanter*,” in Vladimir Nabokov, *The Enchanter* (New York: Putnam’s, 1986), p. 108.

¹⁴ C. J. Fordyce, *Catullus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. xvi.

¹⁵ Cicero, *Pro Caesio*, 13, in *M. Tulli Ciceronis Orationes*, ed. A. C. Clark, I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905).

¹⁶ See Proffer, *Keys to Lolita*, pp. 33, 39–40, and 45–46.

¹⁷ Appel, *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 428.

¹⁸ Proffer, *Keys to Lolita*, p. 26.

¹⁹ Appel, *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 402.

²⁰ The Dick Tracy identification is Appel's, *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 403.