

Gerard de Vries
Voorschoten

LOLITA, BLUE BIRDS AND OVID

“It is like metamorphosis: it won’t happen if
anyone is watching.”
(TWS 284)

1 Humbert, who died on “November 16,” states that he “started fifty-six days ago, to write *Lolita*” while he was in custody (3; 308). This would imply that everything happening after September 21 is the fruit of Humbert’s fantasy and that there has been no letter from Dolly, no killing of Quilty, and no repentance. (For an overview of the debate about this “calendric anomaly,” see Dana Dragunoiu, 342-43.) This means that the reader has “to imagine an alternate fate on Dolly’s behalf” (Dragunoiu 355). Humbert’s memoir’s final chapters are now restyled as an inquiry into a “destination in the making” (*Lolita* 211). *Pale Fire*, the novel Nabokov wrote after *Lolita*, contains another young woman whose destiny is in question. Brian Boyd has argued that Hazel Shade, after her disappearance in the lake between Exe and Wye, is transformed into a “radiant Red Admirable” (147). Another metamorphosis, from girl into bird, can be discerned in *Lolita*.

2 Such magical events belong to the domain of fairy-tales, myths, and fables. *Lolita*, among the multiple ways it could be read, also belongs to this domain. The first reflection Humbert has after seeing Dolly is related to a “fairy-tale” (39). The last time Humbert sees and speaks to her is when Dolly asks for her “Mother’s trunk” which contains “treasures” (244). After Dolly has escaped from her tormentor’s grip, circumstances force her possibly to accept “some restaurant work,” probably in a “foul kitchen,” a fate Humbert might have dimly anticipated when he imagines her clad in “rags” (277; 185; 39). All these particulars also occur in Charles Perrault’s “Donkey-Skin,” a fairy-tail about a girl who escapes from an incestuous relationship with her father. Another subtext is Grimm’s “Snow White” as retold by Alexander Pushkin (discussed below). Equally important are Greek myths of which many have been retold by Ovid. Echoes of some of these myths in *Lolita* have been explored by Zsuzsa Hetényi and by Susan Elizabeth Sweeney.

3 Dolly escapes from Humbert's custody in Elphinstone, about a month after she has decided to leave Beardsley School. Just before her departure, Humbert already fears that she might flee, and has a premonition of the course this might take by calling her "the winged fugitive" (206). Having consented to leave Beardsley, Dolly tells Humbert: "But this time we'll go wherever I want." It is then that Humbert sees her as a "bird" (207). In Elphinstone, Humbert notices "a sparrow perched on a saddle" of what he thinks is Dolly's bicycle (245). And Beardsley School, blurred now as "Birdsley (sic!) School," becomes "Bird School" in Humbert's mind. Deranged by his panic of having lost Dolly, Humbert imagines her as a "New Bird" (235; 246). In a poem written a half year after Dolly's disappearance, Humbert, in his confusion, remembers his "darling" as a "starling" (255).

Avian properties can also be recorded in others connected to her. Dolly's tennis partner in Champion is seen as having "rudimentary wings" (235). The bird-like quality of Dolly's girl friend, Avis Chapman ("avis" is bird in Latin), is reinforced when Humbert calls her father "Mr. Byrd" (285).

4 Birds help to solve the puzzling literary references in the chapters following Dolly's decision to leave Beardsley. Travelling from Beardsley to Elphinstone, Humbert frequently thinks that he is followed by a red Cadillac (217). Its driver, Humbert imagines, resembles an old acquaintance, Gustave Trapp, who, he suspects, is Dolly's accomplice in orchestrating her escape. As Humbert cannot outspeed him, he laments that his pursuer, "his nightmare[.]," does not run "softly," and quotes "*O, lente currite noctes equi!*" (219). As Carl Proffer in his excellent *Keys to Lolita* has explained, this line comes from Ovid's *Amores* 1, 13 (32). In this poem, the narrator seeks to prolong the night he has spent with his mistress now that daybreak is upon them, and asks for respite: "Run slowly, horses of the night!" (*Amores* 1,13). The first lines of this poem refer to the story of Memnon, the Ethiopian warrior, who, after being slain, becomes a bird, as Ovid tells in his *Metamorphoses* (13, 608. References to the *Metamorphoses* are drawn from David Raeburn's translation).

The name of "Aristophanes" is one of the aliases Humbert attributes to the obscure Gustave Trapp. The name of the Greek playwright exasperates Humbert: "What was I missing?" (251). He is likely to be missing the fact that Aristophanes' best known work is *The Birds*, a play in which human beings become birds. Additionally, one of the plays that Dolly studies during her short-lived acting career is Edmond Rostand's play *Cyrano de Bergerac* (230). Its eponymous

hero has discovered six ways to learn to fly, but eventually prefers a seventh mode, to soar “as upon angel’s wings” (153). The above-mentioned starling comes from Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* (see Appel 432). Though it wishes to flee from “the miseries of confinement,” it “can’t get out” of its cage (Sterne 96-97).

Equally close to Dolly’s fate is the heroine of *La Maison des Ramparts* by Henri-René Lenormand, a French playwright whose works, together with Maeterlinck’s plays, have left “echoes” in *The Enchanted Hunters*, “the playlet in which Dolores Haze was assigned the part of a farmer’s daughter” (201; 200). This play is discussed by Carl Proffer. Its heroine, also called Lolita, is, at the age of twelve, “taken away from her Central American home by a Frenchman who is ultimately responsible for debauching her.” It is this Lolita who “imagines being a bird” (Proffer 30). “I greatly liked Lenormand’s plays, when I was young,” said Nabokov in an interview from 1959 (qtd. in Siggy Frank 42).

Omar Khayyám’s “wine, wine, wine” is quoted by Humbert (262) when revisiting Briceland (the home of the Enchanted Hunters hotel) two or three years after Dolly left him. It is a cry from the nightingale in Khayyám’s *Rubáiyát*, Stanza VI. Humbert next refers to “a Persian bubble bird.” This bubble bird is a misnomer for a bulbul, which is in “Perso-Arabic poetry probably ... a nightingale,” and this confirms the allusion to and importance of the *Rubáiyát*’s sixth Stanza (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, vol. 4, 384). But its real significance is only revealed in Stanza VII which ends with “Lo! the Bird is on the wing.” As Humbert used to call Dolly “Lo,” the citation could be read as “the bird Lo is on the wing.”

Most seminal are the references to Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Nabokov “adore[d]” Proust and had in 1930 “read all [its] volumes through twice” (VNRY 354). The references to Proust’s heroine Odette are discussed in detail by Dana Dragunoiu, who concludes that “Dolly might share Odette’s remarkable capacity to squeeze through the prison bars of her cage to outlive and to outflourish her peers” (352). Albertine’s story is told in *Albertine disparue*, and Humbert invokes this title when he refers to the years of Dolly’s disappearance as “*Dolorès Disparue*” (253). Albertine’s presence in her possessive lover’s life is a kind of captivity: like Humbert, Proust’s narrator is obsessed by sexual jealousy. And like Dolly, Albertine is “planning to shake off her chains” vol. 3, 175). The narrator, who fears losing her, sees her as “such fugitive beings” to which “their own nature and our anxiety fasten wings” (vol. 3, 88). After Albertine has left, he hears a song

from Massenet's opera *Manon*: "l'oiseau qui fuit ce qu'il croit l'esclavage," which translates into "the bird that flees what it thinks is slavery." The narrator is struck by the applicability of this line to his relationship with Albertine and is "stirred so deeply that [he] began to cry" (vol. 3, 460).

5 As birds seem to emblemize Dolly's life after she has left her tormentor, it might be asked, knowing Nabokov's predilection for specificity, what kind of bird she might have turned into. A number of clues suggests that she is transformed into a blue bird. "[W]hy blue for heaven's sake," one may ask, repeating Rita's bewilderment. Rita, Humbert's new innamorata, here refers to the color blue of the hotel in Humbert's "fugitive rhymes" devoted to "Dolly's Dell." The hotel is seen through the "blood bath of trees" of the Indian summer (263). If the blood-red color of the trees hint at the miseries Dolly has endured, the blue color of the hotel behind the trees might be indicative of the peacefulness she might have found after her escape.

There is also Humbert's malevolent account of Dr. Blue's treatment of Dolly with some "serum," by suggesting that the serum comes from a "sparrow" as if the doctor wishes to germinate new sparrow life in her (242).

Yet the main reason for the prominence of the color blue might be its rich literary pedigree. Maurice Maeterlinck's play, *The Blue Bird*, may serve as a starting point. "A cluster of interrelated motifs ... indicates that Nabokov deliberately chose *The Blue Bird* as a prototype for his novel," writes Alexander Dolinin (57). Dolinin emphasizes the unattainability of Humbert's yearnings, expressed in the finale of Maeterlinck's play: when happiness nears perfection it flies away. "[T]hose [birds] which are quite blue, ... you can't catch them," writes Maeterlinck (285). When caged, Maeterlinck's dove is no longer blue, as it then "changes colour," like *Lolita's* "green love birds in a cage" (Maeterlinck 253; *Lolita* 243).

The Blue Bird had its première in Moscow in 1908, and the Russian émigré community in Berlin established a "night-club" with the same name as the title of Maeterlinck's play, for which Nabokov wrote a number of sketches (VNRY 200; 231). Two decades before the publication of Maeterlinck's play, Oscar Wilde wrote about "the Blue Bird, singing of beautiful and impossible things" (842). About a century earlier, in 1798, Marie d'Aulnoy had published her *Contes*, containing the fairy-tale "L'Oiseau bleu" (Charles Perrault's collection of fairy-tales appeared a year earlier). Marie d'Aulnoy's "Blue Bird" became a classic. Its main character, a young prince, became a bird because "it is much better to be a Blue Bird ... than

undergo the death sentence of always having what one hates before one's eyes" (qtd in Marina Warner 167). There is some evidence that this fairy-tale was known in Russia because Tchaikovsky's ballet *The Sleeping Beauty* (1889) contains a part titled "*Pas de deux de l'Oiseau Bleu*."

The ultimate source of these blue birds is probably Ovid's story about Alcyone, a young wife who turned into a bird and is seen flying "borne upon her kingfisher wings" (*Metamorphoses* 7, 401). The kingfisher's wings have a splendid blue color and Alcyone found happiness only after being turned into this bird (see *Metamorphoses* 11, 410-748).

As a blue bird Dolly cannot be tracked down by her earthbound tormentor. "In his Russian translation," writes Carl Proffer, "Nabokov changes the name of Humbert's blue car from Melmoth ... to Icarus" ("From *Otchaianie* to *Despair*," 259). The name of Icarus, who perished when flying too close to the sun, suggests that an attempt to catch "the bird Lo on the wing" would prove fatal for Humbert (see *Metamorphoses* 8, 224-230).

6 The transformations of girls into birds in the *Metamorphoses* attain completion, but Sirens are an exception. They retain a hybrid nature, as they have "the feet and feathers of birds, although they kept the faces of girls" (*Metamorphoses* 5, 553). This is also the physiognomy of their Russian sisters, the Sirins. It is from them that Nabokov took his *nom de plume* as a Russian writer. Sirins have been represented, in a variety of colours, by Russian artists since medieval times. Viktor Vastnetsov's *Sirin and Alkonost* (1896) is a more recent illustration of multicolored girl-birds. But Nabokov tends to associate his pen-name with the color blue as Gavriel Shapiro has argued (28 and 65-6). In Sergey Solomko's *Blue Bird (Bird Sirin)* (1897), the lower half of the girl consists of bluish feathers. In Konstantin's Somov's *The Blue Bird* (1918), the hybrid nature is in the title only, as the painting shows a girl, wafting in the air, clad in blue garments, much as Lolita's "*une belle dame toute en bleu*" "floating" in the air (244). There is evidence that these blue fairies occupied Nabokov's mind in 1953, when he was finishing *Lolita*, in the poem he composed in the summer of that year. In "Lines Written in Oregon," the "Mountain forests of the West" serve as a *décor* for the "Blue birds from the bluest fable" (SP 149).

7 After Dolly escapes from Humbert's grip and his account becomes chimerical, his story must allude simultaneously to what might have happened to her. Because the emblem of the blue bird is so firmly associated with Nabokov's Russian past and Russian folklore, one might expect more references to Russia. The most

perplexing one is “Zemfirian,” after Zemfira, the heroine of Alexander Pushkin’s long poem *The Gypsies*, published in 1827 (243). Humbert suggests that a “Zemfirian” vernacular is comparable to the Basque tongue which is used in *Carmen* to conceal from the Spanish authorities what is communicated. Humbert, who wrote books on English poetry and French literature, never refers to Russian literature in the chapters preceding chapter 2, 22 that contains the allusion to Pushkin. (There is one exception: the “Dostoevskian grin,” but “not all Russians love Dostoevsky as much as Americans do” commented Nabokov [70; qtd. 368].)

The reference to Zemfira offers another avian metamorphosis when Pushkin sees the stabbed girl as a “pierced” crane (*Selected Poetry*. 115). That Pushkin had Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in mind is plausible, because *The Gypsies* has a digression of approximately forty lines in which the poet laments the bitter fate of Ovid, who had to spend the last decade of his life in exile. (Nabokov cites the passage in his commentary to *Eugene Onegin* [EO, vol. 2, 59-60].)

Equally surprising, and more consequential, is the date of “November 16,” the day mentioned in the first sentence of this note, and part of the inconsistent timeframe in *Lolita*. It is the same day on which I. P. Belkin’s friend signed his letter to the supposed author of Pushkin’s *Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin*. As Stephen H. Blackwell has shown, this date cannot be aligned to the other dates in Nabokov’s novel or in Pushkin’s “*Tales*.” Blackwell also discusses Nabokov’s use of specific Pushkinian dates and times in *Pnin* and *Pale Fire*, which makes this inconsistency intentional. “In a significant way, all three novels under consideration are marked by a degree of (rather hidden) open-endedness,” Blackwell writes (417).

8 While the Pushkinian date of November 16 calls Humbert’s memoir after Dolly’s escape into question, another reference to Pushkin invites the reader into the realm of the imagination: his fairy-tale “The Dead Princess and the Seven Champions,” a retelling in verse of Grimm’s “Snow White.” The princess of Pushkin’s and Grimm’s tales is, like Dolly, the victim of a murderous step-parent. Pushkin changed Grimm’s seven dwarfs into seven “bogatyri, the warrior-champions of Russian folklore” (Antony Wood 199. Oliver Elton also uses “Champions” in his translation). After Dolly has left “Snow” and arrives in “Champion,” she appears with “white” shorts,” “white breast-kerchief” and a cap with a “white peak” as a veritable Snow White (230-31). Like Pushkin’s heroine, she has to “climb the steps” of the “stone stairs” leading up to the Champion residence (Pushkin, *Selected Poetry* 204; *Lolita* 233). Dolly’s transition to Champion brings her nearer to the culture of her creator’s homeland.

Dolly disappears in Elphinstone, in Colorado. Colorado's landscape and natural scenery had a sentimental attraction for Nabokov. "Some part of me must have been born in Colorado," he wrote to Edmund Wilson (qtd. in *VNAY* 120). In a way, such a joyful naturalization makes Dolly his compatriot, just as he would have her, in still another way, sharing his Russian past by translating *Lolita* into "the language of his birth" (*VNAY* 489). As part of her learning to act in plays, Dolly analyses "the prevailing mood of *Cherry Orchard*" (229). This is another instance of a cultural convergence between Dolly and her creator, because reading Chekhov will help her "to grasp the essentials of ... Russian life" (*LRL* 254).

9 Besides the indirect allusions to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* there is also an overt one: "Melampus" the name of Jean Farlow's boxer dog (89). Melampus is one of the many dogs of Actaeon, and the tragic end of this hunter is best known from Ovid's account. (The Latin name of the dog is retained in Mary Innes' translation of the *Metamorphoses* [79].) Having killed wild beasts with his friends, Actaeon wanders "aimlessly" into the woods, and reaches a pool where the goddess Diana is bathing (3, 176). Diana becomes infuriated that she has been seen naked, and turns Actaeon into a stag. No longer recognized by his own dogs, he is torn to pieces.

How does this story shed any light on Dolly's escape, Humbert's alleged repentance, and the many injuries Humbert inflicts upon Dolly? The myth of Actaeon can be seen as a tale of revenge because of his infringement on Diana's chastity. But Ovid stipulates that Actaeon cannot be blamed: "No crime was committed. Why punish a man for a pure mistake?" (3, 142). Other readings can be considered. The slaying of so many animals ("our spears are drenched in our quarry's blood") is called, in the final Book of the *Metamorphoses*, a "heinous crime" (3, 148; 15, 87). Diana's main concern might be her wish to prevent Actaeon from telling "the story of seeing Diana naked" and he, turned into a stag, learns that "no words followed" when he tries to express himself (3, 192; 3, 201). Or is Diana's *amour-propre*, like Humbert's, excessive?

Nabokov is not the first writer who recalls Melampus. Authors of the Elizabethan period were quite familiar with the names of some of the thirty-three dogs of Actaeon's pack. Shakespeare refers to Melampus, a dog of Spartan breed, in *Othello* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. (See Anthony Brian Taylor, esp. 216-17.) Among these alternative readings of Ovid's myth, there seems to be no obvious clue to clarify the presence of Melampus in *Lolita*. Probably the reference is made to stir the reader's general interest in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. "[E]verything in *Lolita*," writes Appel, "is constantly in the process of metamorphosis" (339). It begins with

“John Ray” who wrote the “Foreword” to the novel. His namesake is the leading 17th-century English naturalist John Ray who made “the first scientific observations” on “metamorphosis” (Mickel 5). And *Lolita* finishes with some metamorphoses as well, as will be discussed next.

10 What might be the final station of Dolly’s odyssey? Dolly as a Blue bird seems to reverse the fantastic journey the Swallowtail makes in *Speak, Memory*, crossing the Bering Strait, to end up in Colorado. This voyage started in Vyra, where the butterfly was pointed out by Nabokov’s “guiding angel” (120). (Nabokov’s Blue butterflies followed the same course.) However, Dolly’s last journey seems to imply another metamorphosis, because she might “fly to Jupiter” (280). There is a Lake Jupiter on Kodiak Island in Alaska, but doubtless the name refers to the main deity of classical mythology, the Jupiter who promised “nymphs” that their “safety is firmly assured” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1,192; 1,196). Dolly died in “Gray Star,” most likely somewhere in the firmament, where she will have her eternal seat, like Ovid’s nymph Callisto, who, after being raped, becomes a star, forever “brilliantly sparkling” (*Lolita* 4; *Metamorphoses* 1, 508). It seems that the answer to Rita’s question “Why blue for heaven’s sake?” is hidden in the phrase itself: “for heaven’s sake.”

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References and bibliography.

The abbreviations in the main text (*EO*; *Lolita*; *LRL*; *SP*; *TWS*; *VNAY* and *VNRY*) conform to those recommended in the “Abbreviations and Preferred Editions” section of the *The Nabokovian* site, which provides the full titles and bibliographical details.

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