

Aestheticism and Decadence in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

Lolita is a deceptive text that has been putting readers on trial ever since its publication in 1955 by the ill-famed Olympia Press.¹ It is a fictitious autobiography written by Humbert Humbert, whose conjoined propensities for pedophilia and highbrow aesthetics have persistently baffled critics. Humbert's erudition manifests itself in the numerous literary allusions he scatters throughout his text. They have been noticed by Nabokov's earliest critics, but little has been said about the correspondences between them and the patterns they form.² The allusions to past writers and their works bolster Humbert's intention of convincing his readers that his case is not an abnormal one, since it has precedents in the lives of renowned artists. In other words, he is trying to persuade his readers that he truly regrets having ruined Lolita's childhood, but he also wants to make them condone his immorality. The allusions serve particular authorial purposes; they posit the book as texture and intimate themes, thereby revealing the "secret points, the subliminal coordinates by means of which the book is plotted" as Nabokov expresses it in a postscript to the novel, 'On a Book Entitled *Lolita*' (p. 334).³ Nabokov, through Humbert's direct or indirect literary references, also points to the exclusively literary existence of his character.

¹ American publishers rejected the book and only the French Olympia Press was willing to publish it. Later, the author in an article entitled "*Lolita* and Mr. Girodias" declared that he had not known that most of Olympia Press's production consisted of "obscene novelettes." (Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* [New York: McGraw Hill, 1973] p. 271.) As a result, *Lolita*'s reputation was tainted for years. There were many objections on the part of the American reading public when the book was published in 1958 in the United States.

² Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1967) p. 338.

³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (London: Transworld Publishers, 1961). All references are to this edition.

Humbert's text feeds on other texts, it is a rewritten and compiled, distorted version of other literary texts.

Humbert is an elaborate stylist and after losing Lolita, he regrets that he no longer has her but "only words to play with!" (p. 35). As a foreigner whose mother tongue is not English, Humbert is playing with the language of his new homeland. He is of "mixed French and Austrian descent, with a dash of Danube in his veins" (p. 11). While he is experimenting with English words and sounding informal, archaic and erudite alternately, Nabokov is doing the same, for he declares in the postscript that *Lolita* was more like a love affair on his part with the English language (p. 334). Humbert provides readers with various pieces of information from his European past, that explain his erudition and the presence of numerous allusions in his text. As a student in Paris, he "switched to English literature, where so many poets end as pipe-smoking teachers in tweeds" (p. 18). Later, after finishing his studies, he worked as a teacher of English in France and then "started to compile that manual of French literature for English-speaking students (with comparisons drawn from English writers) which was to occupy [him] throughout the 'forties" (p. 18). The influence of this work can be faintly detected in Humbert's autobiography. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to remark that the texture (not text) of *Lolita* is very much like a "manual of French literature" for English readers "with comparisons drawn from English writers" (p. 18).

In *Lolita*, Humbert's moral decadence is fused with a taste for literary decadence. When Humbert describes the source of his passion for nymphets, he recalls his first love, Annabel Leigh, echoing Poe's 'Annabel Lee.'⁴ This reference is significant not only because Poe married a thirteen year-old girl (Virginia Clemm), or because it underlines that Lolita's, and thus Humbert's, existence is just as literary as that of Poe's Annabel, but because it serves as a link in series of references that intimate a theme. Humbert stresses that when the germs of his ruthless obsession were born, he and Annabel were co-evals: "When I was a child and she was a child, my little Annabel was no nymphet to me; I was her equal, a faunlet in my own right, on that same enchanted island of time" (p. 20). Unfortunately for him, he cannot remain a simple "faunlet," and after growing up, he becomes a veritable lecherous faun because his obsession for nymphets remains. When speaking about himself and his relationship to nymphets, he consistently sees himself as having the attributes of the pagan faun: he has "ape

⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Prose* (Moscow: Raduga, 1983) p. 55.

ears," "ape paws," "hairy hand[s]," "timid claws" and "talons."⁵ Besides these animalistic features, he is also faun-like in his desire for nymphets. But Humbert's case is not a simple one; his malady is a longing for a "more poignant bliss" which only the females that he designates "nymphets" can provide and to which the unfortunate twelve-year-old Lolita happens to belong (p. 20).

Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travellers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as "nymphets."

(pp. 18-19)

In other words, not all little girls are nymphets. Humbert's problem is that he wants to find the bliss he is seeking through a 'real' girl and therefore projects demoniac attributes onto the brash teenager, Lolita. The critic Michael Wood sees the role of the reader as having a major role in finding the Lolita to which Humbert pretends to be blind: "the 'actual' Lolita is the person we see Humbert can't see, or can see only spasmodically."⁶ Underneath her impetuous teenage vulgarity, Lolita suffers, "sobbing in the night--every night, every night--the moment [Humbert] feigned sleep" (p. 185). Humbert is deeply aware that Lolita will never be able to forget that she has been "deprived of her childhood by a maniac," and since he seems to condemn himself for what he has done to her, the only way he can try to save his soul is to apply "the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art" (p. 298). For Nabokov, the favored character is not Humbert but Lolita, the vulgar little girl of the novel with a philistine background. Brian Boyd informs us in his biography of Nabokov that "of all the thousands of characters in his work, Nabokov once said Lolita came second in his list of those he admired most as people."⁷ Humbert at one point, however, unfairly calls her a "mentally ... disgustingly conventional little girl" (p. 156). Lolita's background is trite and philistine compared to Humbert's erudition and taste. Although his cruelty is incontestable, it cannot be denied that he is blessed with an artistic insight that immediately recognizes and rejects all pseudo-intellectual and artistic commonplaces, as when he describes Lolita's mother and their family home at Ramsdale:

⁵ *Lolita*. pp. 52, 64, 59, 217.

⁶ Michael Wood, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) p. 117.

⁷ Brian Boyd, *Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991) p. 273. The first on the list of Nabokov's favorite characters was Professor Pnin in *Pnin*.

The front hall was graced with door chimes, a white-eyed wooden thingamabob of commercial Mexican origin, and that banal darling of the arty middle-class, van Gogh's 'Arlésienne' ... She [Charlotte] was, obviously, one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club, or any other deadly conventionality, but never her soul; women utterly indifferent at heart to the dozen or so possible subjects of parlour conversation, but very particular about the rules of such conversations... But there was no question of my settling there. I could not be happy in that type of household with bedraggled magazines on every chair and a kind of horrible hybridization between the comedy of so-called 'functional modern furniture' and the tragedy of decrepit rockers... (pp. 39-40)

Humbert thus combines cruelty, lechery, moral decadence and elitist views on art; and it is in the last quality that he rather resembles his creator. Although he may find the real Lolita "conventional," when he sees himself as a faun, she becomes the nymph, that is, the ideal, the beautiful, the inaccessible, all that an artist would strive to attain. When Nabokov in the postscript describes what a real work of art means to him, he emphasizes that:

a work of fiction exists only in so far as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. (p. 332)

For Humbert, this "aesthetic bliss" can be found in the 'flesh and blood' nymphet Lolita and her likes; and he confuses 'real' life with art, as a result. This is of course a paradox, since the fictitious Humbert also produces the text of *Lolita* in order to attain, like Nabokov, "aesthetic bliss ... where art ... is the norm," even though his own character may lack three of the four parenthetical qualities listed by the author. This is where the reference to Poe in the name Annabel Lee becomes the center in a series of correspondences, creating an allusive texture and providing an answer to why Humbert refers to an array of symbolist and decadent French and British artists either directly or indirectly such as Maeterlinck, Rossetti, Swinburne, Wilde and Beardsley.⁸ Several allusions are made to the precursor of French symbolism, Baudelaire, as well. Humbert does not name one of the most important ones,

⁸ There is an indirect reference made by Humbert to Swinburne's poem, *The Nympholept*, when he accuses himself of nympholepsy. Lolita's name, Dolores Haze, is also another Swinburnian name, as in the poet's *Dolores*. (Kenneth Foss, ed., *A Swinburne Anthology* [London: The Richards Press, 1955] pp. 38-39.)

Stéphane Mallarmé, however. The French symbolist poet was fascinated with Edgar Allan Poe (as Baudelaire had been) and translated some of his works, as well as the poetry of Victorian poets such as Swinburne and Tennyson into French and made a living as an English teacher, like Humbert back in France.⁹ Mallarmé also became the leading figure of the symbolist movement at whose Tuesday evening gatherings numerous contemporary French and British artists (some of them more decadent than symbolist) turned up to discuss literature. One of his literary predecessors, Edgar Allan Poe, had an enormous influence on French poetry in the second half of the 19th century, not only through his poems and tales, but also through his critical writings which were early versions of the theory of art for art's sake. The Russian decadent-symbolists came to know Poe's works from the French symbolist and decadent poets. Nabokov's favorite Russian writers, Aleksandr Blok and Andrej Belyj, also borrowed many themes such as "spiritually crippling pessimism and malaise" from their French predecessors.¹⁰ Poe is the link that ties references to French, English, and Russian literature together in *Lolita*, since, through his influence on French poetry, he became a source in turn for British and Russian poets.¹¹

Although Humbert does not directly refer to Mallarmé, his texts always hover in the background. Humbert is similar to the faun in *L'après-midi d'un faune*; his diabolic desire for the nymph matches the description of the faun's in Mallarmé's poem, and their intentions are the same: "Ces nymphes, je veux les perpétuer," the faun declares.¹² This reverberates within Humbert's words: "A great endeavor lures me on: to fix the perilous magic of nymphets" (p. 141). Mallarmé's poem shares characteristics with especially decadent poetry of the time, but writing about nymphs, satyrs and cultivating the pagan spirit appealed to other poets as well.¹³ This tendency in France (which began even earlier)

⁹ Judy Kravis, *The Prose of Mallarmé: The Evolution of Literary Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) pp. 31-34.

¹⁰ Samuel D. Cioran, *The Apocalyptic Symbolism of Andrej Belyj* (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1973) p. 23. Russian readers were first acquainted with French symbolism and decadence in 1892, when Zinaida Vengerova's article in the *Vestnik Jevropi* was published on Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud and others. (Cf. Jean Cassou, ed., *A Szimbolizmus enciklopédiája*, trans. Mária Dévai [Budapest: Corvina, 1984] p. 173.)

¹¹ This is not surprising if we remember that Nabokov's three languages were Russian, English and French.

¹² "These nymphs, I wish to immortalize them" [my translation]. István Fodor et al., eds. *Textes Littéraires Français du XIXe Siècle. I. Poésie* (Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1978) p. 428.

¹³ Marshall C. Olds, *Desire Seeking Expression: Mallarmé's 'Prose pour des Esseintes'* (Lexington, KY: French Forum Publishers, 1983) p. 50.

parallels the aesthetic movement in English literature whose first representatives were D.G. Rossetti, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde in England. Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) demonstrated a return to a hellenistic, impressionistic view of life, which his followers later developed into sensuality, a form of hedonism in life-style, the (self)-criticism of which can be found in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Aestheticism meant elitism in art, or "art for art's sake," and the decadents felt they were fulfilling a purpose by fighting against "barbarism"; mediocrity, conventionality and materialism in their quest for the Ideal.¹⁴ The decadents, in other words, extended aestheticism to the sphere of non-textual existence. There are other reasons why Mallarmé is important, if not so much to Humbert then to Nabokov. Besides the fact that the French poet translated Poe and sounded Arcadian themes, Mallarmé's commitment to art was metaphysical, whereas Wilde's for instance, remained on the aesthetic plane; he flaunted his views in a flamboyant and propagandistic way. Although Wilde's comments on art superficially seem to coincide with Nabokov's, the latter did not agree with the British representative of the art for art's sake theory:

I do not care for the slogan art for art's sake – because unfortunately such promoters of it as, for instance, Oscar Wilde and various dainty poets, were in reality rank moralists and didacticists – there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art.¹⁵

It is with Mallarmé's conception of true art rather than Oscar Wilde's that Nabokov agrees. When Mallarmé began to write *Hérodiade*, his intention was to "peindre, non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit."¹⁶ To him, it is "the art of suggestion in language [which is] ... the only way of creating an entity equal in expressiveness to that which is seen and felt."¹⁷ Nabokov, the stylist seems to agree with Mallarmé, and has Humbert vest the words of his memoir with a magic quality in an attempt to create an aesthetically ideal text that stands in opposition to the impurity of the surrounding world, an ideal text that counteracts his own moral corruption, a "refuge of art" where timelessness and immortality is awaiting the true lover of art (p. 325).

¹⁴ Pierre Brunel et al., *Histoire de la Littérature Française*, Tome 2 (Bordas, 1972) p. 539.

¹⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980) p. 33.

¹⁶ "...to paint not the thing, but the effect it produces." Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes. 1. Poésies*, eds. C. P. Barbier and C. G. Millan (Flammarion, 1983) p. 211. (my translation)

¹⁷ Kravis p. 198.

There is another pattern in the comparative literary network of which Humbert as scholar is also probably aware. Mallarmé's dramatic poem *Hérodiade* (1864) might have served as a basis for Flaubert's *Hérodias* (1877). Nabokov admired Flaubert's fiction, praising his "impersonality" and preference for the style or "form" of a work of art in *Lectures on Literature* (p. 147). In Flaubert's version of the story, Salomé is a very young girl who makes only a few appearances. It is Hérodias, the mother, who believes that she can attain her ultimate goals with her husband by scheming to have her daughter (his step-daughter and niece) noticed and desired.¹⁸ *Lolita*, on the other hand, is the inverted story of *Hérodias*, in that Humbert marries Charlotte Haze to get closer to his step-daughter, while Charlotte does all she can to keep her daughter away from Humbert (she sends her to a summer camp and decides to enroll her in a remote boarding school). It seems that the symbolists and decadents were fond of myth-making, for they returned obsessively to the Hérodias-Salomé theme in painting and music, as well (e.g. Gustave Moreau and Richard Strauss). Oscar Wilde, one of the main representatives of aestheticism and decadence in English literature, took up this popular subject, and with perhaps Flaubert's *Hérodias* and Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* in mind, transformed the story into *Salomé* (1893), a play he wrote in French. Wilde's Salomé is a demoniac *femme fatale*, who is blinded by her own selfish lust for St. John the Baptist. What the unfinished dramatic poem, the short story and the play have in common is the theme of incest. (Hérodias marries her brother-in-law, and her daughter Salomé arouses the desire of her uncle, Herod Antipas). Humbert tries unsuccessfully to act like a father to Lolita, but:

it had gradually become clear to my conventional Lolita during our singular and bestial cohabitation 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. 302)

Nabokov could not directly allude to Wilde's *Salomé*, but through the name of Beardsley, the town where Lolita and Humbert settle for hardly a year, and through the first name of one of Lolita's classmates, Aubrey McFate, the illustrator of the first edition of Wilde's play, Aubrey Beardsley joins the list of *fin de siècle* decadent artists alluded to in *Lolita*. Finally, the first name and the last appear casually together in the text as: "Aubrey Beardsley, Quelquepart Island" in

¹⁸ Gustave Flaubert, 'Hérodias' in *Trois contes* (Le livre de poche, 1972) pp. 103-149.

one of the hotel registrations signed by Clare Quilty, Humbert's rival (p. 264). The rather covert references to Wilde, Swinburne, and Aubrey Beardsley, also point to the Victorian period, when the lives of many decadent artists were looked upon with horror. Humbert is one of their belated disciples, transplanting the decadent spirit from Europe to 20th century modern America. His problem however, is that America proves to be too Victorian in matters of nympholepsy, and too conventional for his aesthetic tastes, but still capable of exerting a powerful influence over him (in the person of Lolita).

There is an even larger literary correspondence behind the name of Beardsley, which branches out to embrace mainly the British symbolist and decadent artists. Aubrey Beardsley was the art director and illustrator for four issues of *The Yellow Book*, which was published between 1894 and 1897. Arthur Symons (who attended Mallarmé's Tuesday evening sessions) and Yeats were also contributors to the magazine, together with many other prominent poets. Yeats, as another example of a symbolist poet, used history as a way of myth-making, turning to the Irish past for the subjects of his poetical dramas. It is incidental, but still worth mentioning, that the subject of Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is based on a true historical event that took place in 1798, when a general named Humbert (!) led a French expedition to Ireland, which triggered a rebellion against the British.¹⁹

The second pedophile in the novel is Gaston Godin. The posters in Gaston's room also indicate a taste for the *fin de siècle*, as well as early twentieth century English and French literature, and Russian music. His sexual preferences are subtly suggested by the pictures of "André Gide, Tchaikovsky, Norman Douglas, two other well-known English writers, Nijinsky (all thighs and fig-leaves), ... and Marcel Proust," but he prefers faunlets to adults or nymphets (p. 191). It annoys Humbert that:

he was devoid of any talent whatsoever, a mediocre teacher, a worthless scholar, a glum repulsive fat old invert, highly contemptuous of the American way of life, triumphantly ignorant of the English language – there was he in priggish New England, crooned over by the old and caressed by the young – oh, having a grand time and fooling everybody; and here was I. (p. 193)

The third pedophile in the book is a peripheral character who rises to key significance in Part Two of *Lolita*, when Lolita becomes interested in dance and

¹⁹ Cassou p. 176.

dramatics at Beardsley School. Quilty happens to be writing his play *The Enchanted Hunters* at The Enchanted Hunters hotel where Lolita and Humbert spend the night together. She will get the title role of Diana in the school performance of the same play.²⁰ Quilty is also the co-author of *The Little Nymph*, the author of fifty-two scenarios, whose work Humbert despises. He is also referred to several times as Humbert's brother, or as his Swiss cousin Trapp. When he manages to abduct Lolita, he checks her out of the hospital in Elphinstone with the pretext that he is her uncle (a continuation of the incest theme). Besides the obvious similarity in looks, Humbert is dismayed to discover from the hints Quilty drops in the hotel registers that: "his allusions were definitely highbrow. He was well-read. He knew French." (p. 263). His plays have a dreamy and symbolic atmosphere to them, and he is called the "American Maeterlinck, Maeterlinck-Schmetterling," and with this reference another symbolist work is implied (p. 317). The theme of "brothers" and "jealous revenge" trickles more dreamily and less blatantly in Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1892), which was one of the most successful plays of the 1880s. Mallarmé, who adored the theater, was also impressed with the drama.²¹ Middle-aged Golaud's tyrannical jealousy of, and passion for, the very young and innocent Mélisande leads to his killing his half-brother, Pelléas. Humbert's jealousy and murder of Quilty is similar to Golaud's. In his plays, Maeterlinck was concerned with the dark forces of Destiny, "le troisième personnage, énigmatique, invisible, mais partout présent, qu'on pourrait appeler le personnage sublime."²² Maeterlinck's preoccupation with destiny is also echoed in *Lolita* and is called McFate. There are a series of incomprehensible coincidences that Humbert blames on McFate, because he does not realize that he too is a literary character whose destiny is sealed by the author:

No matter how many times we reopen "King Lear," never shall we find the good king banging his tankard in high revelry, all woes forgotten, at a jolly reunion, with all three daughters and their lapdogs. Never will Emma rally, revived by the sympathetic salts of Flaubert's father's timely tear. Whatever evolution this or that popular character has gone

²⁰ *The Enchanted Hunter* is the English title K. M. Weber's opera, *Der Freischütz*, which is referred to in Chapter Three of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*.

²¹ Kravis p. 125.

²² "...the third character, enigmatic, invisible, but always present, who could be called the sublime character" (Maeterlinck, quoted in Brunel p. 558), my translation.

through between the book covers, his fate is fixed in our minds... Thus X will never compose the immortal music that would clash with the second-rate symphonies he has accustomed us to. Y will never commit murder. (p. 279)

It is therefore surprising when Humbert finally murders Quilty. He inflicts punishment on the playwright for abducting and debauching Lolita (the same crimes Humbert is guilty of); for being an impotent voyeur of nymphets, and for not having loved her. The character who has to this point played a marginal role appears fully-fledged in the ghastly murder scene Humbert has no qualms about committing, although he insists being “opposed to capital punishment” (p. 325). Invisible McFate is an agent that directs Humbert to his predestined Fate and McFate in turn may be the devilish agent of Clare Quilty, which means that Humbert could in fact be Quilty’s (the American Maeterlinck’s) creation in the prose version of his *The Little Nymph*, alias *Lolita*. (The co-author of *The Little Nymph*, as Humbert finds out from an encyclopaedia, is Vivian Darkbloom, which is an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov). This could be the reason why once Humbert is faced with Quilty, intending to kill him, there is a nightmarish quality to the whole scene, in parody of the dream-like, fatalistic world of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. At the beginning of *Lolita*, Humbert describes one of his dreams:

Sometimes I attempted to kill in my dreams. But do you know what happens? For instance, I hold a gun. For instance, I aim at a bland, quietly interested enemy. Oh, I press the trigger all right, but one bullet after another feebly drops on the floor from the sheepish muzzle. In those dreams, my only thought is to conceal the fiasco from my foe, who is slowly growing annoyed. (p. 51)

The description of this dream is rather similar to the nightmarish slow motion slaughter of Quilty during which, at one point, Humbert feels that “far from killing him I was injecting spurts of energy into the poor fellow, as if the bullets had been capsules wherein a heady elixir danced” (p. 319). At times the slow motion is accelerated, but the dream-like quality of the action is sustained:

with another abrupt movement Clare the Impredictable sat down before the piano and played several atrociously vigorous, fundamentally hysterical, plangent chords, his jowls quivering, his spread hands tensely plunging, and his nostrils emitting the soundtrack snorts which had been absent from our fight. Still singing those impossible sonorities, he made a futile attempt to open with his foot a kind of seaman’s chest near the piano. My next bullet caught him somewhere on the side, and he rose

from his chair higher and higher, like old, grey, mad Nijinski, like Old Faithful, like some nightmare of mine to a phenomenal altitude. (p. 318)

Curiously enough, music is also present in *Lolita* through the musical quality of the words, Humbert's puns, the piano lessons Humbert wants Lolita to attend, and in the musical snatches described in the text. He sings a popular tune about Carmen to Lolita who, just like any ordinary teenager likes to listen to the radio (p. 65). He takes her to concerts and tries to offer her a thorough musical education. She learns to dance at the school in Beardsley, where the curriculum is centered on the "four D's: Dramatics, Dance, Debating and Dating" (p. 186). Music and dance have to be present in the book to a certain extent to complete the references to the decadent-symbolist artists.²³ They believed in the musical, magic quality of the words, "de la musique avant toute chose..." as Verlaine expressed in 'Art poétique.' Impressionist composers however, attempted to combine all the arts in their music - poetry, painting, dance - through developing implications in the subjects of famous poets of the symbolist tradition.²⁴ A prominent example of such a composer was Claude Debussy who in 1894 wrote *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*. (In the most famous staging of this tone poem, the choreography was devised by Nijinsky who also took the part of the faun). Later in 1902, Debussy also composed *Pelléas et Mélisande*, based on Maeterlinck's play.²⁵

The diabolic-incestuous themes of Salomé (Hérodiades); the faun's powerful passion for the inaccessible nymphs in Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*; the jealous passion of Goleaud for Mélisande; the brotherly relationship between Pelléas and Goleaud in Maeterlinck's play, appear throughout in the text of *Lolita* and point to some of the major subjects that preoccupied symbolist and decadent artists at the turn of the century, while also marking some of the "subliminal points" the author encouraged his readers to enjoy in the postscript, but which readers must seek for themselves to find.

Like many decadent artists (Wilde, Pater, Swinburne, Verlaine and Huysmans), Humbert also seeks forgiveness for his sins in Catholicism, but proves to be unsuccessful in his efforts:

²³ See the references to Nijinsky in the passage quoted above. Symbolist painting is also present through the reference to Whistler's *Mother* (*Lolita* p. 194), and Humbert gives as a birthday present to Lolita the *History of Modern American Painting* (p. 210).

²⁴ Paul Verlaine, 'Art Poétique' in Fodor p. 421.

²⁵ József Újfalussy, *Debussy* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1959) pp. 283-4.

A couple of years before, under the guidance of an intelligent French-speaking confessor, to whom in a moment of metaphysical curiosity, I had turned over a Protestant's drab atheism for an old-fashioned popish cure, I had hoped to deduce from my sense of sin the existence of a Supreme Being... Alas I was unable to transcend the simple human fact that whatever spiritual solace I might find, ... nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted upon her. (p. 298)

All these "correspondences" (to use a Baudelairean term) are implicit in the pages of *Lolita* where Humbert is made the most outrageous of all the decadents. When Nabokov remarks in the postscript that "there are many things besides nymphets, in which I disagree with [Humbert]" (p. 333), perhaps he might also mean that Humbert, like many of the decadent artists, could not distinguish moral decadence from artistic decadence, immorality from aesthetic permanence. Aestheticism as a life-style was only an exterior manifestation of the quest for Beauty, and this is perhaps one reason why Humbert persistently but unobtrusively, attempts to defend his moral decadence with literary allusions. He still does not fully realize his error when he refers to a quotation from an "old poet": "The moral sense in mortals is the duty / We have to pay on mortal sense of beauty" (p. 298). *Lolita* is an exploration into the difference between immorality in life and immortality in art. Humbert is sure that he is mortal, unaware that he is only an immoral literary figure who strives to immortalize his Lolita through his memoir. By doing this, he does manage to transcend time and mortality. It is in art that he realizes his desire: "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. 325).