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Gendered Melancholy in *Lolita*: Reading into Humbert Humbert's Dolorous Haze

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Thesis

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English Literature

Gendered Melancholy in *Lolita*: Reading into Humbert Humbert's Dolorous Haze

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Abstract

This paper argues that in *Lolita*, the narrator Humbert Humbert uses the subject-position of the great male melancholic in order to, at the discursive level, (re)perform violent acts of appropriation against Dolly's body, subjectivity and representation. Humbert attempts to translate the loss and waste which he brings about into perverse sorts of gain; these gains relate to processes such as catharsis, compensation, redemption, regeneration, a sense of exceptionality, and aesthetic/erotic/artistic enjoyment. The project has an introduction and two sections. The introduction demonstrates how Humbert enters into the male melancholic subject-position in order to perform his sorrow in a way that threatens to suppress the suffering of others. The first section addresses the manifestations of this gendered form of melancholia in *Lolita*. It aims to situate and define "gendered melancholy" by tracing a historical sketch of the development of this tradition and then showing how Humbert participates in it. The second section addresses the motivations of this gendered form of melancholia in *Lolita*. It aims to demonstrate how a masculine form of anxiety undergirds both Humbert's art and his sense of melancholia, which I then argue is coextensive with his problematic appropriation and suppression of Dolly's representation.

Melancholy: (2) A kind of madness, in which the mind is always fixed on one object.

- *Samuel Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language*

Madness in great ones must not unwatched go.

- *Claudius (Hamlet 3.1.203)*

And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers.

- *Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History"*

Introduction

“Few will be able to guess how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate Carthage.” This line from Gustave Flaubert’s historical novel *Salammbô* (1862) is put to exquisite use by German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin in an essay entitled “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940). In this piece, Benjamin outlines a distinction between two forms of historiography, which he refers to as “historicism” and “historical materialism.” Benjamin rejects the practice of historicism and characterizes it as a suppressive discipline—a history told by the victors. He suggests that it relies on the myth that “The truth will not run away from us,” and culminates in a “universal” history that claims to reveal “the eternal image of the past” (262). Historicists, he argues, in their quest for the eternal image of the past, often aspire to relive a lost era of glory—an impulse which leads them to “blot out everything they know about the later course of history” (256). Benjamin links Flaubert’s heroically despairing quip about “how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate Carthage” with the historicist desire to resurrect an idealized past that effaces the toil, suffering and injustice upon which prosperity is often built. This putatively noble sadness is described by Benjamin as a “process of empathy whose origin is the indolence of heart, *acedia*, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly” (256). The assertion that Benjamin makes about this delusory sense of sorrow is worth quoting at length: “The nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the ruler” (256).

Benjamin's observation about historiography seems to capture the spirit of the literary analysis that follows—which is an interrogation of how in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), narrator Humbert Humbert channels his “noble” sadness and uses the idiom of melancholia to resuscitate an idealized past, efface the suffering and sorrow of the people he harms, and demand the empathy of his audience. To the extent that he succeeds in this endeavor, I would suggest that he is a sinister sort of victor—of the type that Benjamin refers to when he claims, “Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate” (256). Benjamin claims that “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (255); this comment refers to the historicist attempt to blot out the suffering and toil of others in the stories they tell of the past.

Buried in the second page of the novel's foreword is the fact that “Mrs. ‘Richard F. Schiller’ died in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl, on Christmas Day 1952, in Gray Star, a settlement in the remotest Northwest” (Nabokov 4). The author essentially signs his name next to the inclusion of this detail—“Vivian Darkbloom” is the next character mentioned in this “where are they now” list. Here Nabokov draws attention to the fact that *Lolita* is a piece of fiction that he has written, a game he has played for his own aesthetic bliss. It is true that the ludic and parodic style of *Lolita* should be kept in mind. But it is also true that the *rules* of the fictions we write and the games that we play are not privately determined in their entirety—these rules come to us from a world that is charged with political and ethical stakes. The muffled, ethereal description of the premature deaths of Dolly and her child set the tone for what Humbert does in the pages that follow—that is, obfuscate and appropriate the representation of Dolly's body and subjectivity in order to express *his* sorrow and remorse. In

doing this, Humbert converts the loss that Dolly experienced at his hands into a perverse sort of gain; these gains relate to his personal experience of processes such as catharsis, compensation, redemption, regeneration, a sense of exceptionality, and aesthetic/erotic/artistic enjoyment. Humbert's use of the representation of Dolly for these ends seems to pair with Benjamin's comment about how "*even the dead*" are not safe from the victorious. The analysis that follows will try to show how a masculine "idiom of melancholia"—a discursive practice that privileges the expression of sorrow for certain subject-positions—is one of Humbert's main tools for accomplishing this violent act of appropriation against Dolly at the level of representation.

The *Mise-en-scène* of Humbert's "Infinite Melancholy"

A glimpse into the violence and gender disparities that subtend the idiom of melancholia is provided early in the novel when Humbert refers to himself as "an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy" (Nabokov 17). The phrase contains an allusion to Act 5 of *Hamlet*; the wording of Humbert's reference to melancholia recalls a comment that Hamlet makes before interrupting Ophelia's funeral. In this scene, after the gravedigger unearths a skull and tells the prince that it belonged to Yorick, the late court jester, Hamlet takes the skull and exclaims, "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio—a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times and now how abhorred in my imagination it is!" (*Hamlet* 5.1. 190-4). In both texts, the modifier "infinite" refers to breadth and depth of imagination—an inexhaustible ability to express and create oneself. There seems to be something about the way this scene in *Hamlet* unfolds that parallels the

exhaustive and imposing quality of Humbert's narrative about his violent negation of a young girl.

Before learning that the grave is dug for Ophelia—Hamlet's spurned potential lover whose "wicked deed" deprived her of "most ingenious sense"—the melancholy Dane makes of this burial an occasion for eloquent discourse upon the inevitability of death for all mortal beings, even for supposedly great men like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. Referring to their "noble dust," the prince laments, "O, that the earth which kept the world in awe / Should patch a wall t'expel the winter's flaw!" (*Hamlet* 5.1. 222-3). After learning that the funeral is for Ophelia and watching her brother Laertes sorrowfully leap into the grave, Hamlet steps forth from concealment and exclaims, "What is he whose grief / Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow / conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand / like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I, / Hamlet the Dane" (*Hamlet* 5.1. 267-71). Hamlet claims that forty thousand brothers could not match his love for Ophelia as he launches a dramatic provocation against Laertes:

'Swounds, show me what thou'lt do:

Woo't weep? woo't fight? woo't fast? woo't tear thyself?

Woo't drink up eisel? eat a crocodile?

I'll do't. Dost thou come here to whine?

To outface me with leaping in her grave?

Be buried quick with her, and so will I:

And, if thou prate of mountains, let them throw

Millions of acres on us, till our ground,

Singeing his pate against the burning zone,
 Make Ossa like a wart! Nay, an thou'lt mouth,
 I'll rant as well as thou. (*Hamlet* 5.1. 290-301)

Hamlet's behavior in this scene offers an illustrative glimpse into the gendered form of melancholia that this analysis locates in *Lolita*; this melancholia involves both a preoccupation with "men of greatness" and an insinuation of oneself into the foreground of a scene in order to (often aggressively) express and perform personal sorrow in a way that threatens to wrest attention away from the suffering of others. In this scene, Hamlet dramatically and belligerently interrupts the funeral for a deceased young girl whom he claims to love and demands that the expression of *his* sorrow be the central focus of the ceremony; he makes of Ophelia's death an occasion to perform around, on top of, and inside of her grave. Humbert, I will argue, does something very similar in his narrative account of his experience with Dolly.

While the comparison is far from perfect, Hamlet and Humbert overlap in some important ways in terms of their situations and behavior. In both texts, something is rotten for the loquacious male protagonists: they view themselves as having been "usurped" by a challenger and "deprived" of someone or something they love. Hamlet has lost his father at the hands of Claudius while Humbert has lost Lolita at the hands of Clare Quilty. These deprivations have ruined their worlds and plunged them into deep states of melancholy. In both texts, the reader comes to the protagonist at a time when the loss has already occurred; the audience watches as the male heroes work through their sorrow and navigate a world that they now find to be lacking. This process of "working through" involves *both* the expression and display of

sorrow *and* the performance of actions that aim to redeem their supposedly fallen worlds.¹ In both texts, the ability to speak and to act in order to work through sorrow is unevenly distributed along the axis of gender.

It is important to attend to what these florid displays of sorrow and heroically redemptive gestures performed by male protagonists threaten to drown out and obscure—the suffering and losses experienced by female characters. In her reading of *Hamlet* in *The Gendering of Melancholia*, Juliana Schiesari claims that while the gloomy prince “continually desires the attentive gaze of others,” the women in the play—Gertrude and Ophelia—are the “persistent objects of his aggressivity and derision” (10). Schiesari notes the gendered asymmetry that Hamlet’s often-overlooked misogyny helps to establish with respect to *whose* suffering and sorrow gets to be expressed and judged as valuable:

Spurned and ridiculed, Gertrude and Ophelia lose all, even their lives. Yet it is the question of Hamlet’s sense of lack that makes Shakespeare’s tragedy so compelling for the male subjectivity: Hamlet underscores the possibility for men to display their loss, thus encoding a gendered bias within the melancholic syndrome. Concomitantly, the women’s losses are delegitimated or made to seem insignificant by men’s melancholic display of loss. (10)

¹ For example, when Hamlet advances into the foreground of Ophelia’s funeral, it is difficult to determine what exactly is going on—to what extent is he expressing and displaying genuine distress and to what extent is he heroically returning from his close shave with death in order to mount another challenge against Claudius? If one reads Hamlet coming back to Elsinore as a voluntary return to the “mousetrap” in order to seek refuge from a supposedly debased world through his own heroic performance and death, might one say the same thing about Humbert? He doesn’t flee very far after murdering his rival and even drives on the wrong side of the road to assure his speedy incarceration—where in the “tombal seclusion” of his cell he composes a memoir that aims to “save his soul” (310) and redeem his experience with Dolly. In both cases, a gesture which aims to express sorrow and/or redeem a supposedly belated existence *simultaneously* suppresses and obscures the suffering of a young girl whom they have harmed.

Schiesari analyzes the motivations and positioning of this behavior—typically exhibited by male subjects—that seeks to “talk over” or perform around the losses of (typically female) others in a Hamlet-like fashion that draws attention to themselves; she claims that the performative male melancholic “refocuses attention not on the lost object but on the loss, on the ‘what’ of the lost object, whose thingness points back to the subject of the loss (not the ‘whom’ that is lost in mourning but the ‘who’ that presents himself as losing in melancholia)” (42-3).

My reading of *Lolita* attends to the phenomena that Schiesari identifies in order to show how Humbert harnesses this privileged male melancholic subject position in order to display his loss in a way that calls attention to his own sorrow while at the same time delegitimizing the losses of the female characters he harms. As Benjamin claims, “Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate” (256). My analysis asks to what extent is Humbert’s “infinitely melancholic” narrative a victorious emergence or a Hamlet-like performance around the body of a negated young girl whose suffering is not allowed to speak or be heard.

Foucault on Confession

It is important to remember that Humbert views his narrative as a confession—“The Confession of a White Widowed Male”—as opposed to say a dirge, requiem or obituary; this choice highlights the way in which Humbert’s story focuses on the “‘who’ that presents himself as losing in melancholia,” as opposed to the “‘whom’ that is lost in mourning” (Schiesari 42-3). In a lecture on the Christian “hermeneutic of the self,” Michel Foucault analyzes the penitent act of self-renunciation and identifies two seemingly paradoxical goals: a revelation and a

sacrificial destruction of the self. He discusses two forms of this gesture in the early and late Christian traditions: *exomologesis* or “publication of the self” and *exagoreusis* or “verbalization of the self” (214, 220). He characterizes this act of self-publication—which often involved physically punishing one’s body—as a “theatrical representation of the sinner willing his own death” (214). It was a way for the sinner to “express his will to get free from this world, to get rid of his own body, to destroy his own flesh, and get access to a new spiritual life” (214). Ultimately, he describes these penitent acts of self-publication as “the dramatic manifestation of the renunciation to oneself” (214). The second practice of permanent, exhaustive self-verbalization “brings to the external light the deep movement of the thought, it leads also and by the same process the human soul from the reign of Satan to the law of God” (220). He describes this tireless investigation and articulation of one’s thoughts and desires as a “movement toward God,” a “renunciation to Satan, and a renunciation to oneself. Verbalization is a self-sacrifice” (220). Foucault insists that both of these gestures have a close link with the idea of martyrdom or preferring to die rather than abandon one’s faith; he claims that a lapsed sinner “will be reinstated only if in his turn he exposes himself voluntarily to a sort of martyrdom to which all will be witnesses, and which is penance, or penance as *exomologesis*” (215). Foucault offers a neat summary of the relationship between the *surrendering* of the self involved in “publication” and the *investigation* of the self involved in “verbalization”: “We have to sacrifice the self in order to discover the truth about ourselves, and we have to discover the truth about ourselves in order to sacrifice ourselves” (221).

Much of Foucault’s analysis can be applied to a reading of Humbert’s confessional narrative. Humbert’s murder of his own double, Clare Quilty, could be read as parody of self-

renunciation. He projects all of what he denounces in himself onto this figure—which is essentially his own perversion without a romanticized façade—and construes killing Quilty as an act of atonement. Also, Humbert is clearly invested in the idea of penance as self-publication and self-verbalization. His theatrical presentation/renunciation of himself seeks to perform a movement away from his debased double at the same time that it seeks to move toward an ideal—what Foucault characterizes as a destruction of the self in order to gain access to a new spiritual life and a renunciation of Satan in a movement toward God. Humbert describes his art as an attempt to “save his soul” and as the “only immortality” he and Lolita may share (310-1). Lastly, Humbert aims to style himself as a sort of martyr: the last sentence of his first chapter reads, “Look at this tangle of thorns” (9). Alfred Appel, the editor of *The Annotated Lolita*, glosses this line by calling Humbert a “penitent, confessor, and martyr to love” (334). I am more suspicious of Humbert’s confessional art.

Near the end of the narrative, Humbert describes visiting a Catholic priest in order to find spiritual solace and perhaps confess his crimes. He claims that the visit failed and that he would find no comfort as long as Dolly remembered the “foul lust” he inflicted upon her (283). He then claims, “Unless it can be proven to me . . . that in the infinite run it does not matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac, unless this can be proven (and if it can, then life is a joke), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art” (283). Like the confessional act that it is juxtaposed with in this sequence, Humbert’s melancholy art can be read as a self-centered gesture—a local palliative for *his* misery. The act of writing allows

Humbert to deny the notion that his experience with Dolly might not matter “a jot.”² With these and other expressions of remorse, Humbert performs a penitent act of self-renunciation at the same time that he writes a sense of *anagnorisis* or recognition into his art. Both gestures seek to salvage something from the waste he created by rising to a level of higher insight and beauty. But again, these are very local efforts. While melancholy art helps Humbert to defy his localized anxiety over his sense that life (i.e. his experience with Dolly) might be a purposeless joke, for Dolly, the fact remains that “this world was just one gag after another,” and that, “if somebody wrote up her life nobody would ever believe it” (275).

Discussing Humbert’s penitential utterances in her introduction to *Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita: a Casebook*, Ellen Pifer claims, “The remorse he expresses near the end of the story is only the belated articulation of a theme—the haunting threnody of a child’s thwarted life and broken future—that sounds throughout the novel” (9). Her comment reveals the way in which Humbert is able to both suppress Dolly’s suffering throughout most of the narrative and perform penitential acts of self-renunciation. These acts serve as a local palliative for his misery because they allow for him to reject a side of himself that he claims to revile; they also allow for both him and his melancholy art to rise to a level of higher insight—a process that recalls Foucault’s idea about how penance as self-verbalization lets the sinner renounce Satan in a movement toward God. In addition, the confessional act lets Humbert heroically style himself as a martyr—someone who would rather die in jail than betray his faith to the idealization he worships. But it is important to attend to *who* in this narrative is allowed access to melancholia,

² Interestingly, Hamlet uses a similar phrase in the gravedigger sequence. After he asks Horatio if the “noble dust” of Alexander might end up “stopping a bunghole,” and Horatio replies, “’Twere to consider too curiously to consider / so,” Hamlet retorts, “No, faith, not a jot . . .” (*Hamlet* 5.1. 210-214). I would also mention the likely pun on “jot” in Humbert’s expression because it aims to tether *his writing* about the experience to something like the event’s overall or cosmic significance (or lack thereof).

to self-publication and verbalization, to *catharsis* and *anagnorisis*, to martyrdom and redemption, and to reflect on why that might be the case.

This analysis notes the ways in which Humbert's inexhaustible, infinitely melancholic acts of self-publication and self-verbalization threaten to drown out, obscure, and perform atop the suffering and sorrow of the young girl whose life he wrecked and whose broken future—despite the narrator's suppressive intentions—sound a haunting threnody throughout the narrative. The argument is divided into two sections: first is an investigation of the manifestations of Humbert's gendered melancholia, followed by a theorization of the motivations that subtend this gendered representative practice.³

³ The second section begins on p. 47.

I. Manifestations of Humbert's Gendered Melancholy

In her introduction to *The Nature of Melancholy*—a compendium of texts that traces the cultural history of this mood state from Aristotle to Kristeva—Jennifer Radden notes how those who “attempt to define and circumscribe in the long tradition of writing about melancholy seem at once convinced of the importance and centrality of the human category which is their subject matter, while doubtful they can recognize or capture its full span” (9). Radden argues for the importance of a careful reading of the long literature on melancholy, melancholic states, and depression due to “interpretative disagreement over issues as fundamental as whether melancholy was one thing or many, and whether melancholia and depression are the same thing; and because melancholy and depression give evidence of being shaped or ‘constructed’ by pervasive cultural assumptions” (4). Thus, due to its ambiguous and culturally-shaped definition, in a discussion of melancholy it is especially crucial to clarify what is meant by the term.

Radden’s analysis demonstrates how before the emergence of modern psychology and psychiatry at the end of the nineteenth century, melancholy was a term that described a variety of different things: “fleeting moods, mental disorders ranging from severe to very mild, normal

reactions, and long-term character traits” (4). Distinct and incompatible senses of melancholy coexisted for a long stretch of human history. Radden identifies four major themes that recur in the literature her text surveys, which she offers as a loose definition or characterization of the condition: the term’s inherently broad range of meanings; “fear and sadness without cause” as a central tenet of this subjectivity; an association with the category of “genius” and creative energy; and finally, a recurring link with states of idleness (18). Radden’s third theme—the link between melancholy, genius and creative energy—is particularly significant with respect to *Lolita*. In order to demonstrate how this type of melancholia manifests in the novel, it will be helpful to provide a brief historical sketch that aims to track both the development of the “great male melancholic” trope and the gender divisions that subtend this development. Before doing so, it is necessary to make one observation about the type of melancholia present in Nabokov’s novel and the gender politics that surround this presence.

It should be noted that the form of melancholy my analysis locates in *Lolita* has very little to do with clinical depression in its current medical or even cultural sense. Rather, Humbert’s melancholia is more like a representational mode; it relates to both a subject-position that he occupies and an idiom in which he speaks. As a discursive practice, it is coextensive with the politically-charged arrangements that govern the rules of communication and expression: questions about who gets to speak and who gets to be heard.

In his introduction to *Affective Mapping*, Jonathon Flatley claims that not all melancholias are depressing; he focuses on “non- or antidepressive melancholias”: “If by melancholia we mean an emotional attachment to something or someone lost, such dwelling on loss need not produce depression, that combination of incommunicable sorrow and isolating

grief that results in the loss of interest in other persons, one's own actions, and often life itself" (1). His analysis deals with a type of melancholia that is "the opposite of depressing" insofar as it functions as "the very mechanism through which one may be interested in the world" (1). He characterizes this tension between depressive and antidepressive melancholias as "a dialectic between emotional withdrawal and its apparent opposite, the most intense of exceptional devotion of affective energy" (1).

Flatley's notion of a melancholia that involves an "intense devotion of affective energy" feels like the right one to keep in mind in the context of *Lolita*. At the same time, it is important to emphasize the political stakes of an "antidepressive melancholia." As will be shown, access to this "mechanism through which one may be interested in the world" is far from evenly distributed. The terms and stakes of the dialectic Flatley identifies between "emotional withdrawal" and the "exceptional devotion of affective energy" are governed by tensions that involve who can express their sorrow and distress, whose expressions are recognized as legitimate or valuable, and who must be silenced in order for these expressions to be heard.

Melancholy as "Disease of Heroes"

In classical writings of Western antiquity, "melancholy", *melaina-kole*, refers to any disease resulting from an imbalance of black bile; this definition comes from the ancient humoral theory of medicine described by writers such as Hippocrates, Galen and Avicenna. Here, bodily diseases such as epilepsy and apoplexy were said to be caused by the ratio of black bile to the other three bodily humors (i.e. phlegm, choler and blood). Schiesari notes how Hippocratic writings on melancholy concerned *physiological* imbalances among bodily fluids

which occasioned certain affective expressions in afflicted individuals: “Melancholia was associated with fear, restlessness, sorrow, lethargy, and a general moroseness of the mind and spirit” (97). Developing this tradition, second century CE Greek physician Galen of Pergamon “systematized and revised the humoral theory of physiological harmony into the fourfold schema of *psychological* complexions, whereby each person’s character was determined by the dominance of one of the humors over the others” (Schiesari 97). In this altered rubric, black bile was said to causally determine the order and arrangement of a variety of behavioral phenomena: “long-term tendencies in psychologically well-adjusted individuals, character traits in disturbed individuals, episodic but normal reactions to stressful circumstances and florid mental disorder” (Radden 9). With the synthesis of Hippocratic and Galenic traditions, “medical writers began to conceive of the atrabilious person as both physically and psychologically disturbed by a variety of (often contradictory) symptoms including sleepfulness, mania, irascibility, excessive lust, and impotence, but especially fear and depression” (Schiesari 98). Thus, from a purely physiological category, “the humors evolved into a complex system of character and mental types, with melancholia as the most dramatically pathological and negative type” (Schiesari 98).

Flatley notes how the humoral tradition recognized two distinct types of melancholic disease—related to either temporary or chronic excess of black bile; this distinction, he claims, “created the space for the connection between melancholia and genius to emerge. . . . The temperamental melancholic could have a moderate amount of black bile, enough to create a susceptibility to melancholic illness, but also enough to encourage a certain, somewhat mysterious capacity for great achievement” (35). Reiterating the seminal work of Raymond

Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl —*Saturn and Melancholy* (1964)—Flatley claims that it was the latter, temperamental type of melancholy that was influentially linked to the “man of extraordinary ability” in the works of Plato and Aristotle, which inaugurated the historical development of the link between these two categories (35).

Klibansky et al. demonstrate that the Platonic notion of creative frenzy or mania articulated by Socrates in the *Phaedrus* (360 BCE), while importantly linked to Attic Tragedy, was also facilitated by the “right, moderate amount of black bile” (Flatley 35). In Plato’s dialogue, Socrates suggests that “the best things we have come from madness, when it is given as a gift from the god” (*Phaedrus* 244A). Socrates goes on to discourse upon the various types of madness:

Third comes the kind of madness that is possession by the muses, which takes a tender virgin soul and awakens it to a Bacchic frenzy of songs and poetry that glorifies the achievements of the past and teaches them to future generations. If anyone comes to the gates of poetry and expects to become an adequate poet by acquiring expert knowledge of the subject without the Muses’ madness, he will fail, and his self-controlled verses will be eclipsed by the poetry of men who have been driven out of their minds. (*Phaedrus* 245A)

This “expert knowledge,” or *technê*, is an important term that refers to “skill,” “craft,” or “art.” The passage sets up an important link between “madness” and the creative achievement of great men which Aristotle developed in an influential discussion included in *Problems* (ca. 2nd Century BCE) that extends this notion of “madness” to the condition of melancholy explicitly.

The pivotal passage on melancholy from Aristotle's *Problems* xxx, 1, reads, "Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry or the arts are melancholic, and some to such an extent that they are infected by the diseases arising from black bile, as the story of Heracles among the heroes tells?" (qtd. in Radden 57).⁴ This remark sets the stage for a specific path in the term's cultural development. In his book entitled *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, Giorgio Agamben claims that "The answer Aristotle gave to his own question marks the point of departure of a dialectical process in the course of which the doctrine of genius came to be joined indissolubly to that of the melancholic humor" (12). Of this development, Radden suggests that "From enabling agent, for example, melancholy becomes the noxious side effect of creativity and intellectual prowess—'spleen'" (12). Likewise, Schiesari claims that "In this passage, Aristotle frames melancholia as a condition of greatness, an elite affliction, in those for whom black bile 'naturally' predominates and as a diseased condition for those not so blessed" (102). She goes on to note how "Black bile may be just a temporary disturbance for those people who fall ill of this disease, but it becomes the determining influence on the character in 'those with whom this temperament exists by nature'" (103).⁵

⁴ Radden's preface to this excerpt notes how in introducing examples of great melancholic men, the author "alludes to the connection derived from Plato between inspiration and the 'sacred disease' of epilepsy (epilepsy is, after all, one of [Plato's] forms of melancholy)" (56). Interestingly, consider this idea next to one of Appel's glosses on *Lolita*: "Nympholepsy, H.H.'s malady (hence, 'nympholept' [p. 19]), is a species of demoniac enthusiasm supposed to seize one bewitched by a nymph; a frenzy of emotion, as for some unattainable ideal" (Nabokov 339). As will be discussed below, "nympholepsy" is an important component of Humbert's claim to both artistic and overall exceptionality.

⁵ Schiesari's analysis is attentive to the type of person in whom this form of melancholy tends to manifest itself: "if Aristotle does not yet encode the perils of melancholia in terms of the feminine, his description of it does suggest a masculine prerogative, the specifically *androcentric* privilege of 'all uncommon males' [*pantes perittois andres*]. Indeed, Aristotle's choice of eminent melancholics seems to bear out this gendering of melancholia: Heracles, Lysander the Syracusan, Ajax, Bellerophon, Empedocles . . . As much later in Freud, the only mention of a female

During the European Middle Ages, the general understanding of melancholy experienced an important shift. Flatley notes that, “Within the medieval Christian worldview the sense of dejection and withdrawal of interest that had characterized melancholia became a sin . . . potentially the most offensive of sins, as it indicated a rejection of the glory and presence of God, a failure to see God’s presence in the world” (35). This sin was termed *acedia*, what we now refer to as “sloth” in a modified sense. Writing on the medieval understanding of this mood state, Agamben shows how, according to Aquinas, sloth was regarded as a kind of sorrow, “a sadness with regard to the essential spiritual good of man, that is, to the particular spiritual dignity that had been conferred upon him by God” (5). Agamben specifies the nature of this sense of desperation in order to demonstrate its association with a type of virtue or greatness:

What afflicts the slothful is not, therefore, the awareness of an evil, but, on the contrary, the contemplation of the greatest good: *acedia* is precisely the vertiginous and frightful withdraw (*recessus*) when faced with the task implied by the place of man before god. Hence, that is, insofar as sloth is the horrified flight before that which cannot be avoided in any way, *acedia* is a mortal evil; it is, indeed, the mortal malady par excellence. (6)

Due to this link with a “contemplation of the greatest good,” *acedia* was not in fact regarded as unequivocally negative; depending on the person, this condition might conversely be construed as a sort of “saving sorrow” wherein the afflicted subject “seeks always that for which it is

melancholic is not to a *named* woman but to a generic category, the Sibyls, who exemplify the ‘madness or frenzy’ brought about by over-heating of black bile” (104-5). She later comments that her extensive reading of the gender politics of Aristotle’s text is not an attempt to demonstrate the author’s misogyny—which should be of no surprise—but to “unpack the far-reaching influence of this essay on the crystallization of an affective paradigm, the melancholic genius, that at first glance would not seem to be the effect of an en-gendering discursive practice” (105-6).

ardently thirsty,” and as long as they are deprived of it, anxiously go after it “with howls and laments” (Agamben 7). This ambiguous medieval understanding was eventually absorbed into a reworked version of melancholy that developed during the Renaissance.

Discussing the next transition in the term’s cultural development, Agamben claims “It is not easy to discern the precise moment when the moral doctrine of [*acedia*] emerged from the cloister to join ranks with the ancient medical syndrome of the black-biled temperament” (13). Flatley observes how the Renaissance writers who returned to Aristotle and other Greek texts, “rescued melancholics from hell, transforming them into geniuses” (36). The key figure in this rehabilitation of melancholy is Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino: “[He] argued that melancholy was the necessary temperament of thinkers and philosophers who are inclined to think and brood over things that are impossible and difficult and absent. His text was tremendously influential and signaled a subsequent interest in and positive valuation of melancholy in various forms” (Flatley 36). Out of the rehabilitation Ficino inaugurated came works like Milton’s *Il Penseroso*, which celebrates the pleasures of melancholy. Also implicated in this response is the figure of Hamlet, the archetypical melancholic hero who “suffers a debilitating affliction but is all the more beguiling, complex and attractive for it” (Flatley 36). Flatley claims that the Jacobean form of melancholy became “a kind of fashion, a sign of glamour, a pose one might take on” (36). He notes how after a brief decline, the Renaissance interest in the relationship between melancholy and genius was again “revived in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in British and German Romanticism in classic texts such as Keats’s ‘Ode on Melancholy’ and Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (38).

Flatley suggests that the Romantic mood of melancholy is best characterized as a “mode of intensified reflection and self-consciousness” while the suffering that accompanied it was depicted as a “soul-ennobling force” (38). Summing up the Romantic attitude toward the complex in a way that emphasizes its link with greatness, he claims that “To really appreciate beauty or experience love, one must also know melancholy” (38).

Freud’s 1917 essay, “Mourning and Melancholia,” marks the final turn that should be noted in this brief sketch of the cultural understanding of melancholy as it relates to men of genius. Flatley notes how, “The tendency of melancholics to brood over the absent and gone has been a regular theme in a range of genres since the term *melancholia* was coined” (42). Still, one of the key revisions of Freud’s theorization of the term is the way in which he centers his focus on the concepts of loss and grief by proposing that failure to mourn a loss is the origin of melancholia. By noting similarities between the affective responses that cluster around both mourning and melancholy, Freud concluded that melancholy must involve a longing for something lost, “a loss in an instinctual life” (Flatley 43). Agamben offers a succinct summary of Freud’s general argument:

As when, in mourning, the libido reacts to proof of the fact that the loved one has ceased to exist, fixating itself on every memory and object formerly linked to the loved object, so melancholy is also a reaction to the loss of a loved object; however, contrary to what might be expected, such loss is not followed by a transfer of libido to another object, but rather by its withdrawal into the ego, narcissistically identified with the lost object. (19)

In an essay entitled “Reflections on Trauma, Absence, and Loss,” Dominick LaCapra describes Freud’s version of melancholy as “characteristic of an arrested process in which the depressed, self-berating, and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past, faces a future of impasses, and remains narcissistically identified with the lost object” (LaCapra 189). This characterization of melancholy is defined against mourning, where a subject is able to disinvest from the lost object and refocus that libidinal energy toward a new object.

Schiesari offers a close reading of Freud’s essay that demonstrates how his argument is implicated in a tradition that associates melancholia with men of greatness. She notes that the figure of Hamlet is the only named subject in Freud’s analysis—the rest of his examples involve *types* of women such as the “deserted bride” and “self-deprecating wife.” After noting Freud’s claim that the melancholic exhibits a “keener eye for the truth” and has “come pretty near to understanding himself” (Freud 167), Schiesari suggests that in his discussion of Hamlet, Freud depicts melancholia as an “accredited pathology, justified by the heightened sense of conscience that the melancholic is said to display ostentatiously” which serves to elevate him above ordinary men (9). Schiesari argues that on the one hand, Freud provides a ‘clinical’ picture of the pathology of melancholia; but on the other hand, “by his referring to Hamlet and the melancholic’s visionary talents (i.e. his ‘keener eye for the truth’), he points to a cultural apotheosis of its victims, whose sense of loss and ‘melancholy’ is thus the sign of their special nature (11). Thus, while Freud’s theorization has in fact changed the cultural understanding of the condition, there is a way in which it still maintains its gendered association with a privileged male subject-position.

With this historical sketch in mind, we can turn confidently to a discussion of how melancholy is expressed in *Lolita*. Humbert seems to evince all of the qualities noted above: the bodily afflictions of antiquity with his heart condition; the madness that brings technê described by Plato; the desperate withdrawal from the world of things that characterizes *acedia*; the claim to exceptionality glimpsed by Aristotle and developed by Ficino; the heroic posturing exhibited by Hamlet; the celebratory sorrow flaunted by the Romantics; and finally, the intense fixation on a lost object described by Freud. I hope to sharpen my analysis by focusing on the work and influence of Ficino, who is something like a master term or founder of discourse for this sense of melancholy as a “disease of heroes.” Agamben and Schiesari have offered compelling analyses of both Ficino’s work and its inauguration of a specific mode of melancholy; it is within this Ficinian Tradition that *Lolita* seems to be most meaningfully situated.

The Ficinian Tradition

Again, the developed link between melancholy and creative achievement emerged with the Italian humanism of the Renaissance (Radden 13). Agamben suggests that “The double polarity of black bile and its link to the divine mania of Plato were gathered and developed with particular fervor in that curious miscellany of mystic sects and avant-garde cabals that gathered, in the Florence of Lorenzo the Magnificent, around Marsilio Ficino” (12). Radden notes how in his text devoted to the melancholy man of genius, *Three Books on Life* (ca. 1480), Ficino reworked Aristotle’s thoughts on melancholy by combining them with contemporary ideas of his time: Christian assumptions about the freedom of the will; the astrological influence of the

day—which associated melancholy with birth under the sign of the planet Saturn; and the newly emerging category of the man of genius (13).

The work of Klibansky et al. was the first modern study that documented the emergence of this sense of melancholic brilliance during the Renaissance. Schiesari includes a relevant quote from their seminal work:

It was above all the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino, a self-described melancholic, who really gave shape to the idea of the melancholy man of genius and revealed it to the rest of 'Europe' and who defined the affliction as the privileged subjectivity of the lettered, a subjectivity with its own set of risks and with its own rewards. (qtd. in Schiesari 113)⁶

Agamben's analysis clarifies the nature of this set of risks and rewards; he claims that in Ficino's brand of melancholy, "the ruinous experience of opacity and the ecstatic ascent to divine contemplation coexisted alongside each other" (12). For Ficino, the elemental influence of the earth and the astral influence of Saturn unite to "confer on the melancholic a natural propensity to interior withdrawal and contemplative knowledge" (12). Agamben shows how Ficino sought to position the astrologically elect melancholy man of letters as a part of the "noblest species of man":

⁶ Later in her analysis, Schiesari claims, "While he was still alive the fame of Marsilio spread throughout almost the whole world" (160). Likewise, Radden notes the tremendous influence Ficino's work had on Burton (13). It feels important to call attention to Ficino's relevance. Schiesari's chapter on Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" offers a compelling argument that demonstrates the lasting effect that Ficino has had on the modern definition of the term. While I am not suggesting that *Lolita* is in explicit dialogue with Ficino's work, the intense parallels between his ideas and the form of melancholy that Humbert exhibits seems to suggest that a sort of ambient or drifting influence occurred.

The cannibal and castrated god, represented in medieval imagery as lame and brandishing the harvesting scythe of death, became the sign under whose equivocal domination the noblest species of man, the 'religious contemplative' destined to the investigation of supreme mysteries, found its place next to the 'rude and material' herd of the wretched children of Saturn. (12-3)

This tension between the realm of the contemplative and that of the "rude and material" is an essential component of Ficino's definition of melancholy.

Schiesari's analysis of the Ficinian Tradition devotes thorough attention to the opposition between the elect status of the melancholic and the "rude and material" *vulgus*; she claims that "Out of the intellectual situation of humanism—that is to say out of the awareness of freedom experienced with a sense of tragedy—there arose the notion of a genius which ever more urgently claimed to be emancipated in life and works from the standards of 'normal' morality and the common rules of art" (112-3). She notes how Ficino, in his move to elevate the "*homo melancholicus*" above the *vulgus*, revised Aristotle's assertion in *Problems* by replacing the physiological cause that makes some men eminent with a divine gift which implies an unambiguously positive closeness to God and serves to position the male melancholic as the privileged recipient of a heavenly endowment. Thus, "Not just out of the ordinary, the Ficinian melancholic is decidedly above the ordinary" (Schiesari 114). In Ficino's work, depression for qualified men was translated into a sign of spiritual as well as cultural exceptionality; Schiesari claims that "Ficino not only turned melancholia into an inscription of something extraordinary for men but, more specifically, he made the Saturnine man—the melancholic man—an emblem of the mentally creative man, more specifically of the *literarum studiosi*" (114).

In addition to this claim of exceptionalism for the melancholic man of letters, Schiesari presents another important feature of the Ficinian Tradition—an ardent desire for a transcendent (re)connection with the plane of the Ideal: “In this Renaissance pathos of grief, there existed a sense of the tragic, a feeling of finitude whose expression presupposed its reconnection to an exhilarating finitude, coupled with a heightened awareness of the self as ‘different’ from the common *vulgus*, and by virtue of that difference, extraordinary” (19).

While foregrounding melancholia’s link with the man of genius, Ficino also rewrote the condition in terms of his own Neoplatonist philosophy: “in Ficino we come to a *platonizing* of the melancholic genius, a new vision of the melancholic man as one whose quest for knowledge is inspired by an eros that fuels his desire for a relationship with the transcendent” (115).

Ficinian Neoplatonism described an eros whose content was the nostalgic one of recapturing the lost ideal; Schiesari claims that this led the philosopher to underscore “the way the melancholic is poised for the quest for truth, as a nostalgic desire to return to an original state” (115). The superiority of Ficino’s melancholy man of genius is thus defined by his excessive desire for transcendent knowledge.

The melancholic desire for the transcendent entails not only a sense of profound disappointment and longing (thus the melancholia) but also a sense of distaste for the material world: “The devalued category of melancholia as a physiological affliction is now philosophically reinterpreted as the call back to the heavenly and thus as the sign of the philosopher’s transcendence, not just in spiritual but also in temporal matters. Happiness is by necessity impossible on this earth except as error or stupidity” (Schiesari 140). In describing this gnostic component that Ficino added to his theory of the condition, Schiesari notes how his work

outlines a difference between two types of love aimed at either the “Heavenly” or “Vulgar” Venus: “The heavenly Venus allows us to transcend the corporeal and to ascend back to the ‘one’ from which we all descend; the vulgar Venus aggravates the fall into the state of multiplicity that in Ficino’s Neoplatonic system is also the state of the body” (116). Thus, Schiesari’s analysis demonstrates how Ficinian melancholy involves both a claim to exceptionality for downcast men of letters who define their greatness against a common *vulgus* and an eroticized quest for a relationship with the transcendent Ideal that entails a problematic turn away from a field of materiality that is coded as feminine in Ficino’s work. These tendencies that Schiesari describes are very important aspects of Humbert’s characterization.

Humbert and the Ficinian Tradition

Interestingly, throughout *Lolita*, Humbert portrays himself as exceptional by appealing to his talent for creative production, his melancholic qualities, *and* his pedophilic pathology. Evidence for this conflation can be found in a passage where he describes his return from a trip to the Arctic Circle: “The reader will regret to learn that soon after my return to civilization I had another bout with insanity (if to melancholia and a sense of insufferable oppression that cruel term must be applied)” (36). In addition to his sense of melancholy, Humbert portrays his pedophilia in a way that recalls the Ficinian tradition outlined above.⁷

Early in the novel, Humbert explicitly expresses his perverse eros using the idiom of melancholia: “I was, and still am, despite *mes malheurs*, an exceptionally handsome male; slow-

⁷ NB: While Humbert might be said to tap into a “Ficino-like” idiom relatively in earnest, the text of *Lolita* seems to ironize this gesture by having Humbert occupy this subject-position in order to discuss and defend both his generalized pedophilia and the crimes he commits against Dolly.

moving, tall, with soft dark hair and a gloomy but all the more seductive cast of demeanor. Exceptional virility often reflects in the subject's displayable features a sullen and congested something that pertains to what he has to conceal" (25). This "sullen and congested something" might be read as black bile; his description features many of the qualities that tend to cluster around the profile of melancholia: slow-moving, dark, gloomy, sullen. In Humbert's estimation, these marks serve to make him exceptionally handsome and virile; here Humbert clearly tries to enter into the eroticized/romanticized melancholic subject position. There are other occasions where he performs similar gestures: in describing the night at the *Enchanted Hunter* when he writes "the look of lust is always gloomy" (127), and in describing one of the final nights spent at the home in Beardsley when he claims, "I have the ability—a most singular case, I presume—of shedding torrents of tears throughout the other tempest" (209).

Reminiscent of the Ficinian claim to exceptionality and desire for transcendence, Humbert declares that as opposed to a "normal man," one must be "an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy" in order to discern and experience the supposedly transcendent world of nymphets (17). He suggests that these qualities—artistic talent, melancholia, and pedophilia—combine in order to provide him with access to hidden realms of beauty and pleasure; he styles himself as someone who possesses a special sensitivity that makes him exceptional. He goes on to contrast his sensitivity against that of a "normal" man: "The trouble was that those gentlemen had not, and I *had*, caught glimpses of an incomparably more poignant bliss. 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" (18). By setting his privileged access to realms of pleasure against the imagination of

“writers of genius,” Humbert exhibits his sustained defensive attempt to justify his aberrance—and translate it into a virtue—by invoking his talent for creative production. Thus, as with the Ficinian melancholic, Humbert makes a claim to superiority grounded in an excessive desire for transcendence and an ethos based on a talent for artistic production.

Humbert’s descriptions of the sexual gratification he achieves through his predatory experiences with adolescent girls feature a sense of transcendence that parallels the Ficinian Neoplatonist aspiration. Humbert describes being in the “possession and thralldom of a nymphet” as “beyond happiness”:

For there is no other bliss on earth comparable to that of fondling a nymphet. It is *hors concours*, that bliss, it belongs to another class, another plane of sensitivity. Despite our tiffs, despite her nastiness, despite all the fuss and faces she made, and the vulgarity, and the danger, and the horrible hopelessness of it all, I still dwelled deep in my elected paradise — a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames — but still a paradise.

(166)

Likewise, in describing the Sunday morning scene when he is left alone with Dolly while Charlotte attends church, Humbert writes, “I entered a plane of being where nothing mattered, save the infusion of joy brewed within my body. . . Lolita had been safely solipsized” (60). In addition to the eroticized “quest for transcendence,” this reference to solipsism also seems to parallel the Ficinian emphasis on the sacred realm of contemplation.

On the opposite side of this reverence for the realm of fantasy, Humbert exhibits the concomitant distaste for materiality that Schiesari locates in Ficino’s theory. Humbert often

contrasts his supposedly transcendent desire for “nymphets” with his misogynistic disgust for “terrestrial” adult women:

Overtly, I had so-called normal relationships with a number of terrestrial women having pumpkins or pears for breasts; inly, I was consumed by a hell furnace of localized lust for every passing nymphet whom as a law-abiding poltroon I never dared approach. The human females I was allowed to wield were but palliative agents. I am ready to believe that the sensations I derived from natural fornication were much the same as those known to normal big males consorting with their normal big mates in that routine rhythm which shakes the world. (20)

Humbert’s dichotomous language in this passage and throughout the novel parallels the Ficinian opposition between the heavenly and vulgar Venuses: the former of which leads one to “contemplate superior things” while the latter leads one to “procreate inferior things” (Schiesari 116). Thus it seems that Humbert pairs well with the features of the Ficinian Tradition that Schiesari identifies: a claim to exceptionalism that involves an appeal to one’s creative talent and a desire for transcendent experiences that entails disdain for a material realm coded as feminine.

Gendered Melancholy in *Lolita*

Juliana Schiesari’s indispensable intervention, *The Gendering of Melancholia*, responds to a suspicious absence of female figures in the history of “great melancholics,” which includes, in addition to some of the names mentioned above, Petrarch, Rousseau, Chateaubriand and Benjamin. This absence, she claims, stems from a lack of significance given to women’s grief in

patriarchal culture: “In contrast to the distinguished epithet by which men are called ‘melancholic,’ women who fall into the depths of sorrow are all too easily dismissed with the banal and unprestigious term ‘depression’” (3-4). Her study examines the systemic exclusion of women from the canon of melancholia. Despite the existence of a rich tradition of women’s literature expressing sorrow and grief, Schiesari claims, “when it comes to the rubric of melancholia as an expression of a cultural malaise embodied within a particular individual or system of thought, women do not count as so-called great melancholics” (4).

Schiesari notes the aforementioned ambiguous nature of the term’s definition: “Melancholia occurs on the one hand as a clinical/medical condition and on the other hand as a discursive practice through which an individual subject who is classified as melancholic or who classifies himself as melancholic is legitimated in the representation of his artistic trajectory” (15). She sharpens this latter definition when she refers to melancholia as a “specific representational form for male creativity, one whose practice converted the feeling of disempowerment into a privileged artifact” (8). She claims that while the “*homo melancholicus*” might be seen as mad, this madness is often reframed as a “blessed lack” or “holy curse” that signifies “proximity to Truth” and grants cultural legitimacy: “The ‘victim’ of such a malady was thus able to identify his illness as a gift of inspiration. Even in its distress, the masculine ego is thereby preserved and even affirmed through literary and cultural production” (7-8). This point about the male melancholic’s privileged ability to convert feelings of lack into cultural prestige feels like an apt description of Humbert’s poetic translation of the violence he inflicts upon Dolly—wherein his pedophilia is presented as a “gift of inspiration.”

In the novel's fictional foreword, John Ray offers the following commentary on Humbert's narrative: "A desperate honesty that throbs through his confession does not absolve him from sins of diabolical cunning. He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman. But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a *tendresse*, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!"(5). Consider Ray's gloss in light of Schiesari's observation: the male melancholic might be seen as mad ("He is abnormal") but a holy curse signifying proximity to truth (a "desperate honesty") grants him cultural legitimacy ("But how magically his singing violin. . ."). Throughout the novel, Humbert tries to situate his crimes and aberrance under the sign of his artistic capability and present his pathology as a gift of inspiration. Humbert channels his pedophilia in order to stake out a proximity to aesthetic truth which both legitimates his cultural production and, in a perverse sense, preserves and affirms his ego.

Of course, the conversion of moral vice into aesthetic virtue that Humbert attempts is not an innocent feat. Schiesari shows how such translations are an essential feature of the melancholic male subject-position:

[The] implicitly empowered display of loss and disempowerment converts the personal sorrow of some men into the cultural prestige of inspired artistry and genius. At the same time, such an impressive translation of lack seems persistently denied to women, whose association with loss or grief is expressed by less flattering allusions to widows weeds, inarticulate weeping, or other signs of ritualistic mourning. (11-2)

Not only are such translations denied to women, they also depend upon the derealization and denigration of a class of constitutive (often female) others. Schiesari notes how the privileged

suffering of the male melancholic “all too often displays (and belies) the desire for a transcendent relation with the world, a transcendence of difference (whether social, sexual, ethnic, or linguistic)” (13). She describes melancholia as a gendered ethos that tends to find its source of empowerment “in the *devaluing* of the historical reality of women’s disempowerment and of the ritual function that has traditionally been theirs in the West, that of mourning” (12). In this way, “the ideology of melancholia appropriates from women’s subjectivities their ‘real’ sense of loss and, in Lacanian terms, recuperates that loss . . . as a privileged form of male expression, if not as an expression of male privilege” (12). She theorizes another way in which this appropriation takes place: “to the extent that women are persistently situated as the mere objects of patriarchal desire, their material existences become dehistoricized by their conversion into the representation of a ‘timeless’ and anonymous femininity” (14). Thus the important features that Schiesari identifies in her analysis of the gender dynamics of melancholia include: privileged representational access for male subjects in order to *display* their loss and convert it to gain; the derealization of female subjectivities as idealized signifiers of loss or transcendence which fuels the male melancholic eros; and the denigration of female subjectivities whereby the male melancholic aims to establish and maintain his sense of exclusivity. All of these processes are at work in *Lolita*.

i. Access to Discourse

Schiesari offers a useful summary of a chapter on melancholia from Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman* that foregrounds the importance of access to representational platforms in terms of this condition: “to become melancholic one would need some kind of

access to cultural production, that is . . . ‘access to a signifying economy’ whereby the subject in question . . . could represent loss, could create out of the feeling of loss some valid way to articulate that loss, that ‘painful dejection’ meanfully” (66). Schiesari describes melancholia as “a way for men to talk about their exile, about their losses, and about their desire for a union that cannot be had but that points to some kind of truth” (112). Thus, it is important to recognize how the melancholic display of suffering and exile often depends upon a discursive context that tends to privilege male perspectives.

In an essay entitled “The Art of Persuasion in Nabokov’s *Lolita*,” Nomi Tamir-Ghez offers a reading of the novel’s rhetorical structure that sheds light on the importance of access to a signifying economy for the privileged expression of suffering and sorrow. She suggests that because the novel is told from Humbert’s point of view and in his own voice, “The context is always Humbert’s emotional world, and in this context what is communicated to us is *his* pain as he realizes how meaningless he was for Lolita” (22). She also notes the importance of Nabokov’s choice of character: “in order further to secure our empathy for the criminal-speaker, Nabokov presents us with an intelligent, well-educated, middle-class man with good manners and a sharp tongue . . . Moreover, he is a sophisticated rhetorician, who is able to present his case in a most skillful manner” (23). Lastly, she shows how, aside from Ray’s preface, Humbert is given total selective control of the discourse; Humbert’s continuous narration comprises the entire novel. As a result of this imperious control of the discourse, Dolly’s voice is “conspicuously absent” from the narrative:

Not only is Lolita’s voice almost silenced, her point of view, the way she sees the situation and feels about it, is rarely mentioned and can be only surmised by the

reader. . . . The result is that throughout most of the novel the reader is absorbed in Humbert's feelings of fear, desire, suffering, and so on, and tends to forget Lolita's side of the story. (24)

Thus Tamir-Ghez's analysis helps to demonstrate how privileged male access to the artistic expression of sorrow might function to impair deserved attention to the suffering of others in this novel.

Tamir-Ghez notes how, prior to the end of the novel when Humbert's tone seems to become slightly less self-centered, there are only a few strategically placed moments when, "half-disguised by the catalog of items that precedes it, the truth of [Dolly's] suffering . . . emerges for a short moment, only to disappear again in Humbert's rhetoric" (25). One of these examples occurs at the end of the novel's first part after Humbert abruptly tells Dolly about her mother's death: "At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go" (144). Later, in concluding his carnivalesque description of the first cross-country trip, Humbert writes, "Our long journey . . . in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined books, old tires, and her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep" (178). Tamir-Ghez notes that "Evidently, she cries every night, and [Humbert] has known it for quite some time but mentions it here for the first (and only) time" (25). I would add that in addition to revealing how Humbert suppresses information, these disjunctive passages might also be read as ways in which Humbert artistically appropriates Dolly's suffering in order to heighten his story's pathos by investing his work with a contrapuntal complexity—what Pifer describes as the "haunting threnody of a child's broken

life and thwarted future . . . that sounds throughout the novel” (Pifer 9). In these ways, Humbert effectively re-performs—at the representative level—his violent acts of suppression, derealization and appropriation of Dolly’s subjectivity. In a manner that parallels the way in which he prevents Dolly from mourning the death of her mother because it would spoil his horrific agenda, one might say that Humbert fails to depict the extent of Dolly’s suffering because doing so would spoil the therapeutic function he derives from his art by making the story too terrible to be beautiful and the narrator too horrible to listen to or sympathize with. In this way we can say with Schiesari that his melancholia depends on suppressing the suffering of his idealized object for the sake of translating his loss into gain via artistic expression; he can only sustain his voice by capitalizing on his privileged access to a signifying economy and providing an under-developed representation of the true horror of his tale—a tale which, because it comes from an articulate “White Widowed Male” (3), is allowed to be told.

ii. Derealization

In addition to privileged male access to signifying economies, Schiesari also identifies the derealization of others as fundamental to the melancholic project: “As the melancholic comes to perceive himself as an exclusive subject, the hyper-exclusivity of his world requires the negation of everything different from himself” (8). Later in her analysis, she notes how “Women typically appear in the nostalgic fantasy of male writers as domesticated mothers or as dead, in other words as submissive representations that appear as essential to the male, nostalgic view of true feminine sublimity” (32). This work of derealization for the sake of postulating an image of “true feminine sublimity” is an essential process that operates in *Lolita*.

In an article entitled “Parody and Authenticity in *Lolita*,” Thomas Frosch draws attention to the way in which Humbert drives against the flow of traffic, on the “queer mirror side,” after murdering Quilty and claims that the “Mirror side of the road is fantasy, and Humbert has crossed over. Lolita was a mental image, which Humbert translated into actuality and in doing so destroyed her life and his, but his guilt is to know that she has a reality apart from his fantasy” (48). Humbert’s idealized vision of Lolita leads him to treat Dolly as unreal. In *Precarious Life*, Butler refers to this process as an “insurrection at the level of ontology” and claims, “Those who are unreal have, in a sense, already suffered the violence of derealization” (33). Of this form of violence she suggests that “discourse itself effects violence through omission” (34). Her comments foreground how Humbert’s artistic/representative practices, in addition to his material transgressions, perform a violent derealization of the child he claims to love.

Concerning this process of derealization, Pifer claims “*Lolita* offers readers, among other things, a fascinating demonstration of the way that Humbert Humbert’s own ‘creative fancy’—what we may more bluntly call his obsessive imagination—transforms the twelve-year-old American kid, Dolores, Haze, into the bewitching nymphet” (9). In an essay entitled “So Nakedly Dressed,” Jenefer Shute provides an insightful analysis of how this process of derealization and objectification functions at the discursive level. She suggests that in order for Humbert’s inchoate desire to name itself, he must articulate an image of the desired object “limb by limb, sentence by sentence” (111-2). She characterizes Humbert’s pedophilia as libidinal attention to “the body of a child irradiated by a sexuality powerless yet to name itself”; since this sexuality is still mute and potential, “the body has not yet constituted itself as an object of desire” (112). From these premises she claims that in the case of “Nabokov’s nymphets,” since the girl-

woman has yet to constitute herself as an object of visual consumption, “it is the male viewer who, like an artist or magician, must create from this recalcitrant material a landscape of desire” (112).

In an article entitled “Narcissism and Demand in *Lolita*,” Maurice Couturier has analyzed the terms of this erotic process in a way that parallels Schiesari’s point about the distance the melancholic male seeks to maintain from his idealized object. Couturier claims that the main drive that animates Humbert is scopic; early in the novel Humbert fondly describes his visits to orphanages in France, where he could stare at young girls with the “perfect impunity” of a dream (18). Couturier suggests that Humbert’s early taxonomic description of his category of nymphets—which outlines a “mythical distance”—is not only the postulation of a fantasized class of girls, but also a deconstruction of “his tyrannical desire for this special object whose chief attraction is that it is distant and inaccessible”(25). In a way that parallels Shute’s suggestion, Couturier claims that for Humbert, it is because “this object is distant and forbidden and has not yet experienced sexual desire, the nympet having not yet reached sexual maturity, that it is desirable” (25).

Now, it is certain that the practice of pedophilia that serves as the referent of Humbert’s artistic depiction is abominable and appropriative; but this criminal practice is not quite the focus of this line of inquiry, at least not explicitly. What is salient in this context is how, in addition to harnessing his privileged access to a signifying economy, Humbert also makes use of the violence of derealization in order to get away with representing his abominable and appropriative practices at the level of discourse—in a way that satisfies his perverse eros by exacerbating the scopic distance that entralls him *and* bolsters his artistic ego by using the

“unarticulated sexuality” of a child’s body as a canvas for poetic and erotic play.⁸ Thus Humbert’s violation of Dolly’s autonomy is re-performed at the discursive level when he casts her as a silent bearer of meaning and appropriates the representation of her body by using it as “recalcitrant material” for the articulation of his “landscape” of desire.

Of course, Humbert’s primary tool for accomplishing the violence of derealization is his private taxonomy of nymphets. Pifer suggests that the word “nymphet” hints at “the dire consequences this imaginative transformation has for the child” (9). She mentions that in addition to its associations with Greek mythology, the word “nymph,” in entomological terms, refers to the immature stage of a certain type of insect that, unlike a butterfly, does not undergo complete metamorphosis: building upon this suggestion, she claims, “In visiting his fantasy of the nymphet—a fairytale ‘girl-child’ who must ‘never grow up’—on an immature child who has every right to do so, Humbert not only violates Dolly Haze’s body but stunts her growth. As he finally comes to admit, ‘something in her [was] broken by me’” (9). Pifer adds a powerful characterization of the ultimately insuppressible nature of the all too *real* suffering Humbert seeks to derealize and silence: “The remorse [Humbert] expresses near the end of his story is only the belated articulation of a theme—the haunting threnody of a child’s thwarted life and broken future—that sounds throughout the novel (9). Thus we see how Humbert’s derealization of the child he claims to love undergirds both the material violence he subjects her to *and* the artistic expression of the consequences of that violence.

⁸ In an article entitled “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey articulates the gendered politics and positioning at stake in the scopic scenario that Humbert seeks to arrange: “Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey 1).

In the novel's preface, the reader learns that Humbert offers an alternative title for his narrative: "The Confession of a White Widowed Male" (3). In describing Foucault's analysis of the Christian act of self-renunciation—which is tethered to the Catholic sacrament of confession—James Bernauer writes,

The purpose of the Christian hermeneutic of the self is to foster renunciation of the self who has been objectified. The individual's relation to the self imitates both the baptismal turning from the old self who one was to a newly found otherness, as well as the ceremony of public penance that was depicted as a form of martyrdom which proclaimed the symbolic death of the one who had been. (53)

One of Humbert's concluding expressions of remorse recounts an attempted turn to the Catholic sacrament of confession; this is where he expresses how he sees "nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art" (283). He goes on to describe his "articulate art" as an attempt to "save his soul" (310). It seems that Humbert's "articulate art"—with its depiction of the murder of his double and especially with the poetic expressions of remorse such as the one included above—aims to perform an act of self-renunciation that styles itself as a symbolic martyrdom or "baptismal turning from the old self" that in turn allows for entrance into the "only immortality" he and his idealized Lolita may share. It is important to note how such a movement for Humbert "from the old self who one was to a newly found otherness" (Bernauer 53) stands in stark contrast to the figurative resonance Pifer locates in Humbert's chief poetic image: the "nymph"—fixed in an immature stage of development which will not lead to metamorphosis—as signifier of an eroticized "fairytale 'girl-child' who must 'never grow up'" (Pifer 9). Thus, in order for Humbert to perform

(a parody of) an artistic act of self-renunciation that others could bear to hear, he redacts and poeticizes his story by derealizing Dolly. In a way that parallels the violence that occasions Humbert's felt-need for regeneration, his redemptive act demands that he once again suppress Dolly's autonomy—by depicting her as a mythologized seductress and introducing just the “right” amount of her enormous suffering—in order to invest his art with the aesthetic and therapeutic quality he desires. It is important to see how, beyond playing an essential role in the occasioning of Humbert's melancholy art, the process of derealization is wound up in the very act of expression that ostensibly seeks to redress the violence it responds to. It is in this way that Humbert continues to rely on derealization in order to—as Schiesari notes about the melancholic subject position—convert feelings of disempowerment and despair into a sense of empowerment, or in this case the psychological and artistic benefits that emerge from an act of self-renunciation.

iii. Denigration

Schiesari claims that in the Ficinian Tradition, as the melancholic comes to “perceive himself as an exclusive subject, the hyper-exclusivity of his world requires the negation of everything different from himself” (8). While this negation often entails the derealization of an idealized transcendent object of desire that fuels the “exceptional” male melancholic's eros, this process of negation also tends to involve the denigration of a class of others so as to maintain a sense of hyper-exclusivity: “The ‘unnamed,’ ‘feminized,’ objectified, inferior other is

the condition for the morally superior, male subject of melancholia” (Schiesari 11).⁹ Again, this negation of others is a central feature of Humbert’s representative practices: nearly all of the characters he depicts in his narrative could be read as foils for establishing his own sense of exceptionality. Frosch offers a point about Humbert’s rhetorical treatment of Charlotte Haze that demonstrates this discursive process. He claims that one of Humbert’s rhetorical tasks is to inhabit an excessively romantic subject position without falling victim to “literary banality” and suggests that one way Humbert defends himself from the reader’s “charge of mawkishness” is through the way he depicts Charlotte: “a trite sentimentalist whose mode of expression he mocks and against which his own appears unimpeachable” (45). Humbert seems to use most of the characters he includes in order to perform a similar task; aside from Charlotte and Quilty, two other characters who receive much of Humbert’s scorn include Valeria, his first wife, and Miss Pratt, the headmistress of the Beardsley School for Girls.

In addition to motivations that stem from a sense of exceptionality, Schiesari suggests that the privileged suffering of the male melancholic “all too often displays (and belies) the desire for a transcendent relation with the world, a transcendence of difference (whether social, sexual, ethnic, or linguistic)” (13). Concomitant with Humbert’s ardent desire for “transcendent” sexual gratification from adolescent girls is his systemic denigration of any perceived blocking

⁹ “Morally superior” is included here because this comment is offered during a discussion of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholy,” where he claims, “In the clinical picture of melancholia, dissatisfaction with the ego on moral grounds is the most outstanding feature . . . If one listens patiently to a melancholic’s many and various self-accusations, one cannot in the end avoid the impression that often the most violent of them are hardly at all applicable to the patient himself but that with insignificant modifications they do fit someone else, someone whom the patient loves or should love. Each time one examines the facts this conjecture is confirmed” (Freud 248). Schiesari reads Freud’s claim as a suggestion that “either the melancholic speaks the truth about himself” — as Freud suggests, the melancholic “has come pretty near to understanding *himself*” (246 emphasis mine)—or “if he speaks unfairly about himself, it is because he is speaking the truth about others” (50). Thus, she reads Freud’s interpretation of the melancholic’s self-reproaches as a disguised critique of others as closely aligned with the “romanticized view of the melancholic as the misunderstood and self-abnegating but truthful ‘moralist’ critic of society . . . a disagreeable but justified rebel” (50).

agent that prevents his erotic access to such children; and of course, because of this object-choice, these scorned “obstacles” come to comprise Humbert’s entire field of existence—people, legal and social institutions, ethical and moral principles, as well as the force he comes to refer to as “McFate.” Thus, as Schiesari suggests about the melancholic subject position, it appears that Humbert’s tendency to debase others at the discursive level both helps to maintain a sense of exceptionality and betrays his desire for a transcendence of difference and materiality.

Humbert’s vibrant depiction of his idealized love-object depends upon his simultaneous depiction of a “disgustingly” gray world: “with the ebb of lust, an ashen sense of awfulness, abetted by the realistic drabness of a gray neuralgic day, crept over me and hummed within my temples” (139). In other words it is important to note how committing his idealization to the realm of “aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art” (311) also leads Humbert to commit everything else in his path—everything he negates—to what he describes with reference to Charlotte’s death as an “eternal heaven among an eternal alchemy of asphalt and rubber and metal and stone” (90). It is also important to note that he aspires to be the one who *commits*.

In Humbert’s narrative, women absorb the brunt of his scorn; Tamir-Ghez demonstrates one way in which Humbert tries to harness his misogyny for rhetorical purposes. She focuses on Humbert’s oscillation between addresses throughout his narrative and suggests that he shrewdly plays the reader against a hypothetical jury. She tracks a shift in Humbert’s tone from slight to severe sarcasm as he appeals to a group he eventually describes as the “Frigid gentlewomen of the jury” (Nabokov 135). Tamir-Ghez claims that eventually, this tonal shift

“turns into an implicit accusation of the jury, suggesting that they have no right to judge him, that they represent conventionality and are therefore unable to understand the ‘artist’ and ‘madmen’” (31). Of course, a “creature of infinite melancholy” is the missing piece from this paraphrase of Humbert’s self-description. Tamir-Ghez goes on to suggest that by ridiculing a class of conventional women, Humbert subtly courts his other addresses—the readers—whom he implicitly suggests lack the conventionality of the “frigid gentlewomen” (31). Here Humbert seems to explicitly suggest a sentiment that he implies throughout most of the novel: that his ardent appreciation of beauty ought to set him above the law. In a way that parallels Humbert’s claim to aesthetic and thereby moral superiority, Schiesari notes how the category of the genius that Ficino absorbed into his definition of melancholy “urgently claimed to be emancipated in life and works from the standards of ‘normal’ morality and the common rules of art” (112-3). Tamir-Ghez’s example is illustrative of this tendency not only because it features Humbert positioning himself beyond morality, but also because it depicts Humbert bending some traditional rules of art by shifting between addresses and appealing directly to the reader.

A crucial component of Humbert’s claim to superiority is grounded in an ardent desire for his idealized Lolita, which at the same time engenders in him a general sense of dissatisfaction and disgust that leads to a rejection of any and all aspects of an existence that is not touched by Lolita, the “light of his life” (3). This disavowal might be thought of as an affect that is sometimes referred to *taedium vitae*, which denotes weariness with life and has a close historical association with *acedia* and melancholia. After Dolly escapes, Humbert’s characterization of the “three empty years” of his life during this period of separation—which he terms “*Dolores Disparue*” (253)—seems to reflect this sense of weariness with life: “While a

few pertinent points have to be marked, the general impression I desire to convey is of a side door crashing open in life's full flight, and a rush of roaring black time drowning with its whipping wind the cry of lone disaster" (253-4). In his work of affective theory, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, William Miller describes *taedium vitae* as a sort of disgust with life that is also associated with depression, melancholia and *acedia*; he notes how in the style of the Jacobean melancholic, *taedium vitae*,

appears as a kind of misanthropic moral fury marked by a barely suppressed delight in its own shock value and its own substantial wit and intelligence. . . Disgust with sex and women, with generation, with mutability and transience prompts a black humor, both in our sense of the term and in theirs as the black bile of melancholy. (Miller 28)¹⁰

While I would reject the causal arrangement he outlines, Miller's analysis parallels Schiesari's claim about the male melancholic's tendency to demean others in a way that betrays their desire for the transcendence of existential and intersubjective difference. Miller's comments also call attention to the manifestation of this anxiety at the discursive level in the form of "black humor" or the comic treatment of "dark" subject matters such as death, taboo and violence. Humbert of course makes excessive use of black humor and it is perhaps his primary tool for performing acts of denigration at the representative level that serve to bring him joy while allowing for him to style himself as exceptional. A particularly bleak example is a

¹⁰ Miller also offers a discussion of the etymology of "disgust" which provides an additional way of thinking about Humbert's cultivation of a sense of superiority: "The gust in disgust was very early on, both in English and French, not a narrow reference to the sense of taste as in the sensation of food and drink, but an homage to the broader, newly emerging idea of 'good taste.' The new expanded taste was about distinction, class, education, wealth, talent; it was the ability to reject the ugly in art, architecture, speech, and dress, to disapprove of glib music and poetry" (170). Thus Humbert's systemic denigration of everything around him—his sustained feelings of disgust for anything apart from Dolly—might be read as another way in which he postulates the sense of superiority that Schiesari claims is pertinent to the melancholic project.

comment he includes about Charlotte as she recounts her sexual history: “her autobiography was as devoid of interests as her autopsy would have been. I never saw a healthier woman than she, despite thinning diets“(80). The black humor here is a meager attempt to disguise or make light of the violence he committed—it is an act of negation that aims to efface the suffering and sorrow of others.

In addition to the tendency toward derogatory uses of black humor, Humbert’s dismissive treatment of Charlotte’s death points to another typical characteristic of the melancholic project that Schiesari identifies: “Melancholia thus appears a gendered form of ethos based on or empowered by a sense of lack; at the same time, it finds its source of empowerment in the devaluing of the historical reality of women’s disempowerment and of the ritual function that has traditionally been theirs in the West, that of mourning” (12). Schiesari suggests that this devaluing of ritual acts of mourning is tied to a general phenomenon in the discursive history of melancholy wherein women’s expressions of loss and sorrow are denied importance or attention. Thus it is perhaps of little surprise that Humbert, after describing the scene of Charlotte’s death, writes, “I have no reason to dwell, in this very special memoir, on the pre-funeral formalities that had to be attended to, or on the funeral itself, which was as quiet as the marriage had been” (99). As it was during his “special adventure,” once again, in this “special memoir,” at the representative level, Humbert devalues Charlotte’s death by negating its reality and suppressing any mournful attention to it.

Near the end of the novel, Humbert describes a scene when Dolly asks where her mother is buried. After a brief sardonic exchange, Dolly leaves the room and Humbert notices how the magazine she was reading provoked her question. He seems to include this scene in

order to preface an expression of his sorrow and guilt: "I did not rush up to her room with cries. I always preferred the mental hygiene of noninterference. Now, squirming and pleading with my own memory, I recall that on this and similar occasions, it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita's states of mind while comforting my own base self" (287). It has been argued above that these expressions of sorrow, insofar as they allow Humbert to perform an act of self-renunciation, might also be read as ways in which Humbert comforts his "own base self" with his local palliative of articulate art. Here I would emphasize how the immensely "localized" scope of his narrative leads him to, as Schiesari claims, find a source of empowerment in the "devaluing of the historical reality of women's disempowerment and of the ritual function that has traditionally been theirs in the West, that of mourning" (12). Thus, every glimpse at Dolly's pain and bereavement is also an occasion for Humbert to floridly express his sorrow and guilt—to confess. Like Hamlet at Ophelia's funeral, Humbert's melancholic histrionics threatens to wrest any attention away from the pain and grief experienced by the women he harms; his melancholia is coextensive with his violent, discursive acts of derealization and denigration.

II. Motivations of Humbert's Gendered Melancholy

In an essay entitled "Reflections on Trauma, Absence, and Loss," Dominick LaCapra theorizes the stakes of what he views as an often-elided distinction between historical loss and a more mythic sense of absence.¹¹ He uses the categories of mourning and melancholia in order to clarify this distinction: "Historical losses call for mourning—possibly for critique and transformative sociopolitical practice. . . . When mourning turns to absence and absence is conflated with loss, then mourning becomes impossible, endless, quasi-transcendental grieving and scarcely distinguishable (if at all) from interminable melancholy" (190-1). LaCapra's notion of "interminable melancholy" recalls Humbert's self-identification as a "creature of infinite melancholy" (17). Following LaCapra's claim, this analysis attempts to demonstrate how Humbert's sense of "infinite melancholy" might stem from the way in which his sorrow is only partly invested in a historical loss. For Humbert, it seems that his sadness over his material separation from Dolly also points beyond itself toward what Freud refers to in his theorization of melancholia as a "loss of a more ideal kind" (Freud 166). Jenifer Jenkins has a reading of

¹¹ LaCapra admits that these categories cannot be neatly divorced from each other, but he insists upon some crucial differences: "In the light of absence, one may recognize that one cannot lose what one never had. Absence (not loss) applies to ultimate foundations in general, notably to divinity and to metaphysical grounds that tend to be substituted for it. In this sense, absence is the absence of an absolute and should not itself be absolutized and fetishized such that it absorbs or downgrades the significance of particular historical losses. The conversion of absence into loss gives rise to both Christian and oedipal stories . . ." (179-180).

Lolita that offers an excellent articulation of how Humbert might be said to experience the loss of an ideal and respond to that loss through artistic production.

Humbert's *Horror Vacuus*: an Etiology of Gendered Melancholy

In an essay entitled "Searching High and Lo," Jennifer Jenkins argues that *Lolita* follows the pattern of a medieval quest narrative. She describes Humbert's incessant travelling as a "lifelong ritual devotion" and an "unholy quest for his child ideal." She reads *Lolita* as Humbert's "grail" or "sacra" and suggests that this object of desire "dooms the quest from the beginning" because "Young Dolores Haze is a flawed idol. . . She has an agenda and itinerary all her own, which add both sorrow and slapstick to this pilgrimage" (210). Jenkins claims that Humbert's "unique obsessions" transform an inchoate sense of erotically-charged "wanderlust" into an "unholy quest for his nymphet grail" (210). This conversion of adolescent child into nymphet grail involves the process of derealization outlined above, while the conversion of wanderlust into "unholy quest" recalls the male melancholic's eroticized quest for transcendent knowledge associated with the Ficinian Tradition, which derives both stimulation and a sense of exceptionality from erotic deferral.

Jenkins's analysis tracks the dissolution of Humbert's ideal vision as he comes to realize the doomed nature of his "quest":

In finding his grail, Humbert discovers the sorrow of many pilgrims: instead of his idol, he gets a cheap imitation. . . . Humbert goes west not to grow up with Lolita but to continue his quest for the essential nymphet. Their travels westward reflect Humbert's

attempt to turn back the clock and recapture his vision. . . . Westbound roads lead Humbert to the twilight of his idol. (227)

Jenkins suggests that Humbert's questing impulse is "fundamentally nostalgic" because, "Lolita was never Annabel, nor was she ever 'his' nymphet. As early as the night at the Enchanted Hunter, Humbert recognizes an always already lost paradise (228). Jenkins's reference to Humbert's "sorrow" and "fundamentally nostalgic" impulse seems to suggest that his melancholy condition is related to his confrontation with the "always already lost" nature of his gendered Ideal.

Jenkins shows how once Dolly eludes him, "Humbert's entire consciousness focuses on dreams and visions of his lost sacra" (232). She highlights a passage that Humbert includes immediately after Dolly's escape where he describes being haunted by visions of Dolly disguised as Valeria and Charlotte: "That complex ghost would come to me, shedding shift after shift, in an atmosphere of great melancholy and disgust, and would recline in dull invitation on some narrow board or hard settee, with flesh ajar like the rubber valve of a soccer ball's bladder" (255). Jenkins suggests that Humbert found Dolly's presence, though tainted when compared to his idealized vision, far preferable to her absence; after Dolly escapes "the fear of a void within becomes a reality. . . . No more elaborate celebrations of form and passion and frenzy: Humbert's visual imagination now takes a markedly dour turn. . . . Lolita's disappearance has let the air out of his fantasies and his life" (232). She argues that as Humbert responds to this separation by withdrawing into the realms of memory, imagination and art, this fixation on the past allows for him to fill a "dreaded void" (233) left by her absence with a confusion of images and memories: "In recounting this thwarted honeymoon years later, Humbert indulges in the

kind of compulsive categorization common among pilgrim travelers. . . . [He] settles for reciting stops on their journey. The lists of places and people become a kind of catechism for Humbert to recite in worshipful recollection of this journey” (229). This pilgrimage conceit allows for Jenkins to make a remarkably insightful point about Humbert’s sorrowful and artistic response to the separation from Dolly that haunts him.

In order to scaffold her conclusion about Humbert’s embellished and compensatory poetic narrative, Jenkins provides a passage from Cuban novelist and critic Alejo Carpentier describing the baroque mode:

the baroque, a constant of the human spirit [...] is characterized by a horror of the vacuum, the naked surface, the harmony of linear geometry . . . [it] is surrounded by what one might call “proliferating nuclei,” that is, decorative elements that completely fill the space of the construction, the walls, all architecturally available space. (qtd. In Jenkins 212)

Here Carpentier’s comments can be paired with Humbert’s elaborate poetic style, as well as his anxiety over the dissolution of his idealized nymphet vision—his “horror of the vacuum.”

Jenkins notes how an important feature of the pilgrimage depended upon a sensory overload, caused by both the heightened emotional states experienced by the travelers—passion, religious fervor, mortal fear—and the baroque intensity of typical destinations, which served to saturate the pilgrims in a chaos of images and “multiplicity of sacra” (212). Jenkins claims that this sensory overload functioned to distract the pilgrim from “the possibility of nothingness within” (212). This assertion pairs well with the absurdly exhaustive nature of Humbert’s road trips, as well his memoir’s incredibly ornate style. When Humbert concludes his carnivalesque

description of the first cross-country tour he claims, “We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing” (177). This sense of stagnation and waste could be read as referring to both the trip itself and his description of it; Humbert goes on to write,

And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night — every night, every night — the moment I feigned sleep. (177)

In this passage the reader sees what both the collection of objects and the accumulation of nouns and adjectives on the page work to cover over: Dolly’s sobs in the night. For Humbert, part of the purpose of telling this ludic and romanticized narrative is to cover over the fact that there is nothing playful or romantic about the series of events it refers to. Thus Jenkins claims that both his “quest” and his retelling of the “quest” are endeavors that attempt to quell Humbert’s “horror of the vacuum” and “manifest hope that something worth finding” exists at the end of his journey; Humbert creates a chaos of imagery and language to fill a void and cover over what is inevitably the pilgrim’s greatest fear: “that there is no There there” (212). Jenkins suggests that while the search for his idealized erotic vision might be never-ending, “What takes its place is the story, the sacred or erotic or romantic travelogue of the sights and sounds along the way. Faced with the possibility of nothingness, with no meaning, no sacra, no point to the journey, pilgrims will fill the void with poetry, prose, and postcards” (237). Jenkins claims that Humbert “takes refuge in ornate prose and ritual circumambulation to shield himself from the devastating reality of his sacra—Dolly cannot be fixed as a passive object of Humbert’s devotion” (212-3). Humbert’s frustration with this impasse is one more confrontation with the

“always already lost” nature of his Ideal (228). Thus Jenkins’s argument provides a way for thinking about Humbert’s baroque and melancholic art as a site where he both reveals and wrestles with anxieties that constitute the foundation of his perverse eros—a horror of the vacuum provoked by the rupture of his idealized vision which leads him to violently appropriate and negate Dolly’s body, subjectivity and representation.

Jenkins’s analysis provides an excellent starting point for a theorization of the etiology and motivations of Humbert’s sense of melancholia and the artistic performance he pairs with it. Flatley identifies three outcomes that melancholy states and aesthetic practices typically overlap in order to achieve: catharsis, redemption and compensation; he argues that “In such views, art may be seen to transcend the exigencies of everyday life in the realm of beauty, or to relieve repressed emotions through cathartic release” (5). His comments resonate with a claim that Humbert includes near the end of the narrative after reflecting upon the “foul lust” he inflicted upon Dolly: “I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art” (283). Thus we can characterize Humbert’s response to what Jenkins describes as the dissolution of his idealized vision as artistic, melancholic, and therapeutic. Looking closely at how Humbert’s artistic and melancholic response to his *horror vacuus* performs this palliative function helps to identify the gender divisions that subtend it and demonstrate how he might be appropriating Dolly’s representation in order to serve his own ends.

Schiesari defines *horror vacuus* as a “replication on the level of theory of the subject’s more primordial fear of that void that is the unknown”; she also notes that the “fear of the void is readily decipherable in psychoanalytic terms as the fear of castration and of woman” (202).

Schisari argues that “melancholia is driven by a *horror vacuus* that seeks to cover over that lack understood as sexual difference (namely castration)” (237). She claims that “in systems reactively defined by the *horror vacuus* that seek to deny sexual difference, we read the self-doubts to which the melancholic is subject precisely because of his inability to accept castration, to recognize the limits that define him. Paradoxically, he needs to assuage that doubt, which remains the tell-tale sign of a castration that would be denied” (228). Applying this analysis to Humbert, I would argue that there is an illocutionary “my” that precedes all of his references to the private name he has created for Dolly—“*My Lolita*”; these assertions are indicative of his narrative’s overall goal of appropriating something that has eluded him. His artistic attempt to “fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (136) seems to firmly situate the project within the realm of the denial of limits that Schiesari associates with the melancholic castration complex. The introduction of this concept allows for a more nuanced look into what is already a pretty clearly gendered form of anxiety that Humbert exhibits when Dolly escapes; it highlights the ways in which his melancholia and artistic production might perform their therapeutic function insofar as they allow for his masculine denial of limitations as well as a quelling of the fear that his recognition of these limitations provokes.

Agamben’s Melancholy Poetics

In his introduction to *Stanzas*, Giorgio Agamben describes both the “desperation of the melancholic” and the “disavowal of the fetishist” as operations in which “desire simultaneously denies and affirms its object and thus succeeds in entering into a relation with something that

otherwise it would have been unable either to appropriate or enjoy” (xvii-xviii).¹² Agamben draws upon the medieval practice of phantasmology in order to characterize this relationship between melancholia and its unappropriable object; he argues that “an ancient and tenacious tradition considered the syndrome of black bile to be so closely tied to a morbid hypertrophy of the imaginative (or phantasmatic, phantastic) faculty that only if situated within the fundamental complex of the medieval theory of the phantasm could all of its aspects be understood” (23). The phantasm, which is what Agamben uses to characterize the elusive object which he claims the melancholic seeks to enter into a relation with, refers to “a kind of subtle body of the soul that, situated at the extreme point of the sensitive soul, receives the images of objects, forms the phantasms of dreams, and, in determinate circumstances, can separate itself from the body and establish supernatural contacts and visions” (23). Agamben outlines the historical prevalence of phantasmatic commerce in (ostensibly) outmoded theories of melancholic, erotic and artistic processes such as inspiration and possession. He shows how in the Ficinian Tradition, the melancholic was said to be in an “exceptional phantasmatic disposition” because of the excess of earthly humor which allows for them to “fix the phantasy more stably and more efficaciously with their desires” (24). Agamben draws this constellation between eros, imagination and melancholia in order to describe and celebrate the ways in which the melancholic is able to perform an “appropriation of an unappropriable object” because of a privileged ability to fix the phantasm via poetic practices.

¹² Freud’s theorization of fetishism is implicated with the *horror vacuus* discussed above: “According to Freud, the fetishistic fixation arises from the refusal of the male child to acknowledge the absence of the penis of the female (of the mother). Confronted with the perception of this absence, the child refuses to admit its reality, because to do so would permit a threat of castration against his own penis” (Agamben 31). The assumption of a fetish object allows for the subject to manufacture the pseudo-presence of the maternal penis and combat the dread that its absence causes. Agamben shows how melancholic attention to an idealized lost object performs a similar function.

In the analysis that follows I aim to outline how Agamben makes his argument for what I would characterize as a “melancholy poetics” in order to then demonstrate how Humbert tries to participate in this process. Agamben is celebratory of the poetic space that melancholia opens up because he claims that it allows for the subject to enter into relation with a phantastic unreality and attempt an appropriation of the unappropriable; his theorization of melancholy poetics is worth unpacking because it sheds light on Humbert’s gravitation toward this subject position and allows for a look into the gender politics that undergird what is presented by Agamben as a romanticized and rather triumphal process.

My elaboration of Agamben’s theory pays close attention to what happens to *real* objects as the melancholic attempts to enter into a relation with, fix, and appropriate unreal phantasms through poetic practices. The gendered division at work in Agamben’s theory of melancholy poetics is glimpsed almost immediately through his reference to the disavowal of the fetishist in his introduction; this helps to illustrate how the melancholic desire to appropriate the unappropriable phantasm is tethered to the *horror vacuus* that Jenkins locates in *Lolita* and Schiesari theorizes as a motivating force behind the melancholic project. Thus, using melancholia to enter into a relation with what Agamben describes as an otherwise unappropriable object is coextensive with what Schiesari refers to as the melancholic’s denial of castration—a disavowal of constitutive limits which for Humbert leads to a disregard of moral and ethical boundaries.

For the sake of reading Humbert’s melancholy poetics in the light of Agamben’s theory, it is helpful to provisionally consider “Lolita”—the nymphet-idealization that Humbert aims to “fix once for all” through his art—as the phantasmatic, unappropriable object that Humbert’s

melancholia aims to establish a relation with. As the argument moves into a consideration of the gender politics that subtend this poetic practice, it will be shown that this distinction is an irresponsible and dangerous one to maintain.

Agamben turns to Freud's essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," in order to describe the working of the psychic, and eventually aesthetic, attempt to appropriate an unobtainable object:

As when, in mourning, the libido reacts to proof that the loved one has ceased to exist, fixating itself on every memory and object formerly linked to the loved object, so melancholy is also the reaction to the loss of a loved object; however, contrary to what might be expected, such loss is not followed by a transfer of libido to another object, but rather by its withdrawal into the ego, narcissistically identified with the lost object.

(19)

Unlike in the case of mourning, the "loss" involved in melancholia is not immediately evident—Freud considered it to be a loss "of a more ideal kind" (Freud 166). Both the absence of an object-cause and the melancholic fixation upon the loss of an ideal leads Agamben to suggest that "The withdrawal of melancholic libido has no other purpose than to make viable an appropriation in a situation in which none is really possible" (20). In Humbert's case, this "inward withdrawal of libido" would refer to the solipsistic or contemplative attention he pays to "Lolita" after Dolly's escape. Agamben's analysis illustrates why Humbert might derive satisfaction from this inward withdrawal of libido:

From this point of view, melancholy would be not so much the regressive reaction to the loss of the love object as the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object

appear as if lost. If the libido behaves *as if* a loss had occurred although *nothing* has in fact been lost, this is because the libido stages a simulation where what cannot be lost because it has never been possessed appears as lost, and what could never be possessed because it had never perhaps existed may be appropriated insofar as it is lost.

(20)

Here Humbert's claim to be a "creature of infinite melancholy" might be read in an altered light. Just as Hamlet's use of the phrase refers to Yorick's inexhaustible wit, perhaps Humbert refers to his own boundless "imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if lost" (Agamben 20). By imagining a fantasized version of what happened with Dolly and materializing it on the page through his poetic narrative, Humbert is able to both pretend that he once possessed his idealized nymphet and maintain a tie with that idealization. In other words, through an account of his physical separation from Dolly, Humbert tries to engender the mythic and putative presence of his idealized Lolita. While this act may or may not allow for the appropriation of the unobtainable object that Agamben describes, it *certainly* depends upon the appropriation of the representation of Dolly's body and subjectivity—it is only through a misrepresentation of the circumstances that Humbert is able to enter into this relation with his idealization in a way that brings him a sense of *jouissance* or joy and excitement.

Agamben notes how the appeal of this melancholic fixation upon a loss stems from the way in which it provides the subject with the illusory sense of possession of an idealized object that would otherwise remain unobtainable:

Covering its object with the funereal trappings of mourning, melancholy confers upon it the phatasmagorical reality of what it lost; but insofar as such mourning is for an

unobtainable object, the strategy of melancholy opens a space for the existence of the unreal and marks out a scene in which the ego may enter into relation with it and attempt an appropriation such as no other possession could rival and no loss possibly threaten. . . . melancholy succeeds in appropriating its own object only to the extent that it affirms its loss. (20)

In a similar way, Humbert's melancholy art confers upon Dolly the phantasmagorical reality of "Lolita," and opens up space for the presencing of this idealization or phantasm; by simulating the loss of his idealized version of Lolita through his artistic production, Humbert keeps this delusory imaginative creation present and alive.

Agamben thus builds upon Freud's theorization of the melancholic project: he reframes Freud's idea about the internalization of libido as the imaginative simulation of the loss of an idealization. These processes are similar to one another and they appeal to the subject because they allow for the melancholic to maintain a sense of proximity with their intangible idealization. Agamben provides a framework for thinking about how artistic production might allow for Humbert to perform this function. He mentions how Freud notes the eventual phantasmatic character of the melancholic process when Freud observes that "the revolt against the loss of the loved object can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place, a clinging to the object through the medium of hallucinatory wishful psychosis" (qtd. in Agamben 22). Agamben uses Freud's theorization in order to show how this "revolt against the loss of the loved object" can express itself through artistic practices. Such is the route that Humbert eventually takes: he effectively chooses to go to prison—a turn away from reality—where he can then revolt against the loss of his idealized object by manufacturing its pseudo-

presence through the conversion of his hallucinatory wishful psychosis (his romanticized and delusory perspective on what he did to Dolly) into an artistic artifact.

As mentioned above, Agamben is celebratory of the poetic space that melancholia opens up insofar as it allows for the subject to enter into relation with an unreality and attempt an appropriation of the unappropriable: he claims that “If the external world is in fact narcissistically denied to the melancholic as an object of love, the phantasm yet receives from this negation a reality principle that emerges from the mute interior crypt in order to enter into a new and fundamental dimension” (25). In a similar way, one might say that Humbert turns to the sorrow over his failed attempt to translate Dolly into Lolita on a material level (“the external world is narcissistically denied to the melancholic as an object of love”) in order to find in that sorrow an artistic resource that allows him to pursue an alternative attempt at this very translation—a reframed path of approach to the “new and fundamental dimension” he wants to access. Agamben describes this new artistic dimension as an “epiphanic space” upon which the male melancholic comes to depend for his happiness and misfortune:

No longer a phantasm and not yet a sign, the unreal object of melancholy introjection opens a space that is neither the hallucinated oneiric scene of the phantasms nor the indifferent world of natural objects. In this intermediate epiphanic space, located in the no-man’s-land between narcissistic self-love and external object-choice, the creations of human culture will be situated one day, the interweaving of symbolic forms and textual practices through which man enters in contact with a world that is nearer to him than any other and from which depend, more directly than from physical nature, his happiness and his misfortune. (25)

Humbert's melancholy art might be read as an attempt to enter into this "epiphanic space" in order to establish contact with the liminal world described above.

In an essay entitled "Parody and Authenticity in *Lolita*," Thomas Frosch offers a reading of Humbert's various approaches to aesthetic production that helps to demonstrate how Humbert seeks to perform the sort of gesture that Agamben describes wherein a melancholic response to the rupture of one's Ideal vision opens up into supposedly new and rejuvenating artistic plane:

Humbert—who was a failed artist early in his career, who tried to translate art into life and again failed, and who then turned a third time to art, now as a refuge, a sad compensation, and a 'very local palliative' (285)—sees art as a way to 'the only immortality' he and Lolita may share (311). Having in effect destroyed her, he now wants to make her 'live in the mind of later generations' (311). A new idea of art does begin for him in his own imaginative failures. (48-9)

Frosch's reading of this process, while more positive than my own, calls attention to the ways in which Humbert reflects the point that Agamben presents. Like Agamben's theorization of the melancholic artist, Humbert harnesses the (violent) mechanism by which his idealized object slips away in order to enter into an "intermediate epiphanic space"—the "new idea of art" that emerges from his own imaginative failures and allows him to share a form of immortality with his idealized Lolita. And, insofar as this epiphanic space also serves as a "refuge" and a "sad compensation," this "new and fundamental dimension" becomes a "world that is nearer to him than any other," and upon which "his happiness and his misfortune" depends. In Humbert's case, this translation of sorrow and loss into a sort of gain is not something to celebrate

because it is founded upon problematic acts of appropriation and suppression that shed light on some gender biases or blindness that plague Agamben's theorization of melancholy poetics.



Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia 1* (1514)

Agamben ultimately reads melancholy as a space for the “serious play of the word” wherein man succeeds in enjoying his own day-dreams without self-reproach or shame (26). He suggests that the “topology of the unreal” that melancholy designs is also the “topology of culture”: “In the space opened up by its obstinate phantasmagoric tendency originates the unceasing alchemical effort of human culture to appropriate to itself death and the negative

and to shape the maximum reality seizing on the maximum unreality” (25-6). Agamben applies his analysis to a reading of Albrecht Dürer’s famous engraving, *Melencolia 1* (1514). He suggests that the contemplative angel is an “emblem of man’s attempt, at the limit of an essential psychic risk, to give body to his own phantasies and to master in an artistic practice what would otherwise be impossible to be seized or known” (26). Agamben claims that it is entirely fitting that the “instruments of the active life should lie abandoned on the ground, having become the cipher of an enigmatic wisdom. The troubling alienation of the most familiar objects is the price paid by the melancholic to the custodians of the inaccessible” (26). He claims that the heap of cultural artifacts strewn about the scene have been “emptied of their habitual meaning” by the melancholic project and transformed “into images of its own mourning” which have “no other significance than the space that they weave during the epiphany of the unobtainable” (26). He describes these objects as “relics of the past on which is written the Edenic cipher of infancy” and claims that they have “captured forever the gleam of that which can be possessed only with the provision that it be lost forever” (26).

It seems clear that Humbert wants to style himself as the sort of distressed aesthetic hero described above—contemplating his phantasms alone amidst the ruins of an evacuated material reality. But how seriously can the reader take such an aspiration considering the violence Humbert inflicts, the ugliness he creates, and the beauty he destroys in order to produce his own cultural artifact? How can Agamben’s analysis hold up when the melancholic project is inflicted upon a person? When, rather than a heap of artifacts, it is a young child who is “emptied of her habitual meaning” and transformed into an image of mourning—a dolorous

haze—in order for an artistic experience of the “epiphany of the unobtainable”: an attempt to “fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (134).

For Humbert, Dolly’s body and subjectivity serve as something very similar to the negated, evacuated objects described above. Dolly’s body, subjectivity and representation become a relic of the past “on which is written the Edenic cipher of infancy” insofar as Humbert appropriates them in order to work out a postlapsarian sense of anxiety, which finds expression in his story about the ruptured sexual experience of his childhood with Annabel. Describing the scene when he first meets Dolly, Humbert writes, “All I want to stress is that my discovery of her was a fatal consequence of that ‘princedom by the sea’ in my tortured past” (42). There are many moments in *Lolita* where Dolly comes across as little more than an alibi for Humbert’s artistic effort to articulate his ardent desire for the idealization he maps onto her—an excuse for the “greater endeavor” that lures him on: “to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (135). In Humbert’s dizzying description of his approach to the hotel room at the *Enchanted Hunter*, as everything seems to lose its reality while desire and anxiety build, Humbert provides two telling sentence fragments: “Parody of a hotel corridor. Parody of silence and death” (119). As Humbert leads up to his attempt to sexually possess his horrific ideal, his surroundings lose their reality and become parodies of themselves—everything solid seems to melt into air.¹³ In a way that parallels this sense of sublimation, insofar as her voice and pain are significantly redacted from this poetic narrative, Dolly once again seems to lose her reality so

¹³ The scene reminds me of a line from Macbeth’s letter to Lady Macbeth describing his encounter with the witches: “When I burn’d in desire to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanish’d” (*Macbeth* 1.5. 3-5). Interestingly, the *Enchanted Hunter* scene seems to feature an allusion to *Macbeth* that Appel does not gloss: when Humbert locks Dolly in the room he exclaims, “Tomorrow, Lo. Go to bed, go to bed—for goodness sake to bed” (Nabokov 123). Humbert is not haunted by his act of negation in the same way as Lady Macbeth. He remains attached to his phantasm which turns his narrative of the series of events into a parody of silence and death rather than a representation of the raw suffering that it attempts to decorate.

that what is unreal—Lolita, Humbert’s idealized love-object—may become real. When considered in the terms of Agamben’s theory, Humbert’s attempt to enter into a relation with his unobtainable idealization is dependent upon his simultaneous, violent derealization of Dolly, both in “reality” and on the page. Thus it seems that Agamben’s imaginative and aesthetic theorization of melancholy poetics might have trouble holding up when certain material, moral and political questions are brought to bear upon it.

The friction that emerges when trying to apply Agamben’s theory of melancholy poetics to *Lolita* relates to his insistence upon the imaginary nature of the loss that concerns the melancholic:

The imaginary loss that so obsessively occupies the melancholic tendency has no real object, because its funereal strategy is directed to the impossible capture of the phantasm. The lost object is but the appearance that desire creates for its own courting of the phantasm, and the introjections of the libido is only one of the facets of a process in which what is real loses its reality so what is unreal may become real. (25)

Here the material stakes of this theorization start to become apparent. While emphasis might fall on the “imaginary capture of the phantasm,” it is important to note how in this schematic, the “lost object is but the appearance that desire creates for its own courting of the phantasm,” as well as the way in which an object that is real “loses its reality so that what is unreal may become real” (25). It is in this theoretical traffic between reality and unreality that one can point to a flaw Agamben’s theory that has some political and moral implications, especially with respect to gender.

The Gendered Stakes of Melancholy Poetics: Schiesari's Response to Agamben

Schiesari offers an insightful response to Agamben that demonstrates a blind spot in his theorization and thereby allows for the emergence of a more developed understanding of how Humbert's melancholy poetics might operate in *Lolita*. After partly agreeing with Agamben's suggestion that melancholia involves a phantasmatic capacity to make it seem *as if* an object of desire had been lost, Schiesari goes on to suggest that Agamben,

like the melancholic, seems to place an extraordinary value on the hypostatization of a lost object of desire as a way to eroticize the loss. What [he] fails to take into account is the way in which such fantasy implicitly belies an eros dependent on the negation of women's subjectivities since the figure of the 'feminine' is always, in some way, at stake in these kinds of object relations. Furthermore, in so doing, Agamben occludes the political and social realities of disempowerment by arguing that in melancholia the object is neither lost nor appropriated (27). (Schiesari 53n)

It appears that Agamben's chiefly aesthetic (and fittingly solipsistic) theorization of melancholia lacks the ethical and political vocabulary that *Lolita* demands. Schiesari's reply seems to suggest that by discussing "unobtainable objects" as if they could be entirely divorced from the material world that they must in *some* way express themselves in, Agamben's analysis occludes the political and social "realities of disempowerment." If this is the assertion, then her response sheds light on the crucial and ultimately inextricable relationship between Lolita (read in Agamben's terms as Humbert's idealized pseudo-lost object of desire) and Dolly (the violently

negated female body and subjectivity). In an essay entitled “Nabokov’s Novel Offspring: Lolita and Her Kin,” Ellen Pifer provides a helpful articulation of this vital intersection that Humbert viciously eschews:

Both [Lolita’s] name and her image are creations of Humbert’s rhapsodic imagination. Like the goddess Athena who sprang fully formed from Zeus’s brow, Lolita is a mythical being. A figment of Humbert’s dreaming mind, the fantasized nymphet can claim no earthly genealogy or surname. Dolores Haze—the child with whom Humbert conflates the nymphet—is, on the other hand, the daughter of Charlotte Haze and her deceased husband, Harold. The identity of Dolores, or Dolly as she is known at school, is largely a matter of indifference to ardent Humbert; only sporadically does he glimpse, through the ‘rosy, gold-dusted’ haze of his desire for the nymphet, the poignant image of the child. (85)

Pifer goes on to describe how in order “To possess his nymphet, Humbert must first eclipse the child” (86). Her comments foreground the inseparability of Dolly and Lolita, which is arguably the novel’s most essential demonstration: *Lolita* painfully shows the danger that surrounds the creation of alibi-objects that serve as place-holders for and point beyond themselves toward unobtainable idealizations.

Later in her analysis, Schiesari notes how Agamben centers his theorization of melancholia on a lost object of desire; she then calls attention to how, historically, the placeholder for this lost object drifted from God, in the theological literature of the Middle Ages, to the “figure of woman,” in the literature of troubadour poetry. She claims that “In both cases, a way is found to speak about a desire that cannot be consummated. Desire for God or for a

woman would be a way to prolong desire to the extent that to live in desire is to exacerbate it” (111). She goes on to read in Agamben’s analysis of melancholia a “privileging of absence in order for the desiring fantasy to take hold” (111) and claims,

the deferral inherent in this form of subjectivity is grounded in an absence that has everything to do with an ideal—with the longing for a union with God, or, as [Schiesari] will argue, with a de-corporealized (idealized) woman—an ideal of which the melancholic is aware and which empowers his fantasy in terms of the absence itself as the source of *his* emotional state. (111)

Thus Schiesari suggests that this gendered version of melancholia depends upon keeping an idealized object at a distance in order to both dwell inside of an exacerbated state of desire and to derive from that distance an empowered source for imaginative fantasy; she asks, “If men cultivate melancholia as the site of a certain form of male eros, would it not work to maintain women at a distance, to define the moral basis for melancholia as one in which woman functions merely as a detour or strategy whereby the purity of the ‘sufferer’ is measured in terms of the *pathos* of his abstention from women?” (112) In pursuing this inquiry, she demonstrates how the postulation of distance from Idealized Woman is often quite different from the innocent or honorific gesture that it pretends to be because it involves both the derealization and denigration real women.

Schiesari’s argument about the male melancholic’s abstention from sexual relations with women is more applicable to Humbert than one might at first suspect; her point helps to demonstrate the potential danger contained in the eros of lack that he tends to cultivate. One of the main things that Humbert’s category of nymphets signifies is a transcendent experience

of sexual bliss. Humbert's sexual relations with adult women do not live up to his impossibly idealized standard; in order to keep alive the myth of the transcendent sexual experience he longs for, he projects it onto an ostensibly "untouchable" demographic. In doing so, he establishes the sense of distance to which Schiesari refers; Humbert harnesses this distance in order to both dwell within an exacerbated state of desire and to empower his imaginative fantasy which serves as a source of contemplative enjoyment and creative production.

Humbert frequently demonstrates the pleasure he derives from the erotic deferral that sexual distance allows. As he describes lying next to Dolly at the *Enchanted Hunter*, he writes, "The science of nympholepsy is a precise science. Actual contact would do it in one second flat. An interspace of a millimeter would do it in ten. Let us wait" (129). Later in the novel, describing an occasion where he thinks he catches a glimpse of a young girl undressing, Humbert writes,

There was in the fiery phantasm a perfection which made my wild delight also perfect, just because the vision was out of reach, with no possibility of attainment to spoil it by the awareness of an appended taboo; indeed, it may well be that the very attraction immaturity has for me lies not so much in the limpidity of pure young forbidden fairy child beauty as in the security of a situation where infinite perfections fill the gap between the little given and the great promised — the great rosegray never-to-be-had.
(265)

Of course, the reader knows all too well how "never-to-be-had" is not exactly the case. It is only after Humbert has been consumed by his "wild delight," transgressed the erotic boundary he articulates above, and witnessed the horrific consequences that he can speak with assurance

about his devotion to an eros of lack. Coming from someone who for two years coerced a child into sexual cohabitation, this expression of the pleasures of erotic deferral seems to point to the absurd nature of an eros or melancholia that insists on its total fixation upon an idealization. Humbert helps to reveal how the cultivations of these dubiously idealistic complexes have material causes and consequences that can either belie or render irrelevant the supposedly heroic claim of devotion to an ideal.

The Material Stakes of Melancholy Poetics: Žižek's Revision of Agamben

In an essay entitled "Melancholy and the Act," Slavoj Žižek offers a theorization of melancholia that builds upon Agamben's by foregrounding the material stakes of the subject's fixation on an idealized object. For Žižek, "the mistake of the melancholic is not simply to assert that something resists the symbolic sublation but rather to locate this resistance in a positively existing, although lost, object" (659).¹⁴ Arguing from a Lacanian position, Žižek claims that insofar as the object-cause of desire is originally lacking in a constitutive way, "melancholy interprets this lack as a loss, as if the lacking object was once possessed and then lost. In short, what melancholy obfuscates is that the object is lacking from the very beginning, that its emergence coincides with its lack, that this object is nothing but the positivization of a void or lack . . . that does not exist in itself" (659-660).¹⁵ He describes this "positivization" of lack as process wherein "the void of desire paradoxically embodies itself in a particular object that

¹⁴ "Symbolic sublation," in this context, refers to Freud's theses in "Mourning and Melancholia," presented in the terms of speculative dialectics. Here, the "success" of mourning is framed as a logical synthesis where the ego is able to disinvest libidinal attention from a lost object and redirect that energy toward a new object. In melancholia, the process of disinvestment is arrested as the ego seeks to sustain its attachment to the lost object.

¹⁵ The gendered terms of Žižek's Lacanian idiom are important to recognize. While Žižek's theorization assists in thinking about the materiality of melancholy, one could also argue that he offers a phallicized articulation of the condition in which traditional understandings of male psyches play an out-sized determining role.

starts to serve as its stand-in" (663). In other words, he reads melancholia as a process where a subject translates—or has translated for them at a pre- or unconscious level—the loss of a material object into a signifier of the loss of a transcendental object of desire (what Lacan terms the *objet petit a*).

Echoing Agamben's analysis, Žižek reads melancholic attention to an idealized lost object as an attempt to enter into a relation with and assert one's possession of an object that would otherwise remain unappropriable. However, Žižek seems to depart from Agamben's argument by attending more closely to the material terms of his own theorization—he claims that the *only* way for the "void of desire" to manifest itself is paradoxically by becoming "embodied" in a material object. This helps to foreground the material and intersubjective stakes of this theory which might otherwise threaten to recede due to the emphasis on terms such as "lost," "lacking," "idealized," and "transcendental."

Paralleling Schiesari's claim about the male melancholic's desire for the transcendence of difference, Žižek suggests that the melancholic subject yearns for "another absolute reality beyond our ordinary reality subjected to temporal decay and corruption" (660). This leads them to "take an ordinary, sensual material object (say, the beloved woman) and elevate it into the absolute. . . however, since this object is subject to decay, one can possess it unconditionally only insofar as it is lost, in its loss" (660). He claims that the deceitful translation of lack into loss is attractive because it enables the melancholic subject to assert their possession of an idealized object: "what we never possessed can also never be lost, so the melancholic, in his unconditional fixation on the lost object, in a way possesses it in its very loss" (660). In a similar way, Humbert's ardent desire for the transcendence of difference leads him to "take an

ordinary, sensual material object” and “elevate it into the absolute” (660). Humbert tries to graft his nymphet fantasies onto Dolly’s body and identity, but since she is an autonomous—not to mention aging—subject, Dolly is eventually able to resist and refute this translation. What Humbert demands of her is a static presence that dispels his horror of the vacuum: the “rush of roaring black time drowning with its whipping wind the cry of lone disaster” that confronts him when he enters the period of life he describes as “*Dolores disparue*” (253). But because Dolly has disappeared, and must disappear, Humbert can only unconditionally possess what he seeks to make her signify—an idealized love-object whose presence quells his *horror vacuus*—“insofar as [she] is lost, in [her] loss” (660). Thus the melancholic attention he pays to her memory is important to consider because it suggests something less innocent than the commemoration of a historical loss or even an obsessive form of love: it can also be read as a final iteration of Humbert’s self-serving acts of appropriation. By tapping the memory of his experience with Dolly as a source for artistic production, Humbert makes one more attempt to possess his idealization—what he repeatedly refers to as “*My Lolita.*” Once again, the problem with this gesture involves what Humbert must do to Dolly in order to presence Lolita: Žižek’s insistence on the material terms of this process highlights the way in which Humbert’s attempt to appropriate his idealization *depends upon* the negation of Dolly’s material body. If we are to say with Žižek that Humbert tries to unconditionally possess a transcendental object by projecting this signification onto Dolly’s body and then, once she has eluded him, devoting his attention to the very original gesture of that loss, it is important to emphasize that it is *Humbert* who performs the negation that serves as the crucial step in this process.

Žižek claims that “melancholy is not simply the attachment to the lost object but the attachment to the very original gesture of its loss” (660).¹⁶ Building upon this claim, I would argue that Humbert’s masculine melancholia is premised upon not just the loss but the negation of Dolly’s body and subjectivity. As Humbert describes entering Dolly’s home during their final interaction, he writes,

Against the splintery deadwood of the door, Dolly Schiller flattened herself as best she could (even rising on tiptoe a little) to let me pass, and was crucified for a moment, looking down, smiling down at the threshold, hollow-cheeked with round pommettes, vein watered-milk-white arms outspread on the wood. (271)

This moment stands ambiguously against Humbert’s closing lines: “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” (309). In Humbert’s view, Dolly is crucified while Lolita is assumed into the realm of aurochs and angels. Paired with each other, these lines show how Humbert’s melancholy art makes a crucifixion out of Dolly’s negation so that a Lolita he might enter into a relation with and possess could live. As Pifer claims, Dolly is an autonomous being whose “tender flesh was sacrificed on the altar of [Humbert’s] obsession” in order to realize his nymphet-fantasy of Lolita (Pifer 85).

¹⁶ In developing this claim, Žižek offers an interesting reading of the Christ myth that is helpful because it highlights the often-violent nature of the material terms that must subtend the melancholic project. He argues that as opposed to many pre-Christian esoteric wisdom traditions where Divinity was said to remain entirely withdrawn, in the Christian mythos, Divinity embodies itself in the finite body of Christ. However, because this material expression of Divinity is necessarily subject to decay, Žižek claims that it can only be possessed absolutely insofar as it is lost—through an attachment to the “very original gesture of its loss”: the cross as signifier of (among other things) Divinity’s departure from the material world.

Pifer's comment helps to show how a tension involving acts of negation and creation might be built into the melancholic project. This paradox stems from a disjunction between the enduring idealization and the mutable nature of the idealized object upon whom that idealization is projected. As Agamben and Žižek suggest, because the melancholic's sorrow concerns the withdrawn nature of a timeless idealization, it requires a material object that could serve as an alibi for the expression of anxiety over this withdrawnness. Thus the melancholic act requires a material loss as its premise in order to perform on top of and around that loss in a way that quells the *horror vacuus* by allowing for the assertion of one's pseudo-possession of the Ideal through its supposed "loss." The disjunction between the pervasive nature of the idealization and the mutable nature of the alibi-object can lead the melancholic subject into some inconsistent territory; Žižek refers to Agamben's claim that "melancholia offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object" (Agamben 20). Highlighting a related paradox that stems from the same disjunction, Žižek suggests, "The melancholic's refusal to accomplish the work of mourning thus takes the form of its very opposite, a faked spectacle of the excessive, superfluous mourning for an object even before this object is lost" (661). With these thoughts in mind, one could reconsider Humbert's request that the publication of his narrative be delayed until after Dolly's death and reframe it in a way that demonstrates how Humbert's melancholy art is both dependent upon the material effacement of Dolly and perhaps even aware of this dependence.

Humbert seems to exhibit a proleptic and superfluous parody of an intention to mourn his lost object of desire when he writes Dolly *as dead* into the narrative. The disjunction that surrounds Humbert's presentation of his final exchange with Dolly is rather telling in this regard.

After Dolly refuses Humbert's last request that she come away with him, he writes, "'It would have made all the difference,' said Humbert Humbert. Then I pulled out my automatic—I mean, this is the kind of fool thing a reader might suppose I did. It never even occurred to me to do it" (280). Here Humbert trades in a tension that is carefully developed throughout the narrative—particularly through his allusive engagement with *Carmen*—about whether he kills Dolly in exchange for a bathetic rupture of suspense. The moment Dolly emphatically asserts her independence, Humbert also asserts his discursive control. The passage sheds light on the ways in which Humbert *handles* Dolly's life at the representative level. Here one realizes that not just the representation of her body but the fate of her life is harnessed by Humbert in order to stimulate excitement; her life is used as a linchpin for his narrative insofar as the story derives much of its tautness from the question of whether Humbert kills Dolly. In a way that parallels this specific rhetorical use of the question of Dolly's life or death, the narration as a whole threatens to subsume Dolly's reality and autonomy at the level of representation—she *sinks into* or is consumed by the story for the sake of the story.

Although Humbert does not kill Dolly, he might still demand of her that she be dead. The line that follows the bathetic revelation reads, "'Good by-aye!' she chanted, my American sweet immortal dead love; for she is dead and immortal if you are reading this. I mean, such is the formal agreement with the so-called authorities" (280). Immediately after learning that Humbert did not kill Dolly, the reader is assured of the fact that she is dead. After the rhetorical purpose of her life is served—as the force of *kairos* subsides—Humbert formalizes the premise that seems to undergird his narrative from its inception: that in order for Lolita to live, Dolly must die.

After Humbert describes “the whole sad business” of killing Quilty, he claims that “Far from feeling any relief, a burden even weightier than the one I had hoped to get rid of was with me, upon me, over me” (306). He goes on to describe the appearance of “two flies beside themselves with a dawning sense of unbelievable luck” (306). This feels like a fitting image for describing Humbert’s treatment of Dolly. Humbert (the romantic lover/artist) and Quilty (a doubled representation of Humbert’s beastly nature) are like two flies gorging themselves on every aspect of a fallen child—her body, subjectivity, representation. They are ecstatic—“beside themselves”—over what an act of violence and negation has provided them with. The image captures why I am suspicious of Humbert’s melancholy art: it is parasitic upon Dolly’s suffering—a melancholic feast upon her life, death and memory. Humbert writes, “My only grudge against nature was that I could not turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys” (167). In the face of this impossibility, Humbert settles for swallowing her with his story—as the bathetic teasing of her murder demonstrates. Like Saturn—the god who devours his children and whose name adorns Ficino’s precious planet—or Freud’s idea of the melancholic incorporation of libido in defiance of the loss of an ideal, Humbert’s melancholy art is an essentially cannibalizing gesture that, as Agamben suggests, abolishes its object in order to demonstrate its extreme fidelity (Agamben 21). Thus insofar as Humbert’s melancholy art is an appropriative gesture that seeks nourishment—catharsis, compensation, redemption—from his own act of negation, it should be read with severe suspicion while paying close attention to the gendered disparities it exploits.

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