

## NOTES ON A FAMOUS FIRST LINE (“LIGHT OF MY LIFE”)

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Some Nabokovians wonder whether every significant phrase in Nabokov, and many an insignificant one, deliberately echoes important moments in the literary tradition. Others wonder whether these echoes matter at all. Still, these moments, when discovered, invariably shed some light on the given work—even if this illumination simply shows that Nabokov was aware of and either valued or contested how prior artists had treated similar themes. One phrase that has been awaiting scrutiny is the first sentence of *Lolita*'s Chapter One, which, it seems, must have a precursor. And it does, indeed it does.

The expression “light of my life” has probably long been a cliché, with religious use dominating in pre-modern times, and on its own it would not have made for much of a stylistic triumph if Humbert Humbert had not quickly appended the words “fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta. . .” But it turns out that the shopworn phrase has an interesting history that includes at least one, and maybe three, works that might have attracted Nabokov’s eye and ear. There are also many works deploying the expression that are of no real interest whatsoever.

My search was conducted primarily within texts contained in Project Gutenberg and Google Books (and secondarily on other full-text resources on-line). As a result, there is some limitation of texts that are not in the public domain (although Google Books provides results of books under copyright, as well), and of course the search excludes older books not thought worthy of preservation in either digital archive. Still, a majority of “classic” and canonical literature is available to search in this manner. I also searched for several non-English equivalents.

The earliest use of the phrase apparently occurs in Euripides’ play *Andromache*. In most translations, the words are spoken by the title character as she surrenders herself to execution by Menelaus in exchange, as she believes, for her young son Molossus, whom she calls “my babe, light of my life” (E. P. Coleridge translation, <http://classics.mit.edu/Euripides/andromache.html>). The original ancient Greek was “Eye of my life,” cf. line 406, “*ophthalmos biou*.” The several English translations I have checked all use “light of my life,” as does, curiously, the modern Greek translation on Project Gutenberg, by George B. Tsokopoulos in 1910, <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/27592>: “*fos tis zois mou*.” The French translation in the Belles Lettres edition preserves “eye”: “l’oeil de ma vie” [tr. Louis Méridier, Euridipe, *Tragédies*, Tome II, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003]). A few thematic points are obviously relevant; these will be discussed further on.

Another intriguing, but not perfect, match came from Sir Richard F. Burton’s verse translation of Catullus LXVIII (“To Manius on Various Matters) in 1894, where the phrase is used twice. This source is in some ways especially attractive, since Catullus is referred to explicitly elsewhere in the novel. On the other hand, the subject matter of this epistle is not especially resonant with *Lolita*’s themes, and moreover, the accompanying Latin text and prose translation, by Leonard C. Smithers, make clear that the original phrase is simply “my light”:

Aut nihil aut paulo cui tum concedere digna  
Lux mea se nostrum contulit in gremium,  
Quam circumcursans hinc illinc saepe Cupido  
Fulgebat crocina candidus in tunica.

Worthy of yielding to her in naught or ever so little  
Came to the bosom of us she, the fair light of my life,

Round whom fluttering oft the Love-God hither and thither  
Shone with a candid sheen robed in his safflower dress.  
(ll. 131-34)

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Et longe ante omnes mihi quae me carior ipsost,  
*Lux mea*, qua viva vivere dulce mihist.

Lastly than every else one dearer than self and far dearer,  
Light of my life who alive living to me can endear. (emphasis added, ll. 159-60)

(*The Carmina of Caius Valerius Catullus*, Sir Richard F. Burton and Leonard C. Smithers, trans.  
[London, 1894]; at Project Gutenberg: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20732/20732-h/20732-h.htm> .

By far the most alluring precursor appears in Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet cycle *Astrophil and Stella*. This cycle chronicles the lyric hero's frustrating love for and courtship of the beautiful, and married, Stella. At the beginning of Sonnet 68, we read:

Stella, the only planet of my light,  
Light of my life, and life of my desire,  
Chiefe good, whereto my hope doth only aspire,  
World of my wealth, and heav'n of my delight:  
Why dost thou spend the treasures of thy sprite,  
With voice more fit to wed *Amphion's* lyre,  
Seeking to quench in me the noble fire.  
Fed by thy worth, and kindled by thy sight?  
(*The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, William A. Ringler, Jr., ed. [Oxford, UK: 1962], 163-238).

At this stage of the cycle, Astrophil, who early on professed an idealized love for Stella, has been struggling with stronger and stronger carnal desires. In stanza 63, he had cleverly interpreted her reply of "no, no" to his request for a kiss as a double negative, grammatically indicating her assent. Stanza 71 ends with the lines

So while thy beautie draws the heart to love,  
As fast thy Vertue bends that love to good:  
"But ah," Desire still cries, "give me some food."

Still she does not submit to his wish, and in the cycle's second song, between sonnets 72 and 73, Astrophil describes waiting for her to fall asleep. While she sleeps, he kisses her on the lips, apparently with some passion:

Yet those lips so sweetly swelling  
Do invite a stealing kisse:  
Now will I but venture this,  
Who will read must first learne spelling.  
Oh sweet kisse. But ah she is waking.

He quickly regrets that he stole so little (since a second opportunity is unlikely); Stella, apparently, is furious. He later suggests, asking for another kiss, that he “never more will bite” (sonnet 82), raising questions about the severity of his intrusion.

The phrasing and rhythm of the first four lines of sonnet 68 seem very strongly to anticipate Humbert’s opening intonations. No other example I have found, in any text, mimics the echoing “Light of my life, \_\_\_\_\_ of my \_\_\_\_\_” formula that Sidney and Nabokov both employ (Sidney repeats the “\_\_\_\_\_ of my \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ of my \_\_\_\_\_” parallelism in line 4 of the same sonnet). However, it is the thematic environment that speaks loudest for connecting this cycle to Nabokov’s novel. A forbidden love with supposedly ideal but also very real physical dimensions, and a kiss stolen during sleep: Humbert had intended slightly different caresses for his object, but on the whole his plan is parallel to Astrophil’s, albeit unfulfilled while Dolly sleeps. Again subtly anticipating Humbert, Astrophil’s story ends with sonnets lamenting Stella’s absence from him, but also calling her “my only light” (sonnet 108). Additionally, “Stella Fantasia” among Dolly’s classmates (*AnLo* 52), and “Gray Star” (4) as her destination, both seem to evoke in some strange way the star theme embodied in Sidney’s title characters.

To return briefly to *Andromache*, the theme of a doomed child, separated from its doomed parent, stands forth as a possible link between these works (although mother and child are eventually spared in the Euripides play), as in this early reference the phrase “light of my life” refers to the heroin’s “babe.” It is probably coincidence that Nabokov’s version uses the phrase to apostrophize simultaneously both a beloved female and a doomed child, who are in Dolly’s case the same person. Some circumstantial support for authorial intention appears in the fact that Humbert’s second phrase, “fire of my loins,” derives from a blend of the common locutions “fruit of my loins,” which clearly refers to offspring, and “fire of my heart” (*ardor cordis*), which relates specifically to passionate love; both of these produce generous sets of results in full-text searches (searching “loins” in full-text archives produces far more fruit than fire: Nabokov’s phrase appears to be unique; searching “fire of my” is mostly linked with “heart”; second place goes to “soul”). That Humbert’s second phrase, too, combines parental love with erotic passion suggests that Nabokov may well have been aware of the dual usage of “light of my life” in earlier literature. In any event, both of these phrases turn out to be surprisingly apt in their allusive potentials.

Perhaps others with better knowledge of Classical literature and Elizabethan poetry will be able to refine my suggestion, or find deeper implications for the connections proposed here.

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