Nabokov’s Lolita

Narrative Unreliability and Phenomenological Necessity

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Nabokov’s *Lolita* is at once ethically depraved and aesthetically marvelous. On aesthetic grounds, one notices immediately the glossy rhetorical veneer Nabokov uses to disguise Humbert’s ethical degradation. Humbert is both an artist, scholar, and cunning linguist, and his end is presumably to “immortalize” Lolita, or at least to create an image of Humbert the criminal that defies the reader’s expectations: “The book’s protagonist, narrator, and supposed author, Humbert Humbert, continually forces us to maintain a double perspective by calling on us to pass moral and legal judgment upon him as a man and aesthetic judgment upon him as an artist.”¹ The story is told through an atypical frame—unlike *Frankenstein* for instance, in which Shelley unfolds the story through several individual perspectives. Rather, it is framed with reference to the person doing the framing. Humbert imparts his experiences, vis-à-vis a memoir or diary, from prison, from memory alone; but it doesn’t stop there, for John Ray’s introduction and Nabokov’s afterward also clouds the reader’s approach. Thus, when attempting an adequate reading of Nabokov’s controversial novel one encounters inherent phenomenological problems, notably the limits of language with respect to subjectivity and memory, and the inevitable problem of the unreliable narrator. However, this paper, rather than discern whether or not narrative unreliability is “fixable,” it will suggest that because language possesses inherent limitations, and with reference to Humbert’s frame-within-a-frame narration, unreliability is essentially an unavoidable problem, and thus a phenomenological necessity. As a result, critical approaches must be able to expand their points of view, and attempt to see inside and out the nature of the novel, and not through a limited lens. First, an explication of the relevant aspects of the theory of phenomenology is required (that of intentionality), because in viewing *Lolita* phenomenologically, one must recognize that it is not merely that the reader is privy only to

Humbert’s “objects of consciousness,” but that the phenomena of Humbert’s experiences are both generated from a fictional memory, scripted by Nabokov, and related through various rhetorical techniques meant to deliberately confound and distort perceptions of fictional reality (and therefore, reader-reality). Furthermore, because the ethical surface of the novel is so overt, one must assume that Nabokov’s project suggests more than mere parody could suggest; that since individuals all have unique perceptions of reality, which are all rendered imprecisely through the imperfect yet necessary medium of language, the “problem” with Lolita is not only ethical but technical and theoretical. However, before venturing into phenomenology, I feel I ought to address a piece of criticism directly, for if said criticism proves to be solid, it may render any subsequent criticism on the novel inept and futile.

Trevor McNeely, in a staggeringly clever article, suggests that Nabokov’s intentions are to deliberately confound, and to lead interpreters into logically contradictory traps based on the moral/aesthetic polemic that seems to pervade Lolita’s critical landscape. McNeely claims that the moment the critic places his flag on one side of the debate, he is immediately consumed by the trickery of Nabokov, and that in reality, Nabokov’s devices point to authentic nihilism:

The Nabokov intellectual position, articulated in his Afterword and echoed by his commentators, is that Lolita is justified on aesthetic grounds alone, that no other criteria are relevant in judging it. I call this position nihilistic—that is to say, utterly meaningless, and known to be such by Nabokov—though masquerading as reasonable and logical proposition.\textsuperscript{3}


\textsuperscript{3} McNeely 189
Interestingly, and from the vantage point of phenomenological necessity, one cannot disprove McNeely’s theory. The object of Humbert’s consciousness becomes a wisp—a void lined with mirrors and prisms in which Humbert’s reflections become the reader’s perceptions, consuming time and energy into the depths of futile interpretation-seeking. However, his argument at least does what it itself suggests and avoids taking one of the prescribed stands rigged by Nabokov. To take the aesthetic stand, and argue that the moral depravity of Humbert is secondary to the poetic force of his language is to fall into Nabokov’s trap of necessarily condoning pedophilia and sex slavery: “Not only does Humbert’s style serve to trap the naïve reader and at the same time implicate him in Humbert’s crime, exactly as his creator has calculated.”

One must tread lightly when considering McNeely’s “solution” to Nabokov’s presumed riddle however, even though the evidence does appear to, in his explication of the evidence, stack up in his favor. Some have suggested that Nabokov’s “Lolita” is metaphorical embodiment; be it of the aesthetic perfection of the butterfly, or Lolita as romance-novel turned *ars poetica* in a castle full of mirrors. If Lolita is indeed a deliberate façade, it seems almost a vindictive snipe at academia, which in all its philistine glory took Nabokov’s bait and continues its attempt to derive some kind of valuable criticism from the novel while pretending to actually be able to avoid the moral abyss in which the central plot of the novel resides. McNeely continues:

> The dilemma here, however, is that the aesthetic approach, as we have seen, is nihilistic; it has no meaning; a great work of literature cannot be just verbal trickery; beautiful patterns of words in themselves mean nothing. The trick, then, for the commentator, is to base his indifference to the moral issue on the aesthetic

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4 McNeely 193  
argument, but to make selective use of the character argument at the same time in a desperation attempt to wring some meaning—any meaning—out of what Nabokov is doing.\(^6\)

The character argument is yet another facet of the critical debate, discounted by McNeely because it resembles too strongly the aesthetic argument. We may ignore the moral depravity of Humbert in favor of Humbert’s qualities as a character who *represents*, perhaps, Nabokovian literary technique. That is, as Ellen Pifer argues, Nabokov’s characters are “always illusory;” contrary to the realistic moral take on Humbert’s pedophilia, one may attempt to nonetheless see plausibility in the character as such, “connected to the author’s vision of reliability and to the logic of his method in rendering this reality.”\(^7\) Pifer goes on to suggest that, even in concrete terms, the enslavement of Lolita by Humbert the pedophile, contrary to McNeely’s assertions, does not render Humbert, or Lolita, victims of aesthetic nihilism; of *simple meaninglessness*: “Nabokov’s characters serve their literary master; but slaves, after all, are puppets only in the social sense. Their lack of autonomy does not necessarily rob them of intrinsically human qualities.”\(^8\) Conveniently, it appears that whichever one of these, among myriad others, is actually “correct” in its interpretation of *Lolita*, each necessarily serve to reinforce the phenomenological reader’s pursuit, driven by principles rooted in simple *existence*. The fact that the characters of *Lolita* simply are creations of Nabokov the author, rendered concretely by their appearance on the pages of the book, they necessarily appear as objects of the reader’s consciousness—in all their obfuscated glory, because they are “pressed into service by a master whose ambitions they serve,” they not only, as Pifer claims, “live or die within the language of

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6 McNeely 192
8 Pifer 11
their creator,” but they also maintain their feasibility as “real illusory” things because they, as the phenomenologist would say, are what they are.9

Is Nabokov truly this cunning, to be able to weave an intricate, aesthetically rich, rhetorically dynamic piece of literature into deliberate obscurity, so as to create a tripartite critical debate, each prong seemingly mutually exclusive? Perhaps his project parallels Eliot’s The Wasteland, or Joyce’s Finnegans Wake, among many others, in which the interpretive varieties and hues of signification are so different across the critical milieu that they almost have to be at least somewhat deliberate in their obscurity. But McNeely isn’t simply suggesting that Nabokov is attempting obscurity for obscurity’s sake; rather, Lolita in his view is indefinitely an organic farce, with reflexes enough to engage the reader’s moral and aesthetic sensibilities, while at the same time lulling the critic into believing that some semblance of its beauty as a work of literature succeeds in excusing or condoning pedophilia. Humbert, in one of his many interjections, speaking directly about his readers, says:

As greater authors than I have put it: “Let readers imagine” etc. On second thought, I may as well give those imaginations a kick in the pants. I knew I had fallen in love with Lolita forever; but I also knew she would not be forever Lolita…The word “forever” referred only to my own passion, to the eternal Lolita as reflected in my blood (65).10

Humbert is Nabokov’s means to draw the reader into the aesthetic and moral fray (and as a result, into concerns of his character), and in many cases, the reader becomes just as much a

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9 Pifer 11-12
10 Primary quotations taken from Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita, (New York, Vintage International, 1955), and will in all cases be cited in the body of the text in parentheses.
character, via his or her affective responses and presumed interpretations, as his protagonists. In doing so, one cannot help but notice the author’s profound awareness of the power of language to push the phenomenological boundaries, embedded innately into the language itself.

Indeed, *Lolita* possesses no lack of ethically abhorrent acts which Humbert is undoubtedly guilty. Each one ought to strike the reader into sympathetic paralysis. As we have already seen, simply ignoring the moral abhorrence which pervades the novel leads the reader into the same trap that focusing on the immorality exclusively does. The length Humbert is capable of going does not stop at Dolores; is in reality ethically unbounded and, at least in a non-fictional sense, defies justification and forgiveness: “He contemplates impregnating [Dolores] so that when she is too old to be of interest to him any more he can molest his own daughter by her.”11 Yet, Humbert’s, and thus Nabokov’s project, must possess something *more*, if that is at all possible. *Lolita* cannot simply be what it appears to be on its very suspect surface: “That is why the novel is in a way about the power of language—the capacity of language to express and disguise reality”12 However, it is not merely that language has such a capacity, but that such a capacity is so inherently embedded in its function as the communicative medium that in essence, every word a person utters or scripts necessarily disguises reality. While this at first seems to echo McNeely’s “solution,” the illusory elements of *Lolita* still maintain susceptibility to interpretation without conceding that its collapsed moral foundations deserve “interpretive” rebuilding. Nabokov wields the pen precisely because whatever that pen produces is his very own deliberate disguise. Again, echoing Pifer, but with a phenomenological bent, language is the artist’s gateway to and from realities which the art’s perceivers appear to only peripherally

12 McGinn 34
participate in. Yet, we do participate, and it becomes the reader’s prerogative primarily when evidence for “truth” in such a work is so difficult to extract. We, as readers, participate only insofar as we are pulled along by whatever clues Nabokov leaves for us. Language is, in fact, the only way in which human beings perceive phenomena in the world—the mind judges the nature of an object according to what it associates with that object. Any association the mind makes is accordingly rendered into language, which is itself subjective and unique. Nabokov certainly understood this.

If “Consciousness is consciousness of something,” the reader is only conscious of the objects Nabokov presents. The problems are most astute when viewed through the “doubled” frame of Humbert the artist, and Humbert the scoundrel. When asked about his particular creative process Nabokov said, “the design of my novel is fixed in my imagination and every character follows the course I imagine for him. I am the perfect dictator in that private world insofar as I alone am responsible for its stability and truth.”

Thus, if language is inherently deceptive, then the reader must engage Nabokov’s narrator cautiously, so as to avoid seeing truth and stability in the midst of deliberate deception and chaos. As Wayne C. Booth asks in *Rhetoric of Fiction*, “Can we really be surprised that readers have overlooked Nabokov’s ironies in *Lolita*, when Humbert Humbert is given full and unlimited control of the rhetorical resources?” It is clear that Humbert is guilty of that which he admits to. It is less clear the kind of message Nabokov is trying to convey. If McNeely is correct, and *Lolita* is simply a riddle which solves itself, the solution still depends upon the perceptions of the reader, as such. If Pifer is correct, and the correct interpretation resides in the characters as they function within the frame of the

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novel, *as deliberate* creations of its author, the reader is still primarily responsible for discerning such functions. Perhaps most importantly, the reader must be able to separate, somehow, Nabokov from Humbert, in order to see the novel as what it is, a work of fiction. Unfortunately, literary theory is so terrified of committing “intentional” fallacies, that they tend to ignore complete authorial intention, which it turns out is fatal when trying to unearth meaning in a book like *Lolita*. Thus, we attempt now to perceive intention as not fixed to the author as such, but intention as it is utilized as technique. Nabokov allows Humbert to control our perceptions of his intentions as character, narrator, and, if you will, author.

At the bottom of the phenomenological approach is the problem of and the distinction between intention and intentionality. Intention is located outside of the present moment, fixed insofar as it is impossible to find one’s way ontologically “through” time; intentionality is fixed and directed as well, but focused on objects directly in line of ontological consciousness. In other words:

Intention is reducible to logical statement, covered by verbal discourse, even if in a confused, indiscriminate state; it is frozen, a past or a future which may be or may not be accomplished. Intentionality is the eternal present, deeply rooted in the mind, undergirding every (or almost every) psychic structure. Aesthetic intentionality can be said to precede and to condition artistic creation, to inform it perennially, in a constantly renewed process. It is a mode of intending in
perceiving, in valuing, in judging, imagining, feeling, thinking, aspiring,
despairing, uttering, stammering, speaking, and being silent.\textsuperscript{15}

Nabokov, by establishing \textit{Lolita} through its interwoven frames, each serving in some sense to distort the others, creates deliberate confusion as to what Humbert’s end actually is. The simple erotic surface is often drowned, distorted, frustrated, by full stops in the narrative (“ladies and gentleman of the jury”), focused descriptive language, ironic games, puns and riddles. For instance, what is one to make of Humbert’s attempt at placing sex and art in some kind of aesthetic/moral hierarchy? “It is not the artistic aptitudes that are secondary sexual characters as some shams and shamans have said; it is the other way around: sex is but the ancilla of art” (259). Sex, Humbert tries to convince us, is the means to which one hoists up artistic prowess. How convenient. Further, one must consider \textit{subjectivity} as mutable between the two modalities presented through the character of Humbert. That is to say, the abhorrence of Humbert’s interactions with Lolita are “suspended,” phenomenologically speaking, in order to make way for Humbert’s \textit{own constitution} of Lolita as such, and of course, Dolores Haze, as the object and subject of both his ethically depraved consciousness and his aesthetic consciousness: “For all practical purposes phenomenological constitution is an intersubjective process requiring \textit{time}. This means that it is communal and historical, depending on other modes of constitution in society.”\textsuperscript{16} Constitution in this respect is different than the standard connotation: “it is a…construing, a deciphering, an interpretive reading, a making out, (a decoding, not an encoding), a bestowal of meaning upon the presentations from which all naturalistic connotations

\textsuperscript{15}Horia Bratu and Ileana Marculescu, "Aesthetics and Phenomenology." \textit{The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism}, 37.3 (Spring, 1979): 337.

\textsuperscript{16}Bratu and Marculescu 338.
Nabokov provides the reader with a dualistic “picture” of his intentionality—it changes based on the specific representations of each scenario presented by Humbert. But Humbert’s *intentions* are multifaceted as a result; he is captured and enthralled—arguably truly in love with Lolita, thus his affectations toward her maintain an ontological reality of their own. Humbert’s unreliability may be circumstantial, in that it is derived precisely from ambiguity, and thus subject solely to the perceiver’s subjective gaze, but Nabokov positions the reader in the interstices between both the situation *as it is* and the situation as it is to be interpreted. Humbert’s “constitution” as a character is then contingent upon the reader’s interpretation of him. Even if Nabokov in his usual defiance asserts that he has total control over the “truth and stability” of his characters, by equipping Humbert with the language necessary, he passes off control of that “truth” and “stability.” He (Nabokov, or, if one is courageous enough, the reader) arranges Humbert’s nature in such a polemically driven manner, which forces the reader to assess properties of Humbert’s character that arise as a result of the polemic, regardless of the particularities of the aesthetic veneer. Interestingly, Lo’s fascination, and thus Humbert’s disdain for popular culture, and notably cinema, has a peculiar phenomenological effect as well:

Even in cinematography, which a sense of representational realism seems to render impervious to the notion of Husserlian reduction, the initial and basic approach is to “distort,” i.e., to invest the surface of the screen with a fictive depth. This depth denotes the “impression of reality” within the fiction.¹⁸

From this view, one discerns Nabokov’s use of pedophilia as a kind of perverse “impression of reality” which subsequently brings to the fore deeper concerns regarding the limitations of

¹⁸ Bratu and Marculescu 341
language (even when the language is seemingly at its best). Humbert’s dual nature serves to illuminate the inability of the reader to render into appropriate frames an “interpretive” quality that stands on its own, which implies a kind of “negative feedback loop” concerning consciousness and phenomenal experience. Humbert’s “intentions” are clear, that is, his intentions as they are explicated in his “memoir” after the fact. He is who is because of what he does, thwarting immediately his expressed “concerns,” for his actions are themselves “real,” despite his justifications for them. Humbert, after sneakily violating Dolores, nonetheless expresses genuine concern that his actions were far from upstanding: “The elation with which the vision of new delights filled me was not horrible but pathetic. I qualify it as pathetic. Pathetic—because despite the insatiable fire of my venereal appetite, I intended, with the most fervent force and foresight, to protect the purity of that twelve-year-old child” (62-63). We recognize clearly that Humbert is untrustworthy, but Nabokov’s deliberate use of such a recognition forces responsibility on us as readers to maintain diligence in our interpretations: “[Humbert] is a whimsical and mischievous narrator, planting traps and gags all over the place, and defying us to trust him. But this means we have to be careful with our trust, not blandly and conveniently distrust everything he says.”19 Whether or not Nabokov meant to portray a kind of fully consummated nihilism with regard to his characters almost seems irrelevant at this point. Nabokov, it seems to me, was clever enough in his contrivances to render into clear view essentially all sides of the critical debate; indeed, Nabokov is no stranger to academia, and it seems that by stabilizing in his characters the moral dilemmas inherent in interpreting the novel, the problem of reconciling such bestial content with its myriad aesthetically fruitful techniques

becomes less a problem and more a technicality; a rhetorical or structural device with which the narrative exists.

Humbert’s ability to move wittily between interpretive modalities stems primarily from his capacity to force the reader into perceptive corners, hampering their critical faculties. He uses the dynamic “acoustic” quality of rhetorical space and time, bouncing his self-admitted immorality, which came into existence via his tantalizing episode with Annabel Leigh (time), off the more immediate, spatially and aesthetically intense experiences with Dolores: “It will be marked that I substitute time terms for spatial ones. In fact, I would have the reader see “nine” and “fourteen” as the boundaries—the mirrory beaches and rosy rocks—of an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea” (17). Annabel’s sudden death becomes a temporal point of reference from which Humbert is able to impart stunning, high-artistic, poetic (and spatial) Beauty onto Delores, both by idealizing Lolita as a form of Beauty and as the physical cause of his “daemon.” Space, in a sense, is allowed to supersede time, forcing the reader to scrutinize in greater detail the from-memory frame of the narrative. Surprisingly however, even the material elements of Lolita, as such, become suspended, casted off, as erudite phenomena, continuously drawing the reader in and out of seemingly reasonable, sympathetic conversation with Humbert as deviant predator of Dolores the ordinary girl:

Neither are good looks any criterion; and vulgarity, or at least what a given community terms so, does not necessarily impair certain mysterious characteristics, the fey grace, the elusive, shifty, soul-shattering, insidious charm that separates the nymphet from such coeals of hers as are incomparably more dependant on the spatial world of synchronous phenomena than on that intangible island of entranced time where Lolita plays with her likes (17).
Intangible “entranced time” thus becomes the grounds from which Humbert is able to transform reader sensibilities out of the “spatial world of synchronous phenomena.” He allows the perceiver a glimpse of the cause of his “affliction,” then follows it quickly with contrasting “mysteries;” elements of objects which require specific perceptive parameters he himself provides. One is reminded of perhaps the most powerful “affective” scene of the novel, when Humbert abruptly “concludes,” for all intents and purposes the first Part with the climax of a rather quirky dialogue with Dolores:

“Why can’t I call my mother if I want to?”

“Because,” I answered, “your mother is dead” (141).

Then, the actual “conclusion” to Part I follows, with Humbert listing various materials, indeed, various “objects,” blurring the reader’s vision. This is Nabokov at his best, I believe, because he uses language as a kind of cubic mirror, or prism, which when rotated reflects subjectivity differently depending on “where” the perceiver is located. Indeed, Humbert from the outset takes control of the reader’s perceptive gaze, manifesting objects as they “ought” to be perceived. Accordingly, the line “You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go,” which ought to be to the final straw, is distorted, mirroring Humbert’s own confusion of space (perception) and time (memory). The nymphet’s ability to enthrall a perceiver is conditioned specifically in such a way that those who become captives are oddly engaged from the inside out: “It is a question of focal adjustment, of a certain distance that the inner eye thrills to surmount, and a certain contrast that the mind perceives with a gasp of perverse delight” (17). Rotating the phenomenal “mirrored cube,” Humbert somehow lets us off the hook. We do not have to, as McNeely suggests, condone Humbert’s behavior, because Humbert allows us (somehow) to perceive his behavior
through an impenetrable “inner” lens. And at the same time, we are able to see with a similar contrast the way in which Nabokov uses language to shift the reader’s point of focus, away from the surface “qualities” of the character, into the nature of the character’s phenomenal experience. The gifts: “four books of comics, a box of candy, a box of sanitary pads” (141), become dually significant. They point directly to, indeed, they bring into the light the implications, as devastating as they are, of the entirety of the first half of the novel. They also “soften” the blow, and allow the reader to continue reading without being forced into condoning Humbert’s deviance.

It becomes increasingly clear that Nabokov’s project is not merely some simplistic riddle to be solved. Humbert controls us, but does not enslave us—we eventually find our own means of escaping. In truth, with respect to phenomenological interpretive techniques, one is able to peer in on Humbert as he “acts” from all the critical vantage points, aesthetic, moral, “character,” without having to subscribe to one over the other. The authorial approach of Humbert’s creator engages the reader through necessary contrivances, but not to fool us (now more perceptive readers than ever) into perceiving something that has no meaning. Rather, we are able to understand with respect to language’s necessarily limited subjective capacity, the similarly subjective, and thus, authentic, experiences of Humbert Humbert the Nabokovian derelict (and thus, moral example) and literary mechanism. Humbert, and therefore Nabokov, give us that ability—from all sides of the cube; even though the reflected phenomena differs, the cube itself does not change. Pifer, in concluding her discussion on the “question” of Nabokovian characters, entertains such a multi-pronged interpretive attack:

The relationship of a work of fiction to the world of immediate experience is always a figurative one. In much the same way that a model of the atom or of the
universe is only a structural analogy. Such models, and the various data of our experience which they help us to organize, are as close as we ever come to grasping the essence of reality. It is always by means of such constructs, or artifice, that we represent the world to ourselves. Why should we assume then, that Nabokov’s presentation of reality through artifice is any less serious an epistemological enterprise?  

Language is artifice. It is, as perhaps Nabokov tried to suggest, a “sham” of a representative capacity of reality, and thus only a mechanism with which to impart ideality.

Ralph Ciancio’s article “Nabokov and the Verbal Mode of the Grotesque” posits that despite Nabokov’s reduction of his fiction to aesthetics, “no serious writer, not even so obvious a genius as Nabokov, can substitute aesthetics for common sensory experience without raising metaphysical questions about the nature of that experience.”

Indeed, in precisely phenomenological terms, a “notion” like Lolita (the girl and the idea), with all of its moral underpinnings, requires the reader to determine what Humbert’s experience with Dolores means. Commentators that suggest Lolita is actually a love story follow Nabokov’s lead and focus most intently on the prose style, particularly the way in which Humbert recognizes his criminality and yet is inevitably forced to act—the affective responses to the presence of any Lolita repositions the reader from disgust to a semblance of sympathy. For instance, it is quite difficult to maintain sympathy after reading of Humbert’s imaginary impregnation of Charlotte so as to get her out of the way for a while: “with a nice Caesarean operation and other complications in a safe maternity ward sometime next spring, would give me a chance to be alone with my Lolita for weeks,

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20 Pifer 13  
perhaps—and gorge the limp nymphet with sleeping pills” (80). But then, some fifty pages later, having finally made it to The Enchanted Hunters, within “striking” distance of his goal, Humbert interjects:

Please, reader: no matter your exasperation with the tenderhearted, morbidly sensitive, infinitely circumspect hero of my book, do not skip these essential pages! Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me; try to discern the doe in me, trembling in the forest of my own iniquity; let’s even smile a little (129).

Humbert directs the gaze of the reader, commanding us to make “real” the machinations of the “hero,” because his nonexistence is a greater threat, somehow, than the impending relief of what has since been the infinite tantalization of his impulses. In a previous chapter, perhaps the shortest in the novel, Humbert removes himself from the telling of the tale as a tale and is forced to “recall” elements of his story that seem to set him atilt: “Don’t think I can go on” he laments, “Heart, head—everything. Lolita, Lolita... Repeat till the page is full, printer” (109). It is scarcely surprising, noting Nabokov’s technique of weaving in and out of abhorrent moral territory with very human, sensible interjections, that following this seemingly desperate call for repose, Humbert’s relationship with Dolores takes the climactic turn. Perhaps this particular instance is an example of what Ciancio calls his “grotesque antics of form and style.”22 Formally, the first real “sex scene” is preceded by a clear hurdle in Humbert, the narrator who normally has no trouble with language. Ciancio goes on, after noting that many of Nabokov’s novels exist in realms of the supernatural and fantastical: “But even where, as in Lolita, the superstructure appears to be naturalistic, Nabokov’s prose leaks with fiendish timing, so that just as we begin to

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22 Ciancio 511
glide with the lilt of happy cadences, disconcerting drafts from one sentence blow through succeeding ones…and our sensuous hold on the world suddenly breaks apart.”

And it is not so much that this odd “meta” break in Humbert’s narrative is grotesque, but that it establishes another kind of internal frame, from which the reader must reconsider both what came before, and must prepare for whatever it is that is on the horizon. Humbert’s repetitive lamentation, “Lolita, Lolita” makes us reconsider his character, and the moral foundations begin to cloud the interpretive skies again. Is it excusable, as McNeely would inquire, that we allow ourselves to become somehow sympathetic, knowing that probably, through the following conclusion of Part 1, Ciancio’s grotesque end might take place? Cianco writes: “Art is an inspired lie, not life, and woe to those characters who fail to recognize the difference…who…attempt to escape their fictive bondage as though their fate were of their own making.”

Accordingly, and undoubtedly to the reader’s surprise, the thing which Nabokov has alluded to, and successfully dodged up to this point realizes itself. Humbert tells us quite abruptly, after he refuses to “dwell…on the tremors and gropings of that distant night” that “it was she who seduced me” (132). And yet, the oscillations continue, between the dreadfulness of the thing itself and the charges that Humbert—the soul in control—continuously overlays the experience with. Perhaps this instance is indeed the reemergence of Nabokov’s “aesthetic intentionality.” That is, the thing in which the entire novel up to this point has suggested might just happen, does happen. And yet Humbert states he is “not concerned with so-called ‘sex’ at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets” (134).

Of all the startling and, I must add, brilliant, passages in Lolita, these few chapters and specifically the final sentence of Part One, chapter 29, is most disturbing and startling. Just as

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23 Ciancio, 512
24 Ciancio, 512
Humbert states in his quarrel with Charlotte after she commands they take a trip to England, the reader somehow must “ignore the particular.” Somehow, we must simply do away with the experience of Humbert, a rather disgusting moral vermin, in a hotel bed with Lolita, Dolores Haze, a child, so finely explicated and built up from the very beginning of the novel. We must not “ignore the general” (91). We must understand that Humbert’s intentionality, his end in the present-present of the experience, is (or was) to “fix” in form; to render out of obscurity; to break the “issue” as such, out of its socio-moral prison; to immortalize the nymphet’s “perilous magic.” And we do, at least to some extent. We cannot help after reading this novel to at least entertain the possibility that Nabokovian aesthetic technique, however grotesque, is “coherent and supernal,” so even when he plants his sense of the Beautiful in the ugliest soil imaginable, that sense still yields Art: “Nabokov’s art exists by virtue of the self-contradictions it contains…reality yields to the illusion of reality which in turn yields to the reality of illusion, to the affirmation of some aesthetic sphere that transcends even as it evokes its own negation.”

Coming to terms with such complexity in Nabokov’s work requires a barrage of distinction making, especially since Lolita’s moral concerns are so divisive. Unreliable narration, in turn, forces the reader to “expect” deception. Such an expectation immediately taints whatever authenticity the novel contains. But Nabokov’s unreliable narrators, because they appear deceptive, and indeed, are wrought with self-aggrandizements (hoisting up, as it were) and self-conscious reflections, doubts of self, insecurities, etc., force us to reexamine the idea of unreliability. James Phelan, accordingly, reacts by distinguishing “estranging unreliability” from “bonding unreliability,” each functioning according to their coinage:

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25 Ciancio 517-518
In estranging unreliability, the discrepancies between the narrator’s reports, interpretations, or evaluations and the inferences about those things made by the authorial audience leave these two participants in the communicative exchange distant from one another—in a word, estranged… In bonding unreliability, the discrepancies between the narrator’s reports, interpretations, or evaluations and the inferences of the authorial audience have the paradoxical result of reducing the interpretive, affective, or ethical distance between the narrator and the authorial audience.  

Nabokov creates a distance between his readers that is itself “hazy” and illusory; between the reader he “knows” will be attempting interpretation and his deliberate authorial workings generated through his narrators and their “objects.” We are estranged most distinctly when we presume Humbert’s machinations have “grander” implications than simply the satisfaction of his deranged impulses. He’ll position us cleverly “between” his fictive reality, and his “idealized” non-reality, each, in their extreme localities, holding on to opposing logic which Humbert and accordingly, Nabokov, expects us to be able to reconcile. For instance, the fantastic “alchemical” combination of Humbert’s depravity (as even he understands it), and his ideal, almost Platonic representation of the very sources of that depravity, are riddled with suggestions that he both has control and is at the same time enslaved: “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). And just when we, as his frustrated yet fascinated readers, feel as if we have some kind of grasp of the paradoxical dualism of Humbert Humbert (fitting

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direct “pun” for a name) we are again left uncertain, as if trust itself can wield equally deceptive mirrors. That is, just when we convince ourselves that we “get” the paradox, Nabokov finds a way to, in a sense, use the paradox to reconcile itself. Amazingly, reconciliation, typically a “positive” phenomenon, the thing we at first assumed we were pursuing, becomes the very culprit of our confusion. A remarkable example of this, and perhaps one that has been understandably ignored, is when Humbert expresses his frustrations with Dolores’s undesirable behavior, specifically his description of her quarrel with him over going to Beardsley for day school. We see our strange new enemy, “reconciliation,” appear when the language he (perhaps in this instance inserting Nabokov for the “he” is most adequate) uses in her (Lolita’s) stead mirrors quite precisely the methods Humbert himself uses with the reader consistently throughout the novel:

Some twenty miles earlier I had happened to tell her that the day school she would attend at Beardsley was a rather high-class, non-coeducational one, with no modern nonsense, whereupon Lo treated me to one of those furious harangues of hers where entreaty and insult, self-assertion and double talk, vicious vulgarity and childish despair, were interwoven in an exasperating semblance of logic which prompted a semblance of explanation from me” (171)

The “explanation” which is prompted as a consequence of Lolita’s “harangue,” is the same sort of explanatory requirement the reader “blindly” undertakes when Humbert uses similar tactics—notably self-assertion, double talk, vulgarity, despair, all coated and reinforced paradoxically with “exasperating [semblances] of logic.” Humbert’s techniques are themselves unreliable, obviously, but they possess a kind of internally reflexive fortitude. It appears, thus, that Nabokov intricately plants clues and signs that tell the reader quite specifically what they ought to be
perceiving. This strange inverted mirroring hearkens back to the notion that Nabokov’s use of unreliability is technical; he takes advantage of the fact that intentions are inevitably disguised in illusory rhetorical “harangues” of intentionality, and the reader is left to unstitch an already convoluted tapestry of mere traces of purpose, meaning, value, stability, and truth. Indeed, truth itself becomes paradoxical, because what we presume ought to foster clarity becomes further evidence of illusion.

Nonetheless, Nabokov leaves us with no shortage of suspect passages, allowing us to sink our teeth in, and proceed with our unrelenting questioning, prodding and probing the underbelly of Lolita’s labyrinthine mass. Just when Humbert seems most in control—a device used to refocus our attention as receptive, perhaps vainly sympathetic readers—he attempts strangely to ponder fate. Fantastically, fate’s implied nature always suggests something like what the Stoic thinker Seneca masterfully wrote; that we ought to proceed in stride, moving with fate, for it has its own will of sorts, and in choosing to fight against it we allow it to, as it inevitably shall, drag us along by our hair. Humbert’s dabbling with notional fate is actually quite different, even though it appears to offer some resemblance. He ponders the nature of the legality of his “guardianship” over the orphaned Dolores, and obviously because the nature of his relationship is so questionable, if he were to appeal to some legal expert, myriad forms of backlash could ensure, destroying his hellish paradise: “What stopped me was the awful feeling that if I meddled with fate in any way and tried to rationalize her fantastic gift, that gift would be snatched away” (173). And yet, this short musing appears quite odd, as if meddling with criminality and pedophilia were not already more in revolt of fate’s “gifts.” Indeed, this statement in itself is a rationalization, which any close enough reader easily locates in Humbert’s narrative as a staple technique. He rationalizes because it is the only means which he can utilize to continue his
diabolical enslavement of Dolores, even when faced with his very own manifestations of guilt. But this makes sense, does it not?

In some sense, artists are aesthetic “rationalizers;” they break nature into disparate parts and reassemble them into framed, relatively believable, ontologically stable “forms.” James Tweedle’s interesting engagement with Lolita emphasizes the Nabokovian “meddling” with the unbounded nature of language; his prose is crafted in such a way that the reader actually feels convinced of Humbert’s attempt at “immortalizing” Lolita—that “perilous magic of nymphets.” If Nabokov’s narrator is thus a linguistic contrivance, within the bounds of the narrative itself, it appears indeed that “Nabokov has created in Humbert Humert a narrator who strives with great alacrity, even desperation, to capture perfectly in words a human form.”27 But Humbert fails, does he not? Tweedle continues: “One continued value of Lolita emerges from the never-ending patterns woven into the text, patterns that allow the novel to outstrip its commentators…forcing us to confront the contradictions inherent in Humbert’s representation and his desperate attempts to conceal those contradictions.”28 Desperate indeed, perhaps much like academia’s continued attempt at unearthing some linear, all-conclusive, internally stable interpretation of a novel which seems to defy such attempts naturally. Humbert’s failure in immortalizing Lolita mirrors the reader’s failure, in presuming an interpretive approach can capture the nuances of the novel. And yet, in this attempt at “interpretation” there suspiciously emerges a kind of agnosticism, an interpretation of a sort, which in itself “stabilizes” one’s perception of Lolita. Tweedle goes on to conclude that the nuanced and very conspiratorial “details” of the novel, once pulled together “emerge as the whole.” But this particular inquirer (“I”) still feels a wave of uneasiness regarding

28 Tweedle 169
such a conclusion. One finds that critical theory, as it stands, while offering a variety of approaches, still tends to reduce, to constrict the critic’s ability to see more than what they think is there. Perhaps Nabokov’s genius maintains its presence so distinctly because he was able to provide evidence for nearly any kind of interpretation, while at the same time maintaining that specific interpretations could never “fully” get the picture.

Problems inherent to literary theory arise because like most specialist disciplines of very different natures, it is assumed that specific approaches to conflict automatically cancel other approaches out; to “read” phenomenologically is essentially to “banner” one’s self under the, quite “easy,” relativist reader-response corner of the discipline. But as Nabokov shows, the phenomena of a character’s experience, even as artifice, has claims to its own ontological milieu—Lolita becomes about what Humbert and Dolores “bring about” in the minds of their perceivers, and those objects of interpretation prove to be many. The object of Humbert’s consciousness necessarily becomes one of many objects of the reader’s consciousness. Phenomenology “claims to show us the underlying nature both of human consciousness and ‘phenomena.’” But the phenomena which Nabokov contrives is subject to the perceptive reorientations that Humbert, the character, controls. If one commits to restricting interpretation to only what the perceiver, or the critic perceives, which has predominately been reductionist at the core, the many sided nature of Lolita narrows considerably, preventing interpreters from penetrating Nabokov’s complex puzzles. Thus, it appears the narrator’s unreliable nature is indeed necessary, all the more reason to allow for a more diversified approach to the novel’s interpretation.