

Orality and Social Memory in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

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As any reader of *Lolita* knows, Vladimir Nabokov's novel is characterized by the strong, central voice of its narrator, Humbert Humbert, opening as it does with one of the most famous apostrophes in literary history. Humbert lures readers in, seducing them with his confiding tone and the ornate register of his language—he himself refers somewhat self-mockingly to his “fancy prose style.”¹ But the language of the novel does not so much capture Humbert's writing style as his *speaking* style, suffused as it is with markers of oral performance. More important, however, is the fact that this oral performance undergoes a surprising transformation, from what initially seems like a courtroom defense to what reveals itself, in the novel's final pages, as literary memoir. In this essay, I argue that Humbert's turn to memoir represents, within the novel, the character's attempt to more effectively control the narrative and thus his own legacy, by way of suppressing the dialogism inherent to oral performance. Ultimately, however, this attempt is shown to fail, as Nabokov intentionally weakens the persuasiveness of Humbert's narrative, restoring a sense of morality to a novel often thought to delight in its own immorality.

Critical readership of Nabokov's novel has not failed to notice the self-consciously arch literary style of Humbert's narration. Much of the scholarly apparatus provided by Alfred Appel Jr. in *The Annotated Lolita* was devoted to explicating the many allusions made by the novel's narrator, and to providing a guide through the thicket of Humbert's rich vocabulary.² In Appel's words, “Many kinds of allusions are identified: literary, historical, mythological, Biblical, anatomical, zoological, botanical, and geographical. . . . Puns, coinages, and comic etymologies, as well as foreign, archaic, rare, or unusual words are defined” (1991:xi-xiii). Indeed, Appel himself played an important role in shifting critical attention away from more traditional literary-critical concerns such as the reliability of the narrator and the ambiguous moral standing of the text to questions of language and intertextuality. Since then, of course, scholarship on *Lolita* has bloomed to encompass a panoply of critical approaches.³

¹ “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” (Nabokov 1991:9). This self-deprecating statement is debatable (one need only think of Steinbeck or Faulkner's murderers) and yet it suggests a gentleman misunderstood by his inferiors (“fancy”). This impression is corroborated shortly thereafter by the survey of “historical” examples of aristocratic approval of pedophilia (19).

² As Appel notes in his preface, *The Annotated Lolita* was “the first annotated edition of a modern novel published during its author's lifetime” (1991:xi).

³ I refer here to Roper 2015 and to Bertram and Leving 2013. For a comprehensive collection of scholarly takes see the rather recent Pifer 2003 and Kuzmanovitch and Diment 2008.

Yet of these various themes, one whose depths have not yet been exhaustively plumbed is that of orality. As Monica Manolescu has importantly noted in her contribution to a recent edited volume, “it is time to reassess the role played by orality in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* and more largely in Nabokov’s work, a topic that has been obscured by the predominant view of Nabokov as a ‘writerly’ writer of infinite premeditation” (2017:85).⁴ Though *Lolita* and other novels by Nabokov have been subjected to analysis by folklorists, relatively little has been written about the oral qualities of Nabokov’s work in general and even less about *Lolita* specifically.⁵

Nomi Tamir-Ghez tallies the instances of apostrophe to an imagined audience in the text, ultimately claiming that they are examples of ineffectual rhetoric, which only highlight the true redemption of the character when the conceit is abandoned at the end of the novel (2003:18):

Throughout the novel, while Humbert does his best to justify himself, the reader is made aware of his rhetoric, and this awareness counteracts any feelings of empathy that might have developed. Only at the end, when he leaves behind all pretense of self-justification and turns instead to self-castigation, does Humbert win over the reader and close the distance between them. While all the efforts of the narrator to win over the reader fail, the author finally wins us over, using as his strongest weapon the protagonist’s own realization of his guilt.

The question of whether Humbert Humbert’s confession is persuasive is of course an intensely subjective one, but there are reasons to resist the notion that either Nabokov or Humbert win the reader over in any straightforward sense. My reading of *Lolita*, which draws on theoretical work by Benjamin and Halbwachs, instead suggests that the ending represents the culmination of the narrator’s efforts to exploit literary forms drawn from oral performance for their rhetorical and persuasive potential. I argue that the failures and fissures in the narrative, such as Humbert’s self-professed mawkishness, and half-glimpsed breaks in the chronology of the story, are presented by the author in an effort to encourage the reader’s critical stance toward Humbert’s manipulation of the narrative and as an invitation to question his reliability while moving beyond subjective reading of the text.

To begin, this premise is supported by Nabokov’s own texts on literature and *Lolita* in

⁴ I am grateful to the author for sharing her work with me before its publication.

⁵ Cf. Haber 1977; Ciancio 1977; Jones 1980; Wepler 2011.

particular.⁶ In his “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” which he insisted be published with the novel, Nabokov implicitly condemns emotional identification with a novel’s hero or heroine, insisting on an “art for art’s sake” perspective. He writes (Nabokov 1991:314-15):

There are gentle souls who would pronounce *Lolita* meaningless because it does not teach them anything. I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction and, despite John Ray’s assertion, *Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss.

My argument that Nabokov knowingly weakens the persuasive quality of his protagonist’s narrative thus recuperates a modicum of morality for what is otherwise a book that insists on the merits of a predator’s prose. But the reader’s judgment of the narrator, I argue, does not hinge on the reader’s ability or inability to identify with him but, rather, on whether the reader does or does not deem the narrator to be persuasive. I will demonstrate below that the text repeatedly emphasizes the social context of an individual defending himself before an audience, and thus occasioning such a judgment on the narrator’s credibility. It is in this sense that morality is at issue in and central to the text.

In the essay mentioned above, “‘I Speak Like a Child’: Orality in Nabokov,” Manolescu productively dwells on Nabokov’s personal statements and life as a teacher. She draws on his stated inability to deliver impromptu oral remarks, as well as on examples from throughout his critical and fictional oeuvre to develop a sense of the author, writing (Manolescu 2017:86-87):

There are moments in Nabokov’s texts when oral narratives remain irreducible to writing, either resisting transcription or possessing an aura of authority and authenticity that is lost or suppressed in writing. . . . [S]poken discourse definitely appears as a medium distinct from writing, albeit in close interaction with it, and its ephemerality leads to moments when artistic mastery is relinquished or simply made irrelevant.

The above overview of her argument explains Manolescu’s sustained analysis of Humbert

⁶ To emphasize the timeless nature of great literature and its inability to serve as historical witness, Nabokov wrote: “The truth is that great novels are great fairy tales—and the novels in this series are supreme fairy tales” (1980:2). Later in the same essay, Nabokov postulates (5-6):

There are three points of view from which a writer can be considered: he may be considered as a storyteller, as a teacher, and as an enchanter. A major writer combines these three—storyteller, teacher, enchanter—but it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer. To the storyteller we turn for entertainment, for mental excitement of the simplest kind, for emotional participation, for the pleasure of travelling in some remote region in space or time. A slightly different though not necessarily higher mind looks for the teacher in the writer. Propagandist, moralist, prophet—this is the rising sequence. We may go to the teacher not only for moral education but also for direct knowledge, for simple facts. Alas I have known people whose purpose in reading the French or Russian novelists was to learn something about life in gay Páree or in sad Russia. Finally, and above all, a great writer is always a great enchanter, and it is here that we come to the really exciting part when we try to grasp the individual magic of his genius and to study the style, the imagery, the pattern of his novels or poems.

By these criteria, Humbert Humbert would receive high marks as a storyteller and perhaps enchanter, but Nabokov allows ample ground for criticism of his attempt to serve as moralist.

Humbert's voice and sensitivity to the vocal, as well as her attention to the general lack of direct quotation of Lolita herself. Manolescu finds that the title character's climactic account of her escape from Humbert Humbert offers one brief interlude of "narrative agency. . . . Her discourse is the expression of freedom and vocal maturity (hence her 'new voice'), although it is submitted to Humbert's typical narrative mediation" (2017:92). Despite her emphasis on the novel's orality in terms of dialogue, however, Manolescu does not remark on what in Genette's terms we could call the novel's "narrative instance," namely the conceit that the novel's text consists of notes Humbert is preparing for a courtroom speech in his own defense, an apologia. As we will see, the text is rife with direct addresses to an imagined audience, both in the sense of an imagined courtroom audience as well as that of a general reading public, largely one-directional addresses that dampen the supposedly dialogic nature of the novel.

The first lines of Humbert Humbert's narration insist on the evocation of an oral situation by focusing on the physical movement of the tongue in speaking the title character's name: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta" (Nabokov 1991:9). Just as the oral poet apostrophized his muse for inspiration, Humbert Humbert, tasting the name on his lips and feeling how it is spoken, begins to address an audience that would have been sitting before him.⁷ What we are reading, as Humbert will tell us on the penultimate page, were meant to be notes for what is effectively an oral performance of the tale. The narrator explains (308),

When I started, fifty-six days ago, to write *Lolita*, first in the psychopathic ward for observation, and then in this well-heated, albeit tombal, seclusion, I thought I would use these notes in toto at my trial, to save not my head, of course, but my soul. In mid-composition, however, I realized that I could not parade living Lolita. I still may use parts of this memoir in hermetic sessions, but publication is to be deferred.

Let us imagine for a moment the situation in which Humbert would have delivered his address orally. Captured for the murder of his nemesis double Clare Quilty, Humbert could be facing the death penalty. His motivation is to tell the jury his side of the story, to explain a crime, "the cause and purpose [of which] would have remained a complete mystery" were it not for the pages we are reading (4). This narrative was to be, in John Miles Foley's words, a "voiced text" (2002:43),⁸ and it would have been placed against the hard evidence available to police, and testimony from other witnesses, perhaps—and most importantly—including Lolita herself.

⁷ One might compare *Lolita*'s opening lines to those of Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey* in terms of apostrophic invocations: "Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles. . . . Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed" and "Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns," as Robert Fagles (1990:77 and 1996:77) renders the first lines of each respectively in his translations.

⁸ Foley writes, "What separates this kind of verbal art from contemporary written poetry enshrined in literary reviews, chapbooks, and anthologies is precisely its intended medium of publication, the means by which it reaches an audience. Voiced Texts aim solely at oral performance and are by definition incomplete without that performance. Compare this trajectory with the more usual and familiar kind of written poetry, which aims primarily at transmission through print to an audience of silent, individual readers" (2002:43).

But, according to the (fictional) foreword by a certain “John Ray Jr.,” this was not to be, for Humbert “died in legal captivity, of coronary thrombosis, on November 16, 1952, a few days before his trial was scheduled to start,” and “Mrs. ‘Richard F. Schiller’ [Lolita] died in childbed, giving birth to a stillborn girl, on Christmas Day 1952, in Gray Star, a settlement in the remotest Northwest” (Nabokov 1991:4).⁹

In many ways, these deaths perfectly suit Humbert’s desires. The above quote shows that, at some point, a literary text became the vehicle preferable to oral testimony, and the necessity of such a performance was annulled by the narrator’s death. As Humbert had intended, neither he nor Lolita are alive at the time of publication, and because “Lolita” is not capable of presenting the truth, Humbert’s final words ring eerily true: “one wanted to have H. H. exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. . . . And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (309). The possessive of this last word is apt. Lolita is the narrator’s pet name for his beloved, an imposed redefinition of her character that centers on one man’s perception. This brings to light an essential trap of this narrated testimony—that despite an appeal to a factual basis, the reader is here limited to a homodiegetic character’s perspective, a character with plenty of reason to deceive.

The narrative instance of the novel reinforces Humbert’s domination over the narrative by not only exploiting the first-person limited perspective, but also the third-person limited perspective, and even at times shades of an omniscient perspective. As an example of a subtle suggestion of distance between the narrator and a human persona, Humbert Humbert uses a pseudonym, with which he refers to himself in a sly third person with occasional epithets. For example, he claims “Humbert Humbert is also infinitely moved by the little one’s slangy speech, by her harsh high voice” (43). Humbert’s epithets for himself such as “Humbert the Hound” or “Humbert the Terrible” make light of his abhorrent behavior with a self-mocking tone that invites exculpation.¹⁰ The narrator, though meant to seem objective and yet sympathetic, persistently reinforces his own monopolizing perspective.¹¹

Humbert Humbert’s direct apostrophes to his jury all take place in the first half of the book, with the first occurring on the first page of the text: “Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns.” He then introduces an autobiographical sketch of his childhood, of which more below. The “ladies and gentlemen of the jury” will be addressed twice more in those exact words (87, 103), and at other times emphasis is added, for example in the exclamation

⁹ That Lolita’s daughter is stillborn seems meaningful given that that Humbert Humbert at one point fantasizes about molesting Lolita’s daughter and even granddaughter (Nabokov 1991:174).

¹⁰ Humbert Humbert uses the following epithets: “Humbert the Bel” (Nabokov 1991:41), “Humbert the Hoarse” (48), “Humbert the Wounded Spider” (54), “Humbert the Humble” (55), “Humbert the Hummer” (57), “Humbert the Hound” (60), “Humbert the Cubus” (71), “Humbert the popular butcher” (108), “widower Humbert” (111), “friend Humbert” (148), “Humbert the Terrible” (275), and in a case of split personality: “In fact—said high-and-dry Humbert to floundering Humbert . . .” (229). These self-deprecating turns of phrase are distinctly more flattering than his references to Charlotte as “fat Haze” (43), “the old girl” (45), or “busybody Haze” (61), though she is often “the Haze woman” or simply “Haze.”

¹¹ Despite our dependence on Humbert Humbert, when we reread the novel, it is possible to fill in some gaps in the narrative. For example, certain moments such as Lolita’s happiness (Nabokov 1991:202), inexplicable to Humbert Humbert at the time, can with hindsight be traced to a secret encounter with Quilty, Lolita’s future lover.

“Jurors!” (123). Assuming a situation of verbal address, Humbert names his audience in the attempt to maintain their attention and to develop a relationship with a group of people whose task is to judge him.

At times Humbert feels the need to directly address the ladies of the jury, for example, “Gentlewomen of the jury! Bear with me!” (123). When it comes to describing the first copulation between Humbert and Lolita they are “frigid gentlewomen of the jury,” but they then become “sensitive gentlewomen of the jury” just a few pages later (132, 135).¹² When addressing the male members of the jury regarding the ultimate failure of his relations with Lolita, however, Humbert appears to expect sympathy for his lust and fear: “I should have known . . . that nothing but pain and horror would result from the expected rapture. Oh, winged gentlemen of the jury” (125).¹³ Humbert Humbert makes assumptions of each gender’s potential reaction to his narrative and attempts to address them—and appeal to their sympathy—accordingly.

The apostrophes cited above are the first step towards highlighting the oral quality of *Lolita*, and yet there are just as many apostrophes to *readers* throughout the text. The author of the fictional foreword, John Ray Jr., has already foreshadowed the shift from oral testimony to literary memoir described above by referring to the manuscript he has edited and providing his own view on the inherent tension of the work as somewhere between a novel and a diary (3-5). Early in the novel, in the context of an excerpt from his “diary” in which he describes knowing that he could kiss Lolita with impunity, Humbert interrupts himself to say that he “cannot tell the learned reader (whose eyebrows, I suspect, have by now traveled all the way to the back of his bald head), I cannot tell him how the knowledge came to me” (48).¹⁴ It becomes clear, then, that the oral and literary qualities of his narration are by no means mutually exclusive. In other words, there is no definitive threshold beyond which an oral testimony becomes a literary one. Rather, elements of both are intertwined throughout, despite Humbert’s claim that he began with the intention of crafting a verbal performance and decided at the end of his endeavors that a literary document would be more appropriate (308-09).

Humbert Humbert’s imaginary testimony begins with two “exhibits,” playing on the idea of showing his audience physical evidence, as though he were serving as his own lawyer. The first exhibit comprises reminiscences of his childhood, which are meant to be accompanied with photographs.¹⁵ “I am going to pass around in a minute some lovely, glossy-blue picture-postcards,” we read, yet no such photographs are included in the text (9). As Humbert further

¹² Cf. Herbold 2008 and Wakamiya 2008.

¹³ Tamir-Ghez (2003:30-32) suggests that “winged gentleman” is a backhanded compliment, as the intended allusion to Poe’s “Annabel Lee” speaks of jealous seraphs, and thus the apostrophes to the jury are perceptibly more negative than those to the reader discussed below. It seems to me that Humbert Humbert associates his “learned reader” with the therapists he has duped in the past, and that they are not a privileged audience. Rather, I will suggest below that Humbert Humbert tires of addressing an audience at all and falls into hermeneutic sentimentality.

¹⁴ Cf. the “blonde-bearded scholar” (Nabokov 1991:59, 135, 228).

¹⁵ Humbert Humbert’s summary of his early life centers on the love affair he identifies as a precursor to his relationship with Lolita, setting up a textbook example of the Freudian psychosis of melancholia. It seems that John Ray Jr. of the foreword has fallen for it, though Nabokov directly contradicts this interpretation in his appended essay.

explains, his father owned a hotel on the Riviera, therefore postcards are likely readily available. Yet this detail informs us that personal pictures will not be presented, only a commercial product far less likely to provide irrefutable evidence of Humbert's claims about himself. This is but a shadow of the problematic nature of his second exhibit, a diary recording his brief residence with Charlotte and Dolores Haze in Ramsdale. The diary deserves attention for the interesting interstitial point it represents between oral and literary dimensions of the text.

The diary to which Humbert appeals seems to be authentic documentary evidence, but we learn it is produced from memory, thus negating the purpose of a written text as an external support. Describing this "exhibit two," Humbert says (40):

I speak of this neat product of the Blank Blank Co., Blankton Mass., as if it were really before me. Actually, it was destroyed five years ago and what we examine now (by courtesy of a photographic memory) is but its brief materialization, a puny unfledged phoenix.

This reference to the diary is an appeal to the facts, to the pretense of an indisputable record of the events. Yet a diary is in obvious respects a questionable piece of evidence. One might use a diary to establish thoughts on a specific period of one's life, to introduce a sort of testimony from that time, which would be unaffected by later thoughts and motivations. In this case, however, such a use is negated by the fact that Humbert is relying on his *memory* of the diary, only proving, as we shall discuss in reference to the theories of Maurice Halbwachs below, that memory is a reconstruction of the past based on the present point of view.

Also, Humbert's inclusion of "Blank Blank Co., Blankton Mass." is peculiar, to say the least. If he had forgotten the actual name, it would have been easy to omit it. Most likely this turn of phrase is meant to suggest the actual names were unimportant. However, this omission draws more attention to the fact that Humbert controls our access to information and is already imposing his idea of what we need to know onto his reconstruction of the document in question. This impression is heightened when Humbert continues (40),

I remember the thing so exactly because I wrote it really twice. First I jotted down each entry with pencil (with many erasures and corrections) on the leaves of what is commercially known as a "typewriter tablet"; then, I copied it out with obvious abbreviations in my smallest, most satanic, hand in the little black book just mentioned.

This is odd behavior for a diary; indeed, it sounds more like the preparations of a manuscript of a novel for publication, as Humbert hoped to convince his wife Charlotte when she discovered the diary (96). All in all, the reader has learned that the supposedly credible written record of the diary has been subjected to a great deal of editorial discretion in the vein of written revision. Despite his overtures to oral narrative, Humbert has also exploited the potential for revision offered by written texts.

The carefully emplotted exhibits one and two are followed by romantic tropes (sketched with similar meticulousness) that are comparable to folklore motifs, meant to make the narrator's kidnapping and abuse of a child fit within accepted social norms. As Walter Ong has described,

the recurrence of motifs in oral tradition is “conservative or traditionalist” in the sense that it serves to introduce new material in a standardized format (1982:41-42):

Narrative originality lodges not in making up new stories but in managing a particular interaction with this audience at this time—at every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely into a unique situation, for in oral cultures an audience must be brought to respond, often vigorously. . . . In oral tradition, there will be as many minor variants of a myth as there are repetitions of it

Humbert’s apologia employs the well-known motifs and plot structure of a fairy-tale-like love story to lull the audience into a sense of familiarity with and, eventually, understanding for his crimes. For example, his journey through the American “wilderness” (Nabokov 1991:149, 152, 158, 281) might be compared to the taxonomized folklore motifs of the refuge for lovers for Humbert Humbert (R312.1) and captivity for our princess Lolita (R10.1). Lolita, in turn, escapes from her undesired lover (T320ff.), though only after a quest for her (H1385.5) does Humbert find his lost love (T96) and vanquish his villainous double.¹⁶ Humbert thus makes use of his audience’s assumed familiarity with a body of stories, punctuating his story with recognizable tropes.

Though folklore motifs might seem like the basic ingredients of most romantic fiction, Humbert Humbert’s testimony also reflects the even more complicated and canonical structural analysis of folklore such as Propp’s (1968) schemata of the thirty-one functions of folktales. In Propp’s terms, the broad strokes of Humbert’s story break down to *abstention* and *interdiction* (regarding his predilection for nymphets), *reconnaissance* of the Haze family situation, *delivery* of Lolita into Humbert’s grasp, *villainy* by Quilty and Lolita (when she leaves him), the *lack* of Lolita and *struggle* to find her and the mysterious double who stole her, *victory* in locating Quilty once Lolita identifies him, and *punishment* of the villainous Quilty with death, although Humbert foresees his own punishment in the near future.

Comparing *Lolita* to these structural studies of folklore shows us that the story exploits familiar motifs and plots in order to satisfy the audience’s expectations of narrative structure. This should be understood in the broader moral context of a rapist and murderer attempting to justify his actions in and through the satisfaction of his peers’ normative expectations. Humbert’s prose is more than lulling, though—it is entrancing. As I shall argue below, this quality stems from his use of the first-person “experiencing narrative,” with which the story is told in the most persuasive way possible.

Oral Styles of Literature

Humbert Humbert exploits a literary style called the experiencing narrative. In his essay “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” Walter Benjamin (1978:83-109) suggests that an experiencing narrative contains a special quality of orality, which

¹⁶ Motifs cited according to their classification in Thompson 1932-36. The double is perhaps more dominant in nineteenth-century Kunstmärchen such as E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *The Devil’s Elixirs* (1963 [1815]), Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s “A Tale of the Cavalry” (2008 [1898]), and Dostoevsky’s *The Double* (2004 [1846]).

makes it superior for the art of storytelling. Benjamin laments the declining ability to tell a story well, which he defines as the ability to share experience (84-85). As Benjamin writes, “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (87). Benjamin sees this assimilation of experience as gaining wisdom. To conclude, then, a skilled storyteller imparts wisdom to his audience by offering his experience as something that can be applied to their own lives. In this way, advice may be proffered while avoiding an overtly pedagogical tone.

For Benjamin, orality is key in the storytelling process: “Among the writers who have set down the tales, the great ones are those whose written versions differ least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers” (84). Maintaining a style of colloquial speech preserves the natural conventions of storytelling, for example, by keeping “a story free from explanation as one reproduces it” (89). This style of storytelling is used not only to provide fiction with a realistic quality, but also in non-fictional experiencing narratives such as Olaudah Equiano’s autobiography (1999 [1789]), which relates the narrator’s experiences in a straightforward manner, in the hope that the audience will draw wisdom regarding the evils of slavery from the experiences related. The persuasive quality of the experiencing narrative can speak to broader social issues. This is an important tool in turning an account of a single remarkable life into wisdom useful for others and perhaps society as a whole.

The latter part of the title Humbert suggested for his text, “Lolita, or the Confessions of a White Widowed Male” (Nabokov 1991:3), might well trade on such pedagogical narratives, given its allusion to “Confessions of an English Opium-Eater” (De Quincy 2003 [1821]) and more generally the confessional genre from St. Augustine to Rousseau and beyond. Humbert engages in the kind of oratorical style Benjamin described by largely refraining from foreshadowing the plot. Instead, he forces the reader to experience the plot unfolding just as he did when he was living through the events recounted. By leaving out overt additions to the narrative, for example, an aside early in the novel about how he always knew Lolita would abandon him, Humbert preserves a sense of the integrity of the story’s unfolding, and also leaves the story’s surprises intact for the reader, thus heightening the entrancing quality of storytelling, as Benjamin suggested.

With regard to the assimilation of experiences from another person, the discourses of cultural and collective memories come into focus when an individual or group of individuals insists on a particular interpretive frame for understanding said experiences. This assimilation of views is exactly Humbert Humbert’s motivation; he wants the audience to be persuaded by his perspective on the events he narrates, though without overtly demanding it. More precisely, while the audience comes to learn the events of his story, Humbert also wants them to absorb and accept his rationale, namely his supposed desire and love for Lolita. Humbert attempts this precarious balance of fact and opinion by employing both a first-person monologue that details his raptures and also, as discussed above, references to himself in the third person.

As seen in Benjamin’s analysis of Leskov’s “The Wandering Pilgrim,” narratives of one’s life story are ideal for storytelling. Yet despite Humbert’s specific invocation of oration, addressing this imagined audience, several other aspects Benjamin identifies in ideal narratives and oral tradition in general do not apply. First, foreword aside, the reader is confronted with a text and not an oration, not even a narrated conversation as in “The Wandering Pilgrim” or the

dialogic format of Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* Second, Humbert's discourse contains far too many flourishes to be considered colloquial speech. Third, he identifies himself as "the writer" as early as the second page. He even emphasizes the textual nature of his memories when he says, "I leaf again and again through these miserable memories . . ." (Nabokov 1991:13). The implication is that he reads and rereads what he has written down of his memories, a task indicative of literary solitude, which does not suggest the social dynamic inherent in performance or speech.

Lolita is mostly narrated from the first-person perspective, and I have demonstrated that the text shows several qualities of oral performance such as apostrophe. That said, Humbert Humbert at one point exploits the most persuasive artistic device distinctive of literary works, namely omniscient narration, by giving his own perspective a glimmer of omniscience. Whereas, for most of the novel, Humbert describes his memories in the vein of the experiencing narrative, the omniscient perspective arises briefly before Humbert's statement identifying the text as memoir at the end of the novel, when he ends his story in a contrived manner, passing his own definitive judgment. After finally halting his flight from the police in his car, having murdered Quilty, Humbert is waiting for the police to catch up with him. In his own words: "And while I was waiting for them to run up to me on the high slope, I evoked a last mirage of wonder and hopelessness." What follows is a reminiscence of an event that took place shortly after Lolita ran away. Feeling sick, Humbert pulled off a mountain road that overlooks a valley (307-08):

As I approached the friendly abyss, I grew aware of a melodious unity of sounds rising like vapor from a small mining town that lay at my feet, in a fold of the valley. . . . And soon I realized that all these sounds were of one nature, that no other sounds but these came from the streets of the transparent town, with the women at home and the men away. Reader! What I heard was the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic—one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of the bat, or the clatter of a toy wagon, but it was all too far for the eye to distinguish any movement in the lightly etched streets. I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demur murmur for background, and then I knew the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord.

This scene is a departure from the purely experiencing narrative in two ways: firstly, Humbert consciously evokes this scene out of the chronological order he usually attempts to maintain, choosing this scene as a fitting end to both the "Murder of Quilty" section and the story as a whole. Secondly, the scene is one of looking down on the world, a God's-eye view in which he can know where men and women are and what children are doing without actually seeing them, and understanding his and Lolita's place in the whole scheme of things. This strongly suggests the perspective of an omniscient narrator who delivers the story fully analyzed and understood. Humbert switches to this omniscient literary mode because it offers a tone of greater authority, delivering an interpretation of the events he has narrated.

Humbert Humbert's inner monologue is meant to exculpate his actions by authentically

conveying his emotional state, his love for Lolita, and his enormous sense of loss when she leaves him. And yet, at times this very authenticity is subtly undermined by references to the editing process of this literary text. The quotation above is the most obvious example of Humbert's authorial discretion, his choice of what to narrate and subtle suggestions of the correct way to interpret these events. However, there are other places where the careful construction of Humbert's storytelling is laid bare to the reader. This is true of the carefully packaged story of Humbert's childhood, but the best example is the short twenty-sixth chapter, in which Humbert describes the pain he relives as he writes everything out (109):

The daily ache in the opaque air of this tombal jail is disturbing, but I must persevere. Have written more than a hundred pages and not got anywhere yet. My calendar is getting confused. That must have been around August 15, 1947. Don't think I can go on. Heart, head—everything. Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita. Repeat till page is full, printer.

Humbert is attempting to give the audience the impression of witnessing his unadulterated thought processes, yet he himself does not commit the emotional act of filling an entire page with the name of his beloved. Rather, he only wants the *effect* to be achieved by the printer in the interest of impressing his audience. The monologue format of the novel mimics the experiencing narrative lauded by Benjamin, yet Humbert's writing must be examined as a wholly fabricated narrative created for the purpose of persuasion. After all, Humbert's motivation is not to share experience of the kind imagined by Benjamin, namely that of the seasoned traveler or wise peasant. Indeed, Humbert's motivation cannot be considered the desire to impart wisdom at all. Rather, his motivation is to defend himself before an interlocutor, be it an actual jury or the court of public opinion represented by the reading public. This morally inflected social dynamic is one that Benjamin described as crumbling alongside the very practice of storytelling. Indeed, judgment is a key concept for Nabokov's text, drawing out the ineluctably social element of performance, all the while suppressing any actual exchange or dialogue in favor of a unidirectional testimony on Humbert's part.

The Social Quality of Humbert Humbert's Memories

As he looks back, remembering the events of his life, Humbert Humbert is driven by the goal of explaining, giving a rationale for, his relationship with Lolita. His selective narration is thus an ideal example of Maurice Halbwachs' notion of memory as a reconstruction of the past designed to align with a current perspective, a feature of his larger argument that memory is a social faculty. Halbwachs claims that (1992:38):

it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, reorganize and localize their memories. . . . [W]e appeal to our memory only in order to answer questions which others have asked, or that we suppose they could have asked.

Halbwachs offers the psychoanalytic process as an institutionalized example of his notion of

memory as an essentially external process, couched in society rather than in the individual. And indeed, beyond psychoanalysis, it is customary for individuals to interrogate each other in order to establish past events. This practice is aimed at establishing a collective experience, and is thus a social activity.

Even if one does not accept Halbwachs' claim that memory is *only* engaged in order to answer the questions of others, the idea that an individual remembers a story in response to an interrogator is particularly compelling in the case of Humbert's narration. Humbert maintains a defensive stance throughout the text with the premise of addressing an audience. After briefly waxing poetic regarding his passion for Lolita, he even explicitly anticipates questions from the audience, his jury. "Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. . . . Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer. You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style" (Nabokov 1991:9). Humbert's imagined dialogue not only exhibits an example of the staged interrogation of memory, which Halbwachs describes as remembering what we believe others will ask, but also points to a tension between Humbert and the audience he is addressing. Humbert shows himself to be in the process of adapting to the will of the jury, accepting an imagined duty to justify his actions. Despite the show of bowing to public inquest, however, he is surreptitiously attempting to persuade the jury to absorb his point of view on the events in question.

The tension between what Humbert believes his audience would like to hear and what he himself wishes to speak about is especially tangible in the first half of the novel, when he speaks directly to his audience of jurors or readers. Early in the text, as we have seen, he makes a show of reining in his florid description of well-known stories of nymphets and the world-famous authors who loved them. "But let us be prim and civilized. Humbert Humbert tried hard to be good. Really and truly, he did" (19). Here, Humbert falls into an ironic third-person perspective, assessing himself in the same register as he used to illuminate the long tradition of pedophilia he sees himself as propagating. The excuse of educating his audience, which Humbert uses to indulge in the pleasure of reeling off this history, falls away entirely when he comes to the personal experiences that still haunt him. Midway through the novel, after extensively recalling a shopping trip to buy presents for Lolita, he settles in for another sleepless night and considers using on himself one of the sleeping pills reserved for incapacitating Lolita (109):

There were forty of them all told—forty nights with a frail sleeper at my throbbing side; could I rob myself of one such night in order to sleep? Certainly not: much too precious was each tiny plum, each microscopic planetarium with its live stardust. Oh, let me be mawkish for the nonce! I am so tired of being cynical.

Despite the image of Humbert's predatory thoughts at the side of a child, Humbert seems to suspect that his audience will rebel at his indulgence in a bombastic description of the sleeping pills. His admission to mawkishness applies just as well to the long description of the shopping trip he had recently undertaken, which few people besides someone who shares his own prurient interests could be expected to find compelling. As he describes, "I had great fun with all kinds of shorts and briefs—phantom Lolitas dancing, falling, daisy-ing all over the counter" (108). As we can see, he is tiring of explaining himself to his audience, of keeping up the lighthearted distance

of sarcastic self-mockery of the first few pages; now, he is more interested in losing himself in sentimentality. Such indulgence only increases as the novel progresses, its heightening indicative of a decided decrease in the narrator's consideration for the presumed intended audience.

In fact, Halbwachs links an increasing immersion in memories to a separation from the rest of society. In his conclusion to the theory that memory is couched in the fabric of society, Halbwachs states (1992:169):

If recollections were preserved in individual form within memory, and if the individual could remember things only by forgetting human society and by proceeding all by himself—without the burden of all the ideas that he has acquired from others—to recapture stages of his past, he would have the illusion of reliving it.

In the solitary confines of his prison, both physical and mental (Nabokov 1991:31-32, 109, 308), Humbert Humbert becomes increasingly lost in his memories, increasingly choosing to relive them rather than explaining or justifying them to his audience. The premise of an oration in a social context falls away at times, as he gives in to a rapturous state of re-experiencing. This turning away from the explanatory mode and the increasingly self-indulgent attitude of the narrator makes the surprise ending of *Lolita*, the transformation of a testimony into a literary memoir, not quite so surprising. To repeat an earlier quotation, Humbert claims, "In mid-composition, however, I realized that I could not parade living Lolita. I still may use parts of this memoir in hermetic sessions, but publication is to be deferred" (308). Though I have discussed above the persuasive techniques of the text's direct addresses to its audience, the planned "hermetic sessions" mentioned here reflect the increasingly masturbatory mode of writing visible in the novel. More broadly speaking, whereas all of the text's oral qualities emphasize the narrator's initial role in a dialogue with a jury of his peers, the literary techniques of persuasion are initially aimed at his reading audience in perpetuity but develop into an asocial memoir. The narrator's increasing distance from his audience precludes any redemption, because Humbert casts off the pretense of justifying himself to others and himself.

Conclusion

Throughout the majority of Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, which comprises a fictional introductory note and the manuscript written by Humbert Humbert, an expectation of judgment persists, given that its primary motivation is to present a story of malfeasance to a jury in a courtroom or the jury of the reading public. As Humbert writes on his penultimate page (Nabokov 1991:308):

For reasons that may appear more obvious than they really are, I am opposed to capital punishment; this attitude will be, I trust, shared by the sentencing judge. Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape and dismissed the rest of the charges.

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