

GEORGE II, JOSEPH A., M.A. *How Work Enfaiths: Catechizing in the Religious Poetry of Denise Levertov*. (2007)

Directed by Dr. Christopher Hodgkins. 30 pp.

Although the experience of reading Denise Levertov's mid-period protest poetry has received attention from critics, the experience of her religious poetry has been ignored. To begin discussion on this important aspect of her work, I look to criticism of George Herbert's poetry, drawing from the process of "catechizing," as described by Stanley Fish. In, "How Work Enfaiths," I build on similarities between Levertov and Herbert, and apply Fish's theory to articulate the experience of reading Levertov's work.

GEORGE II, JOSEPH A., M.A. "Writing Under Observation:" Applying a Cognitive Theory of Unreliability to Nabokov's *Lolita*. (2007)  
Directed by Dr. Scott Romine. 35 pp.

In "Writing Under Observation," I address the unreliability of Humbert, the narrator in Nabokov's *Lolita*. In particular, I deal with the question of recognizing Humbert's unreliability, which is difficult to do with the text-based theories employed by most critics. To resolve this problem, I apply Ansgar Nünning's cognitive theory of unreliability to *Lolita*, and demonstrate the process of identifying Humbert's unreliability by offering a case study of two readers interacting with the text.

HOW WORK ENFAITHS: CATECHIZING IN THE RELIGIOUS  
POETRY OF DENISE LEVERTOV

AND

“WRITING UNDER OBSERVATION:” APPLYING A COGNITIVE  
THEORY OF UNRELIABILITY TO NABOKOV’S *LOLITA*

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
HOW WORK ENFAITHS: CATECHIZING IN THE RELIGIOUS POETRY OF DENISE LEVERTOV.....	1
REFERENCES.....	27
“WRITING UNDER OBSERVATION:” APPLYING A COGNITIVE THEORY OF UNRELIABILITY TO NABOKOV’S <i>LOLITA</i> .....	31
REFERENCES.....	59

## HOW WORK ENFAITHS: CATECHIZING IN THE RELIGIOUS POETRY OF DENISE LEVERTOV

Nearly every article relating to Denise Levertov's religious poetry includes a quote or reference to her essay, "Work That Enfaiths." Written for a 1990 conference on "Faith That Works," this essay relates how the experience of writing the poem, "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus," became Levertov's "conversion process."<sup>1</sup> With this comment in mind it is interesting and perhaps disheartening to find that the large majority of criticism on her work focuses on its various analytical or historical elements, with little attention paid to the experience of reading her poetry. If the poet experiences a movement from unbelief to belief (Levertov described herself as an agnostic before writing the poem), surely the reader may also undergo a type of movement through the reading and experiencing of the poem. While Levertov's work has not yet received such attention, the poetry of George Herbert certainly has been studied in terms of religious experience. In particular, Stanley Fish's study of Herbert's poetry, in which he applies the process of catechizing in Herbert's *The Temple*, bears particular relevance to Levertov's work, as both poets employ common images and forms as strategies to engage the reader and draw attention to spiritual themes. By comparing the two poets and applying some of the critical approaches used on Herbert's work, I hope to begin a discussion on an underappreciated, yet monumentally important facet of Levertov's work.

When dealing with Levertov's protest poetry of the 60's and 70's, critics often describe the work in experiential terms. Critics such as Ralph J. Mills<sup>2</sup> and Charles Altieri<sup>3</sup> focused on what Levertov herself called "poetry of engagement"—poetry that attempted to not only capture the experience of the situation, but also to spur the audience to a particular response or action. One of the most detailed studies of this goal is Victoria Frenkel Harris's, "Denise Levertov and the Lyric of the Contingent Self."<sup>4</sup> While Harris's overall goal here is to remove the stigma of Romantic solipsism from Levertov's lyric poetry, the emphasis on connecting to the outer world reveals the importance of experience: "While she endorses the necessity of vision, vision is never mere passive reception but always an active receptivity that is both modulated by agency and situated within an arena of social involvement and activism."<sup>5</sup> The importance of "active receptivity" here relies not only on the poet, who must have the "vision" in response to a real world experience in poetic form, but also for the reader, who must receive the experience through the poem and then act on it. In fact, the "agency" Harris refers to here belongs more to the reader and less to the poet; the poet must already exist in the "arena of social involvement and activism" to be able to write such a poem, while the reader must be initiated through the experience of the poem. Harris expounds on this importance by stating, "Responsibility is, indeed, placed upon the interpreter—both as poet and as reader—to negotiate a subject position when confronted by an other—here, the poet's (as well as the reader's) spirit in dialectic with her situated present and that which she confronts."<sup>6</sup> This responsibility requires the reader to confront the poet's experience, as related through the poem, and connect it to his/her own experience. The

poem, then, creates a chain of contingencies, from the world to the poet and to the poem, then from the poem to the reader and back into the world.

This emphasis on experience and contingency is strangely absent from much of the criticism of Levertov's final period, when she converted to Christianity and began writing religious verse. While critics certainly address aspects of experience that Levertov records in her poetry, they do not examine the way the reader confronts and reconciles his/her own experience to that recorded in the poem. Many critics, such as Edward Zlotkowski, trace the history of religious imagery in the poet's life and work<sup>7</sup>, while others, such as Avis Hewitt,<sup>8</sup> examine the reoccurring use of traditional religious rituals, but neither critic discusses the way the reader interacts with these rituals and images. Denise E. Lynch<sup>9</sup> and Gwen Westervalt MacCalister<sup>10</sup> come closer to studying experience by focusing on the "incarnational poetics" (the use of sensory objects to represent religious experience) in Levertov's later poems. For example, Lynch refers to the poem, "This Day,"<sup>11</sup> in which simple and mundane images—"Dry water/ sour wine" (1-2), "the duckpond" (8), paintings featuring "fruit and herbs, pots, pans, and poultry," (32)—are tied together by the observation,

This day I see

God's in the dust,  
not sifted

out from confusion

(3-6)



For Lynch, the combination of these disparate objects represents the idea that “the serenity of faith lies within the confusion and materiality of our varied lives. In mediation, the speaker understands the transcendent perfection of our imperfect lives.”<sup>12</sup> While Lynch’s reading identifies ways for the reader to engage Levertov’s poetry, she stops just short of examining the experience of reading her work. Certainly, the reader intellectually recognizes similarities between these disparate items and the complexities of life, but Lynch never discusses what significance the reader finds in these images. In other words, the reader is familiar with ducks and paintings, but how does the process of connecting these images to “the transcendent perfection of our imperfect lives” effect the reader?

Paul A. Lacy also studies the incarnational poetics of Levertov’s work, but he moves the subject further and hints toward the reader’s role in the process. His observation on the poem, “On Belief in the Physical Resurrection of Jesus,”<sup>13</sup> includes a reference to the reader that begins to explain his/her interior work: “Though some minds can live without what Levertov calls ‘the half / of metaphor that’s not / grounded in dust, grit, / heavy / carnal clay,’” she puts herself among those who, like her patron saint, “must feel / the pulse in the wound,” and those who must “taste / bread at Emmaus / that warm hands / broke and blessed.”<sup>14</sup> Where most critics of incarnational poetics would investigate the correlation between dust, grit, clay and the speaker’s lack of faith, Lacy motions toward the next step: the reader may read and understand words about bread and wounds, but to share in the experience of faith guided by tactile interaction, the reader must also remember his/her own hands on bread and personal interactions with wounds.

To enact<sup>15</sup> this process—to reconcile the experience of acquiring faith through interaction with tactile objects to one’s own struggles with belief and disbelief—the reader must bring his/her own memories and experience to those recorded in the poem. Although incarnational poetry serves as a fine starting point for discussing the experience of Levertov’s work, it is far from the end.

Where Levertov’s religious poetry seems to be relegated to mere representations of spiritual life, the experiential component of George Herbert’s poetry has received far more attention. As with Levertov, there are those who focus on the incarnational aspect of Herbert’s work, but many have studied these incarnations in relation to the reader’s response. Part of the receptivity to responsive criticism of *The Temple* stems from Herbert’s clear evangelistic intentions. As a Cambridge orator turned Bemerton parson, Herbert understood the importance of using simple and immediate images to reach his audience. In the same way Levertov and her readers need to touch and feel to understand, the “dull” members of Herbert’s parish needed “stories and sayings of others [...] for them also men heed and remember better than exhortations, which, though earnest, yet often die with the sermon, especially with country people which are thick and heavy, and hard to raise to a point of zeal and fervency, and need a mountain of fire to kindle them.”<sup>16</sup> For many critics, such as Robert H. Ray,<sup>17</sup> the sequence of poems in *The Temple* represents the architecture of a physical temple: as the speaker leads the reader through, he educates the reader in various facets of Christianity. Others have used poems like “Lent,” “Easter-Wings,” and “Whitsunday” to correlate the sequence to the Christian holy day calendar; while still others see *The Temple* as a story of an

individual's conversion, struggles, and eventual death and resurrection. Whatever the reading, the implications are clear: Herbert uses his poetry as a strategy for teaching his reader about the Christian experience.

In his book, *The Living Temple*, Stanley Fish calls this strategic interaction between reader and poem, "catechizing." Traditionally, catechizing is the process of inquiry where the priest questions individual believers on elements and tenants of the faith. Fish notes that, as a parson, Herbert's style of catechizing varied from that of other priests, in that he altered the difficulty and order of the questions according to "the capacity of the individual."<sup>18</sup> This varying seeks to meet the individual and earn the "full participation" of the catechized:

Rather than being worked on (stamped, carved, ground, filled) as if he were an inert piece of wax or wood or metal, he is working, cooperating in the process of his own "drawing out" (that is his education) [...] He is not an empty vessel waiting to be filled. The "delight" that he then experiences is the delight of self-discovery, in the double sense of discovering something about himself (the knowledge he sought was already, in part, his) and of making the discovery himself (with of course the aid of the catechizer).<sup>19</sup>

Fish relates this process to Herbert's poetry in the way the poet uses recognizable forms, language, and images to represent religious experience in a way that can be shared by the reader. For Fish, the "paradigmatic" catechizing poem is "The Church-floor." In this poem, the speaker directly addresses the reader, drawing attention to certain physical elements of the floor, such as the "square and specked stone" (1) or "the sweet cement, which in one sure band / Ties the whole frame" (10-11). After pointing each of these out,

the speaker modifies his statement so he no longer refers to a physical element, but a spiritual one: “The gentle rising, which on either hand / Leads to the Choir above, / Is *Confidence*” (8-9). Alternations between the sensory and the spiritual continue through the first half of the poem. For most of the second half, the speaker returns to physical descriptions until the last couplet—“Blessed be the *Architect*, whose art / Could build so strong in a weak heart” (19-20). At this point, it becomes clear that the Architect in question is God and that the foundation of this church is not a physical structure, but rather a foundation of spiritual attributes built in the heart of the Christian.

Fish chooses this poem as a prime example of catechizing for three reasons:

1. It presents an architectural metaphor that is subsequently internalized.
2. The metaphor has reference finally to the building of a structure in the heart, or to the building of the heart into a certain kind of structure.
3. Just such a structure is built up in the heart of the reader who enters the poem in search of significances (that is what a reader does) and finds in the end that he himself is their repository<sup>20</sup>

In other words, catechistic poetry involves the poet drawing out the reader by first invoking a commonplace sensory object that the reader has personal experience with and then using poetic form and juxtaposition with other objects and ideas to make the commonplace object a metaphor for a spiritual idea or truth. Rudolph L. Nelson’s observation that “in the Levertov universe there is no radical discontinuity between the worlds of poetic vision and everyday reality”<sup>21</sup> and Christopher Hodgkins’s statement that Herbert “advocated simple, scriptural intelligibility in liturgy, in church architecture, and in poetry”<sup>22</sup> reveals the importance of reader accessibility and engagement in the

poets' respective works. As the reader's initial understanding of the referential object is altered through the experience of the poem, the reader undergoes a transformative experience: he/she is the "repository of significance" as prompted by the poem.

Levertov seems similarly aware of the workings between reader and poem. In her essay, "Some Notes on Organic Form," she alters Robert Creeley's phrase, "Form is nothing but the extension of content," to "Form is never more than a *revelation* of content" (emphasis hers).<sup>23</sup> According to Creeley's original statement, form follows the original idea and intent of the poem, and works to underscore the poem's theme. Levertov certainly agrees with Creeley, but she expounds on this to put responsibility back on the reader. As Harris indicated, the reader must now interpret the form and use its guides and structures to discover the meaning of the poem. In the same way commonplace objects give the reader something to identify with, poetic form gives direction to the reader's imagination to help him/her share in the experience. However, form is not an air-tight maze, but rather a loose structure to serve as a blueprint: "there must be a place in the poem for rifts too [...] Great gaps between perception and perception which must be leapt across if they are to be crossed at all."<sup>24</sup> Although the leaper in this essay is not the reader but the poet, the references to gaps and rifts in form recall the work of Wolfgang Iser and his reception theories. According to Iser, no narrative can account fully for every piece of the story's world; these unaccounted places—which Iser called "gaps"—force the reader to become invested by filling in the gaps with ideas and thoughts from his/her own experience. As a result, the reader's

experience and the experience of the poem become commingled to create a new experience.<sup>25</sup>

With these differences in mind, some adjustments to Fish's criteria must be made before we can examine Levertov's process of "catechizing." While Levertov certainly uses several concrete and sensory images, few were expressly architectural. However, both poets share the goal of using such images: to provide the reader with a commonplace object to guide the imagination and provide access to the poetic world. For both poets, these commonplace objects may be sensory images, Bible stories, and liturgical ceremonies. According to Fish, the speaker of the poem moves reader's conception about the commonplace object and relates this conception to "a structure of the heart." In Levertov, the metaphor may not stand for specifically the heart, but certainly something internal and ineffable, such as the mind or the spirit. In both cases, the reader calls on his or her own experience, knowledge, and understanding to have a moment of epiphany and recognition of God through the mundane. As articulated in Fish, the reader's moment of epiphany is an act both mirrored and prompted by the poem. In the same way the structure is built in the heart of Herbert's reader, so also is the movement and realization enacted in Levertov's reader.

With these adjustments in place, we can clearly see how Levertov's "Flickering Mind"<sup>26</sup> performs a similar action to "The Church-floor." Rather than opening with a concrete image and carrying the reader through, the speaker here begins with a direct address to God: "Lord, not you / It is I who am absent" (1-2). The speaker gives the

reader the impression that he/she has been allowed to listen to a dialogue between the speaker and God, despite the speaker's opening claim that she is "absent:"

At first  
belief was a joy I kept in secret,  
stealing alone  
into sacred places:  
a quick glance, and away— and back,  
circling. (3-8)

Although there are no specifics for the reader to identify with, Levertov employs poetic form in the same way Herbert uses architectural metaphors to illustrate the process of "quick glances" and circling with the poem's form: short, clipped lines like "At first" and "circling" set off by longer lines, giving the reader a back and forth motion. This mental circling builds in the following lines:

I have long since uttered your name  
but now  
I elude your presence.  
I stop  
to think about you, and my mind  
at once  
like a minnow darts away,  
darts  
into the shadows, into gleams that fret  
unceasing over  
the river's purling and passing. (9-19)

This process performs a similar action as the "image suggestion/image alteration" in "The Church-floor." Although Levertov's reader believes he or she is merely observing, the line breaks force the reader to perform the actions described by the speaker. The external

image of an individual longing for constancy is located in the interior of the reader, who searches for stability while reading the lines. When the concrete images of a darting minnow and a purling river are introduced, the reader quickly imagines them in similar manner to the speaker's spontaneous generation of these images. Like the introduction and alteration of the images in "The Church Floor," the images here are introduced and then discarded as insufficient to describe God.<sup>27</sup> The pace of the poem forces the reader to likewise create the image in his/her own mind and then discard it as the speaker quickly moves on. It is with conviction, then, that the reader can mentally "speak" the lines: "Not for one second / will my self hold still," (20-21).

These qualities of "Flickering Mind" make the poem "paradigmatic" to Levertov's catechizing. The key image in "Flickering Mind" is the speaker who longs for constancy. This external image, described through first-person statements, like "Belief was a joy I kept in secret," and demonstrated through oscillating line lengths and introduced/discarded sensory images, serves as a metaphor for an internal quality. In the same way the structures of the Church in "The Church Floor" are not literal walls, but rather virtues recognized and connected in the mind of the reader, so also is the restless soul in "Flickering Mind" not an external speaker who allows the reader to listen in, but the reader him/herself.

According to Fish, one of the main components of catechizing involves the interaction between the catechized's expectations and the catechizer's answer. In both Herbert and Levertov's poetry, the catechizer does not dismiss the assumptions of the catechized, but rather alters or expounds on it. In Herbert's "Love-Joy,"<sup>28</sup> the speaker



sees a bunch of grapes with what he perceives to be the letters “J and C / Annealed on every bunch” (2-3). When “One standing by” (3) asks the speaker what the letters meant, the speaker answers, “*Joy and Charity*” (7). In response, the bystander answers, “Sir, you have not missed, / [...] it figures Jesus Christ” (7-8). For Fish, “Love-Joy” serves as a prime example of Herbert’s catechizing, with the bystander catechizing the speaker, who then catechizes the reader in turn. The annealed grapes serve as the common object in this poem, and when the question of meaning is posed to the speaker, the reader also creates his or her own meanings. Although the reader depends completely on the speaker’s narration to recognize elements of the poem’s world, the combination of letters “J and C,” along with the religious content in the preceding poems of *The Temple*, could very well prompt the reader to guess “Jesus Christ” before the speaker is corrected. When the speaker answers, “*Joy and Charity*,” he frustrates the reader’s expectation, forcing the reader to reconsider his/her position and assumptions, if even for a brief moment. As the reader searches for a new explanation, he or she performs Fish’s second and third stages of catechizing: the reader’s original understanding of the common object is altered and, as the process of alteration takes place in the reader’s mind, the reader experiences the movement from mundane to spiritual. In the same way the letters “J and C” can hold a variety of meanings, “The revelation that it is both does not merely reassure the reader, but asks him to re-examine his own position, not because it has been (finally) challenged, but because it has been shown to include more than he even knew.”<sup>29</sup> For the reader, then, the process of catechizing is a dialectical one. The reader encounters the image, attaches his or her own significance to it, and then has that

significance questioned—either with the speaker’s answer or the bystander’s answer—and finally, expanded.

This interplay between reader expectations and speaker revelation takes on an interesting form in Levertov’s “What the Fig Tree Said.”<sup>30</sup> The speaker here is the personification of the Fig Tree that Jesus cursed in Matthew 21:18-22 and in Mark 11:12-14, 19-25,<sup>31</sup> and the story itself, as prompted by the title, serves as the commonplace object. Levertov draws the reader’s participation by invoking his/her own understanding of the story and then uses the Fig Tree’s perception to alter and expansion upon that understanding. As the speaker performs this correction and expounding, the reader finds a new commonplace object in the disciples’ reactions and, as with “Love-Joy,” relates his or her experience to that of a character in the poem.

Jesus’ actions in the story seem cruel to most readers, prompting the Fig Tree to take an immediate adversarial position against the reader: “Literal minds! Embarrassed humans! His friends / were blushing for Him / in secret; wouldn’t admit they were shocked” (1-3). As the reader encounters these lines, the Fig Tree’s indignation alters his/her conception right at the beginning. As he or she must abandon the original assumption about Jesus’ purpose, the reader forms a connection with the disciples in the story, who were also “blushing” and “shocked” at Jesus’ actions. With this transition in place, the tone shifts once again to alter the object to which the speaker has called attention:

but I, I knew that  
helplessly barren though I was,  
my day had come. I served  
Christ the Poet,  
who spoke in images: (8-12)

In the same way the bystander forced the speaker of “Love-Joy” to reconsider his position, thereby demonstrating how the meaning of the letters J and C meant more than the speaker initially saw, the Fig Tree shows its reader that Christ’s actions here mean much more than the reader sees. The reader, who thought that Christ was angry with the Fig Tree, learns that Christ is indeed angry, but with his disciples and, by proxy, with the reader:

[...] He cursed  
not me, not them, but  
(ears that hear not, eyes that see not)  
their dullness, that withholds  
gifts *unimagined*. (25-29)

The experience of the disciples’ movement from shocked embarrassment to a recognition of Christ the poet, and finally to a shocked embarrassment at their own dullness and lack of imagination is shared by the reader, who undergoes the same experience while reading the poem. By sharing in the disciple’s embarrassment, the internal quality of recognizing the complexity of Christ’s actions, is built not on the page, but within the heart of the reader.

In the same way Herbert and Levertov use the reader's understanding of an image or story as a common object, they also draw from liturgical traditions. One such poem for Herbert is "The Holy Communion," in which Herbert addresses the topic of the Eucharist. Written in a period of strong political and theological contention between Protestants and Catholics, the issue of the Christ's presence in the elements of Communion was hotly contested and near to the minds of Herbert's original audience. Because of its importance, the issue of physical elements in a worship service takes the role of commonplace object with this poem. Similar to the Fig Tree's opening oppositional move, the speaker here begins by contradicting the reader's concerns with these physical elements:

Not in rich furniture, or fine array,  
Nor in a wedge of gold,  
Thou, who from me was sold,  
To me dost now thyself convey;           (1-4)

The speaker addresses the reader's presumptions of physical images and pushes them aside for a spiritual truth: "For so thou shouldst without me still have been, / Leaving within me sin" (5-6). He then makes clear that although "nourishment and strength" (7) travel through bread and wine, "Yet can these not get over to my soul, / Leaping the wall that parts / Our souls and fleshly hearts" (13-15). Nearing the end of the first section, the speaker builds to the point of his sermon:

Only thy grace, which with these elements comes,  
    Knoweth the ready way,  
    And hath the privy key,  
Op'ning the soul's most subtle rooms;                   (19-22)

Up until this point, most of the poem has been a theological treatise. Unlike the speaker of “The Church-floor,” the speaker here addresses God directly instead of the reader. As with “Flickering Mind,” though, the speaker appears keenly aware of the reader’s presence, as the spiritual epiphany would hardly need to be explained to the omnipotent God to Whom the speaker seems to converse. The discussion, then, is for the reader, whom the speaker brings from superficial externals into deeper spiritual truths. First, the speaker recognizes and dismisses the reader’s assumptions about the physical aspects of Communion; second, the speaker explains the ineffable component of spiritual nourishment over physical nourishment. Herbert illustrates the difficulty of the subject—the connection of disparate parts—with a complex *abbacc* rhyme scheme. Once the sermon portion ends, the poem shifts from theological discussion to a call for action, denoted by the tighter, terser lines and *abab* rhyme scheme. In these lines, the speaker emphasizes the longing for spiritual communion with God over physical act:

Thou hast restored us to this ease  
    By this thy heav'nly blood;  
Which I can go to, when I please,  
    And leave th' earth to their food.                   (37-40)

After moving the reader from his/her original assumptions to the realization of God’s miraculous ability, both speaker and reader find themselves with the same outlook at the

poem's shift on line 25. Both speaker and reader, then, share the urgency in the closing lines, accentuated by the tightening rhyme scheme and cadences. Finally, the speaker moves the reader's attention from the physical aspects of Communion to the larger, spiritual truth that "Christ's spiritual substance comes *with*, not *in* the elements," thereby altering the reader's concern from contentious physical issues to spiritual issues.<sup>32</sup>

Levertov similarly moves her readers from external assumption to mature understanding of liturgical conventions in several of her poems. The most famous of these is her aforementioned conversion poem, "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus."<sup>33</sup> Levertov uses the six pieces of music for mass—*Kyrie* (an opening call for mercy), *Gloria* (praise of God), *Credo* (statement of faith), *Sanctus* (a prayer of communion), *Benedictus* (a continuation of the *Sanctus*), and *Agnus Dei* (praise for the Lamb of God)—as the poem's main commonplace object. However, in such a long poem with many parts and movements, the catechizing process is not as simple as in "The Church-floor," where the speaker calls attention to and alters the perception of a single object. Instead, the speaker here calls attention to several assumptions and objects and then frustrates the reader's understanding of the object to create a sense of longing for form and consistency within this reader.

The first catechistic move occurs when the speaker calls attention to the liturgical form and then alters that concept by referring not to a Christian God, but to a combination of vague allusions and concrete images.

O deep unknown, guttering candle,  
beloved nugget lodged  
in the obscure heart's  
last recess,  
have mercy on us (1-5)

While the references to a formal religious ceremony carry connotations of rigid structure dictating behavior, the abstract images and open form force the reader to alter his/her previous conception. The sensory images—"guttering candle" and "beloved nugget"—and formal gaps invite the reader to recall his/her own experiences, while the lack of explanation for these images forces the reader to devise some preliminary chain of association. The descending line lengths suggest a deductive movement, driving the reader's eye down to the solitary object, "last recess," before then moving to the response, "have mercy on us."

The structure of this section builds on the themes of unknowing and longing, as the speaker resorts to repeating the same words over again, as if she cannot think of anything else to say. Also, the lines stay short and unadorned, leaving space for the reader's imagination, but not offering much structural control:

death, death, and the world's  
death we imagine  
and cannot imagine,  
we who may be  
the first and last witness. (10-14)

The gaps and lack of description force the reader to share in the speaker's frustration with unknowing, which stands in stark contrast to the predictable nature of a formal religious ceremony. The speaker's frustrated desire builds in the final stanzas of the first section, where the speaker repeats variations of the word, "unknown," four times in six lines before closing with the plea, "O deep unknown, / Have mercy upon us" (27-28). By the time "*Kyrie*" comes to an end, the reader has moved from ideas about formal worship of a distinct God to informal unknowing and pleading for connection. The reader's experience of moving from knowing to unknowing takes the emphasis off the structure of the liturgical service and places it on the reader/speaker's personal desires, as both experience unknowing through the reading.

This move from distant formality to personal immediacy continues in "*Gloria*," where the speaker employs several natural sensory images:

Praise the wet snow  
    falling early.  
Praise the shadow  
    my neighbor's chimney casts on the tile roof  
even this gray October day that should, they say,  
have been golden.  
        Praise  
the invisible sun burning beyond  
    the white cold sky, giving us  
light and the chimney's shadow. (1-10)

Unlike "*Kyrie*," in which the speaker struggled to use language to find images to localize her emotions, the speaker finds a fertile playing ground in "*Gloria*." The near-alliterations in "burning beyond," the internal rhyme in "Even this gray October day that



should they say,” and the weight placed on individual words like “Praise” suggests that the speaker has found the words she sought in the first section and now abounds in them. The experience of joy is shared by the reader through the tactile elements of reading: the reader feels the bouncing “b” and guttural “g” sounds that permeate the section, can hear the reoccurring “ay” sound in the internal rhyme, and ponders the command “praise” as it stands on a line alone. The exuberance the reader experiences represents the second catechistic act, as the reader moves from a frustration with the vagueness to a tactile joy while reading the poem.

This exuberance, however, is still controlled by the poem’s form—the first lines start out with a command and are followed by a modifying line, as in 1-2 and 3-4—which dissipates as the section closes and the exuberance burns off, allowing the reader to recall the gaps in the previous section:

Praise  
god or the gods, the unknown,  
that which imagined us, which stays  
our hand,  
our murderous hand,  
                                and gives us  
still,  
the shadow of death,  
        our daily life  
        and the dream still  
of goodwill, of peace on earth. (11-21)

Notice the ways the speaker engages the reader to continue the catechistic movement from vagueness to exuberance and now back to the unknown: the beginning has a burst

of sensory images to counter the paucity of such in the preceding section, which gives the reader physical prompts to imagine. After these prompts, the speaker gives a command, but follows the command with more gaps and vagueness. The movement here calls attention to common objects like a neighbor's chimney and gray October sky, but then alters these mundane images by moving back to praising "god or the gods." The catechistical process in this section moves the reader from a desire for connection with a higher power at the end of "*Kyrie*," to a joyous interaction with immediate sensory objects, and back to another attempt to commune with a god, still unknown but slightly more distinct.

"*Credo*" continues the sensory images and tight lines with short, affirmative statements that, until the end, descend directly down. The speaker moves closer to locating the "unknown" of prior sections by attaching the first person accusative, "Thou" (5) and referring to it also as,

thou spirit,  
giver,  
lover of making, of the  
wrought letter,  
wrought flower,  
iron, deed, dream. (7-12)

The progression from affirmative statements of belief to sensory images and then to the "unknown spirit" continues the catechistic movement from sensory to spiritual through formal identification, with the tactile "wrought" images, to imaginative gap-filling, with the spaces in the structure. The interaction of the reader's imagination with the formal

aspects of the poem helps create the experience of an individual longing for a deity beyond the immediate and sensory, thereby moving the reader closer to the catechizer's goal.

Structural shifting occurs in larger chunks in "*Sanctus*" before exploding to line by line variations at the end of "*Benedictus*." The whole of "*Sanctus*" contains a plea to all "known" variations of the "unknown"—"all the gods, / angels and demigods, eloquent animals, oracles, storms of blessing and wrath" (1-3), with the two stanzas jutting to the right, representing a modification of these names. Despite these movements, the stanzas stay tightly justified together, and the language remains tight and fairly determined. Some gaps for the reader to fill do appear in the section, particularly when the speaker begins referring to personifications of "Imagination" (4) and "Vast Loneliness" (8), as well as returning to "the unknown." However, as the phrase "the known / Unknown" indicates, the reader has been grappling between knowable sensory images and imagined unknowables for most of the poem now, and shares the speaker's growing sense of the unknown's identity.

The speaker completes this connection between the sensory and the spiritual in "*Sanctus*" by attaching spiritual connotations to mundane images:

The name of the spirit is written  
in woodgrain, windripple, crystal,

in crystals of snow, in petal, leaf,  
moss and moon, fossil and feather,

blood, bone, song, silence,  
very word of  
very word,  
flesh and  
vision.

(4-12)

Again, the varying line lengths guide the reader through the experience, beginning with the abstract “name of the spirit” and moving through various sensory images of blood and bone, before distilling the experience to the abstract word “vision.” The sensory images serve as commonplace objects for the reader to relate with while the abstract statements serve as the altering factors. This constant calling and altering creates a miniature catechizing process, juxtaposing the immediate and personal sensory objects with the indeterminate abstract lines. This continues until the speaker finally finds the connection between sense and spirit, the common and the altered, with the former being the guide to the latter:

Blesséd is that which utters  
Its being,  
The straw of stone,  
The straw of straw,  
                    For there  
Spirit is.

(39-44)

The gaps increase in following lines as this connection prompts the question:

	But can the name	
Utter itself	In the downspin of time?	
Can it enter	the void?	(45-49)

Perhaps at more than in any other point of the poem, the formal gaps here help draw the reader into the poem and prompt involvement. The spacing of the lines separates them from one another, forcing the attention and weight to rest on each clip of phrase individually. The question of the unknown entering void posed here receives a real answer from the reader, who has made the speaker's connection between sensory image and abstract thought and undoubtedly has some image to represent the Unknowable unknown.

The image that manifests at this point is the result of Levertov's catechizing. As the reader goes through the poem, he or she has been forced to call up images—the Mass, the neighbor's chimney, bone and blood, wrought flowers and iron—and then have them altered through their interaction with abstractions that move from an undefined unknown and now to personified "Spirit." The reader's recognition and alteration of these images and interaction with the formal elements of the poem allows the reader to share the experience of the speaker, who also searches for some type of stability. The result of this catechizing is an image of the unknown: some idea of the deity the speaker longs for, which the reader has been developing as her/she reads. So when the speaker asks if the

image can “enter / the void,” the reader does indeed insert his/her deity as an answer to the question.

This image formed at the close of “*Benedictus*,” serves as the poem’s final commonplace object. In “*Agnus Dei*,” the speaker offers her own image of the deity—the traditional “Lamb of God”—which forces the reader to alter his/her image one last time. The speaker works to mediate the alteration by offering the following question about this image:

Given that lambs  
are infant sheep, that sheep  
are afraid and foolish, and lack  
the means of self-protection, having  
neither rage nor claws,  
venom nor cunning,  
what then  
is this “Lamb of God?” (1-8)

When this question allows the reader to reconcile the Lamb of God to the deity image he/she has built from mundane images and personal experience, the catechizing process is complete.

“Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus,” then, teaches the reader that the religious ceremony is not merely some distant and impersonal set of directions are thoughtless actions, but the formal manifestation of an individual’s desire for communion with a God. The catechizing speaker leads the reader to this action by first juxtaposing the references to the Mass with a vague longing for an indistinct deity, and then introducing concrete and everyday images before moving back to a praise of some god or gods. Throughout this process, the reader develops a personal image of the deity, which

is finally measured against and reconciled to the Lamb of God. The basic elements of Herbert's catechizing still remain: a common image called into attention and then altered by the speaker to form a movement in the reader. In "Mass," however, Levertov alters the alterations, creating a dialectal experience, where the reader thinks he/she has come to a conclusion, only to be met with another juxtaposition.

As the initial poem in Levertov's personal conversion process, "Mass" illustrates the importance of what Liana Sakelliou-Schulz calls "poeticizing" religious content.<sup>34</sup> As demonstrated in "Flickering Mind," Levertov cannot accurately describe God; every appellation and description she gives Him would be ultimately limiting and distorting. The best she can do, then, is record her experience of understanding God in a poem. However, even the mere intellectual agreement with the form's reflection of religious experience is not enough. The importance of "Mass" stems from the experience of reading the poem, of having one's conceptions frustrated and altered, and in the end, being spiritually moved. The attention that George Herbert's poetry has received not only offers a guide for performing such criticism, but also gives me hope that Levertov will eventually receive the same treatment.

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<sup>13</sup> Denise Levertov, *Sands of the Well* (New York: New Directions Books, 1996) 115

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<sup>26</sup> Denise Levertov, *Door in the Hive* (New York: New Directions Books, 1989) 64

<sup>27</sup> Liana Sakelliou-Schultz, *Levertov's Poetry of Revelation, 1988-1998: The Mosaic of Nature and Spirit* (Athens: George Dardanos, 1999) 89

<sup>28</sup> Herbert 108

<sup>29</sup> Fish 29

<sup>30</sup> Denise Levertov, *Evening Train* (New York: New Directions Books, 1992) 111

<sup>31</sup> Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" Immediately the tree withered.

When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. "How did the fig tree wither so quickly?" they asked.

Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." Mathew 21:18-22

<sup>32</sup> Hodgkins 30

<sup>33</sup> Denise Levertov, *Candles in Babylon* (New York: New Directions Books, 1982) 108-

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“WRITING UNDER OBSERVATION:” APPLYING A COGNITIVE THEORY OF  
UNRELIABILITY TO NABOKOV’S *LOLITA*

For its entire life, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* has been characterized as a classic example of a novel featuring an unreliable narrator. Humbert Humbert’s account of his pining for and eventual sexual encounters with his teenaged step-daughter brims with contradictions, wild claims and allegations, and confusing doublings, prompting even the most non-analytical reader to call Humbert “unreliable.” Jen Shelton has demonstrated how Humbert uses textual devices to linguistically “coerce” his reader into certain responses<sup>1</sup>, while H. Grabes has shown that Humbert manipulates events to “convince his judges that he has not deliberately committed a crime, but is rather the abject victim of a ‘fateful’ development beyond his control” thereby reducing “the extent of his personal responsibility for what has happened and at the same time to pass on the charge to an unseen force in control of individual actions.”<sup>2</sup> One of the more common arguments, as practiced by Carl R. Proffer<sup>3</sup> and Anthony R. Moore<sup>4</sup>, builds unreliability from the discrepancies in the novel’s chronology. All of these points, along with Humbert’s general bluster and egoism, leads many readers to agree with Roger Shattuck’s claim, “By now, [...] Humbert’s status as an unreliable narrator with a mad imagination has been, or should have been, fully established.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite this apparent obviousness and the validity of these critics’ readings, most readers cannot sufficiently articulate how they know Humbert cannot be trusted. Much

of this problem stems from the current state of criticism on unreliable narrators. Since the term first appeared in Wayne C. Booth's 1961 book, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, little work has been done to further expand the definition. Most definitions have relied on textual signs for gauging a narrator's unreliability, augmented by vague references to action going on "behind the narrators back."<sup>6</sup> While these definitions are particularly limiting to stories with complex narrators like Humbert, some recent work has been done to expand definitions of unreliability past the textual realm and account for the conceptions and experience of the reader. One such critic, Ansgar Nünning, has proposed a cognitive theory of unreliable narration. In this paper, I will apply his theory of narration to *Lolita* through a three step process. First, I will use Humbert as an example to highlight some of the deficiencies in text-based definitions of unreliability. Second, I will give an explanation of Nünning's theory, and expound on the ways that readers interact with texts—a point of the theory that Nünning leaves relatively empty—by using elements of Wolfgang Iser's reception theories. Finally, I will create two hypothetical readers and give an account of how these readers interact with *Lolita*, using Nünning's theory as a guide.

To this day, Booth's original explanation of an unreliable narrator remains one of the most often quoted: "For lack of better terms, I have called the narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not."<sup>7</sup> The more current definition, from Gerald Prince's *A Dictionary of Narratology*, does little to alter the formula: "A narrator whose norms and behaviors are not in accordance with the implied author's

norms; a narrator whose values (tastes, judgments, moral sense) diverge from those of the implied author's; a narrator the reliability of whose account is undermined by various features of that account.”<sup>8</sup> As the similarities between the two definitions reveal, the key figure in most definitions is a an implied author, who Prince defines as, “The author’s second self, mask, or persona as reconstructed from the text; the implicit image of an author in the text, taken to be standing behind the scenes and to be responsible for its design and for the values and cultural norms it adheres to.”<sup>9</sup> As this definition demonstrates, the main source for understanding an unreliable narrator stems from the text, either as incongruities between the narrator and a textually constructed implied author or as inconsistencies between the narrator and the speech-acts of other characters.

These definitions both fail to explain Humbert’s unreliability because the structure of *Lolita* is too unsound and divergent, filled with contradictions, implications, and boasts. One of the more complicating factors in identifying the implied author in *Lolita* stems from the book’s introduction and afterward. Where the purpose of the implied author, at least in relation to understanding an unreliable narrator, is to differentiate between the norms of the author and of the narrator, the preface and prologue only complicate this process. In the introduction, a fictional critic, John Ray, Jr., PhD, provides his opinions on the text. In dismissing those who would judge the novel on moral grounds, Dr. Ray offers this concession and refutation:

I have no intention to glorify “H.H.” No doubt, he is horrible, he is abject, he is a shining example of moral leprosy, a mixture of ferocity and jocularly that betrays supreme misery perhaps, but is not conducive to attractiveness. [...] He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman. But how magically his singing violence can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!<sup>10</sup>

While this may seem to be a call to enjoy the work on its merely technical and artistic merits, solipsized on its own plane, the rest of the essay undercuts this. There are several references to the “real world” outside of Humbert’s confession, including character names presented in quotation marks to infer that the names we know are pseudonyms, the reference to “Hon. John M. Woolsey,” the real-life judge who presided over the 1933 obscenity trial of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and this curious closing statement: “*Lolita* should make all of us—parents, social workers, educators—apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of brining up a better generalization.”<sup>11</sup> This call to action, along with extra-textual information, seems to imply that the novel does have a real moral imperative, thereby contradicting Ray’s exhortation to ignore the narrator’s shortcomings and enjoy the book on its own isolated ground.

Even if one were to come up with a strong, coherent reading of Dr. Ray, his perspective is complicated by a speaker from a higher diagetetic level. In the book’s epilogue, Vladimir Nabokov appears to explain the genesis of the novel. Along with telling us how the novel came into being, the narrating Nabokov tells us that “there is no moral in tow,”<sup>12</sup> and contradicts his fictional Dr. Ray. While that may appear to be a clear sign of an implied author’s norms— i.e., texts should not be read for moral reasons, but for artistic reasons—the rest of the epilogue gives enough clear reason to question the

narrating Nabokov's reliability. Douglas Fowler's observation that "Nabokov creates in his fiction a character who could have created Nabokov's fiction"<sup>13</sup> underscores the similarities in voice between Humbert Humbert and the narrating Nabokov. Both men are given to improvable hyperboles—Nabokov claims his best works are written in Russian, but he cannot print them for nebulous "political reasons."<sup>14</sup> Both men liberally employ parenthesis that are "pregnant with meaning, treasure troves of narrative and thematic significance buried between brackets,"<sup>15</sup> and both men have an acerbic wit that they unleash on those who fail to meet their expectations. In fact, if the narrating Nabokov had not introduced himself, or given the qualifying phrase, "there are many things, besides nymphets, in which I disagree with him,"<sup>16</sup> many readers would not notice the change from "mad" Humbert to "sane" Nabokov. As with Dr. Ray, the instability in narrating Nabokov's statement exempts the speaker from being a clear indicator of the implied author.

This forces us to look within the narrative for a sign. In his discussion of John Fowles's *The Collector*, William Riggan identifies Miranda's comments about the main narrator, Clegg, as indicative of the implied author because her norms fit in with those of the larger society and they contradict those of Clegg.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, *Lolita*, contains no such character to serve as implied author's proxy. Certainly, many characters indicate disgust or appear to have the norms of the larger society, but all have as many failings as they do achievements. Charlotte Haze shares society's feelings when she calls Humbert "a monster [...] a detestable, abominable, criminal fraud,"<sup>18</sup> but she separates from these norms with her cruelty toward her daughter and seemingly flighty flirtations with H.H.



Gaston Godin shares Hum's intellect and scholastic interests and none of his interest in Delores, but also appears to be "too self-centered and abstract to notice or upset anything that might lead to a frank question on his part"<sup>19</sup> and later has a sexual episode with a young boy in Naples.<sup>20</sup> Any number of authority figures enters the story with a desire to protect Lo, including Mary Lore, who attempts to put distance between Delores and Hum,<sup>21</sup> and Mrs. Pratt, who encourages Delores's participation in normal activities for a teenager.<sup>22</sup> Again, these characters are dismissed as insufficient to accurately judge Humbert's actions. While Humbert's pronouncements may seem biased and, in light of his unreliability, unequivocally false, Page Stegner is correct when she states that Humbert "has a keen eye for the phony and the absurd, and we agree with him in his judgments about the Mrs. Pratts, the Gaston Godins, and the Clare Quiltys of the world." Part of Humbert's brilliant defense includes masking himself with others who are equally undesirable.<sup>23</sup>

The masking defense, however, goes far beyond mere editorial asides; H.H. also meddles with the discourse in the novel. Humbert keeps such a strong hold on the narrative that very few unmediated free discourses appear; nearly every line appears bracketed with a snide or dismissive remark. Furthermore, the discourse itself, though presented as free, often contains signs of Humbert's personality. Consider the following statement by Charlotte Haze:

“We have,” said Haze, “an excellent dentist. Our neighbor, in fact. Uncle or cousin, I think of the playwright. [...] In the fall I shall have him ‘brace’ her, as my mother used to say. It may curb Lo a little. I am afraid she has been bothering you frightfully all these days. [...] It would be so much more reasonable to let me contact Ivor Quilty first thing tomorrow if it still hurts. And, you know, I think a summer camp is so much healthier, and- well, it is all so much more reasonable as I say than to mope on a suburban lawn and use mamma’s lipstick, and pursue shy studious gentlemen, and go into tantrums at the least provocation.”<sup>24</sup>

At first glance, readers may take Charlotte’s words as indicative of her flighty and rambling nature. However, the content of her speech reveals Humbert’s narrative taint. She begins by speaking about her “excellent dentist,” who just so happens to be related to Clare Quilty, and then segues into Lo going to camp, with the connector being a reference to Quilty “bracing” Lo. These connections are not an accident; they are the result of Humbert interweaving references to Quilty and his relationship to Lo into her words. Charlotte’s letter to Hum contains even more overt signs of tampering, despite the decidedly un-Humbertian reference to asking “the Lord what to do about it.” French phrases— “*mon cher, cher monsieur,*” “*Departz!*”— parenthetical asides— “(and kidding poor me)” and “(which I know I won’t- and that’s why I am able to go on like this)” — and a dramatic loquaciousness<sup>25</sup> reveal Humbert’s voice in Charlotte’s words.

Perhaps the most telling detail in the letter appears at the end: the initials, C.H. H.H. regularly uses initials, an extension of his constant naming, as does Hum’s rival, Clare Quilty. Clearly, Quilty serves as a double for Humbert, as he competes for Lo’s attention, makes audacious claims and literary references, and acts as a manipulator. The connection becomes completely convoluted when, during their wrestling match at Pavor Manor, Hum states, “I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We

rolled over us.”<sup>26</sup> Part of the evidence for the “H.H. = C.Q.” theory stems from the apparent agency Quilty exercises, more than any other character enjoys. Not only does he seem to manipulate the grand manipulator— after killing C.Q., Humbert declares, “This, I said to myself, was the end of the ingenious play staged for me by Quilty”<sup>27</sup>— but he also speaks more frequently and with greater authority than any other character (excepting Hum, of course). Where Humbert has heretofore criticized and mocked the banality of other characters, Quilty gets to attack our narrator in a similar fashion:

“You’re all wet! I saved her from a beastly pervert. Show me your badge instead of shooting at my foot, you ape, you. Where is that badge? I’m not responsible for the rapes of others. Absurd! That joy ride, I grant you, was a silly stunt but you got her back didn’t you? Come, let’s have a drink.”<sup>28</sup>

Only Lolita comes close to Cue’s ability to insult Humbert and contradict his narrative, which makes her discourse also difficult for critics. Like most other characters, Lo gets very few chances to speak in quotes, and even fewer of those instances appear without Hum’s editorializing. When she does speak, though, Lolita participates in many of the activities H.H. reserves for himself, including insulting, manipulation, and naming. One of Lolita’s more complicated utterances famously refers to the differing perspectives on Humbert and Lo’s first sexual experience. Although Humbert claims, “it was she who seduced me,”<sup>29</sup> Lolita contradicts him on not one, but two occasions: “I’ll call the police and tell them you raped me”<sup>30</sup> and “You know, the hotel where you raped me?”<sup>31</sup> We also see evidence of Hum-like behavior in a text: the letter she sends to the recently married Mr. and Mrs. Humbert, wherein she playfully renames her stepfather,

“Hummy.”<sup>32</sup> Although they may seem to come directly from her to the reader, these statements are not the freely expressed utterances of Delores Haze, but words mediated by the narrator, Humbert, who “generate[s] an authentic voice for her by quoting the words he most fears to hear,” thereby creating “an atmosphere of realism in [Humbert’s] narrative, although her voices exists so that Humbert may attempt to overmaster it, while the realism operates as an enticing trap for readers.”<sup>33</sup>

In fact, these doublings are exactly what frustrate the reader. With such an unstable text, no one point can be called firm ground enough to judge the rest of the text. Despite their many years in existence, text-based definitions of unreliability still leave one central problem open, which Jenny De Reuck rightly recognizes: If the narrator creates the world of the story for the reader, and all judgments and perceptions of this world stem from that narrator’s perception, “Where [...] can the reader/receiver find the evidential base which will ground his/her judgment that the narrator is unreliable?”<sup>34</sup> Humbert’s personality compounds this difficulty. He is, at turns, spiteful and cruel, given to mocking other characters; he is pathetic and laughable, taking agency from anyone other than himself; he is sincere and loving, longing to preserve Lolita in art. These changes come about without pattern or warning, and his changes in mood affect the text he writes.

A text-based explanation of Humbert’s unreliability, then, would necessitate taking some aspects of Humbert’s personality and leaving others aside. And this is, in fact, exactly what critics and readers have been doing. Nomi Tamir-Ghez creates a Humbert who, despite his stranglehold on the narrative, still allows certain facts about

Lolita's life and "details indicating her condition"<sup>35</sup> slip through. The audience, then, receives these rogue details and uses them to feel sympathy for Lolita, despite the fickle and complicit way Humbert sometimes portrays her. Another critic, Richard Bullock, splits Hum into a narrating-I and experiencing I, arguing that Humbert the character, who embarks on a sex filled road trip with his step-daughter and is apprehended after the murder of Clare Quilty, ends at the same place Humbert the narrator, who authors the book we read as *Lolita*, begins: writing the words, "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins,"<sup>36</sup> while under observation and arrest. At this point of intersection, the two Humberts have the same unrepentant and haughty attitude; but as Humbert the narrator reflects and rewrites his own story, developing his artistic abilities, his humanity also develops and a sense of guilt builds. This development is evident in both the tonal shift and in the quality of writing found in the end of the confession. For Bullock, Humbert's closing words to Lolita indicate his willingness to surrender his Lolita to her husband:

"Be true to your Dick. Do not let other fellows touch you. Do not talk to strangers, I hope you will love your baby. I hope that it will be a boy. That husband of yours, I hope, will always treat you well, because otherwise my specter shall come at him, like black smoke, like a demented giant, and pull him apart, nerve by nerve."<sup>37</sup>

These words can only come when Humbert visits Mrs. Schiller and begs her to come with him; "Her refusal makes 'all the difference' because it proves that his perverted past still exerts control and influence on the events of his life; hence the death of Quilty, who has assumed the pervert's role after wrenching it away from Humbert [...] is a necessity for Humbert— to exorcise his demons, he must kill this projection of his Frankensteinian

fantasies.”<sup>38</sup> Quilty, then, becomes a projection of guilt, either real or created— Bullock claims that it doesn’t matter if Quilty was real or not, only that Humbert sees it that way.<sup>39</sup> To rectify that guilt, Humbert the narrator creates a work of art that not only captures his beloved Lolita in artistic immortality, but also kills the locus of his evil desires, Clare Quilty.

As Dan Chen’s study on narrative and characterization demonstrates, “In fictional discourse, a character’s traits are frequently and most effectively brought out through his/her unreliable evaluation or interpretation.”<sup>40</sup> Although these critics offer complex and compelling readings, they ultimately diminish Humbert’s character traits by attempting to solve him and explain his actions. While Nomi-Ghez’s rogue details theory certainly provides a textual account for the audience’s sympathy for Lolita, it also presents a version of Humbert that ignores his aesthetic rigor and the doubling of himself that colors these “details.” Similarly, Bullock’s argument opens itself to even more questions, as his Humbert cannot be seen as a figure of justice, saving Lolita from Quilty, nor as a complete monster who, as many have read him, seeks to justify his lust for nymphets by offering historical or literary reasons. As with most interpretations, both criticisms create a flat and determined Humbert, stripped of his multifariousness and, quite frankly, his richness.

With this in mind, we must abandon text-based models of unreliability for a one that integrates both textual signs and reader response. Recently, Ansgar Nünning has begun creating such a model. According to Nünning, most theories of unreliable narrator struggle for a text-basis, but fail as “they try to define unreliability by relating it to a

concept that is itself ill-defined and paradoxical.”<sup>41</sup> In particular, the standard by which a narrator is measured, the implied author, is “problematic because it creates the illusion that it is a matter of a purely textual phenomenon. But it is obvious from any of the definitions that the implied author is a construct established by the reader on the basis of the whole structure of the text.”<sup>42</sup> With this in mind, Nünning states, “the link that theorists have forged between the unreliable narrator and the implied author deprives narratology of the possibility of accounting for the pragmatic effects subsumed under the term of unreliable narration.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, as we have seen, text-based models of understanding the unreliable narrator diminish characters like Humbert by failing to provide language to discuss the reader’s “sense” of Humbert’s untrustworthiness.

In response, Nünning argues that the a narrator’s reliability is “a subjectively tinged value-judgment or projection governed by the normative presuppositions and moral convictions of the critic”<sup>44</sup> Nünning’s theory rests on the concept of “naturalization,” particularly as put forth by Monika Fludernik. According to this concept, naturalization is the act of weighing the narrative world against that of the real world, building an understanding of the text through personal experience. This becomes particularly important when dealing with Humbert who, as earlier mentioned, is the exclusive viewpoint for his world and who doubles himself and alters the perception of the world according to his own purposes. Readers then can construct a figure of Humbert by contrasting the cordial comments he makes to Gaston’s face and the insults he keeps in his narrative, and relate this figure to two-faced people in their own lives, or by measuring Hum’s moral code against their own code (instead of that of the implied

author), or any number of personal standards. While the text serves as the “facts,” the reader’s own life and experience serves as the “criteria” for these judgments.

To help clarify his theory, Nünning sets forth two referential frames to guide judgment of unreliable narrators. The first is based on “readers’ empirical experience and the criteria of verisimilitude.”<sup>45</sup> This is the level of the reader’s own life and surroundings, which includes moral and religious assumptions, associations with other people, and other knowledge and experience. With this very simple frame, most readers would judge Humbert as unreliable simply from his violation of moral codes: he justifies and relishes in sexual interaction with his “nymphets,” and is, therefore, untrustworthy. It should be noted, though, that this frame is highly personal and cannot be used as a blanket statement for unreliability. Nünning even uses *Lolita* as an example, claiming “a pederast would not find anything wrong with *Lolita*.”<sup>46</sup> However, even this type of reader could find plenty of other morally questionable material to base his/her reading of unreliability on, from the fact that Humbert admits to being a murderer to a general mistrust of first-person narrators (assuming that nobody knows the whole story, not even the story-teller).

Despite this emphasis on the reader’s personal views, norms, and experiences, Nünning still recognizes the role of the text in guiding these responses. His second frame, that of “specifically literary frames of reference,”<sup>47</sup> includes literary conventions, such as genre conventions and character models, and the norms of both preceding and outside works, as well as norms within the work itself. While this level centers on the text, which most other theories of unreliability base their judgments on, it also allows for



“extra textual frames of reference,”<sup>48</sup> or anything outside of the text that could help judge a narrator’s reliability. In the present case, this could include Nabokov’s statement that “my creature Humbert is a foreigner and an anarchist, and there are many things, besides nymphets, in which I disagree with him,”<sup>49</sup> along with any other critical readings. This model also allows for previous character styles, including unreliable narrators or other tricksters.

The dual frames help remove the restrictions of textual involvement and allow for an interplay between text and reader. Unfortunately, Nünning provides little examination of how this interaction takes place. For the rest of this paper, then, I will attempt to provide such an explanation, first by employing reception theory by Wolfgang Iser to articulate the theoretical interchange between reader and text, and then offer two hypothetical readers to demonstrate the process of recognizing unreliability. Iser’s reception theory is based in the performative action between the text and the reader, who encounters the signs and “is induced to construct the imaginary object.”<sup>50</sup> The key concept to this theory is the fact that “...the whole text can never be perceived at any one time [...] The ‘object’ of the text can only be imagined by way of different consecutive phases of reading. We always stand outside the given object, whereas we are situated inside the literary text.”<sup>51</sup> Because we can only see pieces of the text— or more precisely, the textual world— there are necessarily gaps in every text. These gaps include inconsistencies, information not yet given, information about the fictional world not included in the text, and other narrative failures. The gaps engage the reader by prompting him/her to devise fills for these gaps, which, in turn, enlists the reader in

creation of the text, as the fills come from the reader's previous experience. What readers see when they read, then, is a "gestalt," a momentarily stable understanding of the text based on a mix of textual signs and personal experience.

According to Iser, the process of reading, and the place where a narrator can be accurately identified and analyzed as unreliable, exists in a third frame. This frame contains elements of both the textual and the personal frames, but is not a manifestation nor a subset of either one; it is the combination of the reader's experience guided by the textual signs. However, this frame is not a fixed entity, but always subject to change as the reader encounters instances that force him/her to adjust this frame. These instances can come from within the text, such as a twist ending that forces the reader to reconsider all previous assumptions about a character, or from the reader's life, such as visiting a place that served as a story's setting and having more than just the narrator's descriptions to imagine the world. When the reader dismisses a gestalt, it joins other previous gestalts as the "background." Backgrounds do not disappear, but rather inform all future gestalts. By that same token, a new gestalt also provides the reader with clues for what will happen in future, which Iser calls, "forecasting." Unreliability, then, is not a determined trait inherent in a character, as the aforementioned text-based critics have argued, but shifts as the reader lives and reads.

To illustrate this process, I will design two hypothetical readers of *Lolita* and apply Nünning's theory, accentuated by Iser, to these readers' experiences. Reader A has never read *Lolita* before, but he has a vague conception of the plot: an older man has a sexual relationship with the blonde, underaged daughter of his wife. Although this

conception comes from reading a review for the 1997 film version, it still forms the initial gestalt and foregrounds his understanding of the book. Even when he is confronted with a loquacious Humbert and young, bubbly Delores, different from the ones he pictured from the movie, these two images will still serve as the bedrock—Iser's background—upon which all further conceptions will be built. Conversely, reader B has not only read *Lolita* before, but has done so in an American literature class and participated in a class discussion of the text. This previous reading and discussion gives reader B a more intricate gestalt, but far from a final decision about the text. Proffer states that “On subsequent readings the humbled reader will pick up the trail of clues which he passed over before; in some cases—the more obvious—he will be appalled by his initial blindness, in others—the more devious ones—he will be amazed by Nabokov's craft or intuition and the prodigious demands he makes for complete comprehension,”<sup>52</sup> and this is exactly the experience reader B is looking for when he returns to the text. B knows that Humbert killed Quilty and that he wants to have sex with Lo. Where A finds himself shocked by Humbert's brazen desires and justifications, reader B has moved beyond the book's moral quandaries and seeks to understand Humbert from a structural and aesthetic viewpoint.<sup>53</sup>

To reader A, the Humbert of the first pages is both very sensual, accentuating the physical act of speaking Lolita's name, and shockingly direct. The admittance that Lolita was not his first love seems brazen and revolting to the reader and Humbert's claim that he had loved “a certain initial girl-child”<sup>54</sup> represents the first change in the gestalt. The assumption that Humbert would find himself drawn to Lolita against his will—suggested

to him by the aforementioned movie review—must be pushed into the background where the textual marker, Humbert’s love for a girl-child, foregrounds a predatorial pedophile version of Humbert. It should be noted that unlike reader B, reader A has no context yet to judge Humbert’s claim that this happened “About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer,”<sup>55</sup> so the reader still pictures an older man preying on a young girl, not a consensual relationship between two youths.

While the misconception is corrected in chapter 4, this reading of Humbert remains relatively stable throughout the start of the book. If anything, the view of a predatory Humbert grows from the faux-scientific descriptions of “nymphets”<sup>56</sup> and his historical and literary evidence that follows.<sup>57</sup> At this point, reader A has enough information to judge the narrator as “unreliable,” but he does not know to what extent. I will use one of the terms set forth by Phelan and Martin, who break the narrator into six characters along several axes of unreliability, to describe the initial type of unreliable narrator the reader finds. From the information encountered thus far, reader A believes Humbert engages in what Phelan and Martin call “misreporting,” or unreliability as “a consequence of his mistaken value system.”<sup>58</sup> This passive labeling stands in contrast to its more active cousin, “underreporting,” in which “the narrator tells us less than s/he knows.”<sup>59</sup> Where the former occurs as an innocent mistake or a byproduct of the narrator’s inherent lack of understanding of the world, the latter occurs as an intentional attempt to deceive the reader. The reader evidently accepts Humbert’s historical and faux-psychological descriptions of himself and believes that he suffers from a

psychological aberration, making his statements the honest representations of the world as he sees it.

While reader B begins his reading, he has already confidently labeled Humbert as an “underreporter.” While reader A’s initial judgment stems from the moral distance between Humbert’s norms and his own, reader B attempts to find textual proofs of Humbert’s unreliability. For reader B, the key to this proof is the references to Quilty laced throughout the narrative. Like Grabes, reader B sees this type of manipulative tampering as an attempt to convince the reader of his own innocence and, therefore, an unreliable mediator of the literary world. So while reader A comes to the text expecting to find moral indicators, reader B looks for indications of Humbert’s manipulation. The first sign of tampering reader B finds appears in the list of names contained in *Who’s Who in the Limelight*.<sup>60</sup> In addition to an early appearance of Quilty’s name, reader B also discovers titles like *The Little Nymph* and *Fatherly Love*, which the reader takes as signs of Quilty’s sexual interests. However, the last part of the paragraph takes on more interesting significance to reader B than these incidental occurrences.

As Humbert’s attention moves on to “the look of my dear love’s name even affixed to some old hag of an actress,”<sup>61</sup> the end of the paragraph grabs reader B more: “Appeared (I notice the slip of my pen in the preceding paragraph, but please do not correct it, Clarence) in *The Murdered Playwright*. Quine the Swine. Guilty of killing Quilty. Oh my Lolita, I only have words to play with!”<sup>62</sup> The coexistence of so many Quilty references: “Clarence,” “*The Murdered Playwright*” and “Quine the Swine”—serves as one of the signs of Humbert’s tampering that reader B foregrounded to find.

These occurrences keep his gestalt in place, but the last two lines: “Guilty of killing Quilty. Oh my Lolita, I only have words to play with!” force the reader to discard his gestalt for a new one. Humbert here not only admits to “playing” with words, the text in this case, but also admits to committing murder. Of course, reader B knew that Humbert kills Quilty, but his brazen proclamation laid here as a clue for the reader disrupts reader B’s reading of Humbert. Instead of a narrator who underreports events for the sake of proclaiming his own innocence, H.H. admits his guilt in this passage. Although Hum makes the same admission at other points in the narrative—“You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style”<sup>63</sup>— this instance stands out precisely because of its proximity to multiple utterances of Quilty’s name. It is brazen for reader B, who knows that Hum identifies himself as “guilty” and mystifying for reader A, who does not recognize the name.

This does not mean that reader A’s gestalt remains stable at this point, despite the fact that the list of names contained in *Who’s Who in the Limelight* carries no more significance than those in Dr. Ray’s list of characters.<sup>64</sup> When Humbert reaches the end of the chapter and states, “Guilty of killing Quilty,”<sup>65</sup> the gestalt may change. This change, however, is highly dependent on the reader’s attention to the text. He may read the phrase and connect to the name he recently encountered, and thereby add Clare Quilty’s name to his gestalt, perhaps with an idea that he has been murdered, perhaps that only that he is significant.

In the same way Humbert's line, "I only have words to play with,"<sup>66</sup> forces reader B to mistrust the narrator, reader A also recognizes a certain deviousness with language. Moving backwards, the reader may also recall that there has been no direct discourse in the previous nine chapters. Along with Humbert's one-sided and often mean description of his marriage and divorce to Valeria, reader A joins reader B in assigning a underreporting label to Humbert. This mistrust of the narrator's truthfulness works on Nünning's personal field of reference in two ways. First, he relates the one-sided story to other one-sided stories in his own life, particularly nasty break-ups. Having encountered ex-lovers who attempt to frame the other as simultaneously an idiot and a monster, the reader recalls that neither actually fit this description and that the accuser intentionally lied or exaggerated to garner support from the listener. As a result of this recognition, the reader begins to doubt Humbert's reliability on the ethics/evaluation axis, and this alters the gestalt to foreground Hum's future statements. Again, the reader's judgment comes from the frame of personal experience and conceptions, not from the frame of text; textually, there is no reason to doubt Humbert's description of Valeria because no sign or utterance contradicts it.

The interaction between text and reader also helps explain the action in the "diary" chapters. While reader A still questions the narrator's honesty, this shift in style mutes some from the change in text style. In place of the standard novel format, in which a reader assumes the narrator is reliable until proven otherwise, the reader encounters a diary. Based on the textual frame, which accounts for extra-textual sources and conventions, the reader expects more subjectivity and barer emotions in a diary. With

that in mind, the inconsistencies in the story and overt moral failings match those found in other diaries. The proximity of these textual norms helps ease some of the distrust of Humbert's story. For reader A, the effect works so well that when the text switches back from diary to straight narrative, the similar tone and style allows the reader to still consider the narrative a safe, if subjective, account of the events.

This is particularly important as Humbert begins to act on his fantasies. The first of these occurs directly after the diary ends, in which Humbert stimulates himself with Lolita on his lap. The reader here recognizes unreliability on several axes: the event/fact axis (he lets her go "as if we had been struggling and now my grip had eased"),<sup>67</sup> the understanding/perception axis ("I was a radiant and robust Turk"),<sup>68</sup> and, certainly, the ethics/evaluation axis ("I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor")<sup>69</sup>. The coexistence of these multiple points of unreliability make it difficult to pinpoint what kind of narrator Humbert represents, even with the expanded terms offered by Phelan and Martin. Humbert fluctuates between an underreporter, who consciously tells the reader less than he knows for the sake of manipulating events, and a misreporter, who faithfully tells the reader the events as he sees them. Reader A sees H.H. as ethically unreliable, but both of these labels fall short of describing his actions. As Humbert explains his possible plots to rape Lolita and admits his marriage to Charlotte is merely a means to that end, he seems incapable of underreporting anything. Finally, my reader engages his personal frame of reference and decides that, while morally repugnant, a person that is honest about such sleazy tactics must be honest about everything else.



Reader B also struggles with an appropriate label for Humbert's unreliability, but for different reasons than reader A. The moral consequences of Hum's actions have little effect on reader B, as he already knows what Lo and Hum will do together. However, he must reconcile H.H.'s aforementioned coded admissions of murder to this obvious attempt to demonstrate his innocence. Moving the current gestalt to the background, reader B recalls his gestalt when he began this reading, which saw H.H.'s manipulation as an attempt to dodge guilt, while also recognizing an attempt to tell the truth. Textually, then, reader B is stuck here; the admission of guilt and dodging of responsibility stand diametrically opposed to one another, and negate each other. To resolve this tension, reader B turns to the personal level and recalls his own experiences of guilt: sometimes he is willing accept blame, sometimes he wants to avoid blame. Because he finds these things true in his personal life, reader B is able to find them also true of the character, and uses this to build a new gestalt.

Reader A must also build a tenuous gestalt as he attempts to reconcile the two sides of Humbert that he encounters: a schemer and a pedophile, but also an honest storyteller. This must be moved back, though, with Charlotte's death. After reading about his unrealized plans to murder Charlotte, his careless placement of his diary, his failed schemes to seduce Lo, and finally, after their first night together, the revelation that she had agency where he did not, reader A concludes that Humbert is a failure. Despite this temporary apposition, A already begins working on a further, but more tentative gestalt. Building on the personal feeling that Humbert is a failure and untrustworthy, reader A begins to wonder about the degree of manipulation in the text that reader B built

his gestalt on. Charlotte's conveniently timed death and Delores's agency in initiating the sexual encounter both allow Hum to obtain his desires—sex with Lolita and Charlotte out of the way—without having to act like a villain; certainly he dreamed of these events and reaped their benefits, but he did not actively cause them. My reader develops a waiting, tentative gestalt which understands Hum to manipulate the narrative for the sake of appearances and to earn his reader's sympathy. Rather than advance this gestalt, the reader keeps it as an alternative and foregrounds his expectations.

Another interesting response builds in reader A during these sections, that of delayed anticipation. Despite the mounting frustration with Humbert's failures and disgust with his morals and desires, reader A still believes that Humbert will eventually have sex with Lo. The getting there, however, delays that expectation and creates a sense of frustration and further distance from Humbert. This delayed expectation builds on concepts formed on the textual frame, which includes literary conventions and relations to other works. From the point of Charlotte's death, the book becomes, as the narrating Nabokov intimates, at the kindest level, a romance novel, or at the cruelest, a pornographic novel. Either way, the reader expects some type of coupling between the two characters, and this expectation is frustrated by the constant interruptions between Humbert and his goal.

James Tweedie's observation that "Humbert's 'Confession' appears to prolong the pleasures of anticipation, itself contingent on the promised revelation of a secret"<sup>70</sup> takes on particular significance in the novel's second half, where the story assumes the conventions of detective fiction. Since his consummation with Lolita, Humbert has

occupied an adversarial role for reader A. This only grows through the start of the second half, where Humbert's tightening control over her and her increasing disgust with him— "her cheek (recedant) against mine (pursuant)"<sup>71</sup>— further vilifies Humbert. A familiarity with crime stories, based in the textual frame, and a desire for justice, based in the personal frame, results in the reader's expectation for Humbert's eventual apprehension and punishment. Reader A, then, identifies with the "Aztec Red" who appears behind Delores and H.H. and sees him as a possible agent of justice, thus projecting new expectations into the gestalt. Although this expectation builds as Lolita grows more evasive, particularly with her mystery meeting in Wace,<sup>72</sup> this expectation is frustrated in various ways.<sup>73</sup> The associations between the pursuer and cousin Gustave Trapp, along with Hum's admittance that he may be hallucinating, makes the reader fear that there may be no pursuer at all. When Humbert does finally lose Lolita, the description is buried in the narrated discourse of a hospital nurse, and hardly given more importance than the description of Elphinstone that follows:

Everything was fine. A bright voice informed me that yes, everything was fine, my daughter had checked out the day before, around two, her uncle, Mr. Gustave, had called for her with a cocker spaniel pup and a smile for everyone, and a black Caddy Lack, and had paid Dolly's bill in cash, and told them to tell me I should not worry, and keep warm, they were at Grandpa's ranch as agreed.<sup>74</sup>

Only Humbert's chapter closing statement, "To myself I whispered that I still had my gun, and was still a free man—free to trace the fugitive, free to destroy my brother,"<sup>75</sup> keeps reader A's interest in the crime story. However, even this promise of violence and potential fulfillment of Humbert's "murderer" claim, is side tracked. Several years pass

between Lo's disappearance and her letter, and Humbert's relatively happy relationship with Rita delays the reader's gratification again.

The play between anticipation and gratification actually pulls reader B's norms closer to Humbert's. As a student of literature who recognizes the workings of genre conventions, reader B admires Humbert's artistic abilities. This gestalt strengthens when reader B encounters Hum's artistic observations: "There was in the fiery phantasm a perfection which made my wild delight also perfect, just because the vision was out of reach with no possibility of attainment to spoil it by the awareness of an appended taboo,"<sup>76</sup> and "I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art."<sup>77</sup> While Humbert remains unreliable and an underreporter, his motivation changes from that of expunging guilt to that of a desire for art. The closing lines,

And do not pity C. Q. One had to chose between him and H. H., and one wanted H. H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita.<sup>78</sup>

reveal a Humbert less interested in preserving his own morality and more with preserving Lolita's immortality. Humbert is still certainly unreliable, but reader B sees this unreliability as a positive trait: misleading for art instead of misleading for malice. Interestingly, this moral judgment comes from Nünning's personal frame and allows reader B to finish his search for Humbert's unreliability.

Reader A comes to a different conclusion. When Humbert visits Mrs. Richard Shiller (whose name has been forgotten by reader A), the reader illustrates Iser's theory of enriched gestalt. Although the gestalt built on knowledge of crime stories and expectation of Humbert's capture or revenge has been discarded in favor of new gestalt, in which Humbert is cured by his relationship with Rita, reader A, like reader B, still has lingering hopes for violence. When Humbert visits the adult Delores, the reader expects him to finally commit his murder and kill Dick. But Humbert's dismissal of reader A, and all others who share this expectation, "Then I pulled out my automatic—I mean, this is the kind of fool thing a reader might suppose I did. It never even occurred to me to do it,"<sup>79</sup> forces the reader to push this gestalt to the background. The new conception of Humbert, then, includes the disgust for H.H. that has been built up through the story, the expectation that Hum will commit some act of violence, the desire to see him pay for his offenses, and, with his pathetic begging and dismissal of violence, a new sense of sympathy.

When Lolita finally reveals the name of Hum's pursuer and rival, Humbert writes the following in praise of his narrative skills:

Quietly the fusion took place, and everything fell into order, into the pattern of branches, that I have woven throughout this memoir with the express purpose of having the ripe fruit fall at the right moment; yes, with the express and perverse purpose of rendering [...] that golden and monstrous peace through the satisfaction of logical recognition, which my most inimical reader should experience now.<sup>80</sup>

Although Hum the narrator intends for reader A to exclaim, "Of course!" with his dawning understanding, he actually feels a mix of confusion and disappointment. By

now, many different conceptions of Hum have been built and abandoned, and more expectations have been frustrated than met. When Humbert finally becomes the murderer he has promised to be, he has performed clumsily and digressively, with Quilty stalling and mocking H.H. the whole way.

The view of Humbert that reader A settles on, that of a pathetic creature who clumsily pursues his vile dreams, contradicts the view that reader B comes to, that of an artistic virtuoso whose deft knowledge and control of literary conventions effectively manipulates his reader. The two readers also come to opposite types of unreliability. Reader A sees Hum's misreporting as indicative of his inabilities and failures, and reader B sees Hum's underreporting as a component of his artistic skill.

One may argue that these opposition prove that a cognitive theory of unreliable narration still retains the shortcomings claimed for text-based theories earlier in the paper, namely that such readings limit and diminish the character. This is a fair criticism; my readers have ignored the many literary references, the sincerity of Humbert's confession of guilt, the interplay of art and morality, and any number of other possibilities. However, under a cognitive theory of unreliable narration, these possibilities remain open. Were my readers to encounter some more literary criticism, or attend a lecture, or even just have a conversation about *Lolita*, their subsequent readings would undoubtedly lead to different perceptions. By involving the reader's personal experiences and frame of reference, each encounter with the book will require the formulation of new gestalts. In text-based theories of unreliability that ignore the reader's conceptions and focus instead on determined textual markers, the reader must

choose to ignore certain elements of a character's personality in pursuit of a stable reading—such as Nomi-Ghez's Humbert, who loses control of his own narrative, or Bullock's Humbert, who ultimately becomes a conscientious individual. This results in a diminished and flat version of the character, forcing the reader to sacrifice Humbert's richness for stability. Conversely, a cognitive theory of unreliable narration allows for multifarious responses to literature, allowing the reader to develop a complex and contradictory reading of a character, which is exactly what is needed when encountering a character like Humbert Humber

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14

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<sup>47</sup> Nünning 77

<sup>48</sup> Numming 74

<sup>49</sup> Nabokov 315

<sup>50</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984) 66

<sup>51</sup> Iser 109

<sup>52</sup> Proffer 57-58

<sup>53</sup> The choices made for these readers are not arbitrary. In fact, I base them on a variation of my own experiences reading *Lolita*. I have chosen, however, to use this artificial version of myself, rather than recount my own experience, for the sake of distance between my historical self and my hypothetical self.

<sup>54</sup> Nabokov 9

<sup>55</sup> Nabokov 9

<sup>56</sup> Nabokov 16-18

<sup>57</sup> Nabokov 18-19

<sup>58</sup> Phelan, James and Mary Patricia Martin, "Lessons of 'Weymouth:,' Homodiegesis, Unreliability, Ethics, and *The Remains of the Day*," *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, ed. David Herman (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1999) 95

<sup>59</sup> Phelan and Martin 95

<sup>60</sup> Nabokov 31

<sup>61</sup> Nabokov 32

<sup>62</sup> Nabokov 32

<sup>63</sup> Nabokov 9

<sup>64</sup> A reader with a strong memory might recognize the name “Vivian Darkbloom,” which appears in both the *Limelight* list and in Ray’s list. However, there relation would bear little insight into the character.

<sup>65</sup> Nabokov 32

<sup>66</sup> Nabokov 32

<sup>67</sup> Nabokov 60

<sup>68</sup> Nabokov 59

<sup>69</sup> Nabokov 62

<sup>70</sup> James Tweedie, “Lolita’s Loose Ends: Nabokov and the Boundless Novel,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 46.2 (2000): 154

<sup>71</sup> Nabokov 165

<sup>72</sup> Nabokov 224-226

<sup>73</sup> It is worth noting that, at this time, reader A has forgotten that Humbert is under incarceration as he writes. My reader still worries that Humbert may go free.

<sup>74</sup> Nabokov 246

<sup>75</sup> Nabokov 247

<sup>76</sup> Nabokov 264

<sup>77</sup> Nabokov 285

<sup>78</sup> Nabokov 309

<sup>79</sup> Nabokov 280

<sup>80</sup> Nabokov 272