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OGLING LO:
FOR AN EROTICS
OF LITERARY DESCRIPTION

I watch my daughter play; she lets inanimate objects come to life, makes them sing and talk, always in a shrill voice indicating their autonomous individuality. As I watch her, I nod in agreement with philosopher Kendall Walton, whose aesthetic theory traces the sophisticated engagement with representational works of art back to children's games of make-believe, arguing that novels function like dolls and teddy bears, as props for the imagining of fictional objects, activities, and propositions.¹ What separates her play, we are tempted to ask, from that of the playwright? Yet, I soon remember how she engaged in the aesthetic long before she had acquired the language she now puts into the sewn on mouths of soft toys. From her very birth, she seemed susceptible to art: to the languid lines of lullabies, the booming beats of bass drums, the rhythmic rhymes of rigmaroles and ritournelles. Before imagination, there are impacts, imprints and impressions, a pre-semantic order of affect always at work on the underside of language: what psychoanalytic critic Julia Kristeva terms the "semiotic" aspect of linguistic communication, "rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation."² In this respect, the evolution of the child seems to mirror the

¹ Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the foundations of the representational arts*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press (1990).

² Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, New York: Columbia University Press (1984), p. 29.

history of literature, at least as it is sketched by formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky, who locates its origin in the sensuous songs of Patagonians and Papuans. As Shklovsky concludes: “Poetry appeared before content.”³ Or, in other words: material patterns precede propositional matter.

Consider the following description of the American landscape traversed by Humbert and Lolita during the second part of *Lolita*:

Distant mountains. Near mountains. More mountains; bluish beauties never attainable, or ever turning into inhabited hill after hill; south-eastern ranges, altitudinal failures as alps go; heart and sky-piercing snow-veined gray colossi of stone, relentless peaks appearing from nowhere at a turn of the highway; timbered enormities, with a system of neatly overlapping dark firs, interrupted in places by pale puffs of aspen; pink and lilac formations, Pharaonic, phallic, “too prehistoric for words” (blasé Lo); buttes of black lava; early spring mountains with young-elephant lanugo along their spines; end-of-the-summer mountains, all hunched up, their heavy Egyptian limbs folded under folds of tawny moth-eaten plush; oatmeal hills, flecked with green round oaks; a last rufous mountain with a rich rug of lucerne at its foot. (156)⁴

As a description, this passage does not identify places and objects so much as it produces patterns, prompting through the notion of passing landscapes and the rocking alliterations of pale puffs and phallic formations a synesthetic reading of movement and sound. No one is speaking here, pointing out things and telling us what they are like; but someone is chanting, lulling us in with a lullaby.

Description, in this sense, is a machine of affections, complex and composed. For mixed into the beautiful is the nasty and naughty: the lover’s discourse and the pervert’s discourse combined, woven into the same sentence, sung in the same voice. Nabokovian style has often been associated with perversion and pathology, and in reading it, one will become accustomed to a particular peculiarity of patterned preferences; for, as Nabokov scholar Eric Naiman puts it: “Nabokov encourages and even trains his readers to make illicit, seemingly unwarranted, and often libidinally charged interpretive associations as an essential step in the understanding of his texts.”⁵ Thus Naiman’s apposite appraisal of *Lolita* as a not necessarily explicit but certainly “*stylistically* lewd book.”⁶ In the present passage, a perverse pleasure is found in

³ Viktor Shklovsky, *Literature and Cinematography*, trans. Irina Masinovsky, Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive Press (2008), p. 8.

⁴ All references to the novel are to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr., London: Penguin Books (2000).

⁵ Eric Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press (2010), p. 8.

⁶ Naiman, 2010, p. 17.

semantic and somatic forms surpassing the pinning down of properties: the early spring mountains are the mapping of the nymphet on nature, the lanugo hair an echo of Lolita and the repeated invocations of the “glistening tracery of down on her forearm” (41);⁷ and their calf-like youth finds its dark and violent contrast in the hunched up and heavy, moth-eaten maturity of the aging mountains that follow. And what about the rufous? There, we do not find the color of leaves but the dusty fluttering of mothy wings,⁸ carrying a distorted and dying echo of the “russet” that, throughout the work, remains intimately connected to the perilous magic of nymphets.⁹ What has the form of properties are prompters of affection and patterns of secret signals, woven into the fabric of the work like a single and hardly discernable thread of russet, infusing it all with yet another nuance of nympholepsy.

The beauty of this landscape comes as no surprise; but how can it be erotic, raunchy, nasty on the brink of the scandalous? Because it is the description itself that is, not the things it describes. We cannot go back to see what the phallic formations are *really* like, without its distortion through perverting discourse; and there is no sense in protesting: “Hey, why are you ogling my mountain like that, what kind of person are you?” The perversion is part of the fun of it all, and without it, we would not even be travelling through the healthy and wholesome lands of Adalbert Stifter, but a world without art. And after all, “there is no harm in smiling” (129).

In reading, we respond to patterns, not bodies; and if we seem to encounter fictional objects, chances are they are little more than objective correlates, small machinic components of affect, compositional formulae of emotions.¹⁰ In his *Languages of Art*, philosopher Nelson Goodman presents a distinction between what descriptions are *of* and what *kinds* of descriptions they are, and notes that in fiction, things may be represented without being denoted, as fiction flourishes with descriptions of things that do not exist.¹¹ What matters in

⁷ Cf. “the slenderness of a downy limb” (17), “the blond down of her brown limbs” (44), “my hot downy darling” (55), “an adorable, downy-armed child of twelve” (76), “the golden down on her warm brown limbs” (138), “the wet glistening young down of her armpit” (163), “a little downy girl still wearing poppies” (300), etc.

⁸ As pointed out to me by Peter J. Rabinowitz, the word seems infested by the Rufous Minor, a species distinguishable only through close scrutiny of the genitalia.

⁹ “a revelation of axillary russet” (20); “her warm upturned russet face” (44); “russet nymphets” (66); “her russet beauty and the quicksilver in the baby folds of her stomach” (162); “the most auburn and russet, the most mythopoetic nymphet in October’s orchard-haze” (186); “so rosy and russet, lips freshly painted” (243); “Botticelli’s russet Venus” (270); “the faint violet whiff and dead leaf echo of the nymphet I had rolled myself upon with such cries in the past; an echo on the brink of a russet ravine” (277). On Nabokov’s idiosyncratic use of the word, see Anna Wierzbicka, “Bilingualism and cognition: The perspective from semantics,” *Language and Bilingual Cognition*, eds. Vivian Cook and Benedetta Bassetti, New York: Psychology Press (2011), pp 206-213. Also see Nabokov’s juxtaposition of the two colors in his “Note about Symbols and Colors” (364).

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, London: Faber & Faber (1932), p. 145.

¹¹ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, 2nd ed., Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing (1976), p. 22.

literature, in that case, is not the referential relation between a description and its object, or between a discourse and its world, but how and what a passage is fashioned to express, how it forms a representation-as rather than representation-of. No one is feeling erotic about the landscape, but the landscape is presented as scandalously erotic: it summons a scandalous eroticism. And the relevant question for analysis is what description may do as soon as it stops *describing*, thus going *beyond description*.

According to author and critic David Lodge, the lack of denotative function in fiction makes its use of denotative forms of language a question of *aesthetic significance*: since description is not regulated by its relation to an object, what looks like a matter of veracity becomes a matter of pure stylistic choice.¹² As Lodge puts it, “words ‘become’ what in non-literary discourse they merely represent,”¹³ and thus, they can become many things, and even madly unnatural things. The referential arbitrariness of fictional description does not make it incapable of saying something, of producing meaning, for its governing principles are not obliterated but rather shifted from the informational realm of reference to the artistic realm of composition: in literature, the author gets away with pretty much anything, as long as he is able to achieve a consistency of *effect*. What comes to determine his choice is therefore “his sense of aesthetic logic and [the] aesthetic possibilities of his literary structure,”¹⁴ and what come to determine their appropriateness are “the expectations aroused by the literary structure of which [literary description] is a part.”¹⁵ As a consequence, literature is a communication of meaning through language between those able to produce and those able to receive affect; or, as Lodge puts it: “The writer expresses what he knows by affecting the reader; the reader knows what is expressed by being receptive to affects. The medium of this process is language.”¹⁶

Narratologist James Phelan takes such an idea of unlimited possibility to render criticism impossible, since every choice seems to become entirely capricious on the side of the author: but what Lodge claims is, again, not the destruction of limits but a shift in logic from veracity to pattern. Thus, Phelan’s claim that “[w]hat a writer does first puts constraints on what he can do later” does not counter Lodge, as it sets out to do, but agrees with him.¹⁷ Where they part ways is at the idea that these constraints are produced by some object of

¹² David Lodge, *Language of Fiction: Essays in criticism and verbal analysis of the English novel*, Routledge Classics Ed., London and New York: Routledge, p. 65.

¹³ Lodge, p. 66.

¹⁴ Lodge, p. 67.

¹⁵ Lodge, p. 68.

¹⁶ Cf. Lodge, p. 68.

¹⁷ James Phelan, *Worlds from Words: A Theory of Language in Fiction*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1981), p. 82.

description, i.e., an object independent of the description itself. In Phelan, reading literature seems tightly knit with a practice of orientating oneself towards absent objects in a distant realm, and what can be done with language seems determined by an abstract thinginess, the fictional entity as a ghostlike referent, never fully visible, yet always ready to haunt the author who does not do it full justice. For Lodge, on the other hand, the writer may only stay true to his work of art; or rather, to his aesthetic sensibility and his will to communicate, his will to affective power through the order-word of aesthetic composition.

The conflict between these views is most apparent in regard of fictional characters. In Phelan, character, “though formed from language, is an element independent of it,”¹⁸ and its success will rely on the extent to which the reader is able to form “as precise a portrait of the character as possible.”¹⁹ Lodge, on the other hand, is interested in the things that literary language allows for as soon as it *stops representing*: i.e., when it is freed from performing the duplicating services of the portrait painter. Phelan’s dismissal of Lodge’s theory as an *objectivist approach* is, accordingly, somewhat ironic: for it is precisely the objective relation, and the notion that objects govern discourse, that is excluded by the latter and retained by the former. Phelan’s alternative approach is less “suspicious of the emotional involvement that comes from viewing the character as a possible person,” and rather considers “that involvement as crucial to the *effect* of the work.”²⁰ But Lodge is equally interested in the production of affect, yet locates it elsewhere: not in the emotional involvement with fictional individuals, but in the response to actual formal patterns.

As sociologist Bruno Latour points out, a fictional story “can only obtain continuity for its characters through redundancies that have to be extracted from alterity itself, because each page, instant, and situation are different from each other”;²¹ and a similar philosophy of composition is already found in Humbert, who notes how the novelist “who has given a character of his some mannerism or a dog, has to go on producing that dog or that mannerism every time the character crops up in the course of the book” (104). The need for repetition arises from an infinite difference, but whether or not the author strives for consistency of character, he is damned to achieve his effects by riding the waves of absolute alterity. The distinction between the two approaches thus becomes particularly evident in Phelan’s reading

¹⁸ Phelan, 1981, p. 83.

¹⁹ James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, progression, and the interpretation of narrative*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1989), p. 8.

²⁰ Phelan, 1989, p. 8.

²¹ Bruno Latour, “Reflections on Etienne Souriau’s *Les différents modes d’existence*,” trans. Stephen Muecke, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, Melbourne: re.press (2011), p. 325.

of Lodge's pedagogic example, a brief description of one Mr. Brown: "*Mr. Brown, or Green as he was sometimes called, was short, but tall with it. His fair-complexioned face was swarthy. As one of his friends remarked, 'Grey is a difficult man to pin down.'*"²² According to Phelan, "the intention of the passage is to describe a chameleonlike character";²³ as if the individual Brown is already out there, ready to be captured by the verbal pigments of the poetic portrait painter. But the intention is not to describe the properties that come together to form a specific individual, but to leave the semiotic regime of properties and persons behind, in favor of that of pure patternability. We follow the flow, seeing how each new step adds up to a whole according to a discernible principle. The character is not the same when we reach the end, and in fact, it is not even the same person who has been radically transformed. Arriving at the synthesizing conclusion that "he" is a chameleon-like character reduces the play with patterns to a redundantly roundabout portrayal of a person. The one approach focuses on what kind of discursive description-machine is at work, the other on what kind of particular is pointed out.

So we return to the classic debate on what characters are, and the quarrel between what have been described as theories "treating character as a human or human-like entity" and those "reducing it to a text-grammatical, lexical, thematic, or compositional unit."²⁴ While these positions usually have been labeled mimetic and non-mimetic, or mimetic and formalist, I would rather suggest that the former are concerned with *seeing fictions* whereas the latter are occupied with *hearing literature*. Even more adequate would be a distinction between theories of *simulation* and theories of *poeticity*. According to the former, "it might be that works of literary fiction, with their descriptions of fictional characters and their activities, are capable of calling forth from us imaginative responses that are similar to those called forth by our encounters with real people";²⁵ and it is claimed that "when encountering a fictional character, we use what some theorists call the *person schema* in order to fill out our understanding of a character."²⁶ Theories of simulation favor fiction where characters are represented "as fully human and as particular individuals,"²⁷ and position readers as "onlookers or observers of

²² Lodge, p. 67.

²³ Phelan, 1981, p. 82.

²⁴ Uri Margolin, "Character," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan, London: Routledge (2005), p. 52.

²⁵ Gregory Currie, "Realism of character and the value of fiction," *Aesthetics and ethics: Essays at the intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1998), p. 163.

²⁶ Noël Carroll, "Art, narrative, and moral understanding," *Aesthetics and ethics: Essays at the intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1998), p. 157.

²⁷ Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2007), p. 135.

how the characters feel”;²⁸ consequently, reading fiction is conceived of as being trained in “learning to apply the right emotion to the appropriate object with suitable intensity.”²⁹ The premise that the same norms apply to fictional and actual situations is termed the thesis of “norm-equivalence” by philosopher Daniel Jacobson, who, while remaining critical of such a premise, nevertheless maintains that the “fear and pity aroused by a tragedy are [...] directed at the fictional characters and events, rather than at the work itself.”³⁰ The radically non-referential theories of Goodman and Lodge suggest otherwise, and that such a distinction is impossible, since the object of description is indistinguishable from the description as such. Instead of responding to possible people, we actually *do* respond to the work itself, and to the way it is composed in order to communicate and affect. As philosopher Richard Moran points out, the typically poetic aspects of literary language – such as figuration, allusion, rhythm, repetition, assonance and dissonance, etc. – are certainly able to evoke emotions in a reader, but they may very well *hamper* our ability to think of literature in terms of projected realities. According to Moran, “what is vivid about some representations is that they provoke the mind to *do* various things (relating, contrasting, calling up thoughts),” and “they need not, and normally do not, do so by provoking one to imagine an additional set of fictional truths.”³¹

In contrast to simulationism, then, we find the theory of *poeticity*, or what Roman Jakobson has called “the poetic function” and defined as being in effect when “the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the thing being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality.”³² In order to distinguish the two approaches from each other we may consider a brief literary example, taken from D. A. F. de Sade’s infamous novel *The 120 Days of Sodom*. As Champville recounts one of the complex passions, involving a man intended on the pleasure of depucelating the four children he has by his own four daughters, Blangis is reminded of an even more complex case of incest:

²⁸ Carroll, p. 153.

²⁹ Carroll, p. 144.

³⁰ Daniel Jacobson, “In Praise of Immoral Art,” *Philosophical Topics* 25 (1997), p. 185.

³¹ Richard Moran, “The Expression of Feeling in Imagination,” *The Philosophical Review* 103 (1994), p. 89.

³² Roman Jakobson, “What Is Poetry?” trans. M. Heim, *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions*, eds. Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik, Cambridge: The MIT Press (1967), p. 174.

[H]e once knew a man who fucked three children he had by his mother, amongst whom there was a daughter whom he had marry his son, so that in fucking her he fucked his sister, his daughter and his daughter-in-law, and thus he also constrained his son to fuck his own sister and mother-in-law.³³

For philosopher Berys Gaut, Sade's works are simply "ethically sick because of the attitudes they display of approving of, celebrating, making positive judgments about and aiming to get their readers to enjoy the sexual torture and multifarious degradation of the characters who suffer through their pages."³⁴ In spite of its notoriously schematic and mathematic ordering of characters, Sade's work is apparently able to provoke feelings for its characters, for this is exactly what Gaut finds unpleasant. But how could it be possible to defend Sade if we read him by simulating his stories, playing them out before our inner eye so as to respond to its characters by way of our cognitive person schemas? Like Gaut, writer Georges Bataille concludes that "[n]obody, unless he is totally deaf to it, can finish [*The 120 Days*] without feeling sick,"³⁵ but, what for the former is a final dismissive verdict, for the latter becomes a starting point for an analysis of language and its relation to thinking: through writing, Sade approaches the impossible, making the reader surpass rather than restrict himself to what one was ready to imagine. Thus, Bataille hints at what a reader has to *gain*³⁶ from the nauseating text as soon as he is willing to go beyond the affectionate response to what caused it, the affect of the work, its potential to exert an influence.

In contrast to the mimetic simulationist, Roland Barthes, the prime eroticist of literature who presented the much scorned definition of character as "an impersonal network of symbols combined under the proper name" (i.e., as *figure* rather than *person*),³⁷ is able to distinguish a typically Sadian logic behind a passage like the one recounted, and even finds in it something of a dark absurdist joke. As Barthes remarks, "Sadian crime exists only in proportion to the quantity of language invested in it, [...] because only language can construct it,"³⁸ and here, we find an amusing example of a linguistic economy of condensed sin at work. Crime is shifted from the violated body to the number of taboo relations one is able to violate verbally in a single sentence, and incest becomes little more than a "surprise of vocabulary":³⁹

³³ D. A. F. de Sade, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse, unknown: The Olympia Press (2007), p. 288.

³⁴ Gaut, p. 10.

³⁵ Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton, New York: Marion Boyars (1985), p. 121.

³⁶ Cf. Bataille's "The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1985), pp. 91-102, where Bataille moves from literary analysis to a reading in practical philosophy.

³⁷ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang (1974), p. 94.

³⁸ Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University (1997), p. 33.

³⁹ Barthes, 1997, p. 138.

suddenly, the equation comes out and the sentence “lights up.”⁴⁰ Instead of a mere record of the reader’s personal affection, we get an account of the way the work operates, how its use of language relates to thinking and style. A formalism following this line does not “reduce” everything to language, but explores the fringes of the literary regime, what literature can do and what it may express. The study of poeticity refuses to treat literature as a mere container of imaginary realities, and instead pays attention to language in its singularity: instead of a grammar of art it forms a discipline of what poetician Gérard Genette (following Proust) terms a “*syntaxe déformante*,” or “what singular and coherent world view is expressed and transmitted by [an author’s] very particular use of tenses, pronouns, adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions.”⁴¹

How is the reading of Sade related to *Lolita*? Firstly, on the level of thematic correspondences: Champville’s story of the man depucelating his already incestuous granddaughters is re-echoed in Humbert’s dark fantasy of breeding a Lolita the second, “with my blood in her exquisite veins,” and then practice “on supremely lovely Lolita the Third the art of being a granddad” (p. 174). Like Sade, Nabokov is here using the worst imaginable as a mere stepping stone in pursuit of the even worse; and like Sade, he achieves it through the formula of adding *one more*: no matter how devilish in nature, every crime may always be magnified by way of numeral addition. Humbert’s passion for the “Venus febriculosa” (198), and the taste of blood from a “brown rose” (240), has a more subtle Sadeian tinge, demonstrating a stylistic kinship rather than a direct influence: but even more interesting is Nabokov’s ability of mixing the horrendous with the hilarious. Take some of the more overt puns, like Humbert’s “not exclusively economic kick from such roadside signs as TIMBER HOTEL, *Children under 14 Free*” (147), or the reference to a legal work on marriage neglecting the case of “stepfathers with motherless girls on their hands and knees” (172). These are horrible jokes: horribly depraved, horribly bad (in comparison to the more elegant wordplay found elsewhere), and – horribly fun. So, they work, and the reader of *Lolita* must be one who is able to appreciate the crude and inappropriate joke as well as the sophisticated witticism. And just as we find amusement in the horrible joke, we find beauty in the horrible image, of a Lolita “whose iliac crests had not yet flared” (65).

One of the more persistent concerns of *Lolita*-criticism is how we may describe the name part herself, or how we should respond to the descriptions of her found in the text: there

⁴⁰ Barthes, 1997, p. 33.

⁴¹ Gérard Genette, *Fiction & Diction*, trans. Catherine Porter, Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1993), p. 140.

have even been concerns of whether or not it is OK to call her Lolita at all.⁴² However, these arguments often treat such passages as descriptions *of* objects while paying little attention to them *as* objects. Consequently, critics orientate themselves towards the absent individual, so as to see what she really is like, on the other side of the tinted textual window, outside of narration, freed from the erotics of language: but obviously, there is very little to find once one has peeled off all the layers of Nabokovian prose. As in our initial example, there is no mountain to experience as sensual or non-sensual, but only a mountain-description-as-sensual to experience.

Consider how Humbert's sexual encounters in Europe set up a dark and murky backdrop against which Lolita will prove angelically illuminated. The descriptions of Valeria, his first wife, function to establish an opposition between, on the one hand, the dark and unsatisfactory, and, on the other hand, the bright and desirable; and in responding to them, we do not enter Humbert's evaluation of autonomous beings, or his sexual predilections, but Nabokov's motor of progression. That Valeria exists only as negativity implies neither an evaluation nor an injustice, but the neutral state of a narrative function; and the fact that she reflects the cruel and brutal nature of the protagonist does not imply that we should deliver her in her singularity from the Humbertian grip or gaze, but merely that she constitutes what linguist A. J. Greimas would call an actantial "participle," a kind of adjective merely modifying the substantive.⁴³ No one will deny that Humbert's "perspective" on Valeria is presented as vicious and selfish, but we can only find meaning in her blond hair revealing its "melanic root" and the light down of her face turning "to prickles of a shaved shin" (26) if we consider them as forming a compositional structure of dark disappointment searching the light and downy ideal: there is no way of distinguishing objects from subjects and perceptions here, since these notions do not denote particular existents but flat components spread out over a leveled plane of composition. There is, in other words, no perspectival depth here, hiding a real Valeria or Lolita on the other side of the tinted, Humbertian glass. Rather than Phelan's narratorial "set of lenses through which the audience perceives the story world,"⁴⁴ we

⁴² For a recent comment (based on principles quite different from mine) on the "common critical practice of using the name 'Lolita' to refer only to Humbert's imagined vision, and 'Dolores' to refer to the 'real' child," cf., e.g., Anika Susan Quayle, "Lolita is Dolores Haze: The 'real' child and the 'real' body in *Lolita*," *Nabokov Online Journal* 3 (2009), p. 3. Phelan is one of these practitioners, stating: "In order to differentiate my own perspective from that of Humbert I shall refer to the girl whom he calls Lolita by her given name." The implication is obvious: the character may and should be discussed as a living, breathing human being separable from compositional discourse; *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press (2005), p. 99.

⁴³ Cf. Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An attempt at a method*, trans. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer and Alan Velie, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press (1984), p. 206.

⁴⁴ Phelan, 2005, p. 115.

encounter in the work a plane assemblage reminiscent of stained glass: characters do not dwell on its other side, but coincide with its colorful surface. The glass is there to be looked at, yet there is nothing to see through: the dim and dusky shards of Valeria, the bright and brilliant fragments of Lolita, all come together to form a compositional counterpoint, like the tesserae of a grand mosaic.

Something similar holds true for the nightmarish scene where Humbert attempts to engage a child prostitute, which disgusts us not because of his dodgy intentions but because of the design of the madam's description, "an asthmatic woman, coarsely painted, garrulous, garlicky, with an almost farcical Provençal accent and a black mustache above a purple lip" (23). At work is a verbal machine of nausea, deemed "briskly comic, sardonically overwrought" and almost unreadable by Nabokov scholar Michael Wood:⁴⁵ its garish and gargling alliteration coughed up between the glutinous, gluttonous "garrulous" and the icky "garlicky." Not the identification of properties, helping us behold the individual, but the production of a sickening scent of garlic as the entire sentence seems to be wheezing and breathing with asthma. And then, as the madam presents "a monstrously plump, sallow, repulsively plain girl of at least fifteen with red-ribboned thick black braids who sat on a chair perfunctorily nursing a bald doll" (24), we cannot respond to the girl but only to the description. What Humbert finds monstrous is not necessarily what *we* would find monstrous (the latter lacks interest), for what repels him is, above all, normality, the "provisionally plain," the "essentially human" (17); but the weight and shape of the *sentence* set into motion the image of a corporeality exceeding all limits, an infinite unfolding of formless flesh. For other writers, the girl's age could signal the titillating taboo of the teen, but here it becomes the smell of the dead and decomposed, that which since long has abandoned the realm of the desirable; and just as the motif of thick black hair could signal a lover's fetish in some other work, here it may only evoke the dark thematic braids of maturity, a motif made even more unattractive by the uncanny gesture of breast-feeding a bald doll. Like Humbert, the reader will wish to escape this stuffy and suffocating prison of pimps and prostitutes for the open-air freshness of an enchanted island surrounded "by a vast, misty sea" (16).

When Lolita enters, we find structural relief in her "honey-hued shoulders," "chestnut head of hair" and "bright beauty" (39). This is further prepared by Nabokov's mapping of the encounter on the childhood tryst with Annabel, as it seems to evoke, once again, the sensitive young lover, "a faunlet in [his] own right" (17f), rather than the desperate madman of Paris.

⁴⁵ Michael Wood, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the risks of fiction*, London: Chatto & Windus (1994), p. 112.

By letting the healthy passion from childhood pour over into the encounter with Annabel's new reincarnation, Nabokov lets the image of the child – the “lovely indrawn abdomen where my southbound mouth had briefly paused; and those puerile hips on which I had kissed the crenulated imprint left by the band of her shorts” (p. 39) – flicker between the purity of the mutual memory and the filth of its re-embedding in the new situation, where the nymph remains, but the faunlet has transformed into a horned satyr. Tension arises as the object turns out to be inseparable from description, as Annabel and (by proxy) Lolita are described-as sensuous bodies in a style that itself invokes the reader's tactile sensibility. Just as the nauseating effect of the garrulous and garlicky stems from a patterned effect of language, so the *verbal* folding of a “crenulated imprint” invokes a feeling of tracing the smooth dints and dents of minimally folded skin or the texture of the outside of seashore shells in the kingdom by the sea.

Nabokov invites affection by alienating us from the transparency of words, making the latter stand out, become sensuous objects in themselves, perceivable as a folding of their own, inviting a pause for tactile response and a reproduction of the physical movement of sounds. This is not to say that the novel invites a purely Humbertian perspective on things, but that things and perspectives are indistinguishable from a literary language the reader has always already internalized in a carnal manner, delved deep into and gorged himself upon.

Just like the pure erotics of the faunlet is mixed with the tainted erotics of the satyr, so the sensuous conflates with the monstrous, generating a spark of equivocal pleasure or pleasurable equivocity. We may strive to resist, but in doing so, we do not resist the pleasure of stroking a child but that of stroking the forms of language: this is in no way a significant protest against the eroticizing of children, but a futile protest against the eroticizing of literature, for the resistant reader makes no change beyond censuring literature in the name of a higher purpose.

Let us attempt a partial dissection of the erotics of an early scene, where Humbert eyeballs Lolita in a rather literal manner:

For a moment, we were both in the same warm green bath of the mirror that reflected the top of a poplar with us in the sky. Held her roughly by the shoulders, then tenderly by the temples, and turned her about. “It's right there,” she said, “I can feel it.” “Swiss peasant would use the tip of her tongue.” “Lick it out?” “Yeth. Shly try?” “Sure,” she said. Gently I pressed my quivering sting along her rolling salty eyeball. “Goody-goody,” she said nictating. “It *is* gone.” “Now the other?” “You dope,” she began, “there is noth—” but here she noticed the pucker of my approaching lips. “Okay,” she said co-operatively, and bending

toward her warm upturned russet face somber Humbert pressed his mouth to her fluttering eyelid. She laughed, and brushed passed me out of the room. (43-44)

I will point to three things in particular. First, the presence of the already mentioned color “russet,” a choice of word that becomes significant not primarily because of its semantic meaning but of the trail of echoes reverberating throughout the book as a means for fixing the perilous magic of nymphets: we find it for the first time in the arousing glimpse, caught on the subway, of a school-girl’s lanugo armpit, “a revelation of axillary russet” (20). Indeed, the eyeball scene, too, is closely preceded by Lolita “revealing a stippled armpit” (43).

Second, the making of the *eyeball* the object of sexual contact. Naiman points out “the erotic charge of the excessive, useless act of licking the second eyeball,”⁴⁶ and here, the lofty mirror of the soul is re-embodied in a weird and carnal manner whose transgressive nature far surpasses the simply pornographic. In a Bataillean fashion, the tender and the harsh, the sensible and the eccentric, the natural and the unnatural, become indistinguishable in the corporeal reality of a violating touch; for, as it is put in *Story of the Eye*: “The caress of the eye over the skin is so utterly, so extraordinarily gentle, and the sensation is so bizarre that it has something of a rooster’s horrible crowing.”⁴⁷ The eyeball is a link in a chain of motifs where the soul is conjoined with the body, the inside with the outside, the pale skin with “the lovely prismatic entrails” (116), the “lovely uvula, one of the gems of her body” (240), and the “spicy blood” sucked from “a raised purple-pink swelling” (156) – a doubly organic theme reaching its climax in the craving to “turn my Lolita inside out and apply voracious lips to her young matrix, her unknown heart, her nacreous liver, the sea-grapes of her lungs, her comely twin kidneys” (165). Surely, this is a madman’s discourse, where the tropes of romance are taken all too literally: but the affective and sensuous *kick* one may get out of this mix of the bizarre and the beautiful is inseparable from the aesthetic *kick* one gets out of Nabokov’s weirdly material deconstruction of chaste and chivalrous poetic conventions. If the narrator is mad, it is because the author is madder, and the reader the maddest for begging for more.

The third aspect is found in Lolita’s simple “Okay” which shifts the scene from its initial Humbertian dominance – his rough then tender hold, his clumsy balancing between seducer and abuser – to a vibrant dialectic of agency where the meaning of co-operation wavers between docile compliance and an active partaking in the transgressive event. A

⁴⁶ Naiman, 2010, p. 21.

⁴⁷ Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, San Francisco: City Light Books (1987), p. 83.

similar tension is found in Humbert's later and oft quoted assertion that "it was she who seduced me" (132), a detail that becomes attractive to conflicting interpretations exactly because it *is not* easily dismissed as outrageous absurdity or narratorial unreliability.

Let us consider the debate on the infamous davenport scene of the first part of the book: through blunt Edenic symbolism, it stages Humbert's "first fall"⁴⁸ as he reaches a clandestine climax with Lolita's limbs on his lap. The interpretations vary, as the scene seems to waver between a friendly game, a semi-forced assault, and a mutual act of sexual frottage. As the action reaches its climax, Lolita's expressions becomes a parody of literary erotica: "'Oh it's nothing at all,' she cried with a sudden shrill note in her voice, and she wiggled, and squirmed, and threw her head back, and her teeth rested on her glistening underlip as she half-turned away[.]" (61) Immediately afterward, she rolls off the sofa "as if we had been struggling and now my grip head eased": "There she stood and blinked, cheeks aflame, hair awry, her eyes passing over me as lightly as they did over the furniture, [...] Blessed be the Lord, she had noticed nothing!" (61) Is Nabokov simply playing around with the conventions of literary pornography here; is Humbert projecting his dirty mind on the innocent child; or is Lolita re-enacting a saucy scenario from one of the magazines which play such a prominent role in the scene?

In the davenport scene, feminist critic Sarah Herbold finds a generative chiasmic dynamics at work, for while, on the one hand, Humbert is presented as cunning and Lolita as unaware of the sexual undercurrents of their interaction, on the other hand, Lolita, too, seems to be acting out a sexuality of which Humbert remains ignorant. According to Herbold, "Humbert does not seem to be the only person who is enjoying himself here," and she further asks the reader whether she really cannot "perceive that Lolita is lusty in her own right?"⁴⁹ In stark contrast, literary scholar Leland de la Durantaye finds such an interpretation to be insensible to the interior experience of the child, that it turns "a deaf ear to Lolita's sobs," and that it fails in taking "Lolita seriously as a character."⁵⁰ Provoked by the fact that Herbold's version makes Lolita sound "every bit as 'naughty' as Humbert," Durantaye further accuses the critic of deeming the character undeserving of the reader's pity "because of the girl's lack of cultivation (and hygiene), as well as because of a certain precocious sensual prescience."⁵¹

⁴⁸ Leland de la Durantaye, "Lolita in *Lolita*, or the Garden, the Gate and the Critics," *Nabokov Studies* 10 (2006), p. 182.

⁴⁹ Sarah Herbold, "'(I have camouflaged everything, my love)': *Lolita* and the Woman Reader," *Nabokov Studies* 5 (1998/1999), p. 82.

⁵⁰ Durantaye, pp. 177-179.

⁵¹ Durantaye, pp. 178-179. The remark on hygiene is due to a misreading, since the notion of "a trashy little girl" is Durantaye's own rewording of Herbold's "elusive and sassy nymphet"; Naiman (2010, p. 149) dubs this

Herbold repays in kind by claiming that the male critic's act of victimization only further victimizes the girl,⁵² and this is quite clearly a critical blame game that can only be lost. Yet, Herbold's reading may actually, at least in part, be considered an attempt at taking the character seriously as *literary character*, since she underlines the textual "duplicity" of Lolita, and stresses the impracticality of getting at the core of her human individuality.⁵³ As Herbold explains in a later addition concerned with the teaching of the novel:

From the beginning, the reader is given conflicting information concerning whether Lolita is dumb or smart, a virgin or sexually experienced, powerless or powerful, and students can readily understand that these ambiguities have significant interpretive value. It may be harder for them to see that these uncertainties cannot—and need not—be resolved, but that is one of the things *Lolita* can teach them.⁵⁴

According to Phelan's mimetic reading of the "realist layer" of the novel, the davenport scene forms an event seen "through the filter of Humbert's attitudes"; thus, "simply to read the scene is to take on Humbert's perspective, and to take on his perspective means to see his perverse desire from the inside."⁵⁵ Such a description seems motivated by the classical narratological model based on the distinction between story and discourse, according to which literature is often conceived of as a fictional world mediated to the reader by a positioned agent: under a dense layer of discourse lies an unmediated world of brute facts, beyond the projections of the predatory protagonist lies a bare child. Thus, the very notion of a mediating perspective risks encouraging a disarming hermeneutic strategy where the troubling is tamed by the separation of a disturbing, distorting discourse from a stipulated neutral reality which, in turn, may be reframed within a commonsensical conception of wholesome morality. This is actually what rhetorical narratologist Peter J. Rabinowitz seems to suggest as he encourages us "to resist the pull of the authorial level by taking the narrative level, the characters as people, more seriously than we often do," a practice which includes treating them with care and with the appropriate response to "the demands of others in concrete situations."⁵⁶ But as Herbold points out, there is no neutral existent with which we may compare Humbert's

slippery rephrasing a symptomatic "corollary of [Durantaye's] reaction to a reading that acknowledges female sexual pleasure."

⁵² Sarah Herbold, "Fantasies of Lo," *Nabokov Studies* 10 (2006), p. 201.

⁵³ Herbold, 1998/1999, p. 80.

⁵⁴ Sarah Herbold, "'Dolorès Disparue': Reading Misogyny in *Lolita*," *Approaches to Teaching Nabokov's Lolita*, eds. Zoran Kuzmanovich and Galya Diment, New York: The Modern Language Association of America (2008), p. 135.

⁵⁵ Phelan, 2005, p. 105-106.

⁵⁶ Peter J. Rabinowitz, "Lolita: Solipsized or Sodomized?; or, Against Abstraction – in General," *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism*, eds. Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted, Malden: Blackwell (2004), pp. 336-337.

possible distortions,⁵⁷ and as Naiman adds, the reader who wants to imagine Lolita as a real-world girl or the representation of one is left with his own personal reconstructions.⁵⁸ What we do have is a flat *machine of ambiguity*, leaving us with the hermeneutic scandal of pure indeterminacy where we never will get to know what that shrill note, the flaming cheek, or the compliant consent “really” means. The effect is an interpretational vertigo lacking hermeneutic depth. A passage like the eyeball scene packs its punch by evoking a compositional correspondence to the theme of “the twofold nature” of nymphets, the mixture of “tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity” (44). But what Humbert ascribes to the reality of children, we only have to associate with the patterns of the literary work.

In acknowledging the operations of ambiguous erotical agency in *Lolita*, we do not deny the many scenes where Humbert is brutal and aggressive, for the former would become aesthetically impotent in lack of the latter.⁵⁹ Certainly, there is plenty of proof of Humbert’s bestiality: but these indices do not erase the ambiguities, but rather rely on them. Without acknowledging the dialectic eroticism of ambiguous participation in the early scenes, we are unable to spot a contrast in *Lolita*’s later domestication, her obedience to the “quite murmured order one gives a sweat-stained distracted cringing animal even in the worst of plights” (169), or in the later and jadedly iterative descriptions of sex as the “hours of blandishments, threats and promises [it would take] to make her lend me for a few seconds her brown limbs in the seclusion of the five-dollar room before undertaking anything she might prefer to my poor joy” (147). In neither case are we making a moral judgment on the nature of an individual and her acts, but simply tracing the unfolding of language in crenulated imprints and prismatic entrails.

Following Goodman’s and Lodge’s fundamental insight into the consequences of the de-notational nature of fictional discourse, we must conclude that an erotics of literature involves an obsession with verbal objects rather than with imaginary friends: an obsession with the tactility of patterns, with fondling the details, with being touched by style. Thus, we agree with Rabinowitz’ emphasis on the difficulty of reading *Lolita* on a purely metaphorical level of overriding ideas, and with his stress on the aesthetical joy found in “the appreciation

⁵⁷ Herbold, 2008, p. 137.

⁵⁸ Naiman, 2010, p. 149.

⁵⁹ Pace Per Krogh Hansen, our recognition that Humbert “develops and maintains [the sexual relation] by manipulation and brute force,” does not motivate a utilization of the concept of unreliable narration that eliminates ambiguity and arrives at a clear and comforting convergence between the literary character and our everyday understanding of child psychology and teen culture; cf. his “Reconsidering the unreliable narrator,” *Semiotica* 165 (2007), p. 238.

of the individual details that blossom from the basic trellis of the plot.”⁶⁰ Yet, we oppose the idea that such an appreciation entails engaging with characters as if they were individuals; for, as Naiman so succinctly summarizes: “*Lolita* is an incantation, but its conjuring never moves from word to flesh; the brilliance and tragedy of language is that it is only language and therefore useless.”⁶¹

I will conclude this article by pointing out three critical pitfalls seemingly motivated by the kind of simulationism I have tried to address. First: the notion of formal analysis as violence, a position that obviously risks degenerating into mere mudslinging. Mimetic interpretations seem haunted by the worry of not doing the *character* justice, and display a corresponding readiness to lash out at analyses deemed unethical. Constructivist narratologist Ansgar Nünning’s infamous claim that a “pederast would not find anything wrong with Nabokov’s *Lolita*” clearly suggests that the critical response of readers is limited to their view on real sexual molestation,⁶² and it seems to comply with the ambition in ethical narratology of taking reader’s moral rather than formal judgments seriously. According to Rabinowitz, critics treating *Lolita* as a “function” rather than a “brutalized teenager” are in fact silencing an individual and thus re-enacting the Humbertian offense by “erasing her agency and turning her into an object to serve the critic’s own needs.”⁶³ While shunning the abstraction of allegory, mimetic theories nevertheless seem eager to equate the representation of sexual violence with the rather innocuous sins committed in critical commentary. Formalist studies of poeticity, too, favor concreteness, but find it on the plane of composition: thus, its list of penal offenses is limited to the misrepresentation and misinterpretation of formal principles.

Connected with this is a second pitfall: the resort to judicial discourse in a search for a neutral state of events similar to that of the courtroom. Here, the potential of disturbance and indeterminacy in literature is replaced by a commonsense logic of fairness and plausibility.⁶⁴ An extreme example is found in literary scholar Elizabeth Patnoe’s analysis of the ambiguously elliptic seduction scene in *The Enchanted Hunters* hotel, where the critic, as Naiman puts it, seeks to sort out “who might have meant what and what the two characters desired at each moment.”⁶⁵ By concentrating on the ersatz empirical question of whether

⁶⁰ Rabinowitz, 2004, p. 336.

⁶¹ Naiman, 2010, p. 44.

⁶² Ansgar Nünning, “Unreliable, compared to what? Towards a Cognitive Theory of Unreliable Narration: Prolegomena and Hypotheses,” *Grensüberschreitungen: Narratologie im Kontext/ Transcending Boundaries: Narratology in Context*, eds. Walter Grünzweig and Andreas Solbach, Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag (1999), p. 61. This is, of course, not the only implication of the statement that is worth protesting.

⁶³ Rabinowitz, 2004, pp. 333-336. Several of Rabinowitz’ charges are later echoed by Durantaye.

⁶⁴ Cf. Hansen, 2007, pp. 237-238.

⁶⁵ Naiman, 2010, p. 157.

Lolita has full intercourse or merely petting in mind, Patnoe opts for the latter based on a commonsense understanding of child sexuality.⁶⁶ In this view, Humbert's vagueness about what really went on in the hotel room frustrates reading rather than enriches it. Patnoe interprets it as an expression of the evasive narrator's withholding of a straight answer from his jurors, yet it is the very crooked bend of the answer that makes the scene.

A similar tendency is displayed in Gaut's reading of Quilty's killing. As we remember, Quilty dies a rather ridiculous death at the end of an equally ridiculous scene, where every shot from Humbert's pistol results in the victim hamming up his performance with clownish grimaces, effeminate exclamations, and a theatrical monologue delivered "with a phoney British accent": "Ah, that hurts sir, enough! Ah, that hurts atrociously, my dear fellow. I pray you, desist. Ah—very painful, very painful, indeed ... God! Hah! This is abominable, you should really not—" (303) Gaut, too, suggests that the question of indeterminacy is best remedied by the concepts of unreliable narration and realist plausibility, for in finding that someone being methodically shot to death hardly can react in such a silly way, the philosopher argues that Humbert here is "trying for a distancing, comic effect, so as to seduce us, cast as the notional jury, into accepting the murder for which he is to stand trial."⁶⁷ Yet, in fiction, the bizarre and the outlandish deaths are the norm, and a killing may not only be presented in a comic way, but may also be essentially comic – especially in the case of an author prone to give the screw of convention yet another parodic turn. Quilty's cartoonish nature is not the result of narratorial but of authorial agency: there is no man to be found behind the grimacing mask, and the descriptions of Quilty are not a caricature of an individual but a caricaturish description *per se* – it lacks an original.

We arrive at the third pitfall: an infinite expansion of the ethical circle. Once we start treating characters as individuals, there will always be *one more* demanding our care and consideration.⁶⁸ According to Phelan, the author Nabokov constructs his novel in a way that mirrors Humbert's dominance of Lolita by focusing on the protagonist rather than the title role; and thus, any reading stopping at the reconstruction of the compositional structure will

⁶⁶ Cf. Elizabeth Patnoe, "Lolita Misrepresented, Lolita Reclaimed: Disclosing the Doubles," *College Literature* 22 (1995), p. 93: "[S]urely Lolita does not think that sexual intercourse is common among youngsters – while it would be quite likely that she would believe kissing or petting games are."

⁶⁷ Gaut, 2007, p. 200.

⁶⁸ This seems to be acknowledged by Swedish author Sara Stridsberg in her novel *Darling River: Doloresvariationer* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 2010), for among the four "Dolores variations" making up the book, she does not only include a narrative strand concentrating on the final days of the 17-year old Dolores, but also one focusing on the plight of the (made-up) ape and her coaxing scientist mentioned by Nabokov as the original inspiration for the novel in its afterword.

come to further reaffirm the violence of that dominance.⁶⁹ This is in line with feminist readings aspiring to “reinscribe” the “real” yet displaced girl in the text.⁷⁰ But why stop at taking only Lolita seriously? From a humanitarian point of view, we may be equally inclined to pity poor Quilty, who, in spite of his sins, hardly deserves the cruel punishment from his jealous rival. Such seems to be the implication from readings explaining the grotesquerie of Quilty’s death with reference to the faulty Humbertian perspective rather than the Nabokovian flair for sinister slapstick. Gaut claims that the scene in fact is a trap of “seduction” laid out by the author for the unwary reader: just like Humbert reprieves Lolita of her autonomy, he also reduces Quilty to a mere psychological projection, thus egotistically diminishing the brutal death of another as “a mere symbolic side-event.”⁷¹ According to this interpretation, the point of the scene is the moral lesson of “how easily we can be moved to take up attitudes we would reject if we thought more carefully.”⁷² Phelan comes to a similar conclusion: although Quilty is portrayed as “an ethically deficient man,” Nabokov expects us to recognize that Humbert’s stance toward him is in fact only a more extreme version of his unfair and violent attitudes toward his former wives, Valeria and Charlotte.⁷³

Are we, then, to reinscribe all of these singular individualities in the text, while scolding the author for having reduced them to mere functions serving his own needs? And will every reading that refrains from doing so repeat this hierarchical violence? Such an hermeneutics would not only be impracticable, but also impossible.⁷⁴ More importantly, it denies the possibilities of literature: for just as we may find a scandalous eroticism in the description of a landscape, or a scandalous indeterminacy in the description of an erotic child, so we may find pleasure in the ravings of a madman, joy in cruelty and violence, and humor in the execution of one pervert by another. We may happily continue to root for Quilty’s drunk and disorderly murderer, although the latter, too, is vile and vicious. As we get off on the whimsical grotesquerie of the death scene, we are simply enjoying the work, and our affection does not mirror our attitudes to real violence; there is no need to reject our pleasure *post festum*. We may even feel comfortable about our potential wish of eradicating Charlotte in the first part of

⁶⁹ Phelan, 2005, pp. 130-131.

⁷⁰ Cf. Linda Kauffman, “Framing Lolita: Is There a Woman in the Text?” *Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings of Patriarchy*, eds. Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowalski-Wallace, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press (1989), p. 133.

⁷¹ Gaut, 2007, p. 201.

⁷² Gaut, 2007, p. 201.

⁷³ Phelan, 2005, p. 126.

⁷⁴ For reasons similar to those raised by Wayne C. Booth against the post-Bakhtinian doctrine of unlimited openness; cf. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkeley: University of California Press (1988), pp. 60-70.

the book, so that the real action, so to speak, may commence; for such an attitude is clearly distinct from our everyday feelings toward our fellow beings. The attitudes, and desires, and wishes, we experience in reading a literary narrative are not directed at individuals, actual or fictional, but at the formal patterns making up an aesthetical plane of composition. As we respond to them, we do not respond to the demands of living beings, but are simply tracing the unfolding of language. That *this* act, in turn, implies that we turn our backs to all manners of atrocities committed against real beings in the real world is a fact that remains unchanged no matter how intensely we care for the cognitive figments provoked by reading.

