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### **The Speech Ritual as an Element of Structure in Nabokov's *Lolita***

That fiction has an indissoluble tie with the real world must be beyond dispute: if there were no real world, there would be no fiction. However, as long as the exact nature of this tie remains obstinately beyond formulation, discussion of the "realistic" elements in fiction has tended to remain impressionistic and subjective. Non-realistic elements, notably plot, have been subjected to increasingly subtle morphological analysis, while elements which are not so artificial and self-contained have received less attention from structuralists. One such neglected element is dialogue, discussion of which often takes the form of the question, "How close is this speech to the real thing?" implying rather primitively that dialogue on the page should bear a more or less one-to-one relationship to a conversation in real life. The grounds for dismissing this implication are familiar.

First, written dialogue differs from actual speech in that the speech pattern of any individual has a range of pitch, tone, volume, intensity, speed, vibrancy and duration; hesitancy varies both in frequency and duration; regional, sexual and social coloring are also liable to continuous variation. In real life a listener perceives these ranges and variations and contextualizes them in two ways: against an immediate and against a broad context. The immediate context is the speech act itself; the broad context is everything that the listener believes to be true about the speaker. This continuous contextualization of speech modes is, in essence, how actual speech achieves much of its meaning. Since dialogue in fiction cannot possibly monitor a speech-style in all its aspects and without intermission, its meaning must therefore be achieved in a qualitatively different way.<sup>1</sup>

If the first difference between real speech and written dialogue is the role played by modal contextualization<sup>2</sup>, the second lies in the interaction of speakers. For example, in day-to-day conversation, a

speaker often leaves an utterance incomplete if the listener signifies comprehension; this is part of our elaborate system of signals for taking speech-turns that is now fairly well understood.<sup>3</sup> A writer can imitate this kind of incompleteness and turn-taking, although clumsily, but never the effect of "double-tracking" (simultaneous speech) that usually follows. Such an effect, and others like it, are very characteristic of real speech, but are seldom, if ever, reproduced on the page.

And yet, despite such qualitative differences, dialogue remains of all fictional devices arguably the most realistic. How is this illusion of reality achieved? Three obvious techniques come to mind: the italic, the orthographic (or more closely, dysorthographic), and the adverbial.

The italic method is used to give an indication, though a crude one, of the pattern of emphasis in speech: "Dorothy *dearest* . . . I've been so *wanting* to speak to you. I've something simply *dreadful* to tell you—something that will *horrify* you."<sup>4</sup>

Satirically used, this may be acceptable for a few lines, but it is an unattractive device chiefly because it reflects so inadequately the real pattern of overemphatic speech. Its use draws attention to the weaknesses rather than to the strengths of realistic fiction. The orthographic method involves distortion of spelling to approximate pronunciation. This device is rarely used wholeheartedly, but when it is, for example in Charles Kingsley's characterization of Mackaye in *Alton Locke*, the effect is manifestly tedious. Such sentences as: "An' na brithren any mair at a'!" or: "They made puir Rabbie Burns an' anything-arian, wi' their blethers, an' he was near gaun the same gate," make slow reading.<sup>5</sup> More to the point, the effort is wasted because the accent will come across only to readers who know it already. A reader who has never heard a Yorkshire accent cannot even approximate one from reading Emily Bronte, nor a Nigerian accent from reading Achebe. The third device used to nudge dialogue in the direction of realism is the adverbial. Hemingway's contempt for the method is well known; far from sharing this prejudice, Virginia Woolf often adverbializes at length: "'No going to the Lighthouse, James,' he said, as he stood by the window, speaking awkwardly, but trying in deference to Mrs. Ramsay to soften his voice into some semblance of geniality at least."<sup>6</sup> But even she would never tack this kind of commentary on to several consecutive speeches. Overuse of adverbials, once again, highlights what the novel does badly and not what it does well.

It is clear that these three rather paltry devices do little to bring the experience of reading dialogue closer to participation in actual speech. Evidently there must be some further as yet unidentified element in actual speech that a writer can readily catch and which, correctly reproduced, will create the illusion of speech that is so characteristic of the realistic novel. If this element exists at all, it is not likely to be found in the reproduction of the individual utterance; at this level, while a single solecism is likely to shatter the illusion, an individual line, however perfectly constructed, will contribute very little. When Stan Barstow catches exactly the turn of working-class speech with, "So a wife and six kids on my wage isn't everybody's cup of tea,"<sup>7</sup> the effect is virtually neutral. The line is acceptable, but it takes more than an agglomeration of such lines to create the illusion of real conversation; simply getting the words right is not enough. When the sum is greater than the total of the parts, as it is here, the additional factor—the "synergistic effect"—must be sought in an organizing principle or element of structure. What, then, is this organizing, structuring principle in dialogue?

A novel, as Wayne Booth points out,<sup>8</sup> is subject to Dryden's dictum that "some parts of the action are more fit to be represented, some to be related." Probably no novel consists exclusively of dialogue; typically a novel alternates dialogue (representation) and narrative (relation). Each unit of dialogue is more or less clearly defined by the narrative passages that precede and follow it. Each unit of dialogue will have an internal structure; in addition it will have a place in the overall structure of the work. To discover what controls the internal structure of dialogue, it may be useful to introduce a concept familiar from the analysis of actual speech. Conversation in real life can be seen as containing two elements in varying mixtures: the phatic and the transactional.<sup>9</sup> Broadly speaking, what is transactional is concerned with conveying information; what is phatic is concerned with establishing a relationship between speaker and listener. Is the structure of a passage of dialogue determined by the phatic or by the transactional elements it contains? In a novel of action, for example Sir Winston Churchill's only novel, *Savrola*, many dialogues are snappy informational transactions between busy characters. Once all the necessary information is exchanged (and thus conveyed to the reader) the dialogue is over. The "transaction" between the characters determines the *length* of the dialogue; further, where the information must be given in a logical sequence, it also influences structure. But there is a second transaction between the reader and the work that is often of

more significance than that between the characters since, even in a "novel of inaction" where the barest minimum of information is exchanged between characters, information *about* the characters and their relationship is conveyed to the reader through dialogue. Again, as soon as the necessary information is conveyed, the dialogue ends and narration takes over. Thus it would appear that the transaction determines the length of the dialogue, but influences structure only to the (usually very limited) extent that the information conveyed is locked into an inflexible logical sequence.<sup>10</sup> The missing ingredient in the creation of realistic dialogue would seem, then, to be a phatic element that in some way plays the key role in structuring nearly every passage of dialogue.

I have called this phatic element the *speech ritual*.<sup>11</sup> This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the way in which speech in real life is ritualized, or of the social function of this ritualization. It is enough to say that not only greetings and other small ceremonies are in fact rituals, but that most exchanges—for example, a student complaining to a teacher about a grade; a parent welcoming home a child at three in the morning; a traffic cop issuing a speeding ticket—contain a strong ritual element. The pace, the balance between the participants, the emphasis falling on particular remarks, the development of the argument through its necessary phases, in a word the *structure* of the exchange, unfold according to an agreed pattern. These "agreed patterns," whatever their psychological origin and social function, are what I have called "speech rituals"; and my contention is that identification and replication of these rituals is a key factor in a novelist's ability to write "realistic" dialogue.<sup>12</sup>

First I would like briefly to examine how this ritual element manifests itself in the novel in general and then to examine Nabokov's *Lolita* to show how skilfully Nabokov ritualizes dialogue to achieve specific important effects in the novel, and in particular how he uses ritualized dialogue to define and intensify the two realities that come into collision in this work: Humbert's solipsism and what Nabokov calls "average reality."

In real life there is a number of wholly inflexible rituals, mostly associated with religious worship. One of these is the Catechism. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens makes frequent reference to the Anglican Catechism, structuring a number of dialogues on its archaic, authoritarian form. Most of Miss Peecher's "conversations" with her star pupil, Mary Anne, are cast in this form, whatever the subject.<sup>13</sup>

In Miss Peecher's remaining dialogues with Mary Anne, another ritual element is present, one that Dickens often exploits—the teacher pupil ritual of the classroom. Dickens has Mary Anne raise her hand to speak even tête-à-tête with Miss Peecher. The topic is Miss Peecher's rival, Lizzie Hexam:

Mary Anne again hailed.

"Well, Mary Anne?"

"They say she's very handsome."

"Oh, Mary Anne, Mary Anne! . . . how often have I told you not to use that vague expression, not to speak in that general way? When you say *they* say, what do you mean? Part of speech *They*?" . . .

"Personal pronoun."

"Person, *They*?"

"Third person."

"Number, *They*."

"Plural number."

"Then how many do you mean, Mary Anne? Two? Or more?"<sup>14</sup>

Miss Peecher's anxiety here is to discover whether or not Bradley Headstone, the man of her dreams, finds Lizzie "very handsome," but the form of her enquiry is the classroom inquisition; the structure of the passage, one can say, is determined by the familiar ritual on which it is built. The same could be said for the brutal interrogation of Girl Number 20 in *Hard Times*<sup>15</sup> or of Squeers' practical spelling test in *Nicholas Nickleby*.<sup>16</sup> A close parallel to this interrogation pattern is the barrister-witness variant used again by Dickens in *Our Mutual Friend* in the key conversation between the two lawyers Eugene Wrayburn and Mortimer Lightwood.<sup>17</sup> James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* uses the confessor-penitent pattern to depict uncaring authority wringing the unspeakable truth from Stephen.<sup>18</sup> Similarly one of the wittiest sections of *Catch-22*, Yossarian's discussion with Major Sanderson, develops according to the analyst-analysand model.<sup>19</sup> The parental inquisition, working on much the same lines, comes to dominate the dialogues between Lolita and Humbert Humbert, as will become clear later. It is possible, even in the realistic novel, for the question and answer rhythm to ossify into an inflexible and repeated litany; H.G. Wells exploits this effect in the litany of Moreau's creatures in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*.<sup>20</sup>

I have begun with these examples because the point is abundantly clear: the dialogue is based on a familiar and accepted speech ritual. The structure of the dialogue is largely determined by the established ritual pattern; and this structure is what supports for the reader the

illusion that this is how people do, or might, behave in "the real world." Does the point hold good, however, when we move away from highly structured, inquisitorial situations? In the following passage from James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Gabriel, the preacher, is courting Elizabeth, his future wife:

"Sister, don't you reckon you ought to give your heart to the Lord?"  
 "I reckon."  
 "If you call on the Lord, He'll lift you up, He'll give you your heart's desire. I'm a witness you call on the Lord, you wait on the Lord, He'll answer. God's promises don't never fail."  
 "Till you come, I didn't hardly go to church at all, Reverend. Look like I couldn't see my way nohow—I was all bowed down with shame . . . and sin."  
 "Well, I done come, and it was the hand of the Lord what sent me. He brought us together for a sign."<sup>21</sup>

Although this exchange takes place in the street, its structure derives wholly from the formal context of the church service. The preacher demands and pleads; the convert accepts and confesses. The topic in this extract is not, in fact, conversion, but sexual passion for which these characters have no words; they must fall back on familiar and apparently irrelevant patterns to express their emotions. The narrator of *Look at the Harlequins!* makes a similar point when he says: "When a girl starts to speak like a novelette, all you need is a little patience."<sup>22</sup>

Any novel, such as *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, that presents the behaviour of a circumscribed social group is going to dwell on such speech rituals for an obvious reason: patterns of social behaviour are largely encoded in speech; the encoding lies not in the patterns of individual utterances, but rather in accepted patterns of give and take. Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth* depicts a number of these ritualized give-and-take exchanges. Here a group of aristocrats is at dinner:

"My husband suffered terribly in the slump."  
 "Poor chap."  
 "Yes terrible."  
 "And yet I suppose it did some good. It made people think about the poor."  
 "Round and about."  
 "I don't think any government will allow all the unemployment again."  
 "The slump certainly did much to push forward social legislation."  
 "Like the Great War."



"Oh, don't speak of that terrible time. I was only a child but I still remember the Zeppelins."

"Yes, the war was perhaps not an unmixed evil. It gave us the League. It taught us to be prepared."<sup>23</sup>

Cary has perfectly caught the rhythm here. Each speaker either amplifies the previous remark or reverses it. In neither case does discussion ensue; both agreement and contradiction are taken as equally supportive, speakers being interchangeable. Remarks are politely limited in length, one cliché being judiciously balanced by the next. The rhythm (i.e. the structure) here has taken over almost completely at the cost of transactional elements. James Joyce experiments at length with a similar effect in *Ivy Day in the Committee Room*.

Most fiction is concerned, however, with more intimate relationships where such social rituals are less likely to prevail. But even within a well established relationship, a similar ritualization can easily take place. Graham Greene develops this idea fully in the Scobies' marriage in *The Heart of the Matter*. Scobie is here anticipating the conversation he will have with Louise when he confesses his failure to buy her a ticket out of the colony:

She'll wait for me to speak, and I shall try to talk about anything under the sun to postpone seeing her misery . . . . He knew exactly how things would go: it had happened so often before. He rehearsed every word, going back into his office . . . . I shall go in and say, "Good evening, sweetheart," and she'll say, "Good evening, darling. What kind of day?" and I'll talk and talk, but all the time I shall know that I am coming nearer to the moment when I shall say, "What about you, darling?" and let the misery in.<sup>24</sup>

Greene here telegraphs his punch and then lands it brutally and exactly on target. The device is clearly in the strongest realistic tradition; what is interesting is that Greene not only sees the process of ritualization taking place, but that he undisguisedly uses a preprogrammed speech ritual to achieve his realistic illusion. Although novelists seldom flag their effects in this way, the technique remains similar for widely disparate writers. Consider Mrs. Portnoy's tormenting her family with her wish to be "the patron saint of self-sacrifice." Her nagging sessions are a ritual just as obviously as Scobie's performance with Louise. Mrs. Portnoy's pattern of indirect accusation, feigned total withdrawal, tears, hysterical assertion and final uncompromising demand is captured also by Kingsley Amis in his characterization of another arch-manipulator, Margaret in *Lucky Jim*.

Are these patterns really speech rituals? I would argue that they are. They are repeated patterns in which each participant is shown as playing a familiar role, often unwillingly. There is no serious variation in the form, and many of the linguistic formulas used are largely independent of the subject apparently under discussion. Nevertheless, the rituals I have presented so far, if they are accepted as such, have been special cases which make my point rather clearly. What I still have to show is that dialogue in general is ritualized, and that this phatic ritual pattern gives each passage of dialogue its structure. To establish this exhaustively is beyond my present scope, but I can at least indicate how this might be so.

There is only a handful of basic patterns that dialogue can take. The inquisitorial is one, the manipulative is another; both of these have already been touched on. Making a proposal (the propositional pattern) would be another area with a distinctive structure that would vary as the proposal is accepted, rejected, evaded and so on. Threat, comfort, argument or debate, accusation, quarrel are further areas where one could anticipate that the rituals evolved by a particular speech group could be identified and replicated by the novelist. As an example, I would like briefly to examine the propositional pattern and see how far fragments of dialogue containing propositions do in fact function as rituals. First the proposition-accepted. The extract is from George Moore's *Esther Waters*.

“. . . you will come with me (to the meeting)?”  
 “Next Sunday I'm going to Dulwich to see the child.”  
 “Can't you go after meeting?”  
 “No, I can't be out morning and afternoon both.”  
 “May I go with you?”  
 “To Dulwich!”  
 “You won't go till after meeting. I can meet you at the railway station.”  
 “If you like.”<sup>25</sup>

Is this a ritual? It has all the marks: an exchange of remarks following an agreed pattern understood and accepted by both parties. The rhythm is clear: a series of proposal-rejection dyads ending with a proposal-acceptance. The length of such a series could vary considerably while still preserving this basic ritual structure. The proposal-rejected pattern is likely to be similar, but with a different outcome. William Golding includes such a dialogue in *Pincher Martin*<sup>26</sup> between Chris and Mary on the subject of her virginity. To each of Chris's stereotyped demands, Mary returns a novelettish cliché: “I



thought you were a gentleman . . . . I just don't care for you in that way," and so on. As with Greene's handling of the Scobies, Golding develops this dialogue as an inescapable straight-jacket. The two characters have only clichés for each other until her final words of rejection. The proposal-evaded provides a third pattern. The extract is from Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*; the speakers are Eveline and Paul:

"How old are you, Paul?"

"Free, white and twenty-one . . . we'd better drink up this coffee before it gets cold."

"You don't look as old as that."

"Oh, I'm old enough to know better."

"I'm five years older than that."<sup>27</sup>

Paul's use of cliché to turn aside a too-loaded enquiry is suggestive. If language has developed a pattern of response that is familiar to the point of cliché, then it seems fair to call that pattern a ritual.

There are other patterns the proposal dialogue could follow, but multiplication of details and examples will not, I suppose, make my point clearer. It is necessary rather to turn to a complete novel and to demonstrate that the language ritual really is a principal element in establishing the illusion of reality, and, further, that consideration of the novel from this perspective offers an insight into its structure and significance that might not otherwise occur. Nabokov's *Lolita* is a particularly rewarding novel to study from this viewpoint. First it contains only some seventy-odd "patches" of direct speech (dialogue and monologue) conveniently circumscribing the extent of the material to be studied. Secondly the book is in some sense a comedy of American manners, a genre in which naturalistically observed dialogue is likely to play a significant role. Finally, *Lolita* is arguably Nabokov's most "realistic" novel, despite the solipsistic frenzy of the narrator, and this curious paradox requires some explanation.

Humbert Humbert, whose written confession *Lolita* purports to be, is a murderer with "a fancy prose style"; sexually fastidious to the point of monomania; an arrant deceiver (if we can trust what he says about himself); in short he is Nabokov's typical "unreliable narrator." For the reader, one problem of being locked inside such a consciousness is always the evaluation of the "reality" presented. In *Pale Fire*, for example, Nabokov firmly establishes that many of the "events" Kinbote reports are paranoid fantasies.<sup>28</sup> In *Lolita* Nabokov's technique is to use dialogue to indicate events which are real, and Humbert's "fancy prose style" for events which are fan-

tasies, or at least of unverifiable reality. Many events in the story are inherently improbable. For example, Humbert claims to have licked a speck of dust from Lolita's eyeball very early in their acquaintance;<sup>29</sup> he claims that a rumour of his being Lolita's father was current (p. 103); he claims that Lolita accepted him, albeit incredulously, as an inapt and clumsy sexual trainee (p. 135). For such events we have only Humbert's unreliable word; but amazingly, these events and a number of others acquire for the reader a concrete or quasi-absolute status. Nabokov works the trick by the use of dialogue. The effect is remarkable; whenever Humbert breaks out of his fancy prose style to record plain American spoken English, plus sometimes his own angular alien formalisms, the scene changes status and becomes an island of concrete reality. The three scenes questioned above are all actualized through dialogue, and in each case the dialogue certainly follows a ritual pattern. Humbert's offer to lick Lolita's eyeball follows the offer-accepted pattern; the promulgation of the rumour about Humbert's paternity has John Fowler brutally tactless about Lolita and being rescued by his sleeve-tugging wife—a well worn social ritual, already rehearsed by the Farlows in another connection. (p. 81) Humbert's coaxing Lolita into showing him the sexual ropes also follows a familiar pattern, playing dumb.

Although there is remarkably little dialogue in the novel, a simple list of the scenes actualized through dialogue is virtually a plot summary.<sup>30</sup> Each scene thus actualized, as could readily be shown, is based on a familiar conversational ritual.

Nabokov is, however, one of those writers who insist on playing with an effect once it is in place. Having established that the two styles (Humbert's fancy prose vs. plain speech within quotation marks) are dialectically opposed, one representing fantasy and the other reality, he confronts us with at least two comic lines where things are not so clear. One occurs on a darkened balcony at the Enchanted Hunters, the scene of the first love-making. A mysterious stranger says to Humbert:

"Where the devil did you get her?"

"I beg your pardon."

"I said: the weather is getting better." (p. 129)

Is this terrifying question a fantasy, or is Humbert locking horns with the arch-pervert Quilty for the first time? Nabokov never answers the question—why should he?

What is interesting here is that the supposition that the speaker *might* be Quilty depends on a prejudice Nabokov has worked hard to create, the prejudice that, whatever mistrust we feel for Humbert, his reporting of dialogue is reliable: somebody really did ask, "Where the devil did you get her?" and then retract the question. Similarly Humbert reports Farlow offering him his wife with the words: ". . . and you may sleep with Jean." (p. 102) The reader is puzzled, but nevertheless must accept those strange words as part of plain reality until Humbert admits his sudden twist into fantasy. Nabokov's ability to spring such a trap shows his absolute control over the way his dialogue is working.

A further example of Nabokov's toying with the illusion of reality he has created is Lolita's speech during their second sexual odyssey across the United States by car. (pp. 209, 210-211, 216) Humbert reports her words reliably, but Lolita has meanwhile become an actress; her words are lies, transparent to the reader, but, with the dramatic irony of which Nabokov is master, not transparent to Humbert. Thus Nabokov elegantly solves one of the main technical problems of first-person narration: the reporting of facts unknown (at that time) to the narrator. His solution depends entirely on the fact that Lolita's spoken words are able to achieve a quasi-objective status, divorced from Humbert's perception of them. This sense of their reality is not achieved by any "psychological" understanding of Lolita on the reader's part, we know about her psychology only what the half-demented Humbert has told us; nor is the effect of reality achieved by the reader's ability to verify the truth or untruth of Lolita's words from a source independent of Humbert. There is no such source. The effect is achieved solely by the encoding of what Lolita says in the form of the familiar and unquestioned dialogue-patterns of the American teenager in conflict with authority: the appropriate speech ritual.

Although my theme is dialogue and its rituals, it is interesting to comment briefly on the monologues in *Lolita*. The *long* monologues in the book are generally put into the mouth of Humbert. They are tours de force, brilliant, full of fantasy, and essentially unreal. They bear no relation to Humbert's ability to turn English phrases when he is involved in dialogue. Accordingly, although they are enclosed in quotation marks, these long monologues are dialectically opposed to day-to-day reality; the style, wholly devoid of ritual elements, makes it clear that they are to be read as part of Humbert's introspective fantasy.

Nabokov also uses many one-sentence "monologues" throughout the book. Frequently these are broad Americanisms, perhaps startling to Nabokov's Cambridge-trained ear, and which might be taken as mere local color. Nabokov, however, writes of his need to "inject a modicum of average 'reality' (one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes) into the brew of individual fancy."<sup>31 32</sup> Certainly many of the one-liners keep the reader aware of a reality outside Humbert's solipsistic inscape. For example, he approaches a street-walker: "I asked her price, and she promptly replied with melodious silvery precision (a bird, a very bird!) '*Cent*.'" (p. 23) Her world is not his; it is not based on the same linguistic premises. This alternative world of "average reality" repeatedly breaks in on Humbert's world of ecstasy and despair, and its battering-ram is usually direct speech. For example, at the moment when Humbert's passionate teenage romance with the doomed Annabel is at the point of consummation, it is utterly deflated by two bearded bathers with their jeering cry of "Mais allez-y." (p.55) A similar effect occurs in the emotionally charged meeting between Humbert and Lolita at the end of the book; she is now pregnant and known as Dolly Schiller. Her husband, Frank's, crass "okey-dokey" (p. 259) effectively pin-pricks Humbert's overinflated way of seeing the scene; average reality overwhelms him. The point is an important indicator of how the narrative structure is to be understood: when Lolita married her wordless, unromantic and gloriously misnamed Schiller, she entered, without being absorbed by, the real world. In pursuing her, Humbert too is forced to face this world, and to recognize the tragic impossibility of his existing within it. It cannot accept him, and he has so reshaped Dolly that it cannot accept her either. This tragic effect can be achieved only because Humbert—as fantasist and unreliable narrator—is never allowed to dominate the reader's perception of his situation completely; "average reality" is never wholly displaced, its existence being constantly asserted through the use of direct speech.

To return to the dialogue and its basis in the speech ritual: one of Nabokov's particular skills lies in clarifying and sustaining complex relationships between improbable characters. A marriage, for example, between a woman who has both a "semi-studio" and a "piazza" (no less) in her house and a man of Humbert's stamp is not material for facile social comedy. How does Nabokov convincingly latch the two of them together? Charlotte is described as one of "those women utterly indifferent at heart to the dozen or so possible subjects of a parlor conversation, but very particular about the rules of such con-

versations." (p. 39) Several of her rule-bound speech rituals are given by Nabokov in detail; typically Humbert remains mute, unable or unwilling to sustain his part in the social rite. Their first conversation works in this way; she pronounces every correct cliché in the correct sequence while he remains dumb, until they stumble on Lolita:

"That was my Lo," she said, "and these are my lilies."

"Yes," I said, "yes. They are beautiful, beautiful, beautiful!" (p.42)

Her words echo the alliteration of his opening incantation: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins." (p. 11) His words to Charlotte's rule-toughened ear are, however, the correct response of a flower-loving Frenchman. The ritual pattern is now, for her, established; the feast of irony begins for the reader. In this way, Nabokov gives a difficult relationship the necessary ironic distance by the explicit use of the speech ritual.

The relationship between Humbert and Lolita is, of course, the core of the book. How much of this relationship is defined through dialogue, and how much of this dialogue is ritualized? I have already mentioned the dialogue that accompanies two crucial scenes: Humbert's first penetration of the willing Lolita with his tongue, and his playing dummy to her incredulous sexual instruction. Other crucial scenes are also defined through dialogue. There are two long scenes, however, that repay closer examination. One is the first scene on the first car trip, the other is the Dolly Schiller episode—alpha and omega. These scenes are uncharacteristically packed with dialogue: the first, some five pages; the second, with breaks, eleven pages. Nabokov's narrative strategy is presumably to give these key scenes maximum definition, to allow Lolita to play her part as Lolita, not as a Humbert fantasy. In general terms, a relationship can only be clarified when both characters exist with equal definition. Nabokov achieves this, despite his unreliable narrator, by using naturalistic dialogue based on accepted speech patterns. The dialogue in the car begins with a paternal catechism about Camp Q where Lolita has been spending the summer. Questioned about her "mummy," Humbert tries a passage of *de haut en bas* parental irony, before continuing with fatherly pointers to interesting views. So far, pure ritual. Suddenly a change occurs as the subject switches to their relationship:

" . . . you've stopped caring for me, anyway."

" . . . Why do you think I've ceased caring for you, Lo?"

"Well, you haven't kissed me yet, have you?" (p. 114)

Some distance remains, but for a moment they are talking (almost) the same language, without irony and apparently without ritual. It is a unique and significant moment in the book. Then the styles again fail to latch; she tries the school-yard ritual of slangy wise-cracks, he returns to a *de haut en bas* lecture and the parental catechism about Camp Q. A bribe, an apology, and a proposition-evaded complete this first sustained passage of dialogue. Towards the end of the book, Humbert himself analyzes the structure of such ritual dialogues:

She would mail her vulnerability in trite brashness and boredom, whereas I, using for my desperately detached comments an artificial tone of voice that set my own teeth on edge, provoked my audience to such outbursts of rudeness as made further conversation impossible, oh my poor, bruised child. (p. 286)

The culmulative effect is alienation that ends in tragic rupture.

The long dialogue in the Dolly Schiller episode has a different quality. The language of Dolly's greeting is at first unfamiliar, but is soon recognizable as the convention-bound middle-American dialect of Dolly's dead mother. Dolly even manages to say to her husband: "Dick, this is my Dad!" without apparent irony. Her speech pattern, clearly contextualized against her earlier easy slang, is perhaps more shocking than her visible pregnancy. For a while she sustains the role of daughter and hostess in a world of "average reality." Humbert, however, reverts to a ritual mode that has, in a sense, dominated the book so far, the paternal interrogation. Their final exchange, many pages of it, follows a by now familiar rhythm based on the question: "What have you been up to? I insist you tell me." (p. 116) The pattern is indeed familiar; as soon as Lolita and Humbert became lovers it began to ossify. "Was it Grace Angel? . . . Was it perhaps Rose Carmine? . . . Was it then Agnes Sheridan, perchance?" (p. 138) Interrogation begins in earnest when Lolita misses two consecutive piano lessons. Another bullying cross-questioning begins when Lolita talks to a man on the second car trip. "What did you ask that man, Lo?" (p. 220) When Lolita is missing for twenty-eight minutes, the questions are basically the same: "Whom? . . . Alice Adams? . . . Mary or Jane? Which?" (pp. 226-227) When Humbert glimpses a figure scuttling away from a tennis-court, the question is: "Mr. Mead, who was that person?" (p. 238) At every motel where Lolita and her abductor might have spent the night, Humbert presses the same enquiry. To Dolly Schiller his crucial question is: "Where is he? . . . Come, his name?" (p. 273) Significantly Humbert's first ut-



terance to his adulterous wife, Valeria, is the same: "Mais, qui est-ce?" (p. 30) Lolita's ultimate reply is incomplete. "Do you really want to know who it was? Well it was ——— ." (p. 273) This is perhaps the crux of the book. For whose identity is Humbert really searching with this blind avidity? The same search features in two other Nabokov novels, *Pale Fire* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; in all three works a solipsistically isolated individual searches for the identity of another, a search that predictably produces his own persona wearing another mask. In Humbert's case the individual he tracks down is Clare Quilty (Clear Guilty).

Is Quilty really Humbert's *alter ego*? There is a strange quality in the confrontation between them: unlike all the preceding and one succeeding dialogue, their speech follows no established, ritual pattern. It resembles more the mental processes of a man playing chess with himself. The texture, the development the allusiveness, the intellectual level, the humor of this dialogue are all, however, unmistakable; they echo the now long-familiar sound of Humbert's inner voice. Quilty's catalogue of exotic bribes (pp. 303-304), including the use of his wardrobe and the privilege of attending executions, has an inner logic that belongs solely to Humbert's consciousness, as we have come to inhabit it. Humbert murders Quilty, but that his quest is really for self-extinction is clear in part from certain acts he performs; it is far clearer, however, in the unique quality of the dialogue at that point, contextualized as it is against the naturalistically observed speech rituals that Nabokov uses everywhere else in the book. The effect is perhaps typical of Nabokov; a subtle metaphysical notion conveyed not by overt philosophizing but rather by meticulous organization of a structural element, in this case ritual-based dialogue. As one Nabokov character observes, "It is not the parts that matter, it is their combinations."<sup>33</sup>

This discussion of *Lolita* shows, I believe, that the concept of the *speech ritual* is far from being a mere technical sideshow; it can play a major part in the structural analysis of a work as complex even as a Nabokov novel. Its significance lies firstly in its ability to show how the meaning of an individual novel is articulated by its structure; and secondly—since the structural hypothesis is still not universally accepted—in its offering the structuralist one more objective tool with which to work.

## NOTES

1. Writers do, of course, develop "modal contextualization" as will emerge later in the discussion of *Lolita*, but the number of speech variables that can be captured in print and contextualized is extremely small. A clash of dialects is often used (as with Oliver Mellors' or Tess Durbeyfield's double dialects); sentence length can be varied (as with Isabel Archer's growing terseness in *The Portrait of a Lady* or with Charles Gould's increasing loquacity in *Nostromo*); most speech variables, however, do not easily submit to literary reproduction.
2. Michael Riffaterre's "Stylistic Context" (*Word*, No. 16 1960 pp. 207-218) examines the idea that a work provides its own context.
3. See, for example, Starkey Duncan Jr., "Some Signals and Rules for Taking Speaking Turns in Conversation," *Non-Verbal Communication* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).
4. George Orwell, *A Clergyman's Daughter* (London: Penguin, 1975, p. 42).
5. Charles Kingsley, *Alton Locke* (London: Cassell, 1969), pp. 208-209.
6. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Dent, 1960), p. 16.
7. Stan Barstow, *A Kind of Loving* (London: Corgi, 1978), p. 214.
8. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 149.
9. This division splits Jakobson's six linguistic functions into two groups of unequal size; the phatic function in one group and the five remaining functions in the other.
10. This can be rigorously established only by very detailed analysis of a suitable dialogue. A rewarding passage occurs in Winston Churchill's *Savrola* (London: Beacon, 1975), pp. 130-132, in the conversation between Molara and Colonel Sorrento.
11. The term "ritual" in this sense is borrowed, of course, from Eric Berne. He defines rituals as "highly stylized interchanges which may be informal or may be formalized into ceremonies which are completely predictable. . . . (Rituals) convey little information but are more in the nature of signs of mutual recognition." *What Do You Say after You Say Hello?* (New York: Bantam, 1973), pp. 22-23. I have somewhat broadened this concept, as will appear subsequently.
12. Dialogue in drama obviously works somewhat differently. For the novelist, dialogue is a device to be used only when it is "suitable" (to return to Dryden's dictum). It is surprising how often in realistic fiction the suitability of a passage for development as dialogue depends on the existence of an agreed ritual pattern to give the dialogue its structure.
13. See, for example *Our Mutual Friend* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1907), pp. 320-321, the catechism on the subject of Lizzie Hexam's name. In this novel of unknown, disguised and mistaken identity, the first two questions of the old Catechism—"What is your name?" and "Who gave you that name?"—are formally repeated by Bella Rokesmith in trying to establish her husband's identity (*ibid.*, p. 650).
14. *Ibid.*, p. 207 (The ellipses are mood-indicating adverbials).
15. Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (London: Penguin, 1976), pp. 48-50.
16. Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (London: Collins, 1953), p. 105.
17. *Op. cit.*, p. 269 and p. 278.
18. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Viking-Compass, 1975), pp. 143-144.
19. Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Dell, 1977), pp. 303-304.
20. H.G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (New York: Airmont, 1966), pp. 58-59.
21. James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (London: Corgi, 1973), pp. 215-216. To show the pattern of this exchange with absolute clarity, I have omitted the "he said" and "she said" as well as other "stage directions" without marking ellipses. I hope the resulting directness justifies this unusual step.
22. Vladimir Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), p. 28.
23. Joyce Cary, *The Horse's Mouth* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), p. 158. "Stage directions" omitted and paragraphing normalized.
24. Graham Greene, *The Heart of the Matter* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 56.
25. George Moore, *Esther Waters* (London: Dent, 1951), p. 178. (There are no "stage directions" in the original.)

26. William Golding, *Pincher Martin* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), pp. 149-152.
27. John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, no date), p. 280. (Stage directions omitted.)
28. Two "reality systems" operate in the book: *facts* subject to causality and chronology; Kinbote's systematic but monomaniacal interpretation of them. The reader is trapped between.
29. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Putnam, 1955), p. 45. (Subsequent references are to this edition and are in parentheses.)
30. Humbert's taking Charlotte's room; the eyelicking; his attempt to murder Charlotte; Charlotte's questioning the locked drawer: her rage and death; the first car scene with Lolita; sex in the Enchanted Hunters; Humbert in trouble with Lolita's principal; the argument between Humbert and Lolita; her suggestion of a second trip; Lolita in hospital; Humbert vs. the Ramsdale burghers; Dolly Schiller; the murder of Quilty.
31. Vladimir Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," printed as an appendix in the cited edition of *Lolita*, p. 314.
32. The phrase "average reality" is also used in *Pale Fire* by Kinbote. He contrasts it with the "special reality" that art creates, and which he says has "nothing to do with the average 'reality' perceived by the common eye." *Pale Fire* (New York: Putnam, 1962) p. 130.
33. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: Putnam, 1957) p. 176.