

ARTICLE

The Relevance of Voice for Understanding Ethical Concerns Raised by Nabokov's *Lolita* and Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*

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In Nabokov's *Lolita* and Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* controversial situations of misbehaviour are represented: Humbert and Alex rape, kill, and fight people. While the reader might find the justifications of the characters' misbehaviour inadequate, s/he is asked, as a result of Cohn's double pact of fictional autobiography, to accept it as true and coherent. Not only is the reader trapped inside the narrator's mind, but other characters' inner selves are also made unreachable. *Lolita* and the State in *A Clockwork Orange* are purely Others, and the narrator does not feel any guilt for hurting them. Initially, Quilty and F. Alexander are purely Others too. Nevertheless, both these third-person characters reveal themselves to be symbolically related to the narrators' selves, mirroring their subjectivity, thus – unusually for first-person novels – forcing the reader to adopt an external point of view on the solipsistic narrators. This distanciation provides the reader with a landmark and gives him or her a chance to perceive the narrator's unethicity. Such a detachment emphasises the fact that it is possible to consider two contradictory interpretations in *Lolita* and *A Clockwork Orange at the same time*. The unethical first-person narrative paradoxically makes the book ethical: the reader is uncomfortably led into the realm of unethicity, and it is his or her own responsibility to question it or not.

In her essay 'Fictional versus Historical Lives', critic Dorrit Cohn adds an element to the usual distinction between historical and fictional narratives: the Voice. She highlights the difference between the first- and the third-person narrative by identifying 'the two principal ways a life can be told: by the self or by the other' (1999: 19). This essay explores the ethical implications of the use of the first-person narrative in fiction, and focuses on the comparison of Cohn's views on Voice with two ethically challenging fictions written in the first-person: Vladimir Nabokov's

Lolita (1955) and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). The first-person narrative orients the point of view as defined by Brooks and Warren, that is to say 'the mind through which the material of the story is presented' (1943: 607). Ultimately, the role that the reader's insight into the mind of Humbert in *Lolita* or Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* plays in the ethical ambiguities portrayed in these novels will be considered.

First-person narratives have a tendency to direct sympathy towards the narrator and encourage the adoption of his/her point of view. Cohn explains that in a third-person novel, the narrator is free to come and go in- or outside the main character's mind, and she points out that '[t]here are notable cases where the open mind of a character is sud-

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denly closed off at critical junctures of his life' (1999: 26). Such a thing is impossible in fictional autobiography, where the first-person narrative prevents the author from putting the narrator's thoughts into perspective and limits his/her reader to a restricted view of the story. In *Lolita*, Humbert tells the story and turns it into 'the first-person narrative of a dedicated pedophile, with whom the reader is inevitably and uncomfortably led to identify' (Ladenson 2007: 195). In spite of his immoral actions, the narrator inspires trust since the whole story is seen through the prism of his subjectivity. The narrator sways our judgement by directing his persuasive speech to his '[r]eader!' (Nabokov 1991: 308), mentioning that he 'shall not bore [his] learned readers' (Nabokov 1991: 133), thus dismissing the ethically condemnable aspects of his acts more easily. This same method can be found in *A Clockwork Orange*, in which the story is told by *our* narrator ('your story-teller', Burgess 2010: 68; 'your Humble Narrator', Burgess 2010: 54), thus adding impact to the first-person narrative and making Alex more sympathetic. As in *Lolita*, immorality is mixed with a description of pleasure in violence emphasised by the association of 'vecks and ptisas, both young and starry, lying on the ground screaming for mercy' (Burgess 2010: 29) and 'the joy I had in my night music' (Burgess 2010: 29). This pleasure is presented in itself as a justification for Alex's behaviour, as 'his guiltless joy in violence [...] is such that the incongruous term *innocent* is liable to come to a reader's mind' (Aggeler 1979: 173). Eventually a complicity is created between '[our] Friend and Humble Narrator' (Burgess 2010: 67) and his readers, his 'brothers' (Burgess 2010: 67).

This empathy towards the narrator is partly created through the manipulation of language. Inspired by Benveniste and Bühler, Cohn theorises that 'every linguistic utterance defines, and is defined by, the subjectivity of the speaker' (1999: 24). However, such a statement should be expanded: although it is true that language is inextricably linked with the narrator's subjectivity, it can also

be used to conceal certain aspects of his/her mind. Linguistically, this lures the reader closer to the narrator's point of view by hiding what could morally collide with the audience. The way the narrator speaks therefore modifies the vision of the plot itself. This process is particularly evident in *A Clockwork Orange*, in which the *nadsat*, the slang used by Alex, influences our ethical perception of the text. For example, the word 'horrorshow', used throughout the book, has a double connotation meaning 'violent' as well as 'pleasant' and 'terrific', thus mixing these notions and distorting the judgement of the reader on these ethical concepts (Aggeler 1979: 171). The fictional slang enables Alex to soften the expression of 'ultra-violence', thus manipulating the reader's judgement of his unethical misdeeds through 'the screen of another language' (Petix 1986: 125). In *Lolita*, Humbert uses his oratory talents to manipulate the 'gentlemen of the jury' (Nabokov 1991: 235). Ellen Pifer writes that '[b]y elevating himself to the status of "pure" poet, Humbert understandably desires to remove his actions from the ethical sphere of life' (1980: 166). Humbert illustrates this idea by stating that '[y]ou can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style' (Nabokov 1991: 9). The manipulation through language is mixed with an unintentional bias caused by that which Booth (1983) calls the unreliability of the narrator, as explored in the next paragraph.

Rabinowitz (1977), Yacobi (2000), Nünning (1997) and many others broadened Booth's definition of the unreliable narrator. Lejeune states that the power of autobiography is reinforced by the fact that the reader *expects* the autobiographer to misrepresent things (1983: 23). Will Norman links the unreliability of Humbert with a Freudian idea according to which the mind itself is 'deceitful, manipulative and treacherous' (2012: 108). Straumann insists on the fact that Humbert's irony reveals the status of the novel as a work of art rather than something anchored in moral considerations (2008: 90). Similarly, Brian Walter discusses the supremacy of aes-

thetics in *Lolita*, arguing that the unreliability of the narrator reveals that 'what happens in a Nabokov fiction matters far less than the artfulness with which it is recounted' (2000: 203). The focus on aesthetics in these studies should not make us ignore the ethical consequences of Humbert's untrustworthiness. Of course, by mentioning his frustration after his interrupted affair with Annabel whilst they were children, he tries to ethically justify his attraction towards young girls as an adult, and is clearly 'asking us to believe that Annabel prefigures Lolita' (Wood 1994: 110). Even if we consider this to be an inadequate justification, we have to accept that 'he really is saying what he pretends he is only pretending to say' (Wood 1994: 121), because of what Cohn calls the double pact of fictional autobiography which is 'an autobiographical pact impacted within a fictional pact (1999: 33). It might be only fiction, but the ethical justification of Humbert's unethical acts 'does set the pattern' (Wood 1994: 121), thus making this justification of paedophilia ethically acceptable, at a first glance, within the frame of this fictional autobiography. However, the fact that Humbert is a victim of events 'partly remembered, partly invented' makes him an unreliable first-person narrator (Maddox 1983: 7). This imprisonment within his own subjectivity, highlighted by the first-person narrative, causes him to create an unreachable ideal from his false memories of an idealised Annabel and leads him to commit immoral misdeeds towards Lolita.

We have seen how Alex's ethical justification of his acts through the emphasis on the pleasure he takes from them is similar to Humbert's explanation of the origin of his sexual perversion. However, these narrators are represented as unethical in as much as the narrative highlights what Nabokov calls their *incuriosity*, that is their inability to understand the other characters with whom they interact. The first-person narrative restricts the field of vision within the text, thereby making it difficult to reach the Other's mind. The first-person narrator 'can give life to [other characters'] external appear-

ance, but from their inner-most thoughts he is excluded' (Romberg 1962: 60). His power of analysis is restricted if we compare it to the omniscient third-person narrator. This inability to comprehend the minds of other characters whose lives are described in the third-person makes the first-person narrator unable to 'look upon himself from the outside' (Romberg 1962: 59). Humbert does not value the Other, he 'dramatize[s] [...] the particular form of cruelty about which Nabokov worried most – incuriosity' (Clegg 2000: 98). This ignorance about other characters' feelings can also be seen in *A Clockwork Orange*, where Alex shows no sign of empathy as he tortures or rapes his victims, as they are simply the means for the accomplishment of his pleasure. This *incuriosity* is the source of the narrators' unethicality, and is emphasised by the use of the first-person narrative. Cohn shows that the first-person narrative is 'a cognitive constraint often thematized [...] by the narrator's laments concerning his nonomniscience in the face of an opaque Other' (1999: 30). This statement is nevertheless questioned by the narratologies of Humbert and Alex, who by no means bemoan their incapacity to comprehend the third-person.

In *Lolita*, the main figure of the Other from Humbert's point of view is paradoxically the most important person within his story: Lolita herself. She is, right from the start, described from an external viewpoint and seen through the prism of pleasure: that is sexuality (where Humbert describes her as the 'fire of my loins', Nabokov 1991: 9) or pure aestheticism (on the sonority of her name, 'the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta', Nabokov 1991: 9). The narrator confesses his incomprehension concerning Lolita's mind; according to him, she possesses 'no will, no consciousness – indeed, no life of her own' (Nabokov 1991: 62), and constantly remains a third-person character that the first-person narrator is unable to grasp. In *A Clockwork Orange*, the opaque third-person is alternatively the authoritarian State and the

victims of Alex. The State – and more generally the whole of society – remains a total stranger to him, and he views it as ethically contrary to his subjectivity, to what he essentially is, to his first-person point of view:

[B]adness is of the self, the one, the you or me on our oddy knockies, and that self is made by old Bog or God [...]. But the not-self cannot have the bad, meaning they of the government and the judges and the schools cannot allow the bad because they cannot allow the self. (Burgess 2010: 35)

As we have discussed, Alex shows no sign of interest in or compassion towards his victims, as he and his gang 'gave him the boot, one go each, and then it was blood, not song nor vomit, that came out of his filthy old rot. Then we went on our way' (Burgess 2010: 14). His victims are complete strangers and have nothing in common with the Alex of the first part of the book, thus making him, like Humbert, immoral in as much as he feels no regret in his failure to understand them or their suffering.

Other characters in *Lolita* and *A Clockwork Orange* are initially not understood by the main protagonist. The writer F. Alexander, whom Alex sees at the beginning of *A Clockwork Orange*, does not really exist in the sphere of his conscience as, after beating him up and raping his wife, Alex says: 'The writer veck and his zheena were not really there, bloody and torn and making noises' (Burgess 2010: 22). F. Alexander is just another victim for whom Alex has no empathy. In *Lolita*, the playwright and pornographer Quilty represents an absolute evil character who 'has no moral scruples and is incapable of love' (Maddox 1983: 69). Humbert sees him, until a certain point, as only a third-person character; he might be a paedophile like the narrator, but he is nonetheless, unlike Humbert, lacking in feeling, which 'leads him to the passionless destruction of others' (Maddox 1983: 31). *Lolita* explains

that he 'was a complete freak in sex matters, [...] he had two girls and two boys, and three or four men, and the idea was for all of us to tangle in the nude while an old woman took movie pictures' (Nabokov 1991: 271). He is initially only a third-person character and remains without any clear identity until a very late point in the story, only being a mysterious person that Humbert suspects following him on the road. However, although other characters might seem to have quite minor importance within the plot, these third-person figures will reveal themselves, as we will see, to be closer to the first-person narrator than originally expected.

Indeed, Cohn's assertion that the first-person narrative is characterised by its restricted point of view and that the narrator cannot look at himself from an external point of view can be questioned. Even though the reader is plunged into the inner thoughts of the first-person narrator, he still has the opportunity to analyse him from an external viewpoint: if the narrator 'wants to paint the external picture of himself, then he must look at himself in a mirror' (Romberg 1962: 59). This mirror is, in *Lolita* and *A Clockwork Orange*, the two characters just described. Quilty has many similarities with Humbert as 'his depravity presents an obvious mirror for Humbert's tormented conscience' (Pifer 1980: 107). Humbert does notice those similarities, he encourages the confusion between this third-person stranger and himself by bewilderingly describing that 'he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us' (Nabokov 1991: 299). Quilty epitomises the third-person view of Humbert and this view exemplifies the definitely unethical aspect of the character. Therefore, it provides the reader with a landmark that affords him the opportunity to consider whether the first-person narrative might have misled him about the ethicality of Humbert.

In *A Clockwork Orange*, the author uses a third-person character as a means to explain the *nadsat*, the first-person narrator's main

artifice explored earlier. One of the scientists sees this slang as '[p]ropaganda. Subliminal Penetration' (Burgess 2010: 100); there is therefore a distanciation, a 'mirror' to explain the manipulative mind of the narrator from the outside. F. Alexander is nonetheless the main 'mirror' in the text, he is in fact closer to Alex than we may have expected. They are both writers – Alex presents himself as a writer when he mentions 'this evening I'm starting off the story' (Burgess 2010: 3) and they both have written a book titled *A Clockwork Orange*. At the end of the book Alex's desire to settle down with a wife in a nice house is similar to the kind of life F. Alexander was living with his wife before Alex destroyed it. Alex, like Humbert, is conscious of these similarities. When he reads the name of the author on the back of the book, he is struck by the fact that this writer 'is another Alex' (Burgess 2010: 138). When F. Alexander first meets Alex, he is initially presented as a stranger to him, an unreachable third-person victim; however, this fictitious writer 'is being defined here as a future version of Alex's self' (Ray 1986: 135). His morality (at least in the first part of the novel) anticipates the embryo of morality contained within Alex, and what he will become by the end of the novel.

The first-person narrative permits two potential interpretations of *Lolita*. According to Genette (1988), the narrator of fictional autobiography simultaneously produces the story and its representation. If the text is concerned with the extra-textual constraint of realism then the story itself might be different from the way it is actually told (the narrative) – because of, for example, the unreliability of the narrator. Either Lolita was raped by Humbert (she says she will 'call the police and tell them you raped me', Nabokov 1991: 141), or she seduced him (Humbert says that 'it was she who seduced me', Nabokov 1991: 132). Either Humbert killed Quilty, or Quilty is actually a fantasised alter-ego, as we saw earlier, and therefore Humbert only symbolically annihilated a darker literary version of

himself. The unethical third-person character, the immoral Other, disappears, thus making the first-person self become ethical in line with what Andrews calls his 'moral apotheosis' (1999: 88). Still following Genette's statement, if we remove the constraint of realism from our analysis, then there are two contradictory ways of viewing the text *at the same time*, as there is indeed 'no narratological reason why a novel that disdains realism could not produce at least two simultaneous but contradictory stories' (O'Rourke 2006: 175). This paradoxical simultaneity furthers the conclusion of Rabinowitz's work on the unreliable narrator (1977), a work that explains co-occurring contradictions by the writer addressing different types of audience (actual audience, authorial audience, narrative audience and ideal narrative audience). We can therefore argue that the first-person narrative emphasises the duality of ethics in *Lolita*: Humbert rapes Lolita *and* she seduces him, Quilty is a fantasised double *and* Humbert kills him for real, and Humbert's interrupted affair with Annabel does justify his paedophilia *and* it does not. The ambiguity apparent in these three examples can be seen throughout the novel, especially when Humbert interprets Lolita's attitude towards him and explains that he 'cannot tell [the learned reader] how the knowledge came to me, [...] she was not really looking at my scribble, but waiting with curiosity and composure – oh my limpid nymphet! – for the glamorous lodger to do what he was dying to do' (Nabokov 1991: 48–9). The first-person narrative encourages the reader to believe Humbert, but an external point of view also encourages the opposite interpretation.

The ambiguous ethics resulting from the intricate play between the first-person narrative and the characters whose stories are told in the third-person can also be seen in *A Clockwork Orange*. First of all, if our empathy goes to the first-person narrator Alex, as we saw earlier, it suggests that this empathy is felt towards a criminal as well as a victim, in so far as the status of Alex at the beginning

of the novel is different from his status at the end. These contradictory points of view might not be simultaneous like in *Lolita*, but they nonetheless bring an element of duality to the ethical interpretation of the novel. The State (the society), which for Alex represents the Other, the unknown third-person figure, turns him into a different person. After Alex is caught by the authorities and sent to jail, he loses his status of first-person self, and indeed becomes a stranger, and he 'had become a thing' and he 'was 6655321 and not your little droog Alex not no longer' (Burgess 2010: 60–67). Alex becomes a third-person, even to himself. Throughout the story, the reader has seen 'Alex's depraved "self" replaced by a well-behaved "not-self"' (Aggeler 1979: 178–9), and therefore it is not Alex's acts that disturb him/her anymore, but those of the State, because the State and Alex now share similar ideas; they are not Others any more, and therefore the State becomes, through Alex, the first-person. This analysis can be applied to the whole of society in the book, and Burgess has indeed 'crafted a childmachine [...] and "voiced" him with the lament of a world so mesmerized by technocracy that it has lost its essence' (Petix 1986: 130). Alex stops being immoral as the State starts being unethical when it establishes that it is 'not concerned with motive, with higher ethics' (Burgess 2010: 109). After this ethical shift, Alex's ex-victim F. Alexander is viewed as an enemy of the State as well as an enemy of Alex. He has turned into an absolute Other, while Alex becomes, as we have already seen, very similar to what F. Alexander was at the beginning of the story: Alex evolves into another first-person narrator, he is 'moving into a moral and political realm larger than anything he can understand' (Mathews 1978: 40). Just like the State infiltrated Alex's mind, Alex now penetrates the sphere of the third-person (that of his ex-victim) and integrates this third-person into himself. This double ethical shift of mind (between Alex, the State and F. Alexander) is emphasised by the fact that '[t]he State now

regards F. Alexander as it once regarded Alex' (Ray 1986: 136).

Just as the interplay between first- and third-person point of view has consequences for the ethical interpretations of the story, the presence or absence of the author raises ethical questions about the text. While Romberg argues that '[b]oth the voice and the authority in a first-person novel are part of the novel, part of the fiction itself' (1962: 27), we could claim that some authors seek to distance themselves from their work. Indeed, Nabokov was against an identificatory reading of his texts (1980). However, he believed that 'art exists in a realm entirely separate from, and superior to, ordinary morality' and Humbert's justification of his criminal acts is based on this same kind of argument (Ladenson 2007: 195), making the presence of Nabokov inevitably visible within *Lolita*. In fact, as Cohn explains, 'the distance separating author and narrator in any given first-person novel is not a given and fixed quantity but variable, subject to the reader's evaluation' (1999: 34). What Cohn seems to ignore is the ethical implication of such an effect. Indeed, the reader is asked to question the ethicality of the ambiguous story and of the ethically ambiguous narrator. In *Lolita*, the dull and sermon-like morality of the fictitious Dr. Ray (Wood 1994: 106–7) causes us to move away from a morally zealous reading of the novel. We are *as incurious* as Humbert about other characters, and to some extent we share his point of view. We are 'suddenly revealed to [ourselves] as, if not hypocritical, at least cruelly incurious' and we 'recognize [our] *semblable*, [our] brother, in Humbert' (Clegg 2000: 34). In *A Clockwork Orange*, even if Alex eventually becomes 'well-behaved' and rather moral, such as when he speaks of 'finding some devotchka or other who would be a mother to this son' (Burgess 2010: 165), the reader is led to question the ethicality of the State's method. The character of the chaplain states that '[g]oodness comes from within [...]. When a man cannot choose he ceases to be a man' (Burgess 2010:

73). We are therefore led to question not only the true morality of the State's method, but also of Alex's new character.

The combination of a first-person point of view, the incomprehension of the third-person character and the use of this third-person character to examine the narrator's self from the outside in *Lolita* and *A Clockwork Orange* is defining in terms of the ethical explorations of these novels. The novels start by placing the reader in an uncomfortable position, as he or she is asked to adopt the point of view of a criminal (murderer and paedophile in *Lolita*; ultra-violent rapist and murderer in *A Clockwork Orange*), and make us confront this point of view. The texts only allow us to comprehend the minds of other characters when they present a similarity to the first-person narrative and therefore help us to understand the workings of the mind of the unethical narrator. The fact is that the spotlight is on the narrators' minds 'involves a critical judgement on the reader's part' (Pifer 1980: 9–10). The focus on the Voice being used to describe the different events of the text makes these books ethical in as much as they lead the reader to consider morality by questioning the narrators' points of view.

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
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