Deconstructing *Lolita*

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To Raphaël

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Part Two

FOREWORD

How to read literature with Derrida? How to teach literature with Derrida? Such is the problematic explored by the present work which is an assemblage of articles written on Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* between 2003 and 2017. They have all been published in various places and journals, except the one titled "Sartre, Lacan, Derrida, and Nabokov" which was read at the Nabokov et la France International Conference in May 2013 in Paris, France.

All the essays resort to French philosopher Jacques Derrida's works as a basis for the analysis of different literary issues such as structure, genre, or interpretation.

The book is divided into two parts, the first composed of articles dealing solely with the novel, the second of articles covering reflections about other Nabokov works, with only a fragment on *Lolita*.

The introduction should be read as a general summary of the articles.

The book addresses both Nabokovian specialists and students of Nabokov's works. It thereby can be used as a teaching guide by those interested in not only *Lolita* but also deconstruction.

Marcq-en-Baroeul
November 11, 2021

DATES AND PLACES OF PUBLICATIONS

Introduction

My translation from the French: *Lolita, Guide de la littérature américaine des origines à nos jours*, edited by Jean Pouvelle and Jean-Pierre Demarche (Paris: Éditions Ellipses, 2008), 195–8.

Chapter One: Structure in *Lolita*

Zembla. http.www.libraries.psu.edu/Nabokov/zembla htm (September 19, 2008).

Chapter Two: Putting *Lolita* to the Test of the Theory of Literary Genres

My translation from the French of "*Lolita* à l'épreuve de la théorie des genres littéraires" *Lolita, roman de Vladimir Nabokov (1955) et film de Stanley Kubrick (1962)*, edited by Didier Machu and Taïna Tukhunen (Paris: Ellipses, 2009), 43–54.

Chapter Three: The Ordeal of Undecidability in *Lolita*

Kaleidoscopic Nabokov: Perspectives Françaises, edited by Lara Delage-Toriel and Monica Manolescu (Paris: Michel Oudiart éditeur, 2009), 85–92.

Chapter Four: Lolita's Subjectivity

Zembla. http.www.libraries.psu.edu/Nabokov/zembla htm (March 11, 2009).

Chapter Five: Trauma and Free Will in *Lolita*

LATCH (*A Journal for the Study of the Literary Artifact in Theory, Culture, or History)* (November 2009). www.openlatch.com.

Chapter Six: Generic Glidings and Endless Writing from *The Enchanter* to *Lolita* Through *Lolita: A Screenplay*

The Proceedings in the International Nabokov Conference "Revising Nabokov Revising" (March 24–27, 2010), 27–32.

Chapter Seven: Teaching *Lolita*

Unpublished.

Chapter Eight: "Play! Invent the World! Invent Reality!": Nabokov/Derrida

The Oxford Literary Review 25 (2003): 157–77.

Chapter Nine: "Sois sage, ô ma douleur …": Psychical Suffering in Some of Nabokov's Works

Nabokov Studies (International Vladimir Nabokov Society and Davidson College) 15 (2017) (online).

Chapter Ten: Sartre, Lacan, Derrida, and Nabokov

Nabokov et la France International Conference, Paris IV-La Sorbonne/ENS, Ulm (May 2013), unpublished.

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

Summary

Lolita narrates the story of a middle-aged man, Humbert Humbert, a European emigrant in the United States, who falls in love with the twelve-year-old American Dolores Haze, nicknamed Lolita. In order to approach Lolita, Humbert marries her mother, Charlotte Haze. The latter dies in an accident a few months after the wedding, just when she was about to unmask Humbert after finding his diary. Humbert then leaves to pick up Lolita from the camp she is holidaying at and, after having sex for the first time in a hotel, they embark on a long journey across the United States. Lolita eventually runs away with the paedophile playwright, Clare Quilty, who subsequently abandons her, after which she does not rejoin Humbert. After many years of searching, Humbert finds Quilty, kills him, and then dies some weeks later in prison.

Analysis

Transgressive, subversive, both grave and comical, this novel breaks taboos, destabilises certitudes, embarrasses and fascinates at the same time. It is situated on the razor's edge between the aesthetic pleasure it brings about – it is a masterpiece of twentieth-century international literature – and the ethical question it problematises. It deals with evil and abjection through the anatomy of a sexual criminal perversion: paedophilia.

Its generic status is nevertheless hybrid and multiform. Is it a study of a psychiatric case? Is it a love story, a police investigation, a travelogue? Nabokov plays on these generic codes by resorting to parody, satire, irony, and humour.

But he knows how to tell stories. He masters the art of narration and succeeds in creating suspense, surprises, and reversals of situations.

Some salient episodes – such as the unsuccessful first sexual experience of Humbert when a teenager, or the first apparition of Lolita – punctuate the narrative, the first part of which culminates with the night when they have sex for the first time.

As the novel opens and closes with the absence of Lolita, it presents two antagonistic movements: one progressive, directed towards the future, hope, and desire; the other regressive, which is characterised by the spatial and temporal return and stages memory, regret, or remorse.

Whether it is a question of genre, structure, or writing, play prevails in the novel. Nabokov is indeed a stylistic virtuoso, a magician who excels in the art of mystification and deception, and an author aware of the tricks of his art. The vocabulary is rich, varied, and specific; the syntax elaborate; and the language musical. Play on words is frequent and concerns several foreign languages at times. The text is fraught with intertextual allusions to anglophone writers such as Poe, Joyce, Shakespeare, and Sterne; to French authors such as Flaubert, Mérimée, Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud; and eventually to Russian novelists such as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Pushkin. It is also a metafictional text as it offers a *mise en abyme* of the very process of writing with the insertion of letters, poems, a play, Humbert's diary, and even a fictive preface.

But one should not forget that this masterpiece deals with a criminal perversion and so with the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in art. Thus should, or can, literature simply condemn evil and consequently propose norms in ethics? In this case, *Lolita* would denounce a sexual deviation by showing what one must not do. Humbert would be an immoral pervert who is punished at the end. The novel would offer a moral lesson. One would adopt there the position of the editor of the fictive preface, John Ray, who considers that the novel should incite us to be vigilant so as to improve our generation.

Now, Nabokov himself has refuted this argument in the postface he added to the novel in 1956, one year after its first publication, where he revolts against any didactic literature. An interpretation of the

novel is thereby not straightforward, or is even undecidable, as the preface and the postface present two contradictory viewpoints: one insists on the moral aspect of the book, the other categorically refuses this judgement.

Should we therefore consider the novel as a scandalous, immoral text, which seems to justify an ethical abjection as the story is told by the paedophile, the reader feeling empathy for him, sharing his desire or even his passion? This would support a puritan conformist position and pretend that there are limits to the freedom of art and literature. Should we therefore, as some advocate, mainly appreciate the aesthetic dimension of the novel and affirm the superiority of art over justice? This would justify Humbert's viewpoint where he tries to vindicate himself with the poetry of his text.

Now, *Lolita* is not only a pleasure text (*texte de plaisir*), as Roland Barthes would say, but a text situated at the limit in an unstable position because one should not overestimate nor underestimate either dimension, whether it be aesthetic or ethical. It is indeed neither strictly moralising nor tolerant, or even over-obliging. It resists any fixed and final conclusion because it maintains the reader in a double-bind situation; that is to say a paradoxical position, a dilemma which consists in identifying with the pervert and rejecting him by feeling indignation at his cruelty. Nabokov manages to denounce a sexual criminal perversion without merely applying the simplistic doxa because he has succeeded in writing a nuanced literary text fraught with tensions and contradictions. The novel succeeds in transforming the reader, who must go through an ordeal of indecision before attaining a real ethical choice and a conscious stand in the criticism of evil.

Commentaries

Lolita was published in 1955 when Nabokov was fifty-six years old, having already written eleven novels (nine in Russian and two in English). Being at the height of his powers, he was offering a masterpiece which was to be followed by others such as *Pale Fire* (1962) and *Ada* (1969). The novel was an enormous commercial

success, partly due to the scandal it provoked. Nabokov became a well-known writer worldwide, which allowed him to retreat to Switzerland and devote himself to literature.

It is generally admitted that this work is situated at the crossroads of modernism and postmodernism. It blends narrative techniques linked to certain conventional codes (plot, linearity, causality, temporality) and the subversion of these codes through attention to detail, the meaningful presence of coincidences, forking, and sometimes a fragmented form reminiscent of writing devices of anglophone writers such as Sterne in the eighteenth century and John Barth in the twentieth.

The novel mainly takes place in America in the 1940s and 50s. It stages the American middle class with its motels, cinemas, culture, and gains by being read through this angle, and it therefore appears as a sociological document. Anchored in reality (one of the words which, according to Nabokov, mean nothing without quotes), the novel questions the mimetic dimension of art through invention rather than the imitative representation of worlds which thereby become spectral.

A political spectre, moreover, seems to hover over the novel, written a few years after the publication of *Bend Sinister* (1947) which, as a dystopia, is a denunciation of totalitarian regimes. Is it therefore possible to claim that *Lolita* gives an account of a political monstrosity – Nazism – with a sexual monstrosity – paedophilia? Does the novel attempt to represent the unrepresentable? Even cinema has hesitated to give concrete and specific expression to the nymphet as, in the two cinematographic adaptations of the novel (Stanley Kubrick's in 1962 and Adrian Lyne's in 1997), Lolita appears older than she is in the novel, as if the fantastical representation produced by the act of reading resists the representation entailed by the image.

Lolita has remained topical thanks not only to the films but also the recent scandalous affairs related to paedophilia which prove that Nabokov wrote a bold text, ahead of his time, or even a visionary one. Readers of today sometimes forget that he created a neologism

since he transformed a proper name (Lolita) into a common name (we may speak now of "a Lolita"). Nabokov created a work of lasting importance as he wrote a text which, despite the endless readings it permits or even necessitates, keeps its secret.

CHAPTER ONE

STRUCTURE IN *LOLITA*

In an article that appeared in the *Oxford Literary Review* in 2003, I asked how one might proceed to read and teach literature with Jacques Derrida. I suggested consulting Derrida's texts on literary concepts such as structure, genre, or interpretation and problematising them in the light of a literary text, thereby demonstrating how Derrida renewed them. In applying this strategy to Nabokov's work, I came to the conclusion that Derrida's notions of play in structure, impurity in genre, and undecidability allow a richer reading of some of the texts, and that they could be useful in the analysis of other literary texts as well.

In this paper I will extend my research by showing evidence of play in the structure of not only *Bend Sinister* and *Speak, Memory* but also one of Nabokov's masterpieces, *Lolita*. To do so, after first describing Derrida's position on the issue of structure, I will apply a formalist approach to *Lolita* and then attempt to take into account Derrida's perspective.

Derrida raised the issue of structure in two essays, "Force et signification" ["Force and Signification"] and "La structure, le signe et le jeu dans les sciences humaines" ["Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"], both of which appeared in *L'Ecriture et la différence* [*Writing and Difference*], published in 1967. His main point in "Force and Signification" is that structuralist literary criticism, though at times both brilliant and fascinating, excludes the force of literature since the mere analysis of structure, based on the whole of relations and configurations, is exceeded by the living energy of meaning: the structure of the book becomes a skeleton, a town haunted by meaning which is characterised by reserve and excess. Derrida founds his analysis mainly on *Forme et*

Signification [*Form and Signification*], a book published in 1962 by French literary critic Jean Rousset, who argues that a reader finds meaning through forms that they detect in a literary text's nodes ("noeuds"), figures ("figures"), and reliefs ("relièfs"), which signal the simultaneous operation of a lived experience and its implementation.[1] Although Derrida does not deny the strength of such structuralist criticism, he believes that structuralism corresponds historically to a period of crisis and should be denounced because the detection of structure has become, in his view, no longer a means, a tool, an instrument for working out meaning, but an end in itself. Moreover, structuralism favours spatial configurations, geometry, and form at the expense of time, becoming, and movement, and subordinates certain parts of a text which thus become secondary, incidental, or minor. To counteract this tendency, I shall try to expatiate on what is marginal and accidental in the second stage of my analysis of the novel.

In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida insists that structure is based on the notion of a centre that is supposed to organise it, but whose effect is mainly to limit the play within it. Although he concedes that a centre may open play within the structure, he states that it chiefly prevents play and forbids substitution. Only a de-centring process like the ones employed by Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger, or by anthropologist Claude Lévy-Strauss, can allow play into a system, since this play is due to the presence of an insufficiency or incompleteness of meaning which longs for supplementation. My intent here, therefore, is to give evidence of play in the structure of Lolita.

Before attempting to analyse the book from a Derridean perspective, I will adopt a formalist approach, first enumerating the different

[1] Jean Rousset, *Forme et signification. Essais sur les structures littéraires de Corneille à Claudel* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1962): "Ce livre a-t-il besoin d'une longue signification? Rien de plus normal, semble-t-il, que son propos: saisir des significations à travers des formes, dégager des ordonnances et des présentations révélatrices, déceler dans les textures littéraires ces nœuds, ces figures, ces reliefs inédits qui signalent l'opération simultanée d'une expérience vécue et d'une mise en œuvre" (I).

possible structures that can be extracted from the various organising principles.

First, an outline of the book: preceded by a foreword written by a fictitious editor, John Ray, Jr. Ph.D., the novel is composed of two parts. The first consists of thirty-three chapters and can be divided into three subparts: ten chapters corresponding to a movement from discussion of Annabel, Humbert's first love, to Lolita; twelve chapters tackling the transition from Charlotte Haze, Lolita's mother, to Lolita; and a final group of eleven chapters culminating in Humbert's having sex with Lolita. Two events stand out in this first part: the Annabel episode situated temporally in the summer of 1923 – when Humbert and Annabel's first sexual experience on the beach is interrupted by two bathers coming out of the sea – and Humbert's encounter with Lolita in the spring of 1947. As can be seen, female figures punctuate the unfolding of events and create a pattern of oppositions and substitutions as Lolita appears as the reincarnation of Annabel. Time is either condensed or expanded. The more Lolita is present, the more detailed and apparently accurate the narrative becomes. Days become as long as weeks in terms of the length of the corresponding parts of text. Thus, whereas the first twenty-four chapters cover twenty-four years, the final nine (twenty-five to thirty-three) cover only two days, or rather two nights, when Humbert and Lolita have sex for the first and second times.

Spatially, in part one, we move from France to America and witness the beginning of a wandering across the United States. The second part of the novel, on the other hand, is characterised by spatial expansion; composed of thirty-six chapters, it culminates in the murder of Lolita's lover, Clare Quilty, in the penultimate chapter. As in the first part, climactic events appear at regular intervals in the action, such as Lolita's escape from the hospital on the fourth of July 1949 or Quilty's murder in September 1952. In this light, the structure of the novel seems to be characterised by the rhythmic pattern of climaxes and a general movement towards the end of the novel, a linear evolution towards the dénouement.

But another formal pattern can be discerned, a kind of mirror structure. The symmetry of the novel's two parts is reinforced by devices of repetition, duplication, inversion, and reversion. Thus, the prologue (chapter one) echoes the epilogue (chapter thirty-six). The subdivisions of each part stand in an inverted (mirror-like) relationship to each other. The first ten chapters of the first part, for instance, reflect the last ten chapters of the second. In both sections, Humbert is without Lolita: he sees Lolita for the first time in chapter ten and loses her when she escapes in chapter twenty-two of part two, approximately ten chapters before the end of the book. Rita, the woman Humbert meets and lives with in the second subdivision of part two, is a reflection of Humbert's wives, with whom he lives in part one. Moreover, the progressive movement tending towards dénouement mentioned above is counteracted by a regressive one as characters in part two tend to go backwards, to return in space and time. Thus, Humbert goes back to Beardsley from Elphinstone on his quest to locate the escaped Lolita. Similarly, just as Humbert was first pursued by Quilty, it is he who hunts Quilty in part two. Reminiscence eventually characterises the temporal trend as Humbert projects himself and his story towards the past, trying to recapture, in his experience of the encounter with Lolita in 1947, the memory of his relationship with Annabel in 1923 when he was thirteen.

There is thus evidence of at least two different structural patterns in the novel, the first characterised by a linear series of climaxes, and the second by reflection, repetition, and inversion.

There is, in addition, a third structural principle, the *mise en abyme*, which problematises the notions of centre and centrality and which first appears in the form of chess metaphors. As Edmond Bernhard has shown in an article published in *L'Arc*[2], the metaphor of the chessboard is used several times in the text: America, for example, is compared to a "crazy quilt of forty-eight states"[3] and Humbert's

[2] Edmond Bernhard, "La thématique échiquéenne de Lolita," *L'Arc* 99 (1985): 37–45.

[3] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 152.

travelling to successful or failed "moves." Centrality is further called into question by the *mise en abyme* proper which proceeds from play in the temporal and spatial markers. Twenty-four years pass between Humbert's affair with Annabel and Lolita's first appearance, and five years pass between the first time Humbert sees Lolita (May 1947) and the last time he sees her (September 1952). This first lapse of time corresponds to the difference in ages that must separate, according to Humbert, a nymphet and a nympholept (Humbert is thirty-seven when he meets Lolita, who is then twelve), whereas the second lapse of time (five years) corresponds to the lifespan of a nymphet (between the ages of nine and fourteen). The effect is one of enclosing this typical period of time within the general secondary one of a nympholept's life. In addition, the temporal gap is then transposed into spatial terms by Humbert who, propounding the characteristics of nymphets in chapter five, declares:

> It will be marked that I substitute time terms for spatial ones. In fact, I would have the reader see "nine" and "fourteen" as the boundaries – the mirrory beaches and rosy rocks – of an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea.[4]

Likewise, one notices the presence of enclosed spaces in the novel: the prison where Humbert writes his confession, the psychiatric hospital, the hospital at Elphinstone, etc. These enclosed spaces stand in contrast to the open roads along which Humbert flees with Lolita or later pursues Quilty. Between the enclosed and the boundless, there is the automobile, which is at once closed and mobile and represents a wandering centre surrounded by concentric circles. The *mise en abyme* structure is further reinforced by the presence of other moving centres or points of view, such as Humbert's consciousness, editor John Ray's commentary encircling Humbert's confession, the author's indirect intervention, and even Lolita's inaudible voice.

A listing of the structural patterns described above – only three of an obviously more extensive list – demonstrates the relevance of a structuralist approach in the elaboration of meaning. But the structuralist

[4] Ibid., 16.

method essentially rests on the discovery of oppositions, between prominent events and secondary ones in the pattern of climaxes, between the two parts of a symmetrical pairing in mirrored patterns, and finally between smaller elements and the larger ones in a *mise en abyme* structure. Although the latter gives evidence of the undermining of centrality, I would like to study in greater detail what Derrida refers to as play in a structure; play which creates a sense of incompleteness due to the lack in meaning longing for supplementation.

To do so, I will examine what may seem marginal, accidental, or secondary in the novel, but which is, to my mind, of paramount importance: coincidence and narrative metalepses. In order to better understand their role and function, I will turn to two theoretical works: Derrida's essay on chance and Genette's analysis of metalepses.

In October 1982 Derrida delivered a lecture entitled "My Chances / Mes Chances: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies"[5] at the Forum on Psychiatry and the Humanities. In it he addresses the issue of chance as it relates to psychoanalysis and literature. By alluding to Epicurus's concept of the clinamen – the small deviation of atoms from a straight line in the course of their fall in the void – Derrida insists on the presence in nature of chance, which entails surprise and unpredictability, as opposed to the determinism of fate and necessity. Genette, in the fifth chapter of *Figures III* dealing with narrative voice, introduces the figure of speech known as metalepsis[6] and defines what he calls "a narrative metalepsis," a figure that allows a narrator to indulge in switching between narrative levels – the level of the diegesis and the level of narration, for example – one classic instance being the request of the narrator in *Tristram Shandy* that the reader shut the door. In a more recent book, *Metalepse: de la figure à la fiction* (2004), Genette notes that the device can also be found in works of cinema, one example being Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo*.

[5] Later published in Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (eds.), *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis, and Literature* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).
[6] Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 243–5.

In Lolita, coincidences correspond first of all to the role of chance in the novel. In his preface to *The Annotated Lolita*, Alfred Appel, Jr. notes the importance of coincidence, pointing out that, "Humbert goes to live in Charlotte Haze's house at 342 Lawn Street, he and Lolita inaugurate their illicit cross-country tour in room 342 of the Enchanted Hunters hotel, and in one year on the road they register in 342 motels and hotels."[7] Although one may object that coincidences do not really occur in fiction, dependent as they are on authorial intervention, I would like to show how their presence serves to question the issue of causality in the novel.[8]

Humbert is supposedly writing a confession of his affair with the nymphet Lolita addressed to members of the jury who are going to judge him for the murder of Lolita's lover, Clare Quilty. He pretends therefore to wonder about the reasons for the affair and the cause of his attraction to young girls. At the very beginning of his confession, he declares: "in point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child."[9] He wishes thereby to imply that his propensity for nymphets is due to the trauma of his failed first sexual relationship with Annabel. Yet he later admits:

> I leaf again and again through these miserable memories, and keep asking myself, was it then, in the glitter of that remote summer, that the rift in my life began; or was my excessive desire for that child only the first evidence of an inherent singularity? When I try to analyze my own cravings, motives, actions and so forth, I surrender to a sort of retrospective imagination which feeds the analytic faculty with boundless alternatives and which causes each visualized route to fork and re-fork without end in the maddeningly complex prospect

[7] Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita*, edited by Alfred Appel, Jr. New York: Vintage Books, 1991, xxviii.
[8] To study in more depth the notion of causality in fiction, one may refer to Roy Jay Nelson's *Causality and Narrative in French Fiction from Zola to Robbe-Grillet* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990) and Brian Richardson's *Unlikely Stories: Causality and the Nature of Modern Narrative* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997).
[9] Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 9.

> of my past. I am convinced, however, that in a certain magic and fateful way Lolita began with Annabel.[10]

He thus shifts from one viewpoint to its opposite, assigning responsibility either to himself or to mere fate, either to some inherent trait or to past events. By doing so, he justifies his actions with external reasons, freeing himself from the feeling of guilt. Yet Nabokov, by building other coincidences into the story, complicates this too-simple interpretation by interspersing allusions in the text which tend to imply that not only the reasons for Humbert's actions may be numerous and varied but the course of one's life can fork and re-fork, branching in several directions. The first such coincidence appears in part one, chapter eight, when Humbert describes how, while in prison, i.e. in 1952, he comes upon a magazine entitled *Who's Who in the Limelight*, a listing of actors, producers, and playwrights dating from 1946, one year before he sees Lolita for the first time. Two significant names appear in the magazine, the first being Clare Quilty, the dramatist with whom Lolita will later run off, and the second being Dolores Quine, Dolores being Lolita's real given name. Thus, Lolita and Quilty are brought together. Nabokov is playing here on two narrative levels or in two distinct worlds: the world and time of narration (1952) and the world and time of the events recounted (1946–7).[11] The two worlds overlap as in the narrative metalepsis which appears some lines later when Humbert, addressing his lawyer Clarence Choate Clark, adds in a parenthesis: "I notice the slip of my pen in the preceding paragraph, but please do not correct it, Clarence."[12] This sort-crossing – to use a phrase applied to metaphors by Colin Murray Turbayne in *The Myth of Metaphor*[13] – leads to a "sort-trespassing" which undermines linear temporality and causal logic. Indeed, the teleological trend maintained until this point in the text is shattered by this device, which

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[10] Ibid., 13–14.

[11] For more on the significance of time lags in *Lolita* see Tadashi Wakashima, "Double Exposure: On the Vertigo of Translating Lolita," *Zembla* (2007).

[12] Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 32.

[13] Paul Ricoeur mentions Turbayne's lexicon in *La Métaphore vive* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 316.

destabilises the entire structure of the novel, throwing it off balance, inducing a gap in meaning as the coincidence corresponds to a rift in the novel which traverses it slantwise.

Another coincidence worthy of analysis relates to the narrative function of letters, and more particularly those that Charlotte writes after she discovers the diary in which Humbert confesses his desire for her daughter, Lolita (part one, chapter twenty-two). She writes three letters, one to Lolita, one to the manager of a boarding school, and the last to Humbert. Before she can drop them into the mailbox, thereby disclosing the secret of Humbert's perversion, she is struck by a passing automobile and dies, giving Humbert the opportunity to intercept them. Her sudden accidental death disrupts the straight line of Humbert's destiny; the interruption of the programmed flow of events makes his life's course deviate and branch in a new direction.

Derrida may be useful here in explaining the significance of the narrative device. In his article, he insists that chance may be linked to the issue of destiny and destination as it causes the possible detour of a clinamen. The metaphor Derrida employs is a letter which, he notes, might not arrive at its intended destination because of randomness – it may be erring, or rather, as he says, destinerring. This he declares in refutation of Lacan's claim that a letter always arrives at its destination. Chance may have no role in the unconscious as interpreted by psychoanalysis or in literature given that the author pulls the strings, but it might be argued that the themes of chance and coincidence in fiction can metaphorically represent breaks in the straight line of the narrative, the disjunctive detours that allow often significant events to emerge. A branching in a narrative may therefore entail surprise, suspense and the expectation of a new horizon.

Chance occurs not only within the narrative sequence, but also plays a role in the act of reading, as Derrida implies by alluding, in the process of his argumentation, to "his strokes of chance" ["ses coups de chance"]. A final example from the novel, again involving a letter, will demonstrate the importance of the reader.

Lolita, now married, sends Humbert a letter on September 18, 1952. Ironically addressing it to her "dear dad," and admitting that it is "a hard latter to write," she asks for money because, being pregnant, she finds herself in financial need. The reader is struck by the suffering that Lolita seems to have experienced and is filled with both pity for Lolita and anger at Humbert for his cruelty. Although addressed to Humbert, the letter is in one sense directed at the reader, who must therefore react to it as he or she chooses. The reader is free to play with the text by relying on his or her own "strokes of luck": the play inherent in the structure permits, through the reader's responses to it, the emergence of new interpretations of the text. This is why I would like to conclude with Derrida's gloss on a statement by Freud which he cites in his article on chance: "[W]e are all too ready to forget that in fact everything to do with our life is chance [Zufall], from our origin out of the meeting of a spermatozoon and ovum onwards," to which Derrida adds in square brackets: "this is also that which I name, in my language, dissemination."[14]

[14] Smith and Kerrigan, *Taking Chances*, 30.