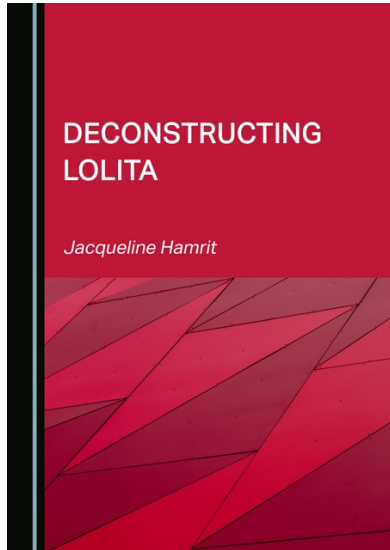


***Deconstructing Lolita*, by Jacqueline Hamrit.** Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022. ISBN 9781527581784. 129 pp.



Nabokov scholarship has not tended to be a hotbed of high theory. Its outlook has often accorded with the values of the man himself – as briefly as possible: liberal and aestheticist. This is unsurprising for several reasons, not least of which being that liberal humanism is also guiding spirit of the professional practice of literary criticism in English. High theory appears at times to provide a detour from the dour predictability of ideological critique, and in that way, it can work as a kind of incidental ally to liberal humanist criticism. Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction has, in particular, intermittently been drawn into a complicated alliance with Belletrism. For this reason above all, Jacqueline Hamrit’s *Deconstructing Lolita* makes a genuine addition to the literature. The question is whether it is likely to win many converts over to the necessity of Derrida for Nabokov scholarship.

The text consists of two parts: the chapters of the first part focus exclusively on *Lolita*, while those of the second part examine other works by Nabokov. Both parts consist of a series of chapters, several of which were previously published in French as standalone essays, and which have related or interconnected themes. There is not a sustained overarching argument with respect to a Deconstructionist reading of *Lolita*, but Nabokov and Derrida are the uniting factors for the text as a whole. References are given in footnotes and then assembled in either a bibliography or

works cited section by chapter. There are a few infelicities in Hamrit's English prose, but the translated passages from Derrida show a high level of care. Hamrit's use of Derrida relies almost entirely on his own writings; the main critic of Derrida's who is cited (sparingly) is J. Hillis Miller.

In Chapter One, Hamrit introduces the aspect of Derrida's work that she will choose to emphasize with the 1967 essay "Structure, Sign, and Play." It is a peculiarity of Derrida's that any summative use of his work to exemplify a position as such will rely on bits and pieces drawn from across his oeuvre, as Hamrit does. Derrida nowhere lays out his philosophy in a conventionally systematic way, and indeed avoids doing so for reasons that are properly philosophical. Deconstruction is, (in)famously, not a method. Thus we might refer to Derridean themes, say, rather than a Derridean position; the Derridean themes that recur for Hamrit's reading relate to the privileging of margins over centres and to the refusal of gestures of closure.

A kind of general sympathy in values between Nabokov of Derrida comes into focus in Hamrit's emphasis on the marginal and accidental, rather than the formally obvious. One hesitates, however, about the desire to return the marginal to a role of "paramount importance" (14) – Deconstruction does not stop at inverting the places of the marginal and the central; rather, the hierarchical relation itself should be demonstrated to be untenable through the necessity of mutual interdependence between centre and margin.

Chapter Five may raise a few eyebrows among Nabokovians and Derrideans alike in that it is a psychoanalytic reading of *Lolita* in terms of how Humbert exhibits the symptoms of trauma. Later, in Chapter Nine, Hamrit will argue as to why she is among the minority in Nabokov studies who affirm the positive importance of Freud for Nabokov, regarding him as a "worthy rival" rather than a bitter foe. As much as this is unusual for a Nabokov critic, it also sits curiously with Derrida's critiques of Freud and Lacan; one might have expected her to argue that Nabokov's complaints with Freud, e.g. his determinism, are actually quite compatible with Derrida's (as in e.g. *The Post Card*).

Chapter Eight restages and elaborates on some of the arguments and citations first offered in Chapter One; it seems to have been placed where it is in the structure of the book mainly on account of its reliance not on *Lolita*, but upon *Speak, Memory* and other texts by Nabokov. The chapter begins with an explication of the relationship between philosophy and literature. She cites

Miller and Jonathan Culler on the fecundity of maintaining a tension in that relationship, rather than resolving it into a tidy hierarchy. Moreover, she argues that not only does Derrida do the same, but that there is a special aesthetic affinity between Nabokov and Derrida. The essential point she wishes to underline is that it is the lack of an organizing centre in Nabokov's works that echoes Derrida's critique of centredness or centre-dependency in structuralism.

Here as throughout the text, Hamrit relies on the notion of play, upon which there may be some equivocation; playful though he may be, "play" in the Derridean sense has long been argued, and broadly understood, to be less like children's play, and more like the way loose machine parts function within imperfect tolerances. A more fulsome recourse to the secondary material on Derrida may have reassured the Derridean reader.

This may be symptomatic of a tendency that runs throughout the book. The argument proceeds by showing similarities or affinities between fragmentary remarks or passages by Derrida and Nabokov. While the attention to closely-read detail is admirable, one does not necessarily form a clear picture of a larger Nabokovian or Derridean view which might be respectively compared. For this reason, it seems at times that Nabokov and Derrida are being marshaled to support Hamrit's generalizations, rather than providing evidence for a comparison of their own views as articulated. She finds numerous similarities in the rhetoric of Nabokov and Derrida that are tantalizing, but a more rigorous exegesis may have been more persuasive. For example, both Derrida and Nabokov make remarks about inventing the world. This is certainly noteworthy; but Nabokov does so through a narrator who is parodic (in *Look at the Harlequins!*) and Derrida does so in an essay on Levinasian ethics. Is Nabokov's remark meant earnestly? Does its similarity to remarks he made in interviews conclusively demonstrate that it is? But more important is the question of what the two might mean by "invent" as such—does it stem e.g. from the classical Latin rhetorical mode? Or how might it contrast with other ways representing the act of writing, e.g. poiesis? One hopes for this apparent affinity to be someday more closely argued.

Hamrit opens the book as a whole by addressing questions as to the applicability or relevance of Derrida to literary criticism; to raise this question a second time at the end of Chapter Eight seems to bookend the text. However, two more brief chapters follow. To dwell on this question as a kind of conclusion, the further question that seems to remain hovering over this text

is how Derridean its approach may be. For all Nabokov's metatextual forays, illusions, philosophical doubts about the nature of time, memory, perception, reality, and so on, one suspects that for him, the figure of the author as an "anthropomorphic deity," a god or master of the text, remains one within whom the closure of meaning must reside – at least, according to his own view.

All that said, this text will probably be most useful to new readers of Nabokov who are already well-versed in Derrida, since those who are not might find the aspects of Derrida introduced here not to offer much access to his philosophy, nor a compelling reason to investigate it more deeply. Perhaps the most productive passages deal with how Nabokov's work resists closure or summative totality in a way that mirrors or resonates with these themes in Derrida. In this way, the text succeeds in leaving the reader with the sense of an affinity between the two writers, and it should be hoped that this line of thinking will be explored further.

Jeremy Stewart,
Lancaster University

