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Nabokov

Toker, Leona

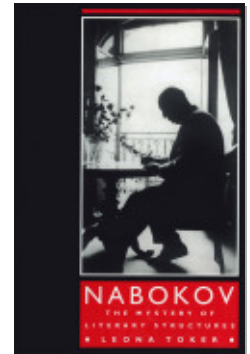
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Preface

Several years ago, while reading, without interruption, all the books on “the Nabokov shelf,” I ceased to deplore the penalties one pays for having turned one’s love of literature into a profession. A return to the same shelf became, time and again, an effective antidote for sundry vexations of the spirit. The magic lay in the earnestly playful eschatology that transpires through these books, as well as in the limpid sense of freedom that suffuses their style, a sense not divorced from an awareness of whatever threatens to curb freedom of action, sensation, and thought.

Because the “aesthetic bliss” of a literary critic seldom remains unpragmatic for long, I am fortunate that it is within my professional purview to discharge the debt I owe to Nabokov—although, paradoxically, the relatively sober study that follows does not entirely reflect what charmed me in Nabokov’s style. The approach I have taken here is, largely, a response to an imbalance in the critical literature devoted to Nabokov. Much of this literature either discusses his breathtakingly subtle techniques or explores his humanistic themes (the latter a rather recent reaction to the previously unjust treatment of Nabokov as a cold virtuoso). In the best studies of technique, the humanism of Nabokov’s content is taken for granted; in the best studies of his thematic content, the technical refinements are tacitly assumed. Only a few, most of them of limited scope, deal with the combination of formal refinement and poignant humanism in Nabokov’s fiction. Precisely how this combination works is the subject of my inquiry.

I first treat Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*, a novel that provides useful insights into the tendencies manifest throughout his fiction. Then, in chrono-

logical order, I discuss nine of his other novels, starting with his first, *Mary* (1926), through *King, Queen, Knave* (1928), *The Defense* (1930), *Glory* (1932), *Laughter in the Dark* (1933/1938), *Invitation to a Beheading* (completed 1935, published 1938), *The Gift* (first serialized in 1937–38), and *Bend Sinister* (1947), ending with *Lolita* (1955), part of which he wrote during roughly the same period as *Pnin*. The quasi-circular structure of my book is not merely a reflection of Nabokov's preference for quasi-circular forms. It is meant to suggest that the relationship between the features of his various works is a matter of evolvment rather than of development: each novel explores a potentiality that has always been present in the moral/aesthetic phenomenon called Vladimir Nabokov. Such a retrospective look at his literary career is, of course, related to the Schopenhauerian view of character that he seems to have held.

I analyze Nabokov's early works in their revised English versions, taking into account the significance of the changes that occurred during their linguistic transubstantiation. The ten novels chosen display variations on those formal issues (perspective, recurrent motifs, self-referentiality) to which I wished to limit the scope of the structuralist aspect of my analysis. In other words, these are the novels to which my somewhat eclectic model approximation is most conveniently applicable. The selection does not imply value judgments.

The relative space given to the theme and the structure of each of the ten has, to a large extent, been determined by the state of Nabokov criticism. For example, I devote much more space to the structure than to the main theme of *Invitation to a Beheading* because my basic interpretive approach to this novel is similar to that of several earlier studies. I give more attention to thematic analysis when a formerly neglected aspect of the novel's theme has to be brought into relief or when my reading is at variance with most existing interpretations. The book is deliberately nonpolemical, however, despite a few sore temptations. I refer to the critical literature either to acknowledge my indebtedness or to explain why I do not discuss certain issues.

Portions of this book have appeared elsewhere in earlier versions, and I thank the publishers for permission to use the following material. Chapter 2 is based on my article "*Pnin*: A Story of Creative Imagination," *Delta* (the Paul Valéry University of Montpellier, France), 17 (October 1983), 61–74. Chapter 3 is a revision of "Ganin in Maryland: A Retrospect on Nabokov's First Novel," published in *Canadian-*

American Slavic Studies, 19 (1985), 306–13. Chapter 6, “Nabokov’s Glory ‘Good Example of How Metaphysics Can Fool You,’ ” appeared in *Russian Literature*, 21 (1987), 293–312. Part of Chapter 8 is reproduced from “Ambiguity in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*” in Hans Braendlin, ed., *Ambiguities in Literature and Film: Selected Papers from the Seventh Florida State University Conference on Literature and Film*, with the permission of the publisher, The Florida State University Press, Tallahassee.

I am grateful to the U.S.–Israel Educational Foundation for a research grant that financed a three-month stay in the United States in 1984 and to the 1985 School of Criticism and Theory (held at Northwestern University) for a fellowship that allowed me to broaden my critical perspective.

A number of people have read chapters of the manuscript, and I thank them for their suggestions and constructive criticism. In particular, I thank Mrs. Vera Nabokov (for comments on the essay that eventually became Chapter 2), Helena Goscilo of the University of Pittsburgh, Gerald Bruns of the University of Notre Dame, and my Hebrew University Colleagues Shuli Barzilai, Lawrence Besserman, Baruch Hochman, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, and H. M. Daleski. Discussions with Professor Daleski have been of major importance to me from the start and have had an effect both on my critical strategies and on the texture of the book.

The help of my research assistants, Ilana Rosberger and Barbara Hall, considerably speeded up my work. I am grateful to Patricia Sterling, copy editor for Cornell University Press, for her careful critical attention to the manuscript.

Special thanks to my husband, Gregory Toker, for (among other things) smoothing my way into the wonderful world of word processors.

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