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Nabokov

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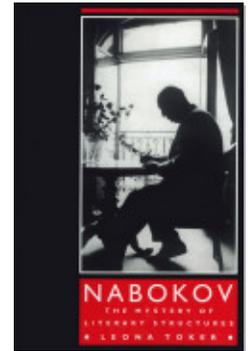
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Conclusion

“By all means place the ‘how’ above the ‘what,’ ” is Nabokov’s advice to critics, “but do not let it be confused with the ‘so what’ ” (*SO*, 66). If the “how” stands for the local felicities of good writing, then the “so what” refers to their integration into a work’s general design. But if the “how” stands for the general design, then the “so what” must be the mystery of the literary structure, the moral aspect of the relationship between the content and the form. Nabokov does not merely pay lip service to morality when he makes Humbert “quote” the following couplet of a nonexistent “old poet”:

The moral sense in mortals is the duty
We have to pay on mortal sense of beauty.
[*L*, 285]

“The mortal sense of beauty” is a euphemism for carnal pleasure, the pleasure of the senses that must be held in check by one’s moral alertness. Yet in the case of aesthetic enjoyment divorced from the gratification of more basic needs, the “moral sense” is not a tax to be paid but a vital dimension of the experience. To put it metaphorically, the “aesthetic bliss” and the “moral sense” are Siamese twins: the disease of one menaces the life of the other. It is noteworthy that *Nabokov’s Dozen*, which is largely a programmatic collection of short stories, includes a fragment called “Scenes from the Life of a Double Monster” (written approximately three years after *Lolita*), which realizes, as it were, the metaphor of the Siamese twins.

Such a statement amounts, of course, to treading on thin ice; it is time to recollect the ice of the puddles where Nabokov’s toy trains sank near the Hotel Oranien (see *SM*, 27). “Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint. Ignore allegories,” says Nabokov in the interview quoted above (*SO*, 66). And yet in *Bend*

Sinister the puddle that forms a gateway between contiguous worlds does have the shape of someone or other's footprint. Time and again one is tempted to start playing Nabokov's cryptographic games, if only to reduce the "high seriousness" that creeps into any conversation on aesthetics-cum-morality.

This is because the conversation must continue. Throughout his career Nabokov sought an integral unity of virtuoso technique and humanistic content; this search is also the major recurrent theme in his novels. His fiction is a city of many gates. There are avenues leading to the center from any gate, though there are also numerous discoveries to make and blind alleys to stray into on the way. The segments of the city, each an architectonic feat in its own right, offer a grateful context for one another, but this context—as well as some caryatids and bridges—must be constructed (building can be edifying) by the wanderer's own imagination. The aesthetic in Nabokov is inseparable from the ethical: both author and reader must take responsibility for the worlds that they "invent."

The aesthetic is, at the same time, the anaesthetic because, among other things, it silences the suffering and the desires of the consumer world. And it is not mere wordplay to claim that in Nabokov the aesthetic is also closely linked with the synaesthetic: synaesthesia—the blending of the senses which he experienced most concretely as *audition colorée* and attempted to convey through the tremulous images that make up the landscapes and portraits in his fiction—is a promise of transcendent reality waiting just beyond the bend. In the utopia erected by Nabokov in collaboration with the reader, moments of aesthetic bliss are among the repetitions of that promise.

