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Between Appreciation and Defense

Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977) remains one of the most polarizing of the major novelists who have written in English. His admirers are passionate about him. These include both critics and many novelists in England, America, and elsewhere. Some gestures of imitation have been made by other writers, though as is generally the case with writers of the first order of originality—Proust and Kafka come to mind—these efforts have not been very successful. On the opposing side, there are some readers who cannot abide Nabokov, finding little in his work but coy literary devices, mannered or overwrought prose, and a pervasive archness. Such starkly antithetical responses are uncommon in the reception of eminent writers. Dickens, for example, may not be altogether to every reader's taste (Nabokov, as we shall see, happened to be keenly enthusiastic about him), and some may be put off by the gargoyle-like characters, the contrivances of plot, the bouts of sentimentality, yet by and large such readers might say they would rather read Jane Austen but are unlikely to consign Dickens to the dustbin of literature. That, however, is often what those who are put off by Nabokov have done.

In my own response as a critic to this polarization, the discussions that follow may strike some as a bit defensive. I avowedly

do not assume that Nabokov is invariably at his best, that he is never free of the self-indulgence of which he is sometimes accused. But such accusation is often the result of a failure to see what is really going on in his novels, and my aim here is to show in a variety of finely tuned ways what such goings on entail. I should say that I have been writing about Nabokov for decades, and my basic view of him has not changed over the years, though it has been deepened by the exemplary work of his biographer and astute commentator, Brian Boyd, and by many critics, the first among them being his earliest prominent American critic, Alfred Appel Jr. Ever since I became an avid reader of Nabokov, I have been convinced that the self-reflexivity of his writing, its ingenious deployment of codes and games, its sheer literariness do not draw us away from the real world outside literature but, on the contrary, are a beautifully designed vehicle for engaging that world.

Even some of Nabokov's admirers, enamored of the games, have been inclined to downplay their purposefulness in illuminating the realm of experience we more or less share when we are not reading fiction. An enthusiastic essay written in 1979 by Mark Lilly vividly illustrates this predisposition. Between the two time-worn functions traditionally assigned to literature, to delight and to instruct, Lilly sees Nabokov coming down entirely on the side of delight: "His novels actually become games in which the readers are players, their task being to 'solve' the problems set by the games [of the] master-novelist. It is in this sense that we can properly refer to Nabokov as *homo ludens,* man the player."[1]

This characterization surely has considerable validity, but I think it fails to tell the whole story about Nabokov. Lilly ends up justifying Nabokov's achievement by saying that his pervasive playfulness is especially welcome in our age of "heavy

seriousness." It seems to me that this needs to be put differently: the playfulness is finally about serious things—about the wrenching turns of modern history, about love and the shattering disappointments to which the lover may be vulnerable, about the terrible toll exacted through manipulative relationships, about loyalty and betrayal. As dismissive as Nabokov chose to be of reality in his pronouncements about it, the games of his fiction repeatedly lead us to experience the various emotional, moral, and even political aspects of the real world.

As an initial take on this large question, which will be addressed from different angles in the pages that follow, I would like to consider "That in Aleppo Once . . . ," a story written in English in 1943, three years after Nabokov's arrival in the United States. The narrator is a Russian émigré poet struggling to obtain the visa that will enable him to flee France after the Nazi invasion and get to the United States. He addresses his story to a certain V., a fellow Russian who has succeeded in entering the United States. V. is a writer, evidently a successful one, who is being asked to turn the narrator's story into a published text. He shares a first initial with Vladimir Nabokov, but as elsewhere in VN's fiction—one thinks of the narrator in *Pnin,* who has certain biographical features in common with Nabokov but is otherwise his antithesis—the connection is a tease: later in the story we are told that V. is the father of twins, a marker of his difference as a fictional character from his author. The presence of V. is thus a kind of game that reminds us of the ambiguous border between reality and fiction. Writers long before Nabokov have played this kind of game. At the very inception of the novel as a dominant genre in the modern era, Cervantes undertakes an elaborate maneuver of representing his book as a translation of a work by an Arab "historian" that he has discovered.

The story's title, "That in Aleppo Once," is of course taken from Othello's last speech, just before he commits suicide. At the very end, the narrator pleads with V. not to use these words as a title: "It may all end in *Aleppo* if I am not careful. Spare me, V. . . . you would load your dice with an unbearable implication if you took that for your title."[2] This ending leaves it an open question whether the narrator, in fact, is about to commit suicide. As is almost always the case in fictions constructed on a central allusion to a previous literary text, there are both parallels to and marked differences from the work invoked. The narrator, like Othello, is considerably older than his beautiful young wife, whom he adores. Unlike Desdemona, she actually betrays him, or at least claims to have done so: she is an extravagant liar, even inventing a beloved dog left behind on the couple's flight from Paris and later telling an older woman friend that her husband killed the dog, when they never had any pet. The young wife, then, is her own Iago, perhaps inventing—simply in order to torment her husband—this "brute of a man," a seller of hair lotions, with whom she spent several nights after she and her husband were temporarily separated, or perhaps actually indulging in some rough sex with the uncouth stranger.

Although it is perfectly natural for a writer as steeped in literature as Nabokov to build his fiction on a literary allusion, the procedure has been adopted by many novelists and is hardly an indication that the focus on literature somehow carries the writer away from the world of experience outside literature. Fielding makes the Joseph story in Genesis central to *Joseph Andrews*; Joyce famously organizes the episodes of *Ulysses* as parallels to episodes in the *Odyssey*; Faulkner uses the biblical story of Absalom's rebellion as a prism through which to see the catastrophic history of the American South. Yet the framework of allusion in no way detracts from the aim of each of these

novels to provide a compelling representation of a particular time and place in all its ramified network of social relations and historical contexts. Some might regard the deployment of allusion as an instance of Nabokov's fondness for "codes," but as I am suggesting, it is a characteristic move not only among novelists but in literature as such. The key to the sexual betrayal plot via *Othello* is probably in the tragic hero's words in his last speech that he is "one who has loved not wisely but too well," which is a perfect characterization of the hapless émigré of the story but scarcely a piece of arcane cryptography.

In any case, I suspect that the ultimate breaking point for those who think that Nabokov in certain ways illuminates the real world and those who think he is confined to a literary playground is the response of each group of readers to style in his fiction. For the first group, his style is inventive, amusing, arresting, and at peak moments altogether sublime. For the second group, it is self-regarding, precious, annoying, and anything but a vehicle for engaging us in something like the real world. I shall have more to say about Nabokov's style in the pages that follow, but it may be instructive to look briefly into the operation of style within the restrictive compass of "That in Aleppo Once . . ." A sentence in the second paragraph of the story is a characteristic gesture that is likely to invite a polarized response.

The narrator, having briefly recalled the time when he and V. started out as poets in Russia, both continuing to write in their mother tongue after emigration, goes on to say: "And the sonorous souls of Russian verbs lend a meaning to the wild gesticulation of the trees or to some discarded newspaper sliding and pausing and shuffling again, with abortive flaps and apterous jerks along an endless windswept embankment" (p. 556). The interaction between language and things that is signaled at the beginning of the sentence is a small clue to Nabokov's view of

the world. "Reality"—here those scare quotes he insists on for this term seem appropriate—is not a free-standing entity but is constituted by the words with which we represent it, the words we inevitably live with and with which we build the world around us. A small riot of personification imbues the represented scene here with life: the trees do not formulaically shake or sway in the wind but wildly gesticulate, as the windswept newspaper slides and pauses and shuffles and flaps. The one word here that will give some readers pause and drive others to their dictionaries is "apterous." The *Random House Dictionary* defines it in the following fashion: "wingless, as with some insects." One detects a signature of Nabokov the lepidopterist. It might be objected that it is unreasonable for a writer to introduce a term that few of his readers will know. I don't think such language occurs as often as is thought in Nabokov, but its use here is precisely to the point of his general conception of style: he constantly reaches for the most precise word—for shapes, for colors, for smells, and for much else—and his use of a term of entomological taxonomy (rather than merely "wingless") is the means for giving the metaphor of the wind-driven pieces of newspaper as insects a kind of scientific precision. This is not a moment of great significance in the story just now unfolding, but it is a token of how the defamiliarizing figurative language he uses concretely imparts a striking presence to all sorts of things in the world with which we are acquainted but scarcely notice. In the celebrated characterization of Viktor Shklovsky, one of the leading Russian Formalists, whose heyday coincided with the beginning of Nabokov's career, it exhibits literature's special gift for rescuing the stoniness of the stone from the dullness of automated response. This sort of exuberance of metaphoric inventiveness is often visible in Nabokov's prose, and his delight in exercising it is surely a chief reason for his otherwise slightly surprising enthusiasm for Dickens.

Yet at least as frequently it is a strategic selectiveness, the deployment of a single telling detail, that makes his writing speak to the reality of experience. In this, he may be following Flaubert, the pioneer of the art-novel—one recalls Charles Bovary's mental summary of his first marriage to a considerably older woman, whose "feet in bed were like blocks of ice." The narrator of "That in Aleppo Once . . ." does not offer any detailed description of the young woman he has married, but the following efficient notation perfectly suffices to convey both his adoration of her and his troubled relationship with her: "When I want to imagine her, I have to cling mentally to the tiny brown birthmark on her downy forearm, as one concentrates upon a punctuation mark in an illegible sentence" (p. 557). The focus on the small birthmark and the downy forearm beautifully expresses the desiring lover's enduring attachment to this pretty young woman as well as the sensuality of her presence in his imagination, while the compact simile of the punctuation mark in an illegible sentence makes it painfully clear that she remains an enigma for him. The minute physical detail, moreover, poignantly suggests that he is desperately grasping a fragment of the woman who, like Albertine in Proust, is irretrievably *disparue*, vanished, from his life. This brief sentence is a powerful demonstration of how finely wrought prose can, with the greatest concision, convey the full emotional burden of a character's experience.

Allow me to offer another brief sentence, one in which a mere parenthesis enclosing a small series of objects says all that needs to be said about the protagonist's suffering. The couple have been fleeing by train to Nice in hope of obtaining the necessary visa there and boarding a ship for America. At an intermediate stop, the narrator gets off the train in order to purchase some food. Then disaster strikes: "When a couple of minutes later I came back, the train was gone, and the muddled old man

responsible for the atrocious void that faced me (coal dust glittering in the heat between naked indifferent rails, and a lone piece of orange peel) brutally told me that, anyway, I had no right to get out" (p. 559). This is a moment when Nabokov can be seen as very much in the tradition of realist fiction, much as he might have objected to the affiliation. There are no elaborate figurative maneuvers here, no real verbal pyrotechnics, but the coal dust glittering in the sun, those empty rails, wonderfully characterized as "naked indifferent," coupled with the discarded remnant of a piece of fruit (the antithesis of the edible stuff he was buying for his wife and himself) hauntingly concretize his terrible desolation. His sense of desperation is compounded by "the muddled old man," presumably the food vendor, who appears to have fatally delayed the transaction, telling him that he has no right to leave the country. There are no codes or games here and no signs of self-reflexive fiction, but terrible anguish is expressed. It is a small demonstration of the depth of emotion that is often present in Nabokov's writing, decried as it is by some as coy and cerebral. Two more extended passages from the story should suffice to show its poignant experiential burden.

The separated couple find each other again in Nice, where she tells him about that "brute of a man" to whom she offered herself, and then the two plunge into the bureaucratic labyrinth from which they may or may not extract visas for America. Here is the evocation of that labyrinth:

> So nothing remained but to torture each other, to wait for hours on end in the Prefecture, filling forms, conferring with friends who had already probed the innermost viscera of all visas, pleading with secretaries, and filling forms again, with the result that her lusty and versatile traveling salesman

> became blended in a ghastly mix-up with rat-whiskered snarling officials, rotting bundles of obsolete records, the reek of violet ink, bribes slipped under gangrenous blotting paper, fat flies tickling moist necks with their rapid cold padded feet, new-laid concave photographs of your six subhuman doubles, the tragic eyes and patient politeness of petitioners born in Slutzk, Staridub, or Bobruisk, the funnels and pulleys of the Holy Inquisition, the awful smile of the bald man with the glasses, who had been told that his passport could not be found. (p. 561)

Nabokov himself did not undergo this sort of ordeal in extricating himself from France, and he actually departed by ship with his wife and child from Le Havre, not from Nice. His imagining, however, of the plight of the refugees in the Mediterranean city, including even an oblique indication of the heat in the South during this dire September, is utterly convincing. The wit of the writing is not self-serving but a vehicle for transmitting the anguish of these human figures. Thus, the desperate inspection of old, perhaps expired, visas is a probing of their innermost viscera, like pathologists conducting an autopsy in what may be a doomed effort to uncover the cause of death. The narrator's consciousness of the sexual betrayal by his wife gets all mixed up, as he confesses, with this bureaucratic nightmare. The wife's lover is not only "lusty" but "versatile," a thoroughly Nabokovian turn of wit that suggests that he is, in the poor cuckold's imagination, a man given to athletic sexual variety. The catalog of *fonctionnaires* and their implements at the prefecture, "rat-whiskered snarling officials, rotting bundles of obsolete documents, bribes slipped under gangrenous blotting paper," is devastating, some of it reminiscent of the account of decaying Chancery documents in Dickens's *Bleak House.* The

"gangrenous blotting paper" is still another piece of pointed Nabokovian wit, the repulsive green of the blotting paper represented through an image of disease that reflects the narrator's pervasive sensation of disgust with this place. Another expression of disgust with these sordidly oppressive offices is the fat flies settling on necks sweating in the heat. The photos with "subhuman doubles" are of course passport photos of the protagonist: most of us turn out very badly in such photos, but the narrator in the midst of his ordeal sees himself hyperbolically as "subhuman." The photographs are concave because they are wet from just having been developed and, in the photographic technology of the day, are curling upward. The torture instruments of the Inquisition appear here because the protagonist, in the grip of this hellish bureaucracy, feels that an apparatus of power is diabolically tormenting him. The bald bespectacled man at the end of the passage is an apt concluding touch: his helplessness after the loss of the passport is palpable, and it is a strong indication of how the narrator's desperation, in the fear of being caught in an occupied country that has become a death trap, is shared by a host of others. In sum, every detail is telling, strategically chosen, and strikingly formulated, communicating a memorable sense of the fear and despair of the émigré community—all the stated places of origin are Russian—in this dark time. Nabokov the realist is on full display.

For my final example, I would like to offer a more modestly executed but nevertheless equally poignant moment. The narrator has at last obtained visas and has come with his wife to Marseille, where they are about to begin the voyage, so he imagines, to America. Armed with the tickets for the ship, he mounts the stairs (of course there is no elevator) to their hotel room. When he opens the door, this is what he finds:

> I saw a rose in a glass on a table—the sugar pink of its obvious beauty, the parasitic air bubbles clinging to its stem. Her two spare dresses were gone, her comb was gone, her checkered coat was gone, and so was the mauve hairband with a mauve bow that had been her hat. There was no note pinned to the pillow, nothing at all in the room to enlighten me, for of course the rose was merely what French rhymesters call *une cheville.* (p. 562)

There are no elaborate stylistic maneuvers in the prose, and the closest the passage comes to figuration is the "parasitic" clinging of the air bubbles to the stem of the rose. Everything is enacted through the writer's shrewd choice of concrete details. The empty wardrobe speaks for itself, while the fact that the young woman has only two spare dresses reflects the poverty she shares with her distraught husband. The choice of "mauve" for the bluish purple of the hairband and bow is in keeping with the keenly visual Nabokov's general commitment to use precisely nuanced terms for colors—it is integral, he asserted more than once, to seeing the world in all its rich particularity. The wife's adopting a hairband and bow in lieu of a hat in an era when proper women wore hats—sometimes extravagant ones—whenever they dressed up might be another reflection of her poverty, or perhaps a small sartorial indication of her unfettered ways. Finally, there is that French term at the end. Like "apterous" at the beginning of the story, it is likely to annoy some readers, who may conceive it as a token of Nabokov's cultural elitism, for, after all, few will know what it means. Let me propose that the unfamiliar term serves both a mimetic and a thematic purpose. What it means in French is a hackneyed word or phrase plugged into a poem simply in order to make a

rhyme (like "eyes" and "skies" in English). The narrator, we should remember, is a poet, and he surely has been immersed in French poetry and its terminology, probably since his early years in Russia and obviously after living in France after emigration. It is thus quite plausible that a person with this sort of background would invoke such a term, and not necessarily as an affectation. But the term also suggests the tricky ground that his story is treading between literary cliché and believable experience, which tends to be true of much fiction, as Nabokov is keenly aware, here and throughout his writing. The rose in water, soon to fade, is the only detail in the scene that is not an absence—that brief catalog of the wife's scant belongings which have now vanished. It shows the reader a rather paltry, sad image of beauty in the bleak hotel room and of beauty's transience, and as the single present detail in a roomful of absences it makes the scene sadly real. Yet it also looks suspiciously like a cliché, and the poet-narrator is quite aware of this, putting it down as *une cheville,* even if it was actually there at the site of his abandonment.

It may be objected that this brief story is by no means typical of Nabokov. It contains no extended passages of bravura writing; there is no flaunting of the literary artifice of the fiction, no signature butterflies, no teasing hints of the author's presence within the fiction (apart from the minimal indication that the addressee of the story shares an initial with him); and, except for the single allusion to *Othello,* there is no elaborate allusive network of the sort we will be following in several of the major novels. Yet I think "That in Aleppo Once . . ." is instructive in regard to an underlying impulse in Nabokov's writing. Although he repeatedly shows himself conscious of the multiple ways in which fiction constitutes worlds through sheer invention, deploying the technical procedures, the images, the

narrative situations of antecedent literature, and though he very often delights in playing with the necessary artifice of fiction, he remains, as this story should indicate, deeply concerned with representing humanity in the toils of emotional experience and moral dilemmas, struggling with relationships, constricted by the harsh vise of historical circumstance. He is in this way more deeply anchored in the great tradition of the novel than is often thought. The flaunted artifice of his novels, the codes and complicated games he deploys in them, are not an impediment to this representational enterprise but among the principal means through which he realizes it, in concert with the fine attention to place and concrete detail that we have seen in this story. Through the chapters that follow, I shall try to show how self-reflexivity and realism work together in some of his major works.

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