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Nabokov's Cosmic Synchronization and "Something Else"

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Nabokov Studies, 1 (1994), 155-77. J. B. SISSON (Edina, MN, U.S.A.; NABOKOV'S COSMIC SYNCHRONIZATION AND "SOMETHING ELSE" Central to his aesthetic and to an understanding of his work is the concept that Nabokov labels "cosmic synchronization."¹ This concept is a formulation of the posited desire of the artist to apprehend the entire universe by an awareness expanding rapidly outward from the artist's consciousness and the part of the world immediately present in order to involve into a grand unity as much distant activity as is coherently possible. This process ideally occurs so rapidly as to create an effect of instantaneity, but of course in practice the artist who must work with temporal sequences, can construct only a suggestive simulation of such an effect. Nabokov's oeuvre develops certain devices for this increasing comprehensive of unified vision, from the three relatively simple devices of the catalogue of remote activity, the juxtaposition of contrasting images, and the metaphor of metamorphosis, to, in the later novels, the two

significant but unusual devices of the fusion of the apparent contradictions of alternative realities, in *Pale Fire* (1962), and the incorporation of increasingly complex other worlds, in *Ada* (1969), *Transparent Things* (1972), and *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974). In this discussion I shall consider cosmic synchronization in some of Nabokov's earlier works, with an emphasis upon the first three devices enumerated above and upon the relationships of cosmic synchronization with Nabokov's belief in the limitless scope of love and with his frequent indications of a world of phenomena inaccessible to everyday perception. All these devices and themes are blended by Nabokov in his construction of literary models that stimulate in his reader an awareness of the process of cosmic synchronization, a pleasurable experience affording bliss. The experience of cosmic synchronization corresponds to the illumination that is the third and final phase of Christian mysticism, or, more precisely, since Nabokov excludes a Christian orientation, the experience of cosmic synchronization corresponds roughly to the secular and spontaneous ecstasy of universal oneness described by the psychologist 1. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Putnam, 1966), p. 218. 156 Nabokov Studies Richard Maurice Bucke in *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901). And throughout Nabokov's work appear the principal features of the mystic experience as categorized by Arthur J. Deikman: "(a) intense realness, (b) unusual sensations, (c) unity, (d) ineffability, and (e) trans-sensate phenomena."² Page Stegner has suggested that Nabokov "might dislike being called a mystic,"³ but many of Nabokov's effects are similar to those of mysticism, and when, for example, his narrator Hermann, in *Despair* (1936), scoffs at Dostoevsky's "mystical trimming,"⁴ the rejection is not of mysticism itself but of its superficial imposition. But Nabokov's mystical correspondences may be offered only as approximations, because Nabokov shows no inclination to analyze or explain cosmic synchronization beyond a brief and suggestive definition in his autobiography *Conclusive Evidence* (1951) and its revision, *Speak, Memory* (1966). One may also guess, for example, that Nabokov's experiences with cosmic synchronization began with the fevers of his childhood illnesses, described in chapter 2 of *Speak, Memory*. Instead of analyzing the experience of cosmic synchronization, Nabokov seems intent upon creating in his reader an aesthetic simulation of this experience. When in *Speak, Memory* Nabokov describes the circumstances of the composition of his first poem, in 1914, he asserts that, in a sense, all poetry is positional: to try to express one's position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness, is an immemorial urge. The arms of consciousness reach out and grope, and the longer they are the better. Tentacles, not wings, are Apollo's natural members. Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical friend of mine, in later years, used to say that while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time. Lost in thought, he taps his knee with his wandlike pencil, and at the same instant a car (New York license plate) passes along the road, a child bangs the screen door of a neighboring porch, an old man yawns in a misty Turkestan...

J. B. SISSON (Edina, MN, U.S.A.)

NABOKOV'S COSMIC SYNCHRONIZATION AND "SOMETHING ELSE"

Central to his aesthetic and to an understanding of his work is the concept that Nabokov labels "cosmic synchronization."¹ This concept is a formulation of the posited desire of the artist to apprehend the entire universe by an awareness expanding rapidly outward from the artist's consciousness and the part of the world immediately present in order to involve into a grand unity as much distant activity as is coherently possible. This process ideally occurs so rapidly as to create an effect of instantaneity, but of course in practice the artist, who must work with temporal sequences, can construct only a suggestive simulation of such an effect. Nabokov's oeuvre develops certain devices for this increasing comprehensiveness of unified vision, from the three relatively simple devices of the catalogue of remote activity, the juxtaposition of contrasting images, and the metaphor of metamorphosis, to, in the later novels, the two significant but unusual devices of the fusion of the apparent contradictions of alternative realities, in *Pale Fire* (1962), and the incorporation of increasingly complex other worlds. In *Invitation to a Beheading* (1969), *Invitation to a Wedding* (1972), and *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974). In this discussion I shall consider cosmic synchronization in some of Nabokov's earlier works, with an emphasis upon the first three devices enumerated above and upon the relationships of cosmic synchronization with Nabokov's belief in the limitless scope of love and with his frequent indications of a world of phenomena inaccessible to everyday perception. All these devices and themes are blended by Nabokov in his construction of literary models that stimulate in his reader an awareness of the process of cosmic synchronization, a pleasurable experience affording bliss.

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1. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Putnam, 1966), p. 218.





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