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THE GIST OF MASKS:  
NOTES ON KINBOTE'S CHRISTIANITY  
AND NABOKOV'S AUTHORIAL KENOSIS

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*How much more intelligent it is—even from a proud infidel's point of view!—to accept God's Presence—a faint phosphorescence at first, a pale light in the dimness of bodily life, and a dazzling radiance after it.*

CHARLES KINBOTE  
Note to line 549 of  
John Shade's 'Pale Fire'

*Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.*

OSCAR WILDE  
'The Critic as Artist',  
from *Intentions*<sup>1</sup>

***Introduction***

**K**inbote is not Nabokov. Even when scholars determine that Kinbote is the true author of the internal text of *Pale Fire*, such theories do nothing to challenge the common refrain: *Kinbote is not Nabokov*. But does Shade resemble Nabokov any more than Kinbote? Of course, no reader of *Pale Fire* thinks that Shade is Nabokov's identical double. Yet the mere fact of some perceived pressure to clarify the resounding dissonance between Kinbote and Nabokov betrays the uncritical assumption of a more fundamental authorial analogy linking Shade to Nabokov. This is unhelpful. Overstating Nabokov's difference from Kinbote impedes inquiry into the real resonances that link them together in ways that, at times, are more intimate than the ones linking Shade with Nabokov. Not only this, but arguments about the identity of

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, *Intentions*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, vol. 4, *Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, the Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy, 71–228 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 185.

Nabokov's better ressembler do little to form better readers of *Pale Fire*, let alone narrow the distance separating us from the ever-receding identity(s) of the novel's internal author(s). A more fruitful method involves taking up Zoran Kuzmanovich's invitation to chart the moments wherein Nabokov may be understood as suffering an aesthetic 'fracturing of identity' and 'emptying of the self', wherein he reflects, refracts, and repeats aspects of his authorial identity across his novels and in his characters.<sup>2</sup> This article thus calls for a reconsideration of the nature of Kinbote's difference from Nabokov, and argues that Kinbote's identity as Nabokov's opposite or negative image is insufficiently negative. To this end, this article proffers a brief cartography of moments when Kinbote's voice merges not only with those of Nabokov's beloved Adam Krug (*Bend Sinister*) and Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev (*The Gift*), but with Nabokov's autobiographical voice, and suggests that Nabokov gifts to Kinbote aspects at the core of his private 'optimysticism' (*RLSK* 138). What these shared aspects reveal is a more intimate, if also more apophatic identification between author and character, as the two come together in a mutual summoning of words and images that gesture to the ultimate impotency of language and thought before that which transcends every abstraction.

### ***KINBOTE AND CHRISTIANITY***

Kinbote's Christianity has received minimal sustained critical attention. Even in such works as Brian Boyd's *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery*, which considers at great length the ways that Shade influences Kinbote's commentary, Kinbote's faith does not feature as a significant aspect either of the novel or of Kinbote's unique contribution to the various 'metaphysical' readings of the novel.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, while Priscilla Meyer considers some of Nabokov's theological sources throughout her *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden: Vladimir Nabokov's 'Pale Fire'*, her study offers little by way of an examination of the theological relevance of these sources, aspects which would seem to matter most to Kinbote.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it is only the history

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<sup>2</sup> Zoran Kuzmanovich, "'Just as it was, or perhaps a little more perfect": Notes on Nabokov's Sources', *Nabokov Studies* 7 (2002/2003): 13–32, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Priscilla Meyer, *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden: Vladimir Nabokov's 'Pale Fire'* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 80, is correct to observe that 'the mist that Nabokov says clouds his vision of the afterlife, the pale fire and shades that provide the chiaroscuro of his novel, are closer to Kinbote's language and vision than to the American pragmatism of the Institute for the Hereafter that Shade attends, though Shade's rejection of the dogma and ritual of any church is closer to Nabokov's'.

of these texts, conceived solely as contributions to the vast enterprise of literature, bracketed thus from their metaphysical, religious, or theological commitments, that exercises any bearing on fitting interpretations of the novel. Against this general trend, Kinbote's faith is worthy of consideration in its own right. Indeed, Kinbote's Christianity enriches our understanding of *Pale Fire*'s subthematic interest in theology and religion, as well as Kinbote's location amid Nabokov's fractured authorial identity.

### ***Zemblan Christianity***

We know from various notes throughout Kinbote's commentary that, during his Appalachian exile from Zembla, Kinbote identifies as broadly American Episcopalian. The Episcopal Church (TEC), an American expression of the Anglican Communion, seems the most suitable match to Kinbote's 'Zemblan brand of Protestantism' (C549; cf. C802, 49).<sup>5</sup> Kinbote nevertheless admits that Zemblan Protestantism 'has some magnificent peculiarities of its own' and seems to have experienced 'The Reformation' (C549) in a way unique unto itself. However, just as the Reformation from which Anglicanism sprang is generally considered part of the Protestant Reformation yet was at the same time sufficiently unique to earn the title of the English Reformation, Zemblan Protestantism, so Kinbote tells us, remains 'rather closely related to the "higher" churches of the Anglican Communion' (C549).

Kinbote speaks often of the 'high' (C957) liturgy of his Zemblan church. Its liturgy is adorned with priestly vestments and liturgical candles, 'boy choirs' sing 'rich music' (C549), and the sacrament of Confession is administered. Moreover, that Kinbote does not speak antagonistically about Sybil Shade's associations with Roman Catholicism in her early youth, and that he also laments her having weaned John away from the Episcopal Church and 'from all forms of sacramental worship' (C549), suggests that Kinbote's peculiar brand of Anglicanism is a Zemblan pastiche of Anglo-Catholicism.

Often celebrating Mass according to the Roman Catholic Rite, Anglo-Catholicism is a movement within Anglicanism that affirms all Roman Catholic doctrine and practice, with the sole exception of papal supremacy, according to which the Pope is seen rather as the chief bishop. While not necessarily with great intimacy, Nabokov surely gained familiarity with various aspects

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<sup>5</sup> All citations from *Pale Fire* are given in abbreviated form, where C=Commentary, F=Foreword, I=Index and P=Poem.

of Anglo-Catholicism during his undergraduate years at Trinity College, Cambridge (1919–1922), when chapel attendance remained mandatory—perhaps at the parishes of Little St Mary’s and St Clements.<sup>6</sup> Kinbote’s particularly enigmatic parenthetical aside, which he includes as he mentions praying in ‘two different churches (on either side, as it were, of my Zemblan denomination, not represented in New Wye)’ (C802; cf. C49, 549), supports the theory that Zemblan Christianity is Anglo-Catholicism made strange, for the two churches on ‘either side’ of his Zemblan denomination must be The Episcopal Church and Roman Catholicism.

It remains tempting, nevertheless, to identify semblances of Eastern Orthodoxy in Kinbote’s Zemblan Christianity. However, to speak of denominations on both sides of Orthodoxy is almost nonsensical, as there exists no synthesis between Orthodoxy and another church in a way similar to the attempted synthesis of Protestantism (broadly understood) and Catholicism purportedly achieved by Anglo-Catholicism. Moreover, despite his St. Petersburg upbringing, Nabokov spent his childhood attending eastern churches (with a devotional fervour inversely proportional to his aesthetic pleasure).<sup>7</sup>

Kinbote’s comment to line 49 is particularly interesting in this regard. There, Kinbote recalls a letter he received from Queen Disa on 6 April 1959, in which she quotes a quatrain from Shade’s poem, ‘The Sacred Tree’. The poem appears in Shade’s collection of short poems, *Hebe’s Cup*:

The ginkgo leaf, in golden hue, when shed,  
A muscat grape,  
Is an old-fashioned butterfly, ill-spread,

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<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Alison Milbank for pointing this out to me.

<sup>7</sup> I have avoided capitalisation on this point because there seems to be some confusion throughout the current scholarship on Nabokov and faith. According to Sergei Davydov, ‘Faith’, in David M. Bethea and Siggy Frank (eds.), *Vladimir Nabokov in Context*, 219–27 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 220, Nabokov ‘was baptised according to Eastern Orthodox rites’, though Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 42, mentions only a christening, sans any denominational detail. Davydov, ‘Faith’, 220, also claims that Nabokov’s mother was ‘of a sectarian (Old Believer) background’ and ‘dislike[d] . . . the atmosphere of the Russian Orthodox Church’. To support this claim, Davydov cites from the same paragraph of *Speak, Memory* where Nabokov recalls his mother’s ‘healthy distaste for the ritual of the *Greek Catholic Church*’ (SM 387, emphasis added), an amalgam of churches, and so of liturgical rites and customs, originally belonging to the Eastern Orthodox Church, but which, due to political and cultural influences and pressures, came to recognise the authority of the Bishop of Rome.

In shape. (C49)

Given the clear resurrection motif throughout this quatrain, as well as the theme of eternal youth (which naturally accompanies any mention of Hebe's cup), it stands to reason that the date upon which Kinbote received the letter from Disa, which she had to have written the week prior, is significant.

Falling on a Monday, 6 April 1959 was the second Monday after Easter 1959 in Western churches, a fact of which Kinbote is surely aware. On the one hand, if the Zemblan church follows Western Christianity's adoption of the Gregorian calendar, it is likely that the theme of resurrection figures substantially throughout Disa's letter to Kinbote, and therefore that her quotation from Shade's collection, *Hebe's Cup*, is not incidental, but rather aids her meditations upon the resurrection during Eastertide. Indeed, the quatrain which Disa quotes in her letter recalls Dante's conjunction of butterflies and the resurrection in *Purgatorio* 10.124–29:

Do you not recognize that you are worms  
born to become angelic butterflies  
that fly to justice with no veil between?  
Why is it that your thoughts float up so high?  
You, with your faults, are little more than grubs,  
chrysalides (no more!) that lack full form!<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, if, as throughout the Orthodox church, the Zemblan church follows the Julian calendar (which lags behind the Gregorian by thirteen days), the Easter motif remains nonetheless. Accordingly, Disa's letter would fall under the veil of annunciation. (In 1959, Orthodox churches celebrated Easter on 3 May N.S./20 April O.S.) In the Old Style, 6 April (the date Kinbote receives Disa's letter) is 24 March, the Eve of the Annunciation. According to ancient Christian tradition, as evidenced by Jacobus de Voragine's compilation of brief hagiographies, *The Golden Legend* (1275/1470), the feast of the Annunciation (the immovable feast of 25 March, which anticipates Christmas by nine months) is also the date of the crucifixion (as well as a slew

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<sup>8</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio* 10.124–29, in *The Divine Comedy: Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2012).

of other significant moments throughout biblical history), thereby sealing an intimate connection between the feast of the Annunciation and Easter.<sup>9</sup>

Now, I very much doubt that it is possible to determine with any degree of respectable certainty which calendar the Zemblan church follows. Nevertheless, it is clear that Disa's letter abides within the terroir of the ecclesiastical calendar. Should it be determined that the Zemblan church follows the Julian calendar, Disa's letter—which was received Monday 6 April N.S./24 March O.S. 1959 (and therefore could not have been written any later than Friday 3 April N.S./21 March O.S.)—was written in anticipation of the Orthodox feast of the Annunciation. On the other hand, if the Zemblan church follows the Western church's adoption of the Gregorian calendar, Disa wrote the letter during the first week of Eastertide. Whichever is the case, *Pale Fire* rewards readers sufficiently familiar with the broad swathes of the Christian theological tradition as well as the ecclesiastical calendar.<sup>10</sup>

Kinbote's elaboration upon the mode of Confession in his childhood church also does little to distinguish between Western and Eastern identity. Auricular confession is a staple of Orthodox, High Anglican, as well as Roman and Eastern Catholic sacramentality. That in the Zemblan church Confession takes place (in all its vagueness) 'in a richly ornamented recess' recalls both the confessional of Catholicism and the *analogion* and *iconostasis* of Orthodoxy; though it remains

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<sup>9</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, 'The Feast of the Annunciation or Salutation of the Angel Gabriel to our Lady', in *The Golden Legend: Lives of the Saints*, vol. 1, trans. William Caxton, 577–81 (London: Catholic Way, 2015), 579–80. According to the *Legend*, 25 March is also the date of the creation and fall of Adam, Abel's murder, Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine to God, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, and the beheading of John the Baptist. It is worth noting in this regard that throughout much of pre-modern Europe, 25 March marked the beginning of the new year. Albeit with great dullness, this is reflected in the structuring of the British fiscal year, which restarts 6 April. When England transitioned from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian in 1752, there was an eleven-day discrepancy between the two calendars, such that 25 March O.S. became 5 April N.S. An additional, twelfth day was added, however, as a result of the *Calendar (New Style) Act of 1750*, 24 Geo 2, c. 1., which, in addition to moving the beginning of the civil year from 25 March to 1 January, states that the tax year shall run 'from' 25 March, which really means that the tax year *begins* on 26 March O.S./6 April N.S.

<sup>10</sup> In his note to line 549, Kinbote recounts a conversation he had with Shade on 23 June about religion. The religious significance of this date has not been noted. 23 June is St John's Eve, the forefeast of John the Baptist. Intimately associated with Midsummer throughout European as well as Slavic countries, St John's Day (otherwise known as Kupala Night or Ivan-Kupala throughout Slavic countries) is often celebrated the night before. The most common form of celebration involves lighting bonfires or torches as an emblem of St John the Baptist, whom Jesus calls 'a burning and shining lamp' (John 5.35 NRSV). This is significant. For not only does the saintly John beg the question of Shade's (pseudo-)saintly identity, but Kinbote seems aware of the religious identity of this date as he, in an ultimately metafictional gesture towards the title of Shade's poem as well as Nabokov's novel, says, 'How much more intelligent it is—even from a proud infidel's point of view!—to accept God's Presence—a faint phosphorescence at first, a pale light in the dimness of bodily life, and a dazzling radiance after it?' (C549). Moreover, note that Kinbote plays with the name of Shade's poem a whole nine days before Shade would begin writing his poem, the title of which he would not receive for another twenty-eight days, on 21 July.

peculiar that, as in the Orthodox church, the confessor should stand rather than kneel. Nevertheless, the ‘purple-black sleeve’ that Kinbote had feared to stain with the dripping wax of the taper he had held as confessor is reminiscent of the violet stole worn by Catholic priests when hearing the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Matters become somewhat clearer when one steps back from the novel to consider Nabokov’s *very* peculiar churchly activity during his years teaching undergraduate literature courses at Cornell. Most peculiar in this regard is an observation by Peter Khan, one of Nabokov’s colleagues at Cornell. Khan recalls that, after being approached by Nabokov about designing a new stained-glass window for St. John’s Episcopal Church (TEC) in downtown Ithaca, Nabokov proceeded to recite ‘fifty-five sainted Johns’, apparently untroubled by Khan’s implicit question, ‘*which* St. John?’. Khan recalls,

He told about the main saints, and the minor saints, and the banished saints, and the Popes that were saints, and so on and so on. Actually we had two windows in that little chapel, and there are two major St. Johns. One of them was apparently St. John the Baptist, and the other was St. John the Evangelist. And Nabokov knew all the attributes, and the symbols that are associated with the two saints.<sup>11</sup>

The foregoing thus suggests that where the Eastern Christianity of Nabokov’s youth grounds pre-Reformation Zemblan Christianity, St. John’s inspired the music, choir, and vestments typical of post-Reformation Zemblan Protestantism.

**‘. . . that we may die with him’<sup>12</sup>: Providence, Participation, and the Theatre of the World**

Kinbote is adamant to remain orthodox in his theological metaphysics; and yet, in spite of his attempts to remain within the limits of Zemblan Christian orthodoxy, the topic of suicide keeps Kinbote forever upon the cusp of unorthodoxy, even as his suicidal temptations are the obverse of a nihilistic boredom or exasperation with the world. Rather, Kinbote’s reflections upon the ‘spiritual situation’ of suicide are rooted in an epistemology and metaphysics of theological hope and ecstasy: ‘The more lucid and overwhelming one’s belief in Providence, the greater the

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in George Gibian and Stephen Jan Parker (eds.), *The Achievements of Vladimir Nabokov: Essays, Studies, Reminiscences, and Stories from the Cornell Nabokov Festival* (Ithaca: Centre for International Studies, Cornell University Press, 1984), 229. Cf. Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 291.

<sup>12</sup> John 11.16.

temptation to get it over with, this business of life' (C493). Moreover, it is not in spite but rather because of Kinbote's reverential focus upon the allure of what follows upon 'the warm bath of physical dissolution', namely, 'merging in God' (C493), that Kinbote is moved to muse upon religion, theology, and the afterlife.

Kinbote's suicidal temptations are founded upon apt reflections on the theological analogue to the post-mortem variation of the problem of the one and the many. This problem, voiced most pointedly in *Pnin*, constitutes one of Nabokov's foremost eschatological concerns:

One of the main characteristics of life is discreteness. Unless a film of a flesh envelops us, we die. Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is the space-traveler's helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego. (310)

In his note to line 493, Kinbote echoes this sentiment as he imaginatively forecasts human's life temporal and ontological end (*telos*). Note, also, the erotic language Kinbote deploys to describe not the act of suicide, but its result: something broadly comparable to the Christian doctrine of *theōsis*, whereby the soul by grace comes to participate in God:

Ecstatically one forefeels [*sic.*] the vastness of the Divine Embrace enfolding one's liberated spirit, the warm bath of physical dissolution, the universal unknown engulfing the minuscule unknown that had been the only real part of one's temporary personality.

When the soul adores Him Who guides it through mortal life, when it distinguishes His sign at every turn of the trail, painted on the boulder and notched in the fir trunk, when every page in the book of one's personal fate bears His watermark, how can one doubt that He will also preserve us through all eternity?

So what can stop one from effecting the transition? What can help us to resist the intolerable temptation? What can prevent us from yielding to the burning desire for merging in God? (C493)

The three central aspects of Kinbote's suicidal temptations—ecstasy, merging, and enflamed desire—call to mind the *exitus-reditus* (procession and return) structure of Christian



Neoplatonic metaphysics: God's literally ecstatic procession out of Godself in the act of creation, and creation's yearning (*erōs*) for its return to its origin in God.<sup>13</sup> The end of this ultimately spiral movement is *theōsis*: the participation (or 'merging', as Kinbote has it) of the individual in God.<sup>14</sup> *Theōsis* is an ineluctably hierarchical and providential affair, though, against the general trend of contemporary ideology, such hierarchy is grounded upon an ontology not of violence, but gift.

*Theōsis* and providence are ineluctably intertwined around the celestial hierarchy. Writing in the sixth-century under the pseudonym Dionysius the Areopagite (whom Paul is recorded evangelising in Acts 17.34), the author of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* states that the Seraphim (Heb., lit. burning ones) are the first to contemplate the dazzling radiance of the divine.<sup>15</sup> The highest of the hierarchies, the Seraphim communicate the flame of their *erōs* to the hierarchies down the line, seeking the 'vigorous assimilation and revelation of the subordinate, as giving new life and rekindling them to the same heat . . . the divine imitation of the Divine Likeness'.<sup>16</sup> They are that hierarchy, which is to say mediator of providence and *theōsis*, who by their mediatory power make each thing a pale fire of the divine flame: 'a faint phosphorescence at first, a pale light in the

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<sup>13</sup> 'The very Author of all things, by the beautiful and good love of everything, through an overflowing of His loving goodness, becomes out of Himself, by His providences for all existing things, and is, as it were, cozened by goodness and affection and love, and is led down from the Eminence above all, and surpassing all, to being in all, as befits an extatic [*sic.*] superessential power centred in Himself', Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *On Divine Names*, in *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, vol. 1, trans. John Parker (London: James Parker & Co., 1897), 4.13.

<sup>14</sup> Observe that while Kinbote speaks of 'merging in God', this merging must accommodate his trust that his personality will be 'preserve[d]' in God 'through all eternity'. Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, 11.3: 'And the perfect Peace seeks to guard the idiosyncrasy of each unmoved and unconfused, by its peace-giving forethought, preserving everything unmoved and unconfused, both as regards themselves and each other, and establishes all things by a stable and unswerving power, towards their own peace and immobility.'

<sup>15</sup> A controversial theological figure, pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite has exercised immeasurable influence upon Western and Eastern Christianity alike. In his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas cites the Areopagite only less than Aristotle. Dante, too, was intimately familiar with Dionysius' writings, mentioning them throughout the *Commedia* as well as to his patron, Cangrande della Scala (also Nabokov's direct ancestor), in a letter explaining how the *Commedia* is to be read, as well as the Dionysian metaphysics underwriting it. On pseudo-Dionysius' ancient and modern readers, as well as the controversies surrounding the 'pseudo-' that modern interpreters have appended to the Areopagite, see Charles M. Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: 'No Longer I'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 11–40.

<sup>16</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Heavenly Hierarchy*, in *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, vol. 2, trans. John Parker (London: James Parker & Co., 1899), 7.1, 2. Compare the more recent translation by Colm Luibheid, in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. Paul Rorem, trans. Colm Luibheid, 143–91 (New York: Paulist Press, 1987): 'For the designation seraphim really teaches this—a perennial circling around the divine things, penetrating warmth, the overflowing heat of a movement which never falters and never fails, a capacity to stamp their own image on subordinates by arousing and uplifting in them too a like flame, the same warmth . . . The aim of every hierarchy is always to imitate God so as to take on his form, that the task of every hierarchy is to receive and to pass on undiluted purification, the divine light, and the understanding which brings perfection.'

dimness of bodily life, and a dazzling radiance after’, as Kinbote has it (C549). So writes the Areopagite:

The purpose, then, of Hierarchy is the assimilation and union, as far as attainable, with God . . . by looking unflinchingly to His most Divine comeliness, and copying, as far as possible, and by perfecting its own followers as Divine images, mirrors most luminous and without flaw, receptive of the primal light and the supremely Divine ray, and devoutly filled with the entrusted radiance, and again, spreading this radiance ungrudgingly to those after it, in accordance with the supremely Divine regulations.<sup>17</sup>

This is the movement of providence, by which all things, ordered by a final cause, are moved towards their final cause: the divine mind.<sup>18</sup> And in the return movement of providence, the end of which is *theōsis*, the soul is ushered ever more intimately into ‘God’s Presence’, where what was perceived as a ‘pale light’ (C549) seen in this life as in ‘a glass, darkly’ (1 Cor 13.12)<sup>19</sup> will be revealed as ‘a dazzling radiance after it’ (C549)—from pale fire to ‘glowing heat’, as Origen of Alexandria (c.185–c.254) had it.<sup>20</sup> Even ‘a proud infidel’ (C549) would affirm it, so says Kinbote—or Nabokov, who has donned Kinbote’s face as a mask—with a wink. Moreover, by characterising his desire for ‘merging in God’ as a ‘burning desire’, Kinbote betrays Nabokov’s familiarity with the characteristics associated with the highest celestial hierarchy, as well as the traditional association of *erōs* with *theōsis* and providence throughout the Eastern Christian tradition.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Heavenly Hierarchy*, 3.2.

<sup>18</sup> ‘It is necessary that the type of the order of things towards their end should pre-exist in the divine mind: and the type of things ordered towards an end is, properly speaking, providence’, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), 1a.22.1.*responsio*. ‘All things, whether made by Him immediately, or by means of secondary causes, are ordered to God as to their end’, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 5 vols., trans. and ed. Anton C. Pegis, et. al. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1975), 3.17.8. See also Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a.44.4.ad 4; Pseudo-Dionysius, *Heavenly Hierarchy*, 3.2.

<sup>19</sup> Against the 1,000-line thesis, Kinbote notes Prof. Hurley’s belief that Shade did not foresee the final form of his poem: ‘None can say how long John Shade planned his poem to be, but it is not improbable that what he left represents only a small fraction of the composition he saw in a glass, darkly’ (Foreword).

<sup>20</sup> See Origen of Alexandria, *On First Principles*, 2 vols., trans. and ed. John Behr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.6.6.

<sup>21</sup> Writing under the pseudonym V. Sirin, Nabokov published in 1923 an as yet untranslated ten-poem cycle called ‘*Angely*’ (‘Angels’), containing one poem corresponding to each of the angelic hierarchies.

Manic as he is, Kinbote's suicidal temptations are not only rooted in a theologically coherent system, but this system elicits and substantiates his trust that, in the words of Adam Krug's metaliterary author-deity, even in suicide 'he is in good hands . . . there is nothing to fear' (*BS* 169). For if the soul or consciousness subsists beyond death, is not death 'but a question of style' (*BS* 169)? And however ridiculous Kinbote's trust may appear, it remains profound. For while Nabokov's gloss on Krug's death as 'but a question of style' refers to the metaliterary sleight of hand by which Krug returns 'unto the bosom of his maker' (*BS* 169), one cannot dismiss the metaphysical and distinctly theological significance of Krug's return as well as the illumination it sheds upon Kinbote's suicidal temptations.<sup>22</sup> In the first place, 'the bosom of his maker' (*BS* 169) is a clear reference to 'Abraham's bosom' (Luke 16.22), where the blessed dead peacefully remain, awaiting final judgement. Moreover, the analogy between Krug's metaliterary return to his author and the soul's return to God forms a covert gesture towards the analogy of metafiction and metaphysics that Nabokov seeks to express as he deploys the terms of self-conscious literature to express metaphysical and often theological ideas.

Reorienting the hope of *theōsis* as the suicidal temptation *par excellence*, Kinbote reinforces the common Nabokovian trope of the otherworldly—and its analogue, the metaliterary—as the realm of both mania and transcendence. This is likely the result of a grotesquely literal reading of St. Paul's words to the Philippians: 'For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain . . . My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better' (1.21, 23). Kinbote's persistent suicidal thoughts may also be an expression of a Christian *memento mori*—a perpetual calling to mind of one's mortality, of the Christian's call to die to self, and of the victory over death that has taken place in the death and resurrection of Christ, in which the believer, too,

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<sup>22</sup> The metafictional dismantling of Krug's world, which *Bend Sinister's* narrator initiates by 'slid[ing] towards him along an inclined beam of pale light' (233), is inescapably theological, indebted as it is to Athanasius of Alexandria's (c.295–373) hagiography of St. Antony of Egypt (c.251–356). Recounting Antony's temptations, Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, in *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, trans. Robert C. Gregg, 29–100 (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), §10, writes: 'In this circumstance also the Lord did not forget the wrestling of Antony, but came to his aid. For when he looked up he saw the roof being opened, as it seemed, and a certain beam of light descending toward him. Suddenly the demons vanished from view, the pain of his body ceased instantly.' As the hagiographic tradition developed, Athanasius' illiterate saint would receive the gift of literacy in the *Triptych of the Temptation of St. Anthony*, Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1516), oil on panel, 131 x 228 cm, c. 1500; <http://museudearteantiga.pt/collections/european-painting/temptations-of-st-anthony>. Centring his triptych on the faint beam of light evocative of God's presence, Bosch's gift of literacy to the hermit anticipated Gustave Flaubert's revisionist and proto-metafictional novel-cum-play, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, trans. Lafcadio Hearn (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), surely one of Nabokov's as yet unacknowledged sources for *Bend Sinister's* theatrical and metafictional dénouement (see esp. *BS* 238–39).

participates, suffering death and resurrection in baptism, becoming another in the self's place: 'I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2.19–20).<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Kinbote's desire to be with God and to attain greater Christ-likeness defines his suicidal fantasy: the cliff-thrown body plunges closer to earth, 'and the voluptuous *crucifixion*, as you stretch yourself in the growing rush, in the nearing swish, and then your loved body's obliteration in *the Lap of the Lord*' (C493, emphasis added).

Nevertheless, Kinbote maintains sober awareness of 'the terrible sin implicit in self-destruction' (C493). Coupled with his trust in the transcendent beneficence that he believes will cause the soul to perdure post-mortem, Kinbote's awareness and 'fear' (C493) of the judgement awaiting the suicide suggests that Kinbote is countering by parody the vilification of suicide levelled by G. K. Chesterton, whose writings Nabokov 'devoured' in his youth.<sup>24</sup>

Whereas Kinbote hopes that 'we who burrow in filth every day may be forgiven perhaps the one sin that ends all sins' (C493), Chesterton (writing before his conversion to Roman Catholicism) voices the Roman Catholic Church's official position on suicide and draws a drastically opposing view upon Kinbote's premise:

Not only is suicide a sin, it is the sin. It is the ultimate and absolute evil, the refusal to take an interest in existence; the refusal to take the oath of loyalty to life. The man who kills a man, kills a man. The man who kills himself, kills all men; as far as he is concerned he wipes out the world. His act is worse (symbolically considered) than any rape or dynamite outrage. For it destroys all buildings: it insults all women. The thief is satisfied with diamonds; but the suicide is not: that's his crime. He can't be bribed, even by the blazing stones of the Celestial City. The thief compliments the things he steals, if not the owner of them. But the suicide insults everything on earth by not stealing it. He defiles every flower by refusing to live for its sake. There is not a tiny creature in the cosmos at whom his death is not a sneer . . . There is meaning in burying the suicide apart. *The man's crime is different from other crimes—for it makes even crimes impossible.*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> On this, the theme of the 'divine' or 'vertical' double implicit in Paul's 'no longer I', see Stang, *No Longer I*, 153–96; *Our Divine Double* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov*, 166. Cf. Boyd, *Russian Years*, 79.

<sup>25</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 64, emphasis added.

Kinbote and Chesterton's conclusions regarding the damning motivations of suicide could hardly be more antagonistic, especially as Kinbote proves that Chesterton was wrong on one point: no one can deny that the suicide is not satisfied with diamonds, but that is not because he cannot be bribed; in fact, he has been bribed by something far more valuable than diamonds, the value of which may perhaps lessen the abomination, and that is his desire to go into the far country where the self's prison bars cast no shadow. Even so, Kinbote and Chesterton share a univocal premise: suicide is 'the one sin that ends all sins' (C493). 'It makes even crimes impossible', Chesterton avers, and it is the fear of eternal damnation that alone prevents Kinbote from trying *everything* in his power to dissolve in 'the warm bath of physical dissolution' (C493).<sup>26</sup>

Kinbote's sense of providence, his desire to break into 'the universal unknown' (C493), both of which underwrite Kinbote's suicidal temptations, as well as the fear (though not necessarily the ideological foundations of this fear) that ultimately prevents him from killing himself, attests to a covert link between Kinbote and his author. For in his manic *memento mori*, Kinbote non-identically repeats Nabokov's own attempts to peer into the timeless realm beyond consciousness, which he relates in the opening paragraphs of *Speak, Memory*:

Over and over again, my mind has made colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life. That this darkness is caused merely by the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from the free world of timelessness is a belief I gladly share with the most gaudily painted savage. I have journeyed back in thought—with thought hopelessly tapering off as I went—to remote regions where I groped for some secret outlet only to discover that the prison of time is spherical and without exits. *Short of suicide, I have tried everything.* (SM 369–70, emphasis added)

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<sup>26</sup> In an interview with Alfred Appel, Jr. in late September 1966, Nabokov, *SO* 64, emphatically states that Kinbote 'certainly [committed suicide] after putting the last touches to his edition of the poem [on 19 October 1959]'. While this is surely an instance of authorial intrusion, an attempt by Nabokov to assert his control over the text outside the text (i.e., Kinbote's extra-textual suicide), to my knowledge it has not been observed that, by consigning Kinbote to suicide, Nabokov betrays further affinities between *Pale Fire* and *Timon of Athens*, which ends with Timon's probable but by no means certain suicide.

### **REPETITION AND AUTHORIAL KENOSIS**

Further connections between Nabokov and Kinbote remain. The prevalence of such connections between Nabokov and his characters suggests to Kuzmanovich that Nabokov suffers an aesthetic ‘fracturing of identity’ and ‘emptying of the self’ in the act of writing. This authorial kenosis allows Nabokov to link ‘across his works, a set of migrating, overlapping, and evolving themes that at once lead to and spring from *Speak, Memory*, with its infinitely recyclable past testifying to the longing that makes Nabokov’s art both necessary and possible’.<sup>27</sup> In his analysis of this phenomenon, Kuzmanovich follows Gennady Barabtarlo’s conception of what he calls, borrowing a term from evolutionary theory, Nabokov’s ‘noosphere’ (from the Greek *nous*), a postulated sphere of evolutionary development concerned with consciousness and the mind. Barabtarlo writes,

Links among thematic points grow into an ever more intricate web and their intricacy becomes more meaningful as Nabokov’s art gains strength . . . [The] regular reader may reach a stage of study from which Nabokov’s novels, famous especially for their structural rigidity, lose much of their discreteness and gradually become entangled into a larger system, first engaging thematic links between adjacent works, then transmitting them to groups of books, and lastly seeing the entire complex of Nabokov’s lifetime’s work in two languages as an expanse of fiction divided into lots but irrigated by one furrow system of major themes.<sup>28</sup>

Building upon the quotation from *Speak, Memory* that concluded the previous section—wherein Nabokov alludes to his various attempts to peer into the timeless realm beyond consciousness, which in its turn recalls Kinbote’s manic obsession with first and last things and their relation to his suicidal temptations—the following series of passages taken from *The Gift*,

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<sup>27</sup> Kuzmanovich, ‘Notes on Nabokov’s Sources’, 25, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Gennady Barabtarlo, ‘Nabokov’s Trinity (On the Movement of Nabokov’s Themes)’, in Julian W. Connolly (ed.), *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives*, 109–38 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 111.

*Bend Sinister*, and *Speak, Memory* betray moments of real and substantial identification between Nabokov and his characters. In their turn, these correspondences provide a hermeneutic for interpreting those moments throughout *Pale Fire* when Nabokov expresses himself with Kinbote's voice.

Before proceeding to these correspondences, however, it is helpful to observe that both Kuzmanovich's theory of Nabokov's self-fractured authorial identity and Barabtarlo's notion of an irrigated system of migratory themes rely upon an implicit yet undefined poetic—indeed, a metaphysic of repetition extending from yet always returning to *Speak, Memory*. To adapt a phrase from Harold Bloom, it is not biography so much as autobiography which is 'always the prior mode' for Nabokov.<sup>29</sup> This is to say that while *Speak, Memory* arrives at the midpoint of Nabokov's career, the relation between Nabokov's autobiography and those moments throughout his other works wherein he suffers a self-emptying may be conceived in a similar fashion to the poetic of repetition Charles Péguy perceives in the fall of the Bastille and Monet's water lilies—namely, the power to 'repeat the "unrepeatable"', in Gilles Deleuze's analysis.

With respect to this power [to repeat the 'unrepeatable'], repetition interiorizes and thereby reverses itself: as Péguy says, it is not Federation Day which commemorates or represents the fall of the Bastille, but the fall of the Bastille which celebrates and repeats in advance all the Federation Days; or Monet's first water lily which repeats all the others.<sup>30</sup>

In much the same way, neither *Pale Fire* nor any of Nabokov's other works commemorate or re-present *Speak, Memory*, even as they may, at times, give the impression of an 'extreme resemblance or perfect equivalence'.<sup>31</sup> Rather, *Speak, Memory* celebrates and repeats in advance all Nabokov's other fictions. This is because there is in *Speak, Memory* a potency, a *poesis*, a creative element summoning forth, by way of its own anticipation for what has already come in Nabokov's works prior to 1951 and for what will come in its wake, its non-identical repetition in and as those other works.

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<sup>29</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), xxvi.

<sup>30</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 2. See also Charles Péguy, *Clio: Dialogue de l'Histoire et de l'Âme Paienne*, 33rd ed. (Paris: Les Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue Française, 1917), 45, 114.

<sup>31</sup> Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 2.

Precisely as non-identical as opposed to identical repetition, the form of this repetition is gift.<sup>32</sup> Nabokov tells us so, as he recollects:

One night, during a trip abroad, in the fall of 1903, I recall kneeling on my (flattish) pillow at the window of a sleeping car (probably on the long-extinct Mediterranean Train de Luxe, the one whose six cars had the lower part of their body painted in umber and the panels in cream) and seeing with an inexplicable pang, a handful of fabulous lights that beckoned to me from a distant hillside, and then slipped into a pocket of black velvet: diamonds that I later gave away to my characters to alleviate the burden of my wealth. (*SM* 373)

Nabokov's work of memory forms a clear allusion to *Glory's* Martin Edelweiss, who, sitting at campfire, sees 'in the murky, mysterious distance' the shimmering 'diamonds lights of Yalta' (20), and, later, 'during the night journey from Marseille to Switzerland', recognises what he thinks to be 'his beloved lights among the hills . . . even though it was no longer a *train de luxe* but a plain express' (40–41). It is precisely this kind of double repetition that attests to the creative element, 'the originary repetition of the first', to use Conor Cunningham's phrase, that makes of *Speak, Memory* a celebratory repetition of all subsequent iterations of itself.<sup>33</sup>

The lights that Martin sees first in the dark distance and again on a plain express scene may be approached as a kind of dress rehearsal for Nabokov's translation of life into art in *Speak, Memory*. However, as Catherine Pickstock observes, because 'from the outset, every *res* [thing] is already a repetition, we cannot expect to explain a later process in terms of its origin'.<sup>34</sup> Thus, even as *Glory* comes after the personal history that Nabokov refracts in *Speak, Memory*, the obverse is also true from the perspective of art: *Glory* proceeds from the life-turned-art that is *Speak, Memory*. From this perspective, *Speak, Memory*—which is always already a non-identical repetition of

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<sup>32</sup> On repetition, and the concept of non-identical repetition in particular, see Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, in *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. M. G. Piety, 1–81 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); *Repetition and Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); John Milbank, 'The Sublime in Kierkegaard', *Heythrop Journal* 37 (1996): 298–321; *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); 'The Double Glory, Or Paradox Versus Dialectics: On Not Quite Agreeing with Slavoj Žižek', in Creston Davies (ed.), *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, 110–233 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>33</sup> Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology* (London: Routledge, 2002), 202.

<sup>34</sup> Pickstock, *Repetition and Identity*, 118.



Nabokov's life and art—is best conceived as the originary gift of form to what Pickstock might call Nabokov's 'invisible form'.<sup>35</sup>

What *Speak, Memory* is to *Glory* (as well as to Nabokov's other fiction, fore and aft) may be compared to the storming of the Bastille. For with its omnivorous power, the storming of the Bastille consummates all previous skirmishes, battles, and riots as a kind of dress rehearsal for this day which in its anticipatory fulness commemorates every Federation Day. Moreover, like Monet's water lilies, which pullulate by an 'unanalysable compound of the same and the different, in such a way that the same has always become different, and the different forever remains in a certain manner the same', thereby obfuscating the apparent distinction between original and copy and so between identity and repetition—for we cannot say which lily has ontological priority over the others—the movement of Nabokov's works is a trembling, a vibrato oscillating ever so delicately around the primary note sounded by *Speak, Memory*, such that Nabokov's later works may also fruitfully inform and deepen our understanding of his earlier works.<sup>36</sup>

To clarify: the relation of Nabokov's pre-1951 works to the interiorising and reversing movement of repetition of *Speak, Memory* is biographical. As an autobiography, *Speak, Memory* is a stylisation of a personal history. This history necessarily antedates its refraction throughout Nabokov's Russian, French, and English works up to 1951. The repetition and celebration that *Speak, Memory* accomplishes 'in advance' of Nabokov's pre-1951 work is thus historical. In his post-1951 works, however, the 'in advance' movement of repetition of *Speak, Memory* is determinately aesthetic. For the literary stylisation, which is to say the aesthetic, non-identical doubling of Nabokov's biography as art (which is his autobiography) repeats in advance every refraction of itself throughout all his works written after it. In this way, *Speak, Memory* (borrowing again Cunningham's language) 'offers itself in such a manner that subsequent repetitions non-identically intensify its truth'—this, in *both* directions.<sup>37</sup> This poetic of repetition is the tacit ground of Nabokov's authorial kenosis in its two primary expressions: first, in linking across Nabokov's works themes leading to and springing from *Speak, Memory*, and, second, in opening space for Nabokov's characters to participate in his self-fractured authorial identity.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>37</sup> Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 222.

### ***Kinbote within Nabokov's Noosphere***

What is perhaps the most significant indicator of Kinbote's location in Nabokov's 'noosphere' is the sense of providence that motivates his suicidal fantasies. There is something of the transmogrifying signature about it. Indeed, the recurring theatrical language that naturally accompanies most every evocation of providence throughout *The Gift*, *Bend Sinister*, and *Speak, Memory* suggests that Kinbote's apophatic Christian mysticism is intimately related to Nabokov's 'optimysticism' (*RLSK* 138)—this, in spite of Kinbote's positive valuation of the church.

In the first place, Kinbote's rehearsal of the primary motivating factor of his suicidal temptations—providence as compelling evidence of a final 'merging in God' (C493)—is merely the transposition into Christian idiom of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's reflections upon the concealed transcendent source of happiness permeating his world:

Where shall I put all these gifts with which the summer morning rewards me—and only me? Save them up for future books? Use them immediately for a practical handbook: *How to Be Happy?* Or getting deeper, to the bottom of things: understand what is concealed behind all this, behind the play, the sparkle, the thick, green greasepaint of the foliage? For there really is something, there is something! And one wants to offer thanks but there is no one to thank. The list of donations already made: 10,000 days—from Person Unknown. (*Gift* 328)

Surely, the same invisible stagehand who left traces in the 'thick, green greasepaint of the foliage' is also responsible for the signs Kinbote sees 'painted on the boulder and notched in the fir trunk' (C 493).

Moreover, a comparison of Fyodor's reflections upon the 'gifts with which the summer morning rewards me' (quoted above) with the preantepenultimate paragraph of Kinbote's note to line 493 as well as Nabokov's own attempts in *Speak, Memory* to trace the distinct design of his life's indelible ink confirms the theory that Kinbote non-identically repeats a central aspect of his Nabokov's mysticism.

When the soul adores Him Who guides it through mortal life, when it distinguishes His sign at every turn of the trial, painted on the boulder and notched in the fir trunk, when every page in the book of one's personal fate bears His watermark . . . (C493)

Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap. (*SM* 374)

Aspects of the latter passage from *Speak, Memory* are mirrored throughout the selections from *Pale Fire* and *The Gift* (quoted above). In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov merges the terms of literature and theology (in this case, the *imago Dei*) in the meticulously worded pun, 'life's foolscap' (emphasis added), a brand of writing paper with a watermark depicting a fool in a cap. In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote not only scours the environment around him to discern signs of his creator, but he, too, uses literature, particularly the question of how a character might peer beyond the book that binds him, as an analogy for considering the twin abysses that form the edge of human life.

What is more, Kinbote's veritable repetition of Nabokov's 'watermark', which each deploys to evoke something like the *imago Dei*, further solidifies Nabokov's identity as Kinbote's metafictional creator-god, and thus to Nabokov's metaliterary presence to Kinbote as a 'pale light in the dimness of bodily life' (C549). In addition to furthering the Dionysian subtext I have noted in Kinbote's meditations upon providence and his burning desire to merge in God, this correspondence enriches our understanding of *Pale Fire*'s many mirrors, suggesting that Kinbote (if not also every character throughout the novel) should be understood as a kind of 'mirror . . . of the primary light . . . the entrusted radiance', in the Areopagite's phrase, of the evasive and ever-receding internal author.<sup>38</sup>

Nabokov's 'anonymous roller' also recurs in Fyodor's 'Person Unknown' and Kinbote's God. It should be observed, however, that Nabokov's 'anonymous roller' is not 'anonymous' in the sense of being 'inexistent, or indifferent', but rather 'unnameable', as Leland de la Durantaye

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<sup>38</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Heavenly Hierarchy*, 3.2.

aply observes.<sup>39</sup> Thus, while Fyodor confesses to having found ‘no one to thank’ in spite of his desire to ‘offer thanks’, Fyodor’s invocation of one ‘Person Unknown’ must not be misconstrued as admitting inexistence or non-reality. For to infer absence from the apparent affirmation of absence (‘there is no one to thank’) betrays the same kind of prison-barred reasoning typical of Alexander Yakovlevich Chernyshevski’s death-bed assertion:

‘What nonsense. Of course there is nothing afterwards.’ He sighed, listened to the trickling and drumming outside the window and repeated with extreme distinctness: ‘There is nothing. It is as clear as the fact that it is raining.’ And meanwhile outside the spring sun was playing on the roof tiles, the sky was dreamy and cloudless, the tenant upstairs was watering the flowers on the edge of her balcony, and the water trickled down with a drumming sound. (*Gift* 312)

‘Person Unknown’ rather bespeaks a poetic of divine predication comparable to the nameless one whom a prophet, or perhaps a madman—perhaps both—named with no name upon an altar, and whose name is as lost to us as the author who inscribed it: *agnostos theos*, the unknown God and its author (Acts 17.23). It is poetically indistinguishable from the one whom Gregory of Nyssa (c.335–c.395) lauds without having ever found: ‘But I did not find him. I was calling him by name, as far as I was able to discover names for the Nameless, but there was no name whose sense could attain the one I was seeking.’<sup>40</sup> Read in this light, Fyodor’s having found ‘no one to thank’ suggests that ‘Person Unknown’ denotes a transcendent cause radically in-and-beyond phenomenal nature, one which is best conceived under the rubric of Nicholas of Cusa’s (1401–1464) *non-aliud* (‘not another thing’) principle, which affirms a relationship in which, according to Rowan Williams, ‘the finite expresses the infinite in its finite forms’, such that an altar names not absence, but the presence of a mystery.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Leland de la Durantaye, ‘The True Purpose of Autobiography, or the Fate of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*’, in Maria Dibattista and Emily O. Wittman (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*, 165–79 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 172.

<sup>40</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs* 6, trans. and ed. Richard A. Norris, Jr. (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 193.

<sup>41</sup> Rowan Williams, *Christ, the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), 251.

Recalling again Kinbote's subtextual conversation with Chesterton, observe that each of the quoted passages from *Speak, Memory*, *The Gift*, and *Pale Fire* are reminiscent of that inimitable chapter of Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*, 'The Ethics of Elfland', wherein Chesterton writes:

Now, the fairy-tale philosopher is glad that the leaf is green precisely because it might have been scarlet. He feels as if it had turned green an instant before he looked at it . . . He feels that something has been *done*.<sup>42</sup>

What is more, that Fyodor finds not no one to thank, but a title, a signature, and so a trace, recalls the poetic analogy Chesterton identifies between the origins of the cosmos and the origins of the work of art, both of which Chesterton calls 'conjuring trick[s]':

[First,] the thing [the creation of the cosmos] is magic, true or false. Second, I came to feel as if magic must have a meaning, and meaning must have someone to mean it. There was something personal in the world, as in a work of art; whatever it meant it meant violently.<sup>43</sup>

Nabokov shares Chesterton's conviction that an analogy exists between the creation of the world and the creation of the work of art. Nabokov even asserts that his art, and its deceptive aspect especially, is an act of (messianic) divine mimesis: 'I loved doing simple tricks—turning water into wine, that kind of thing; but I think I'm in good company because all art is deception and so is nature' (*SO* 10).<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, the theatricality of Chesterton's language, its associations with magic and the haunting suspicion it effects—something has been done and someone has done it—recurs as Fyodor contemplates 'the thick, green greasepaint of the foliage' (*Gift* 328), as Kinbote meditates upon the 'paint[] on the boulder and notched in the fir trunk' (*C*493), and in the 'certain intricate watermark' pressed upon Nabokov by an 'anonymous roller' (*SM* 374). In each of these instances, the result is happiness and mania, which together elicit a kind of vertigo. Such self-conscious theatricality, the vertigo accompanying the feeling that one has been cast as both audience and player in a world perpetually refashioned, is quintessential to Nabokov's metafiction and

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<sup>42</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2007), 49–50.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>44</sup> 'All artists do, then, in a sense realise the first artist—nature—which is itself the realisation of God's artistic intention', Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 202.

metaphysics, and betrays the fundamental analogy that Nabokov seeks to express between the terms of art and life, which Georges Canguilhem, speaking for himself, expresses thus:

Consciously or not, the idea that man has of his poetic power corresponds to the idea he has about the creation of the world and to the solution he gives to the problem of the radical origin of things. If the notion of creation is equivocal, ontological and aesthetic, it is neither by chance or confusion. As soon as man begins to find the world eccentric, off the hinges, or disturbing, as soon as he wonders: ‘How are these things possible?’, as soon as he confronts what is given to him to perceive according to what he could conceive, that is to say give birth, he simultaneously gives birth to two problems, that of the creation [of the world] and that of his creations.<sup>45</sup>

Many of Nabokov’s characters, not least his written self in *Speak, Memory*, share Kinbote’s belief that a ‘diabolical force urged us to seek a secret design in the abracadabra’, (C347)—Shade’s ‘[s]ome kind of link-and-bobolink, some kind / Of correlated pattern in the game’ (P812–13).<sup>46</sup> Recall Krug’s suspicions that,

among the producers or stagehands responsible for the setting there has been . . . it is hard to express it . . . a nameless, mysterious genius who took advantage of the dream to convey his own peculiar code message which [. . .] links him up somehow with an unfathomable mode of being, perhaps terrible, perhaps blissful, perhaps neither, a kind of transcendental madness which lurks behind the corner of consciousness and which cannot be defined more accurately than this. (BS 218–19)

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<sup>45</sup> «Consciemment ou non, l’idée que l’homme se fait de son pouvoir poétique répond à l’idée qu’il se fait de la création du monde et à la solution qu’il donne au problème de l’origine radicale des choses. Si la notion de création est équivoque, ontologique et esthétique, elle ne l’est ni par hasard, ni par confusion. Dès que l’homme se met à trouver le monde excentrique, hors des gonds, ou inquiétant, dès qu’il se demande: «Comment ces choses sont-elles possibles ? », dès qu’il confronte ce qu’il lui est donné de percevoir à ce qu’il pourrait lui-même concevoir, c’est-à-dire enfanter, il donne naissance simultanément à deux problèmes, celui de la création et celui de ses créations», Georges Canguilhem, ‘Réflexions sur la création artistique selon Alain’, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 57, no. 2 (Avril–Juin 1952): 171–86, 171.

<sup>46</sup> While the *OED* notes no support for these hypotheses, various folk etymologies trace ‘abracadabra’ to Hebrew and Aramaic roots, bearing the meaning, ‘I create as I speak’—the ‘Let there be . . .’ of the Bible’s first page.

By comparison, whereas the theatricality of Fyodor's world evokes happiness, for Kinbote it elicits manic, ecstatic, and grotesque desire for and trust in God, a trust he shares with the saintly Krug. This trust, or perhaps the moment of revelation that elicits this trust, Nabokov calls 'cosmic synchronization' (*SM* 544) and is an experience Nabokov shares with Krug and Kinbote.<sup>47</sup>

This is *ecstasy*, and behind the *ecstasy* is something else, which is *hard to explain* [see above, *BS* 218–19]. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern—the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal . . . Something impels me to measure the consciousness of my love against such unimaginable an incalculable things as the behavior of nebulae (whose very remoteness seems a form of insanity), the dreadful pitfalls of eternity, *the unknowledgeable beyond the unknown*, the helplessness, the cold, the sickening involutions and interpenetrations of space and time. . . . When that *slow-motion*, silent explosion of love takes place in me, unfolding its melting fringes and overwhelming me with the sense of something much vaster, much more enduring and powerful than the accumulation of matter or energy in any imaginable cosmos, then my mind cannot but pinch itself to see if it is really awake. (*SM* 479, 614, emphasis added)

All he felt was a *slow sinking*, a concentration of darkness and tenderness, *a gradual growth of sweet warmth* . . . Krug continued to seek into the heart-rending softness, into the black dazzling depths of a belated but—never mind—*eternal caress*. (*BS* 350–51, emphasis added)

Ecstatically one forefeels the vastness of the *Divine Embrace* enfolding one's liberated spirit, the *warm bath of physical dissolution*, the *universal unknown engulfing the minuscule unknown* that had been the only real part of one's temporary personality. (C493, emphasis added)

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<sup>47</sup> For a brief analysis of the eschatological or otherworldly aspect of cosmic synchronisation, see Erik Eklund, "A green lane in Paradise": Eschatology and Theurgy in *Lolita*, *Nabokov Studies* 17 (2020–2021): 35–60, 39–40.

Though intimated at best, and in spite of the cruelty throughout so many of his novels and stories, participation in a transcendent beneficence remains the unquenchable hope of Nabokov's most loved and, as they so often are, pitiable characters.

We should reconsider, therefore, whether this theological apophenia or natural religion which Nabokov shares with Fyodor, Krug, and Kinbote is all that manic. Surely, the behaviour it elicits seems manic, but, more often than not, the conclusions arrived at by Fyodor, Krug, and Kinbote tend towards the truth, even if they are considered untenable according to what phenomenal reality may be said to afford. For as Kinbote aptly observes to Shade,

with no Providence the soul must rely on the dusk of its husk, on the experience gathered in the course of corporeal confinement, and cling childishly to small-town principles, local by-laws and a personality consisting mainly of the shadows of its own prison bars. (C549)

Fated to the panopticon of time and space, our intimations of transcendence are confined to what nature affords; and whether through microscope or telescope, Nabokov remains convinced that no 'science' will pierce 'the mystery': 'the situation remains as hopeless as ever. We shall never know the origin of life, or the meaning of life, or the nature of space and time, or the nature of nature, or the nature of thought' (SO 38). Nabokov and Kinbote converge on this point, particularly as Kinbote repeats one of Nabokov's most recurring images, the prison bars of the finite imagination.

In this regard, it is worthwhile to recall the nameless young boy of 'Signs and Symbols'. His family was exterminated, one-by-one and with few exceptions, by the Bolsheviks and the Nazis. Convinced that everything is a veiled reference to the secret of his being, the world around him is a source of unrelenting torment. With unwavering determination, he seeks from within the mental institution to which he is confined the secret that phenomenal reality conceals. He is drawn to suicide, yet it remains unclear why the act he has so often failed to complete should be called a suicide as opposed to a passion of sorts, which is the very performance and embodiment of *memento mori*. He was prevented from jumping off the building because another patient thought he was learning to fly and stopped him; but, like Kinbote, like Krug, like Nabokov, 'what he really wanted to do was to tear a hole in his world and escape' (*Stories* 599) into 'the universal unknown'



(C493); ‘an unfathomable mode of being’ (*BS* 218); ‘the unknowledgeable beyond the unknown’ (*SM* 614). Perhaps his mania stems from his having intimated the secret. Perhaps he is insane only by virtue of the incommunicability of the secret—that in spite of the greatest human evil there lurks a transcendental beneficence that Nabokov’s ingeminating formative prefix (*un-*) does not finally deny. A shilpit digit protruding from a shrouded hand, Nabokov’s *un-* points to the inexhaustible depths of that which stands on the other side of language, on the other side of thought, on the outer edge of the other side, and thus to the ultimate silencing of language, negative or otherwise, before it. For whatever it is, it remains ‘hard to express’ (*BS* 218): Krug’s ‘nameless, mysterious genius’ (*BS* 218); Fyodor’s ‘Person Unknown’ (*Gift* 328); Nabokov’s ‘contrapuntal genius of human fate’ (*SM* 479); Kinbote’s God.

### ***THE GIST OF MASKS***

Having surveyed several moments wherein Nabokov suffers an aesthetic ‘fracturing of identity’ and ‘emptying of the self’ in the act of writing, it is worthwhile to speak of there existing between Nabokov and his (principal) characters a metapoetic analogy by which his characters reflect, refract, and repeat their author by varying grades and degrees in the mirror of his art.<sup>48</sup> What is more, the sections of *Pale Fire* that have been the focus of this article bear witness to Nabokov’s fantastical though nonetheless sober-minded meditations upon several theological themes.

Nevertheless, Kinbote remains other than Nabokov’s double. And yet, while he assuredly forms ‘a ludicrous parody of Nabokov himself’, as Samuel Schuman observes, it is by no means certain that Kinbote ‘certainly does not speak for Nabokov’, as Schuman elsewhere claims.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the very preposterousness of Kinbote’s parody only conceals a more mysterious and substantial identity between the proud infidel and his idiosyncratic Christian. Nor is it clear, contra Sergei Davydov, that ‘Nabokov seems more “optimystic” [*RLSK* 138]’ than Kinbote.<sup>50</sup> Kinbote is rather quite the ‘optimyst’. His apophatic faith, in fact, requires that the shadows of the mind’s

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<sup>48</sup> Kuzmanovich, ‘Notes on Nabokov’s Sources’, 25.

<sup>49</sup> Samuel Schuman, ‘Beautiful Gate: Vladimir Nabokov and Orthodox Iconography’, *Religion & Literature* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 47–66, 53; ‘Nabokov’s God; God’s Nabokov’, in Michael Rodgers and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (eds.), *Nabokov and the Question of Morality: Aesthetics, Metaphysics, and the Ethics of Fiction*, 73–85 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 74.

<sup>50</sup> Davydov, ‘Faith’, 220.

prison bars remain ever in sight; for however far the eye extends, if the shadow touches it, it remains on the inner edge of corporeality and must be forcefully denied. Yet Kinbote's is not a purely negative theology, for his denials ('One can know what God is not; one cannot know what He is', C549) underwrite his firm conviction that God's presence to the soul is as a pale fire at first, a pale fire throughout, and 'in the spiral unwinding of things' (*SM* 620) an enrapturing flame of infinite love.

Though neither is this to say that Kinbote is a negative image of his author, that he is Nabokov's opposite. This is insufficiently apophatic. It is not negative enough. We must rather go behind this denial, and deny it, too. For however thoroughgoing his apparent unlikeness to Nabokov remains, when shed of his homosexuality and commitment to *organised* religion, we see that Kinbote is very much like his author. His theology only serves to cloud the art of the analogy. A mask, Kinbote's Christianity and homosexuality allow Nabokov to express his beliefs about humanity's relation to transcendence and the divine in a strikingly straightforward manner while his face remains out of sight.

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By way of a neat conclusion, let me note what seems to me the most delectable example of the stylistic and theological game that Nabokov plays behind Kinbote's mask. Consider the beginning of Kinbote's note to line 549: 'Here indeed is the Gist of the matter. And this, I think, not only the institute (see line 517) but our poet himself missed.' Checking line 517 of Shade's poem ('It [the Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter] missed the gist of the whole thing'), it is clear that Kinbote's capitalised *Gist* is an instance of what René Alladaye calls 'controlled distortion'.<sup>51</sup> In this case, it is an abnormal capitalisation which, by calling attention to itself, invites the reader to ponder its potential significance. Following James Ramey's thesis, that 'Nabokov is unlikely to have been extremely negligent and careless regarding issues of italicization in the Index', it stands to reason that Nabokov 'might have been willing to appear

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<sup>51</sup> René Alladaye, *The Darker Shades of Pale Fire: An Investigation into a Literary Mystery* (Paris: Michel Houdiard Éditeur, 2013), 142.

sloppy in the service of a higher goal' in this case, as well.<sup>52</sup> Most apparently, Kinbote's capitalised *Gist*, as opposed to Shade's *gist*, reinforces the difference Kinbote seeks to maintain between the numerous gods surveyed at the Institute and the one true God. Yet there is more to this theological retort. For in a moment of exceptional cleverness and quintessentially Nabokovian style, the improperly capitalised *G* forms a covert signal to the latent double pun in the now obsolete meaning of *gist*, which Nabokov, wearing Kinbote's face as a mask, deploys to unify the themes of migratory Lepidoptera, exiled royalty, and the mind's journey to God in a seemingly insignificant piece of American slang. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the now obsolete meaning of *gist* is 'a list of stopping-places or stages in a monarch's progress'. *Here indeed is the Gist of the matter.*

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<sup>52</sup> James Ramey, 'Parasitism and *Pale Fire*'s Camouflage: The King-Bot, the Crown Jewels and the Man in the Brown Macintosh', *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 2 (2004): 185–213, 200.

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