

Maxim D. Shrayer

NABOKOV'S USE  
OF HEBREW IN "EASTER RAIN"

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In a number of English- and Russian-language works published in 1997-2007, I argued for the centrality of Jewish characters, themes, and predicaments to Nabokov's biography and artistic vision.<sup>1</sup> The body of literature on the subject is proportionally growing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maxim D. Shrayer/Maksim D. Shraer, "Death, Immortality, and Nabokov's Jewish Theme," *The Nabokovian*, 38 (Spring 1997): 17-25; "Souls of the Dead": Reflections on Nabokov's Jewish Theme, in *Proceedings of the Fifth Conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas (ISSEI)* [CDROM], ed. Frank Brinkhuis and Sascha Talmor (Utrecht/Cambridge: University for Humanist Studies/MIT Press, 1998); "Jewish Questions in Nabokov's Art and Life," in *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives*, Ed. Julian W. Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 73-91; "Evreiskie voprosy v zhizni i tvorchestve Nabokova," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, 43 (1999): 109-128; "Evreiskie voprosy v zhizni i tvorchestve Nabokova," in Maksim D. Shraer, *Nabokov: temy i variatsii*, tr. Vera Polishchuk with the author (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000), 250-271, 344-346; "Nabokov, evreiskii vopros i zhurnal 'Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie,'" *Zembla* (September 2001), <http://libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/shranlo.htm>, rpt. as "O nevyiachivaniu piatogo punkta," *Kuritsyn Weekly* (2001), <http://www.guelman.ru/slava/texts/shraer.htm>, accessed 17 June 2010; "Interlude: Literature Is Love," in Shrayer, *Waiting for America: A Story of Emigration* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 178-185. My new article on Jewish motifs in Nabokov's stories, "Saving Jewish-Russian émigrés," is forthcoming in the proceedings of the 2010 Kyoto International Nabokov Conference.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars and critics who at various times have written about Jewish themes and/or questions in Nabokov include: Alfred Appel, Jr., [Notes] in Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991 [first ed. 1970]), 372, 435-436, 448; 1970; L. Kosman, "Vladimir Nabokov i evreistvo," *New American/Novyi amerikanets* 1.12 (1988): 47-48; Leona Toker, "'Signs and Symbols' in and out of Contexts," in *A Small Alpine Form: Studies in Nabokov's Short Fiction*, ed. Charles Nicol and Gennady Barabtarlo (New York: Garland, 1993), 167-180; Douglas Anderson, "Nabokov's Genocidal and Nuclear Holocausts in Lolita," *Mosaic* 29.2 (1996): 73-90; Yuri Leving, "Phantom in Jerusalem, or the History of an Unrealized Visit," *The Nabokovian* 37 (Fall 1996): 30-44 [as Yuri Zavyalov-Leving]; "Nabokov v Ierusalime (Istoria nesostoiavshegosia vizita)," in *Jews and Slavs*, ed. Wolf Moskovich et al., vol. 6 (Jerusalem-Ljubljana, 1999), 373-388; "Samuel Izrailevich: Pnin's Character, Nabokov's Friend," *The Nabokovian* 39 (Fall 1997): 13-17 (as Yuri Zavyalov-Leving); "Tenishevtsy Vladimir Nabokov, Osip Mandel'shtam, Samuil Rozov: peresecheniia," in *Russkoe evreistvo v zarubezh'e*, ed. M. Parkhomovskii, vol. 1 (VI), 142-162; "Nabokov, kotoryi riadom (Pis'ma k

Here I wish to present some further textual evidence for Nabokov's Jewish concerns and Judaic explorations, this time drawn from his early Russian short fiction. I would like to suggest that some indications of Nabokov's Jewish linguo-ethno-historical interests—and of his metaphysical Judaic awareness—may already be located in the stories of the early 1920s. For instance, “Пасхальный дождь” (“Easter Rain” 1924; pub. 1925), one of Nabokov's earlier Berlin stories, may recommend that we look closer at the possibility that Nabokov's Judaic interests had either predated his marriage to a Jewish woman or were ignited by their meeting and rapprochement.<sup>3</sup> (Vladimir Nabokov and Véra Slonim met in 1923 in Berlin and were married there on 15 April 1925.)

In “Easter Rain” one Zhozefina L'vovna, previously a Swiss governess to a St. Petersburg family, is spending the dawn of her days by the shores of Lake Lemán, reminiscing about her Russian past. (A partial prototype of Zhozefina L'vovna was the Swiss governess of the Nabokov children, Cécile Miauton, who had come to Russia from

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S. I. Rozovu: 1945-1976), *Ierusalimskii zhurnal* 2 (1999): 142-160; Galya Diment, *Priniad: Vladimir Nabokov and Marc Szeftel* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997); Svetlana Malysheva, “Praded Nabokova, pochetynyi chlen kazanskogo universiteta,” *Ekho vekov [Kazan']* 1/2 (1997): 31-34; Tomas Urban, *Nabokov v Berlíne*, tr. S. V. Rozhnovskii (Moscow: Agraf, 2004); this is a translation of Thomas Urban, *Vladimir Nabokov—Blaue Abende in Berlin*, 1999); Savelii [Savely] Senderovich, Elena Shvarts, “Starichok iz evreev,” *Russian Literature* 3.43 (1998): 297-328; Savelii Senderovich, Elena Shvarts, “Nabokovskii paradoks o evree,” in *Paradoksy russkoi literatury: sbornik statei*, vol. 3 (St. Petersburg: Inapress, 2001): 299-317; Anna Brodsky, “Nabokov's *Lolita* and the Post-War Émigré Consciousness,” in: *Kultura russkoi diaspori: Vladimir Nabokov—100*, ed. Irina Belobrov'tseva et al. (Tallinn: TPÜ Kirjastus, 2000), 371-390; [Iurii] Yuri Leving, Maxim D. Shroyer [Maksim D. Shraer], “V svoikh knigakh vy prodolzhaete okunat'sia v ledianuiu glubinu”: Neizvestnoe pis'mo 1936 g S.I. Rozova V.V. Nabokovu,” *Solnechnoe spletenie*, 16-17 (2001): 199-205; modified version reprinted in *From the Other Shore* 1 (2001), 39-46; Anna Brodsky, “Nabokov's *Lolita* and the Postwar Émigré Consciousness,” in *Realms of Exile: Nomadism, Diasporas, and Eastern European Voices*, ed. Domnica Radulescu (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), 49-66; Adrian Curtin, Maxim D. Shroyer, “Netting the Butterfly Man: The Significance of Vladimir Nabokov in W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*,” *Religion and the Arts*, 9.3-4 (2005): 258-283; Tim Conley, “History and Denial in Nabokov's ‘Conversation Piece, 1945,’” *Journal of the Short Story in English* 45 (Autumn 2005): 113-121 (2005); Shalom Goldman, “Nabokov's Minyan: A Study in Philo-Semitism,” *Modern Judaism* 25.1 (2005): 1-22 [judging by this article, Goldman is not sufficiently familiar with Nabokov scholarship]; Leland de la Durantaye, “Eichmann, Empathy, and *Lolita*,” *Philosophy and Literature* 30 (2006): 311-328; Iurii [Yuri] Leving, “Razbiraia bred, ili kto pomozhet Chernyshevskomu?” *Nabokov Online Journal* 1 (2007), [http://etc.dal.ca/noj/articles/volume1/LEVING\\_Decoding\\_Delirium\\_3.pdf](http://etc.dal.ca/noj/articles/volume1/LEVING_Decoding_Delirium_3.pdf), accessed 17 June 2010.

In his two-volume biography, Brian Boyd supplies many facts illuminating the subject of Nabokov's Jewish intersections; see Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). In her biography of Véra Nabokov, Stacy Schiff provides valuable factual information about the Jewish background of Nabokov's wife; see Schiff, *Véra (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov)* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> To the best of my knowledge, Svetlana Polsky (Svetlana Pol'skaia), who unearthed and published “Easter Rain,” has not discussed its Jewish and Judaic meaning and significance; see Svetlana Pol'skaia, [Pref. to] Vladimir Nabokov, “Paskhal'nyi dozhd',” *Zvezda* 4 (1999): <http://magazines.russ.ru/zvezda/1999/4/pashr.html>, accessed 15 September 2009); Svetlana Polsky, “Vladimir Nabokov's Short Story ‘Easter Rain,’” *Nabokov Studies* 4 (1997): 151-162.

Lausanne. This inevitably results in some overlap between “Easter Rain” and “Mademoiselle O” along with the respective sections of Nabokov’s memoiristic books.<sup>4</sup> Nabokov’s narrator refers to the retired governess by her Russified first name (presumably, Josephine, derived, like its male equivalents, from the Hebrew “Yosef” = “he [G-d] shall add/increase”) and a patronymic derived from the first name Lev (Russian equivalent of Leon or Leo). Yet, Zhozefina L’vovna herself only knows a few Russian words and barely manages the Cyrillic alphabet. On the eve of Orthodox Easter she decides to dye and decorate eggs. (In Russian, the word *Paskha* is used for both Easter and Passover, in some cases with the addition of the adjectives *pravoslavnaia*, “Orthodox” and *evreiskaia*, “Jewish,” respectively.) She tries to paint the Russian letters “X” and “B” on one of the eggs; those stand for “Христос Воскресе” (“Christ is Risen”). Nabokov’s narrator reports that Zhozefina L’vovna manages the letter “X,” but has a hard time recalling the letter “B” and it ends up looking like a “ridiculous, crooked Я.” This, in turn, leads her Russian émigré neighbor, Platonov, to remark (the last name “Platonov” reverberates with the name of the Greek philosopher): “What’s she doing throwing Jewish initials around...” (“Chto eto ona evreiskie initsialy zakatila...”).<sup>5</sup> Whether or not the Platonovs’ remark is indicative of his anti-Jewish prejudice, both Platonov and his wife refuse to share the Swiss (and, presumably, Protestant) lady’s tears of Paschal joy. But why exactly does Nabokov’s narrator mention the Jewish (Hebrew) initials in the first place?

If Platonov gleans Hebrew letters in a crooked Cyrillic “Я” hand-painted on Zhozefina L’vovna’s Easter egg, Nabokov might have in mind several Hebrew letters, such as Gimmel (ג) or Tet (ט) or even Qof (ק), depending on how incorrectly or “crookedly” the “Я” is drawn and which way it faces. For a hand-painted Cyrillic “X,” Nabokov most likely has in mind the Hebrew Alef (א). I would suggest that through Platonov’s comment about the “Jewish initials” (he does not say Jewish letters but *initials*), Nabokov-the-polyglot is deliberately marking his curiosity about Hebrew—and also about Christianity’s Judaic origins—by inviting the reader to interpret the combination of “X” and “Я.” My own hunch is that both phonetically and graphically, Zhozefina L’vovna’s “X. Я.” points to the

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<sup>4</sup> On this matter, see J. E. Rivers, “Alone in the Void: ‘Mademoiselle O,’” in Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin, eds., *Torpid Smoke: The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 85-131, esp. 86-95, 113-114.

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, ed. Aleksandr Dolinin (St. Petersburg: Simpozium, 1999-2001), I: 77-78.

Tetragrammaton יהוה' (Yod-He-Vav-He, YHWH), which in the Jewish tradition was no longer pronounced after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., and which in common Jewish usage is substituted with the name "Adonoi" ("My Lord") there where the Tetragrammaton appears in biblical texts.<sup>6</sup> This is, of course, just scratching the surface of the story, and I am confident that further research will reveal the depth of Nabokov's Judaic quest.

Valid questions arise concerning Nabokov's interest in—and familiarity with—Hebrew. In his Russian-language article "Decoding Delirium, or Who Will Help Chernyshevsky?" (2007), Yuri Leving discussed Nabokov's use of Hebrew and Aramaic in the speech of the dying Alexander Chernyshevsky in *The Gift*. Elsewhere, Leving has also commented on Nabokov's use of Hebrew words in Nabokov's texts. In *King, Queen, Knave*, Nabokov names a secondary character "Menetekelfares." Both Vera Polishchuk and Marta Antonicheva have discussed Nabokov's coded use of the prophesying Aramaic message "mene, tekel, fares [peres]," which Prophet Daniel deciphers in the scene of King Belshazzar's feast (Dan. 5: 25-28).<sup>7</sup> Other scholars have also probed the subject in their commentaries to Nabokov's works.

In a private communication to me, dated 16 June 2010, Yuri Leving suggested that the young Nabokov might have known the Tetragrammaton from Western art, and nominated Rembrandt as a likely source. This is indeed a fascinating possibility. As Steven Nadler stated in *Rembrandt's Jews* (2003), "no other non-Jewish painter in history included as much Hebrew in his art as [Rembrandt] did."<sup>8</sup> Drawing not only from Rembrandt, but also from the context of Northern Netherlandish and Dutch art of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I am aware of the possibility that "X. Я." could be read as "Христос ЯХВЕ" ("Christ YHWE"), and I will respectfully defer to other scholars on this matter.

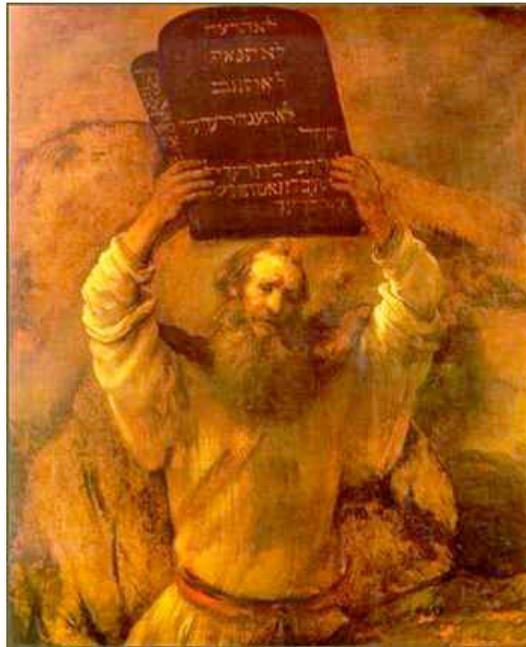
<sup>7</sup> "This is the writing that is inscribed: MENE MENE TEKEL UPHARSIN. And this is the meaning: MENE—God has numbered [the days of] your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEL—you have been weighed in the balance and found wanting; PERES—your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and the Persians," in *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 1480. See Vera Polishchuk, "Kommentarii," in Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*, 2: 701; Marta Antonicheva, "O roli dvoinoi alliuzii v romane V. Nabokova 'Korol', dama, valet'" *Zapovednik* 61 (January 2005), <http://zapovednik.litera.ru/N61/page06.html>, accessed 16 June 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 128.

centuries, Nadler offers very useful information regarding the artists' use of "Hebrew or Hebrew-like characters, especially in biblical scenes."<sup>9</sup> Nadler further indicates that

in most cases, it is not true Hebrew that appears, but either imitations of Hebrew forms [...] or real Hebrew letters arranged in a nonsensical way. The only genuine words that appear with some regularity and consistency are the tetragrammaton [...]; and, in paintings of Jesus on the cross, the Hebrew or Aramaic inscription that is traditionally included along with Greek and Latin translations on the notice that Pontius Pilate is said to have attached over Jesus' head to indicate his crime: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." There are also, on occasion, representative phrases from the Ten Commandments in depictions of the two tablets of the Law [...].<sup>10</sup>

According to Nadler's research, eight works by Rembrandt "purport to represent Hebrew."<sup>11</sup> Another recent student of Rembrandt's biblical themes and subjects, John I. Durham, has catalogued and analyzed instances of Rembrandt's pictorial use of Hebrew in *The Biblical Rembrandt: Human Painter in a Landscape of Faith* (2004).



III. 1: Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, "Moses with the Tablets of the Law" (1659)

Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin

Source: <http://www.ort.org.il/year/eshavuot/tor.htm>

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<sup>9</sup> Nadler, 128.

<sup>10</sup> Nadler, 128-129.

<sup>11</sup> Nadler, 128-129.

The principal examples of Hebrew lettering employed in Rembrandt's paintings and etchings include: "Two Old Men Disputing" (1628, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne); "Judas Repentant, Returning the Pieces of Silver" (1629, private collection, England); "Moses with the Tablets of the Law" (1659, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin; "Belshazzar's Feast" (1635, The National Gallery, London), and others. In connection with the hand arranging fiery Hebrew letters inside a radiant circle on the palace wall in the upper right corner of "Belshazzar's Feast," Durham writes: "Rembrandt has arranged the letters of the message vertically so that they read as no Aramaic sentence would, from top to bottom, though with the words in their proper sequence, from right to left [...] the letters are arranged vertically to render them more mysterious—they make no sense read in the normal order from right to left."<sup>12</sup> Speaking of the Hebrew letters one might glean from the pages of an open book portrayed in the bottom left corner of Rembrandt's "Judas Repentant, Returning the Pieces of Silver," Durham proposed that "the letters at the top of the right-hand page appear to suggest [...] the Tetragrammaton."<sup>13</sup> We should finally note that in his research on Nabokov and painting, Gavriel Shapiro has named nine separate paintings and etchings by Rembrandt as the works that might have informed Nabokov's literary texts, most notably *The Gift*.<sup>14</sup> Shapiro must have had his reasons not to hypothesize about Nabokov's familiarity with Rembrandt's Old Testament paintings, including the ones the young Nabokov might have seen in European museums—or in art books—in the 1920s.

But to become more than a speculative source of Nabokov's fictional inspiration, Rembrandt's Jews and the artist's Hebrew lettering must lead one back to "Easter Rain"—and not away from the story. This brings me to the second comment Yuri Leving made on 16 June 2010 upon reading a draft of this article: "I have suspected [but have not followed up on it] that this story [i.e. 'Easter Rain'] is somehow related to Pasternak, although I did not have in mind the aspect upon which you have touched [my tr.—MDS]." Leving is, in my judgment, absolutely correct in linking the name of Nabokov's main character with the

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<sup>12</sup> John I. Durham, *The Biblical Rembrandt: Human Painter in a Landscape of Faith* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2004), 105.

<sup>13</sup> Durham, 94.

<sup>14</sup> Gavriel Shapiro, *The Sublime Artist's Studio: Nabokov and Painting* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 40-45.

Pasternak family. That Nabokov avidly followed Boris Pasternak's career seems fairly clear; they have even shared the pages of émigré periodicals.<sup>15</sup> In "Easter Rain," the name of the Swiss governess, "Zhozefina L'vovna," points rather directly to Boris Pasternak's sister Zhozefina (Josephine) Leonidovna Pasternak (1900-1993), a student of philosophy and a poet.<sup>16</sup> By 1924, when Nabokov composed the story, Josephine Pasternak had already left Russia and was living in Germany with her parents and sister. The identification of Nabokov's fictional governess with the name of Josephine Pasternak (the patronymic "L'vona" disguises "Leonidovna" only slightly) hints at a closer source of Nabokov's knowledge of Rembrandt's pictorial Jews and use of Hebrew lettering. I believe the story's linkage with the Pasternaks points to Leonid Pasternak (1862-1945; born Yitzhok-Leib Pasternak), a prominent Jewish-Russian artist and a great influence on both Boris Pasternak and Zhozefina Pasternak. Suffice it to say here that the Pasternaks traced their lineage back to Sephardic Jews, to Don Isaac ben-Yehudah Abravanel (Abarbanel) (1437–1508). In 1923, Leonid Pasternak's book *Rembrandt and Jews in His Art: with 30 plates of Rembrandt's Works* appeared in Berlin in Russian, released by the Jewish-Russian publisher S. D. Zaltsman.<sup>17</sup> Nabokov likely came across Leonid Pasternak's book, took inspiration from it, and fictionalized Josephine Pasternak in "Easter Rain." The rest of this story remains to be unraveled, and I wish to express my gratitude to Prof. Leving for his feedback and his contribution to this article. Ultimately, it is not just the sources, but the meaning and significance of Nabokov's use of Hebrew in "Easter Rain," that are most deserving of further inquiry.

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<sup>15</sup> See Maxim D. Shrayer, *The World of Nabokov's Stories* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 188-189.

<sup>16</sup> About Josephine Pasternak, see, for instance, Helen Ramsay, "Obituary: Josephine Pasternak," *The Independent*, 4 March 1993, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-josephine-pasternak-1495569.html>, accessed 17 June 2010.

<sup>17</sup> L. O. Pasternak, *Rembrandt i evreistvo v ego tvorchestve: s 30 snimkami s proizvedenii Rembrandta* (Berlin: S. D. Zaltsman, 1923). Although the word "evreistvo" in the original title of Leonid Pasternak's book could mean both "Jewry" and "Jewishness," it is generally rendered in English as "Jews" or even "Judaism."