

NABOKOV AND RELIGION
Forum

PART ONE

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Preamble (*From the Editor*)

In his famous answer to Alvin Toffler’s question from the *Playboy* interview (“[D]o you believe in God?”) Vladimir Nabokov stated: “To be quite candid – and what I am going to say now is something I never said before, and I hope it provokes a salutary little chill – I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more.” This is yet another variation of the theme which the writer had formulated earlier, in his last Russian-language short story, “Ultima Thule” (the Adam Falter case). The last twenty years have witnessed renewed interest in bringing Nabokov’s thought and work into conversation with moral, ethical, and philosophical thought. The same cannot be said of Nabokov and religion, despite the efforts of scholars like Gennady Barabtarlo, Samuel Schuman, and Vladimir Alexandrov. Our present forum will partially address the question why is this the case?

Yuri Leving: How do we parse Nabokov’s stated “utter indifference to organized mysticism, to religion, to the church — any church” in the light of the recurrent religious, mystical, or broadly theological imagery in his work? What constitutes “utter indifference”? Is it hostile, as Leland de la Durantaye claims; or are matters more complicated, as Dana Dragunoiu has shown of Nabokov’s relation to politics, which he similarly and rather dubiously claims “leave me supremely indifferent”?

Michael Wood: I take ‘utter indifference’ to be a hyperbole of the kind to which Nabokov often resorted. A ‘strong opinion’ similar in form to what is called the ‘strong’ version of a philosopher’s argument – that is, the least compromising and the most dramatic. Nabokov wasn’t indifferent to anything that was interesting, and religion is certainly that, at the very least. But I also think he meant to make clear his refusal of any attachment to a single faith or formally organized church. He was not going to take to singing Christian hymns in the shower, as Charles Kinbote did. Kinbote is a good instance here, though, since we are invited to take his devotion to ritual and theology as a sign of a sort of despair, a need that has to be satisfied. He needs to believe in a doctrine that will counteract ‘the unspeakably dreadful notion of chance reaching into eternity’. And he needs a formally recognized, historical version of this doctrine. We may think John Shade’s notion of ‘texture’ satisfies the same need, and to some extent it does – at least it allows him to believe in the afterlife of his child. But he is closer to Deism than to Christianity, and we may wonder whether Deism is a religion or just something that looks like one.

Mary Ross: John Shade is interesting because, despite being prone to mystical transcendence since childhood, doubt remains his spiritual bane until the near end of his poem when he seems to overcome all doubt. Yet his doubt is ironically belied within moments by his death – or is it? Perhaps this means he is about to find out for himself?! Was he a Deist? Deism rejects the supernatural, and Shade seemed primarily concerned with the personal afterlife more than the nature of the Deity, but then I guess Deists don’t really care about the Deity either. Apparently, the working title for *Pale Fire* was *The Happy Atheist*. Was Shade happy? I think the title was meant to prove ironic. I have always felt that Kinbote got the better of their spiritual discussions (probably because he was quoting Augustine and/or Aquinas.)

Matthew Roth: Nabokov’s “indifference” to religion is of a piece with his resistance to the generalizing tendency of all groups. While it’s clear that Nabokov held a rich and complex set of ideas about God and the hereafter, it was most important to him, both as a person and as an artist, that his ideas, values, and aesthetics be seen as products of his own individual consciousness and free will.

Christopher Link: I think the whole matter of “utter indifference... to religion, to the church—any church” might best be understood in the light of Nabokov’s radical privileging of the virtue of *curiosity*, insofar as any “*organized* mysticism” or doctrinally defined faith tradition would, *qua* institution, aim to fix for its adherents carefully formulated answers to questions of the deepest mystery and significance, as in a catechism or liturgy (or even in such call-and-response practices as, say, the Four Questions of the Passover *Haggadah*). In this way, institutionally prescribed dogma and liturgical responses might well be regarded, from at least one angle of vision, as fundamentally *antithetical* to curiosity: for every profound question that might be posed, *here* is the ready-at-hand answer to be recited! Nabokov, therefore, may indeed have been indifferent to the ready-made, conventional answers of various religious institutions, while *never* having been incurious about the stirring questions such answers propose to address. Indeed, his abiding interest in (or, at least, his literary use of) angels, saints, and Scripture speak to the significant independent curiosity Nabokov had for such matters (as in the anecdote related about Nabokov in which he rattled off, from memory, detailed information about fifty-five different saints named John [Gibian and Parker 229; cf. Boyd, *VNAY* 291]). While I have fastened upon “curiosity,” I would add that I think this all accords quite well with Matt’s observation about the importance for Nabokov of “free will” in all his intellectual endeavors—including his oft-repeated disdain for the notion of ever having been “influenced” by any other author or mind.

Erik Eklund: I really appreciate Christopher’s insistence on curiosity, and it makes me think of the apocryphal story (from *Inferno* 26) where Ulysses says that he is in hell because his curiosity caused him to turn away from his loyalty to family and country. He had convinced many of his men to join him in exploring the northernmost places beyond the divinely prescribed limits of the

known world, toward Zembla, I suppose. Nabokov greatly admired Dante's work, of course (especially in Singleton's translation), and so he would certainly be aware that curiosity (*curiositas*) was considered a great vice—"insubordination in its purest form," he says in *Bend Sinister*. Though I suspect that his opinion of this apocryphal scene from Ulysses' life was other than damning since curiosity is arguably the chief virtue in Nabokov's work. See, for instance, Nabokov's comments on the "capacity to wonder at trifles—no matter the immanent peril," which he describes as "the highest forms of consciousness," as in the "cartoon depicting a chimney sweep falling from the roof of a tall building and noticing on the way that a sign-board had one word spelled wrong, and wondering in his headlong flight why nobody had thought of correcting it" (*Lectures on Literature* 373–74). Any *system*—religious, political, anything really—that weaseled its way in-between him and the whim of curiosity, that is where Nabokov will place his picket sign.

It cannot be ignored that "organized" is doing the majority of the work in the sentence, and so we should not reduce Nabokov's statement to mean that he was utterly indifferent to mysticism, religion, and the vagueness of churchliness, whatever that means. He was, as H. Peter Kahn relates, actively involved in the commissioning of a new stained-glass window for St. John's Episcopal Church in Ithaca, and he had hoped that it would be of St. John of the Cross (Gibian and Parker 229). Perhaps it means something that this particular St. John not only wrote a poem about leaving his home under the cover of darkness so as to un-know himself in the embrace of the unknown God, but that he also wrote a rather odd and at times almost disjointed commentary to that poem! Moreover, as Dana Dragunoiu has shown in relation to Nabokov's politics, Nabokov's self-proclaimed "supreme indifference" to politics is actually a version of the "Kadet Party's official commitment to remain 'above politics'" (*Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* 226). Nabokov says as much himself: "I suppose that my indifference to religion is of the same nature as my dislike of group activities in the domain of political or civic commitments" (*Strong Opinions* 40). Nabokov's penchant for speaking as if the dogma of *ex cathedra* applied to the art of criticism also causes problem, and the solution, I think, lies in parsing the author from the work by utilizing the distinction Michael Wood draws between the four author functions. Sure, Nabokov the historical person may have had no abiding interest in organized religion and all the rest, but for the

Nabokov who is neither more nor less than the “particular clusters” of “identifiable habits of writing and narrating” (*The Magician’s Doubts* 22), matters are patently different.

Mary Ross: Right, “organized” anything was anathema to him. In a 1967 interview he makes a very candid statement that his aversions to social and group activities are simply his personality, rather than condemnations: “My aversion to groups is rather a matter of temperament than the fruit of information and thought” (*Strong Opinions* 64). That story about the windows and the 55 St. Johns is the most intriguing evidence we have of Nabokov’s non-literary *personal* connections with actual religion. Apparently the two windows of the church were of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist. It may be interesting to point out that these two saints were venerated by the “Johannine” freemasons. Nabokov’s father was a member of the Johannine Russian Grand Orient lodge, whose origins go back to French and then Scottish Rites freemasonry.

Mysticism and politics are recurrent themes in Nabokov’s work. In no way can it truly be said that he was “indifferent” to either. The old saw that religion and politics should not be discussed in polite society has a certain wisdom that holds here. Every human, since time immemorial, has had their knee-jerk opinions, wishes, projections, and inculcated ideas, all deemed important, even necessary for others to agree with. This leads, of course, to arguments, dissension, schisms, war, and ruins a party.

Worse, it bores the party – so much beating-around-the-burning-bush of Ultimate Truth. Even our most revered saints’ and avatars’ messages become misinterpreted and/or codified and then further misunderstood. The “perennial philosophy” has endured, not with words but with ineffable, yet un-singular *experience*. “Have some more fish,” says Krug, in dismay of his attempts at a “new” philosophy (little realizing that he is evoking the Christian symbol).

Nabokov is never didactic; he demonstrates. He knew what a bore it is to read something with agendas and stale, or worse, pious ideas: “Frankly, a national, folklore, class, masonic, religious, or any other communal aura involuntarily prejudices me against a novel, making it harder for me to peel the offered fruit so as to get at the nectar of possible talent” (*Strong Opinions* 113).

Originality of genius was his literary standard; that is, not simply something that has not been done before, but something original that ignites or renews, shall we say, the “pale fire,” of

spiritual perception. Throughout his work Nabokov gives evidence of his intimate knowledge of mystical experience, which is inherently “ineffable” and personally precious, a secret not to be sullied. “Indifference” is not the operative word, but “organized.” This is where “hostility” comes in. This is a whole other arena of Nabokoviana, rather dangerous to enter – psychology. That is, psychologizing *him*. His introversion, his fragile ego, his compensating superiority, his deflections, dissemblings and secrets, his craving to be understood while remaining singular, aloof, and untouchable. Here he becomes almost buffoonish in his hostility, except that his *bon mots* are just so good – and effective. This is not indifference, but passionate self-protection against anything that gets too close to his secret self. (However, I appreciate Michael’s remarks about philosophical “strong arguments” as the least compromising and the most dramatic way to state his “strong opinions.” That makes Nabokov seem less haughty and more in control.)

That being said, I think that being a natural mystic, Nabokov had experiences of the sacredness of the inner self, as well as its ineffable quiddity, so that any attempt to define it feels profane. That is the role of great art.

Erik Eklund: While it remains helpful to listen to the Nabokov of the interviews and the Nabokov of Boyd’s biography, there is a sense that we can ignore him when his personally held attitudes and beliefs hinder constructive engagement with what is very much there in the texts. Charles Kinbote’s natural theology is an important and obvious if also neglected aspect of *Pale Fire*, particularly as it relates to the idea, for example, that the world is a divinely ordered text in which intimations of the ultimate author can be hazily discerned. Nonetheless, I am fairly certain that we can safely say that Nabokov did not adhere to any religion, but I’m not so sure that we can say that Nabokov was not religious nor that his religious, mystical, or otherwise theological sensibility was not informed by definable religious traditions, however *ad hoc* his drawing may very well have been. Nabokov lists the New Testament but not its elder brother among “the best and most successful works of literature” (*Think, Write, Speak* 381), and while this certainly does not mean that Nabokov was a Christian, it stands to reason that he had an enduring interest in it.

Mary Ross: I agree, Erik; focus should be on the text more than the man. As for the man, I think “enduring interest” is a good way to describe his spiritual engagement. As for what the man *says*,

there is his typical dissembling, most clearly stated to Andrew Field: “[...] the tone of a number of my poems... they accept the religious view of the world. [...] I still say that it was a stylistic pose, a stylistic poesy – a slight pun if I may – I don’t know why I tell this kind of pun – there is no more to it” (*Nabokov: His Life in Part 88*).

Michael Wood: I have learned a lot already from this conversation, not so much in the form of answers to questions as in new precisions about how to ask them. I was very taken by Christopher’s lines about ‘privileging... curiosity’.

Christopher Link: As far as I can ascertain, Nabokov’s professed indifference to religion—read by Brian Boyd, in advance of Leland de la Durantaye, as “hostility”—may well have originated as a personal matter of reciprocal or, rather, mutual indifference, given the scene Nabokov paints of his baptism in chapter one, section one of *Speak, Memory*, in which “the bungling archpresbyter, Father Konstantin Vetvenitski” nearly christened the “howling, half-drowned” infant Nabokov with the name Victor rather than Vladimir (*Speak, Memory* 21). Such incurious inattentiveness on the part of this priest seems to have called forth in Nabokov his avowed indifference. But, it is also worth noting that this scene of sacramental “bungling”—standing, as it does, as quite early grounds for a quarrel with the church—nevertheless appears in the very same chapter that so movingly concludes with Nabokov’s remembered image of his father being thrown up high into the air by peasants upon a blanket, in celebration of his generosity. Appearing, in Nabokov’s memory, framed through the window, reclining casually in mid-air, this image of Nabokov’s father is transformed, through a kind of verbal-imagistic slight-of-hand, into that of “one of those paradisiac personages” painted “on the vaulted ceiling of a church” (*Speak, Memory* 31-32) where, down below, a funeral rite is being performed (almost certainly that of Nabokov’s father himself). Thus, by the end of the chapter, any ostensible “indifference” or “hostility” towards the religion of the church appears to give way to a filial piety of the profoundest affection: a memory painted with intimations of an altogether traditional vision of the afterlife in which, among the various heavenly figures of a celestial paradise, we might glimpse our own most dear, departed loved ones.

And all of this is to say nothing of the passages treating his mother’s own stubbornly independent, exceedingly strong faith as treated in the second chapter of that same work:

A streak of sectarianism ran through her direct ancestry. She went to church only at Lent and Easter. The schismatic mood revealed itself in her healthy distaste for the ritual of the Greek Catholic Church and for its priests. She found a deep appeal in the moral and poetical side of the Gospels, but felt no need in the support of any dogma. The appalling insecurity of an afterlife and its lack of privacy did not enter her thoughts. Her intense and pure religiousness took the form of her having equal faith in the existence of another world and in the impossibility of comprehending it in terms of earthly life. (*Speak, Memory* 39)

It may be simplistic to assert that this description of his mother's "intense and pure religiousness" might give us some insights into Nabokov's own religious feelings and attitudes, and, yet, from all we know about the author's views on such matters (however scant) and from the striking tone of appreciative approval here, it seems fair to claim that her own beliefs—grounded in both the certainty of a faith in a world beyond ours and an open-ended curiosity about the wholly unknown and unknowable—had some substantial influence over those of her eldest son:

“It isn't that we dream too wild a dream:
The trouble is we do not make it seem
Sufficiently unlikely...”

(*Pale Fire* 41, lines 227-229)

Michael Wood: I found Mary's incursion into the 'dangerous... arena' of psychology very persuasive, because it helps us to know where we are. We are trying to understand the 'buffoonish' performances of someone we know to be anything but a buffoon. Similarly, although this takes us to a quite different part of the arena, I found Christopher's quotation of the passage about the mother's relation to the church very helpful. Nabokov's language is so full of longing ('appalling insecurity', 'equal faith'), that I wonder if he is exaggerating the sturdiness of her faith. Or is that just my skepticism talking?

Matthew Roth: Michael makes mention of Deism, and I know Erik has recently made a case for Nabokov's interest in Christian mysticism. If I were forced to give a name to Nabokov's particular

set of beliefs about God and the afterlife, I would say that he most closely conforms to what is usually called philosophical theism. As explained by Martin Gardner, whom Nabokov greatly admired, philosophical theists believe in a personal god and an afterlife, but they also believe that these things can never be accurately described or systematized by any religion (see Gardner's *The Why's of a Philosophical Scrivener* for a detailed account of this point of view). Nabokov's belief in a divine, designing consciousness is most evident when he discusses what he sees as nonutilitarian evolution in things like animal mimicry, where "phenomena showed an artistic perfection usually associated with man-wrought things" (*Speak, Memory* 124). And his interest in some kind of afterlife (or forelife) is a near-constant presence throughout his works. That said, his insistence on his characters' inability to obtain any certainty on these matters speaks to his ultimate skepticism towards any organized set of religious beliefs or practices.

***Yuri Leving:* Does Nabokov's insistence that the metaliterary form of his art delimit its content obscure the theological or religious themes in his work? Are the mystical or theological ideas in Nabokov's work reducible to the metaliterary expressions in which they are often found?**

Mary Ross: On the contrary, I think theological themes serve to delimit the metaliterary forms. The Infinite cannot by definition be limited, but if Nabokov's intention is to suggest theological ideas in original ways, then he is necessarily limited to whatever metaliterary expressions are capable of approaching the complexity, depth, unity, beauty and truth, and transcendence of the otherwise ineffable. Véra Nabokov has said that *potustoronost* (the beyond) was always his primary concern. A word I prefer is "transcendence" because it suggests more than just the afterlife; it also suggests transcendence of ego and the transcendent nature of true art. Religious tropes, such as the Bible, provide a proven structure, an organization (that word, again, but in this context not necessarily nugatory). In other words, if his metaliterary and ludic techniques are, as he has asserted, merely that he liked to play games, winning would mean affecting the reader's inner being with "poignant artistic delight" (*Speak, Memory* 292). That is, the "tingle in the spine"; the re-igniting of the "divine spark" in the human "vessel" (a Gnostic notion). Mere cleverness cannot do that.

Erik Eklund: As Alexandrov, Barabtarlo, Boyd, and, more recently, Dragunoiu each have shown (though I am tempted to say that every one of us has said this in one form or another at one point), Nabokov's aesthetics is a metaphysics. While this is true, this statement can be read as suggesting that Nabokov's metaphysics is merely aesthetics. I think this is too narrow. As in *Bend Sinister*, where the author-deity slides down an inclined beam of pale light (*à la* the temptation of St. Antony of Egypt, where an inclined beam of pale light indicative of the Lord's presence and pity causes the hermit's visions to vanish in an instant), Adam Krug's metaliterary return to his author works to express important questions regarding both authorial agency and theology, such as theodicy, the relation of this world to absolute, unfettered reality, and the Shakespearean and equally Jewish and Christian Middle Platonic idea that there is one cosmic drama with a spiritual expression and an earthly one ("as above, so below," runs the phrase). If we focus only on the metafictional or self-conscious aspect (the author questions), we will neglect the very real theology in the novel. In *Bend Sinister* and other works like *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Pale Fire* (I am tempted to include aspects of *The Gift* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, as well), Nabokov deploys various metafictional techniques in service of a kind of theo-semiotics, and, as Barabtarlo suggested back in 1999, there is good reason to treat Nabokov "also as a mystic."

Michael Wood: This is a fabulous question, since it is one that Nabokov's work keeps raising, and also, with meticulous fidelity, insists on failing to answer. I don't think the theological or religious themes are obscured by the doctrines of Nabokov's art, by his recurring, unmistakable credos, and nor are they 'reducible to metaliterary expressions'. As with the previous question, the confident clarity of Nabokov's language makes it hard to see him as hesitating in any way, but I think we are looking at a sort of orchestrated hesitation, the writing of an author who will not step over the line into faith, but needs to stay close to that line. Is the artist a god? Certainly not. Is God an artist? Probably, but since he may not exist, it's very hard to place or judge his work. The narrator of *Bend Sinister* knows that immortality is 'a slippery sophism,' and the narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* suggests that he and Sebastian may be not themselves but "perhaps... someone whom neither of us knows." The first claim feels too confident and the second feels too cautious.

What happens if we need to go beyond scepticism, but can't believe in a terrain we would have to invent?

Mary Ross: Interesting question, Michael. Nabokov's whole oeuvre, in a sense, seems to be an attempt to deal with reframing/reclaiming religion. *Ada* does that – the mythical “other world” is our Terra – heaven on earth.

Matthew Roth: Nabokov's resistance to outward-looking interpretation certainly stunted most attempts to consider theology or any of the myriad socio-political aspects of his work. In the last two decades, however, we have seen a blossoming of critical work related to these social and political realms, so a focus on theology and religion would seem to be not only welcome but overdue. As for the reducibility of these ideas, the question seems to provide its own answer: if the ideas can be found within the work, then they have already passed the test of reducibility.

Christopher Link: Hmm. Is the theological ever reducible to the metaliterary? I don't think so. If I understand this question correctly, its premise is something like a topsy-turvy inversion of Vladimir Alexandrov's claim that, in Nabokov's works, “*the metaliterary is camouflage for and a model of the metaphysical*” (“Nature and Artifice,” *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* 554; *Nabokov's Otherworld* 18). Here, I would side with Alexandrov and claim that the metaliterary aspect of Nabokov's work, far from imposing a delimitation of any kind, is instead an index pointing, beyond itself, towards what it implies about (for lack of a better phrase) the various levels at which reality might be perceived. Nabokov's fictional characters, for example, might occasionally perceive or intuit a world beyond their own, which is none other than that world which we recognize as our own historical reality (and in which Nabokov composed his works). But this metafictional maneuver implies, for us, a similar metaphysical realm beyond our own that we but dimly or rarely perceive or suspect. It is widely recognized, in this context, how often Nabokov likened, however playfully, the creative labor and absolute authority of the author of fiction to that of a divine Creator—indeed, he did so *so* often that I won't bother to example it here. But, as Samuel Schuman incisively observed, “this recurrent motif (Nabokov is to his created world as God is to his) makes no sense if there was to Nabokov no God” (*Nabokov's Shakespeare*

93). Saying that, I think, opens broadly, rather than closes or delimits, the theological potentialities of Nabokov's metaliterary fictions.

Michael Wood: I find myself torn between two ways of thinking about the 'meta'. Christopher asks whether the theological is 'ever reducible to the metaliterary', and I agree that it is not. But I don't think the reverse proposition works in the same way, so that a 'metafictional maneuver implies... a similar metaphysical realm beyond our own'. It may imply only a wish to play this particular game. I don't mean we can't get beyond the game, only that there is no metafictional trick that can guarantee that it is not... metafictional. This is the whole realm of *Pale Fire*, a great book about the need to believe.

Yuri Leving: **Samuel Schuman argued that “a staunchly secular approach does not do justice to the *religious* richness of [Nabokov's] fiction.” Indeed, Nabokov was adamant to assert the divinity of his authorial persona, often comparing, as well as the role of deception in his work, to “the Almighty” and even to Jesus Christ: “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.” How might critical approaches to Nabokov be reoriented to do justice to this religious richness? What are the risks of doing so and where are the limits?**

Matthew Roth: While I don't like to quibble about terminology, it seems to me that the richness Schuman highlights could be more accurately termed theological rather than religious. Theology is a set of ideas, while religion is a way to organize, propagate, and reinforce those ideas. Nabokov seems much more interested in the former than the latter, just as he was more interested in the human psyche than he was in any systematic school of psychology.

Michael Wood: I agree that 'a staunchly secular approach' can't do justice to the many mysteries and elusive invitations in Nabokov's work, but to call these elements the mark of a 'religious richness' is, I think, to go too far the other way, in part because Nabokov himself was so careful not to be dogmatic about belief or unbelief, and in part because 'religious', if unqualified, is a word that means too many things, including quite few that Nabokov's work refuses to have anything to

with. The joke about the ‘simple trick’ of ‘turning water into wine’ will seem blasphemous to many, and is, by any account, a brilliant statement of non-exemption: no one, not even Jesus Christ, is safe from the real joker. This would be the Mel Brooks side of Nabokov, and if in this case the joke is on religion, he happily makes similar mockery of the staunchly secular. Of all certainties, perhaps. But then the longing for certainty is a subject of great interest to the sympathetic sceptic.

Christopher Link: I love Michael’s framing here of “the Mel Brooks side of Nabokov.” It’s an apt reminder that much of what we love in Nabokov—the source of so much of the pleasure found in reading his works (as well as, say, his interviews)—is his *humor* and that his greatest achievements are not dour affairs of seriousness and plodding profundity but, rather, intricate and hilarious novels that plunge us unexpectedly into unanticipated depths. I can’t help but note, in this connection, that Brooks’s *The Producers*, with its show-stopping “Springtime for Hitler,” and Nabokov’s short story “Tyrants Destroyed” strikingly come to the same conclusion: each proffers, in laughter itself, “a kind of secret remedy against future tyrants, tigrroid monsters, half-witted torturers of man.” I’ll refrain here from developing a whole mini-treatise on laughter and its (positive, not *always* antithetical or satirical) relation to religion, but I will just mention that even the strictly ascetic fourth-century desert father Evagrius Ponticus notably identified *hilaritas* (joy, cheerfulness, good humor) as an essential Christian virtue, to say nothing of the venerable and thoroughgoing significance of humor in Jewish tradition (behind, and beyond, that of Mel Brooks).

Erik Eklund: I have always loved Nabokov’s charging God and Christ with deception. It is really an idea that only us Nabokovians seem to readily accept and eagerly affirm. What strikes me, however, is that in so many discussions about Nabokov’s metapoetics of deception, there is very little attention on the theological claim that underwrites Nabokov’s sense of deception. Nabokov’s art is full of deception because of nature, true, but nature is deceptive because, if we can take Nabokov at his word, “God” (which, as a name, is nothing other than a catchphrase that tells us almost nothing about whatever it is that God is, as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas equally tell us) is a (the) deceiver. I am inclined to agree with Schuman that Nabokov’s tendency to compare himself to the Almighty is a weak analogy in a non-theist context, and, of course, to say that Nabokov believed in “God” tells us far less than I think is generally believed. The difficulty

lies less in figuring out what Nabokov may have meant by the term (which strikes me as almost futile) than in identifying the mystical, religious or otherwise theological subtexts in Nabokov's works and the texts that compose those subtexts, and plumbing them for shared themes and ideas. The risks, of course, are that we extrapolate a bit too wildly from the literary performance called "Nabokov" to Nabokov the historical person, and that we draw too strict a genealogy or, put otherwise, that we overinterpret what is actually said. As Michael rightly points out, it is not merely that Nabokov does not provide an answer, but he is adamant about depicting what he sees to be the inevitable failure of any attempt to provide one in the first place.

Matthew Roth: Erik's nuance is fitting here. Since I teach at a religiously affiliated institution, my students are often keenly interested in the question of Nabokov's personal religious beliefs. Their interest, it seems to me, springs from their sense that Nabokov's works reveal a theologically-oriented consciousness. In that sense, it's an understandable question. What I try to show them is that it is more interesting to wonder what Nabokov's theological urge means within the works and for them as readers, as opposed to wondering whether or not Nabokov himself recited the creeds, a rather boring question by comparison.

Michael Wood: First, a word about words. I think 'theology' is a good word for what we are trying to talk about, more useful than religion or mysticism. There is a 'very real theology' in *Bend Sinister*, as Erik says; and as Matthew points out, 'theology is a set of ideas.' I believe I know what Mary means when she talks of Nabokov's having an 'intimate knowledge of mystical experience' and being 'a natural mystic,' and I agree if we are talking about a fascination with these things. But does he have knowledge? Isn't that just what he worries about not having? For me, 'mystic' carries a degree of certainty that something otherworldly is actually happening. But then I guess all our questions are conditioned by what we want to find, and this is the subject of my long, amiable argument with Brian Boyd. I think Nabokov gets as close to belief (in ghosts, God, the afterlife) as anyone can but always stops short of the final conviction; Brian thinks he gets to the other side but only just. The difference between these positions is tiny, but of course very real. Or if you prefer, real but tiny. The 'abiding interest,' as Chris and Mary say, is always there.

Mary Ross: If this is meant to be suggestions to critics, I would say don't let your humanistic or atheist biases get in the way. People tend to want their heroes to think as they do. What if he is not joking? The risk there is that he could end up canonized. The limit is that Nabokov doesn't have the answer, either. Or, at least he is wisely not explicit.

The resolutions in his novels are always ambiguous. Does Cincinnatus lose his head or just his ego-mind? Does insanity "save" Krug through a trick of his Creator, or does Grace save one when the ego-mind realizes its "real" world is a projection from an un-real personality? (i.e. ego-death reveals the immortal "self"). Do the characters of *Pale Fire* die ironically and needlessly? Or if one is to suppose that they are, in fact, all archetypes in Prof. Botkin's mind subsumed into the greater mind of the self – does he then transcend? The same may be asked of Luzhin, Cincinnatus, Krug, Person, or Vadim Vadimovitch. Insanity v. transcendence is the main ambiguity of most of Nabokov's novels. *Bona fide* mystical experiences are often deemed crazy and make people uneasy, including the experiencer. As Nabokov put it: "...the awful pressure of metamorphosis, the aura of a disgraceful fit in a public place" (*Speak, Memory* 132). This may be why he allows for dual solutions. Like young John Shade, the "wonder and the shame" becomes a secret that "must not be too explicit." The ambiguity and inexplicitness are necessary aspects to hold, but not contain, the mysticism and keep didacticism at bay. They also serve to keep Nabokov safe from attack or pigeonholes. I would not say that he was "adamant" to assert his authorial divinity, since there is always a wink in those declarations, but it seems he did see the creative impulse as divine, not metaphoric.

Christopher Link: There is that line in Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" in which the narrator, having compared two identical passages—the first by Cervantes, the second ostensibly penned by Borges's fictional Menard—says of the verbatim passages that critics will no doubt find Menard's "more ambiguous [...] but ambiguity is richness." This has always stuck with me and I suppose that, because I fully accept that "ambiguity is richness," I have probably also come to believe that richness consists, to some degree or other, in ambiguity. So, in speaking of the vein of religious richness running through Nabokov's work, waiting, as it were, only to be mined like so much gold, I can't help but think that a good deal of that richness is not only to be found in its depth and diversity and bright, glittering metaphysical interest, but in its *ambiguity*. In

other words, part of the richness of stumbling upon overt or subtle religious themes and imagery in Nabokov is the undecidability of it all. Is Nabokov merely satirically spoofing the divine, the demonic, the angelic, the saintly—figurations that should, in the end, strike us as hopelessly anachronistic? In other words, is this or that religious image or allusive shimmer only fool's gold of little genuine value? Or, are we perceiving in such material earnest hints of an age-old spiritual wisdom or insight breaking through and pushing aside all the jocular irony to reveal the hidden depths of Nabokov's literary project? The fact that we are never *quite* sure is what saves such material from the dual dangers of either a saccharine, pseudo-or-sub-literary piousness or an altogether arch, mocking nihilism. Nabokov keeps us on our toes and the "richness," I think, resides in being obliged to see such material with a double vision or a Keatsian negative capability. Critics must therefore take care to preserve these delicate ambiguities and resist the temptation to make Nabokov over into either a full-blown religious mystic (or, worse yet, a sectarian Christian dogmatist) or into a wholly satirical skeptic (or, worse yet, a nihilistic atheist of the most pedestrian variety). As Herman Melville once asserted, "Truth, who loves to be centrally located, is [to be] found between the two extremes" (*Typee* Ch. 27).

***Yuri Leving:* Scholars often speak of a "gnostic" element or theme in Nabokov's work, but it is not always clear how "gnosticism," broadly conceived, is antithetical to or intractably different from core ideas from the Christian tradition, "East" and "West." What, then, is "gnosticism" as it relates to Nabokov? Is the term helpful and to what extent does it differ from Christian conceptions of eschatology or the afterlife?**

Michael Wood: I think the term 'gnostic' is suggestive in the context of readings of Nabokov's work, but only as a remote parallel, a way of evoking a sympathy with belief that is not belief itself. I am looking at Elaine Pagels' book *The Gnostic Gospels*, where she compares 'the concerns of gnostic Christians' to 'a river driven underground'. There is no question of their not being Christians, however buried their doctrines were for so long, and however heretical much of their thought was proclaimed to be. I don't find a close connection to Nabokov here, I can't see him as some kind of unorthodox believer – to treat him this way tips him over just when he is doing his best balancing act, right on the outside edge of faith.

Erik Eklund: It is unclear to me how this is uniquely gnostic. "...on earth, as it is in heaven," runs the Christian prayer. The idea that this world is a mirror image of a transcendent realm, that this world is distorted image of the more perfect reality above, certainly has some gnostic aspects, but these ideas are central both to Hellenic Judaism and to the Christian vision "East" and "West" — though it must be granted that the Eastern traditions have done a better job of articulating these expressions throughout the centuries. Daniel Boyarin, J. Louis Martyn, and John Ashton each have shown that these ideas are not only implicit to the Johannine prologue ("In the beginning was the Word...") but are at home in the thought-world of Jewish apocalypticism. St. Bonaventure conceives the world as a finite (read: enclosed) infinity of divine reflections and footprints that the mind must ascend by steps (*gradus*) in the ascent to God. Of course, none of this is to say that Nabokov had any intimate awareness of the nuances of these ideas (though they are rather explicitly communicated in the Johannine prologue and in the Book of Revelation) — only that if Nabokov's two-world cosmology (as Johnson calls it) is *merely* gnostic, then so are Judaism and Christianity, which is patently false. As concerns eschatology, I am confident that Nabokov's main point is that the true purpose of eschatology is to stir in us a desire for that absolute reality, whatever it is. In this respect, he is not that different from C. S. Lewis, except, of course, in religion. Both believe that "tours through anthropomorphic paradises" (*Speak, Memory* 297) are rather useless and that their only purpose was historically situated to the time of their creation. Nabokov's eschatology also has some rather unique contours that distinguish it from Christianity, if only because he sought to distance himself from any associations with any religion. Nevertheless, the idea that in the afterlife we will be granted a kind of timeless access to all of history so as to come to understand the art of the master Artificer (which Boyd has thoroughly traced in his book on *Ada*) is by no means unique in the history of philosophical and religious speculation. It is an idea he shares with Origen of Alexandria.

Matthew Roth: Johnson, Toker, Davydov, Alexandrov, and others have made a strong case for the gnostic element in Nabokov's work, particularly focusing on the two-world theme and the quest for hidden knowledge. Yet these themes are not exclusive to gnosticism, and I think interpreters go too far when they claim that these themes actually reflect the author's own "gnostic beliefs."

The belief in an otherworld, and a desire to understand it, is not uncommon in many traditions, including Christianity, while also providing a mirror for the reader's own desire for knowledge and understanding. Given that full knowledge nearly always eludes Nabokov's characters, it might indeed be fair to see his novels as a critique of gnosticism inasmuch as that tradition posits that hidden secrets can be found.

Mary Ross: Scholars seem to not have a problem with suggesting quasi-Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism, but they seem to be allergic to specifically Christian interpretation of Nabokov's work, despite persistent Biblical tropes.

It would be incorrect to suggest that Nabokov was a Gnostic given that dualism is a main tenet of Gnosticism and Nabokov made it clear that he was an "indivisible Monist" (*Strong Opinions* 124). Gnosticism's strict asceticism and Nabokov's lepidopteric passion and transcendent delight in precisely perceived physical details obviate Gnosticism, as well. The main thing that ties him to Gnosticism is the Gnostic emphasis on personal experience of spiritual expansion and union. The concept of the "divine spark" within is Gnostic and is present through much of Nabokov's work (*Pale Fire* most blatantly).

Gnosticism holds that there are two deities: God-the-Almighty who shines effulgently and eternally, resting in his spotless *Pleroma*, and the dark demi-urge, Satan, a.k.a Ba'al/Beelzebub, Asmodeus, Ahriman, El, *etc.*, the god of the imperfect Creation (and therefore the creation of pain, destruction, and Evil). God has a whole finely delineated hierarchy of angels, however, and likewise the demi-urge has demons – it is the same in Christianity, but not as pronounced. Gnostics believe in Jesus, although they do not claim that he alone is "the way, the Truth, and the Life." The Gnostic belief in Jesus as more a saint than a god is probably closer to Nabokov. The Gnostics deny the incarnation, but they *do* believe in re-incarnation, which would also suit Nabokov.

The main difference is between doctrine and personal experience (gnosis). Obeisance to doctrinal belief, hope for unmerited grace (faith), and charity are core for organized Christianity. For the Gnostics the actual mystical experience of unity with the Unmoved Mover is primary, and organization and influence have never reached anything like the Christian churches (although Gnostic ideas are fundamental to Freemasonry). Nabokov's aversion to organizations and his assertion that "I know more than I can express in words, *etc.*" would put him more in the gnosis

camp. The Gnostics however were harshly ascetic. They believed flesh was evil and one should avoid all fleshly and material desires. The material world, in fact was seen as the source of Evil. This does not sound like Nabokov. Pederasty, homosexuality, incest, murder, etc. for subjects and un-pedantic ambiguous endings do not suggest Gnosticism. Of course neither are these tropes Christian. Is he intimating that the “wages of sin is Death,” then? I don’t think so; not exactly, although death is certainly a pervasive theme, as is sin and salvation. Nabokov’s ambiguous endings perhaps come partly from his own unresolved questionings.

Christopher Link: I think the claims of Gnosticism in Nabokov’s work are greatly exaggerated, even if some quite willfully, consciously gnostic themes appear in his work and thought. *Invitation to a Beheading* is, without doubt, suffused throughout with gnostic elements and its conclusion sees its nightmare world crumble away as an evil delusion in which Cincinnatus—better in every respect than this world—has been trapped. It is, indeed, a sort of Gnostic fable. Furthermore, in his playful interviews, and especially in that response to the question “Do you believe in God?” cited above, Nabokov often hints at a secret *gnosis* of which he is in possession but which he refuses to divulge. But the chief evidence against a thoroughly Gnostic worldview in Nabokov, I feel, is his inexhaustible affection for the loveliness of this world. In early poems such as “In Paradise” and “I Like That Mountain,” Nabokov vividly and explicitly envisions paradise as the preservation of the beauties, varieties, and beloved memories of *this* world—a theme to which he returns in *Pale Fire* when John Shade writes,

[...] I’ll turn down eternity unless
The melancholy and the tenderness
Of mortal life; the passion and the pain;
The claret taillight of that dwindling plane
Off Hesperus; your gesture of dismay
On running out of cigarettes; the way
You smile at dogs; the trail of silver slime
Snails leave on flagstones; this good ink, this rhyme.
This index card, this slender rubber band
Which always forms, when dropped, an ampersand,

Are found in Heaven by the newlydead
Stored in its strongholds through the years. [...]
(*Pale Fire* 52-53, lines 523-536).

Passages such as these, in my estimation, express a strongly *anti*-Gnostic outlook which, far from rejecting or denying the world as evil, ensnaring, and illusory—to be escaped at all costs—instead perceives the whole of life and of Creation, in its minutest, most concrete, most “fleshly” details, as the very matter of salvific redemption. The fact that Nabokov’s work swings, pendulum-like, between overtly Gnostic and strongly anti-Gnostic imagery and attitudes is, it should be noted, something that the author arguably shares with Christian tradition, which regularly affirms the Creation as good—the work of a loving, beneficent, and just Creator, often even looking to Nature as a second book of Scripture—while also urging adherents, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world” (1 John 2:15-16, NRSV). I think Nabokov would bristle mightily at this spiritualized, wholesale rejection of “the world,” even as it entails precisely the same sort of gnostic urge or outlook that also informs *Invitation to a Beheading* and, say, the horror-shaped world of *Bend Sinister*.

To be continued in the next issue.

