

**Gavriel Shapiro**

## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON NABOKOV'S FAITH

---

That human life is but a first installment of the serial soul and that one's individual secret is not lost in the process of earthly dissolution, becomes something more than an optimistic conjecture, and even more than a matter of religious faith, when we remember that only commonsense rules immortality out.

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*

**N**abokov's faith is of paramount importance to understanding his Weltanschauung. In this article, I discuss the unique ways in which Nabokov treats some biblical motifs and, following Samuel Schuman's pioneering research, examine the writer's theological views.<sup>1</sup>

A few words about Nabokov's religious background. He was baptized and brought up as an Eastern Orthodox Christian, or as he termed it a "Greek Catholic."<sup>2</sup> As a child, Nabokov used to recite bedtime prayers: "Closed inside shutters, a lighted candle, Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, something-something little child, the child kneeling on the pillow that presently would engulf his humming head. English prayers and the little icon featuring a sun-tanned Greek Catholic saint formed an innocent association upon which I look back with pleasure."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See Schuman, "Beautiful Gate," especially 52–55, and "Nabokov's God; God's Nabokov." More recently, the subject has been addressed in the following studies: Hart, "Nabokov's Supernatural Secret"; Davydov, "Faith"; Eklund, "A Green Lane in Paradise" and "The Gist of Masks."

<sup>2</sup> Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 85–86.

The family celebrated major Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Nabokov recalls “the huge Christmas tree that touched with its star the pale-green ceiling of our prettiest drawing room” and “a one-week Easter vacation, during which painted eggs enlivened the breakfast table.”<sup>4</sup> The writer also reminisces that as a boy he attended with his mother, Elena Ivanovna, a service at the Russian church in Wiesbaden, Germany, “that might have been in the Lenten season.”<sup>5</sup> While studying at Tenishev School between 1911 and 1917, Nabokov had Sacred History as one of its subjects.<sup>6</sup>

When asked about the family religious practices, Elena Vladimirovna Sikorski, Nabokov’s sister (1906–2000), replied, “We had the traditions of an ordinary Russian family. We would go to church, would fast, then would break the fast [...] I have preserved my father’s Gospel in French, where all the texts, read before Easter, are marked on the first page in his marvelous handwriting.”<sup>7</sup> On another occasion, Elena Vladimirovna was more specific about the family rituals:

He [V. D. Nabokov] knew perfectly well and loved the church service. We children were taken [...] to matins, but not every Sunday. But we were never taken to the all-night vigils. And while on the country estate, we rode to the church, although it was half an hour walk. I remember very well that we always rode on Trinity Sunday. And on Holy Week we went every day. And that was the week when there was also fasting at our home.<sup>8</sup>

While Vladimir Dmitrievich “loved the church service,” Elena Ivanovna, who had a “healthy distaste for the ritual of the Greek Catholic Church [...], found a deep appeal in the moral and

---

<sup>4</sup> Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 180.

<sup>5</sup> Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 96.

<sup>6</sup> Skonechnaia, “Nabokov v Tenishevskom uchilishche,” 109–12; Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 166.

<sup>7</sup> «У нас были традиции обыкновенной русской семьи, мы ходили в церковь, постились, потом разговлялись [...] У меня сохранилось Евангелие моего отца на французском языке, где его дивным почерком на первой странице отмечены все тексты, которые читаются перед Пасхой»; Zolotusskii, “Puteshestvie k Nabokovu.” Here and henceforth, unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine.

<sup>8</sup> «Он [В. Д. Набоков] прекрасно знал и любил церковную службу. Нас, детей, водили [...] на заутреню, но не каждое воскресенье. А на всенощную не водили—никогда. И в имении мы ездили в церковь, хотя пешком—полчаса пройти. Очень хорошо помню, что всегда ездили на Троицу. А на Страстной неделе ходили каждый день. И это была неделя, когда был пост и у нас дома»; Bobrovskaia, “V gostiakh u Eleny Vladimirovny Sikorskoj (Nabokovoi).”

poetical side of the Gospels”; Nabokov further comments on his mother that “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.”<sup>9</sup> It is quite possible, therefore, that Elena Ivanovna’s belief in the hereafter exerted influence on Nabokov’s perception of otherworldliness (see the discussion below).

In “the Russian years,” Nabokov identifies himself as “a Russian Orthodox” and mentions wearing a cross.<sup>10</sup> He proclaims his predilection for Russian Orthodoxy over Catholicism, declares that he “personally prefer[s] the most worthless, baldish little Russian parish priest to the rustling abbot with a pseudo-inspired, waxy countenance,” and claims to have “the wonderful, happy, religion [...], my very own.”<sup>11</sup> The writer sends his wife, Véra, a clipping of an article from the British weekly, *The Observer*, “about the discovery of Christ’s appearance,” which he finds “rather convincing” and “very interesting.”<sup>12</sup>

In “the American years,” by way of Adam Krug, one of his most attractive characters, Nabokov approvingly describes the advent of Christianity as “that wonderful Jewish sect whose dream of the gentle young rabbi dying on the Roman *crux* had spread over all Northern lands.”<sup>13</sup> Perhaps for this very reason, as a true Christian, Nabokov was especially indignant upon encountering any evidence of anti-Semitism. Thus, the writer recalled an incident when he, accompanied by Dmitri and his son’s friend, had gone to a New England inn,

Opening the menu, Nabokov noticed therein the succinct stipulation “Gentiles Only.” He called over the waitress and asked her what the management would do if there appeared at the door that very moment a bearded and berobed man, leading a mule bearing his pregnant wife, all of them dusty and tired from a long journey. “What... what are you talking about?”

---

<sup>9</sup> Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, 52 and 151–52. It is unclear whether Nabokov continued to wear a cross, but an episode in *Pnin* (1957) may suggest that he did. When Pnin comes to bathe in “the bubbling and glistening stream,” he removes “from his neck” “the Greek Catholic cross on a golden chainlet”; Nabokov, *Pnin* 127 and 128.

<sup>11</sup> Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, 78.

<sup>12</sup> Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, 144.

<sup>13</sup> Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, 193.

the waitress stammered. “I am talking about Jesus Christ!” exclaimed Nabokov, as he pointed to the phrase in question, rose from the table, and led his party from the restaurant.<sup>14</sup>

Here Nabokov alludes to the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph’s journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem (Luke 2: 1–5). Although the Gospel does not specify the mode of transportation, a mule (or a donkey) was traditionally used in paintings depicting this biblical episode as, for example, on the left panel of the Portinari Altarpiece by Hugo van der Goes, *Mary and Joseph on the Way to Bethlehem* (ca. 1475, the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence).

In addition to his overall favorable attitude toward Christianity, Nabokov possessed an enviable knowledge of the iconography of Christian saints. According to Peter Kahn, a painter and Cornell Professor of Fine Arts, who was commissioned to design stained glass windows for the chapel of St. John’s Episcopalian Church in downtown Ithaca,

Nabokov recited fifty-five sainted Johns in that sort of order in which he loved to categorize. 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 these two saints.<sup>15</sup>

It is a small wonder, therefore, that throughout his literary career, and expressly at its early stage, Nabokov composed a sizable number of poems and short stories permeated with biblical motifs. Suffice it to mention poems such as “The Last Supper” (“Tainaia Vecheria,” 1920), “Through the garden Christ walked with his disciples...” (“Sadom shel Khristos s uchenikami...,” 1921), “The Glasses of St. Joseph” (“Ochki Iosifa,” 1923), and “The Mother” (“Mat’,” 1925) as

---

<sup>14</sup> Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 436.

<sup>15</sup> Kahn, Untitled, 229.

well as short stories such as “The Word” (“Slovo,” 1923), “Christmas” (“Rozhdestvo,” 1925), and “Easter Rain” (“Paskhal’nyi dozhd’,” 1925).<sup>16</sup>

“The Last Supper” is one of Nabokov’s earliest known biblical poems:

The hour is pensive, the supper severe,  
the predictions are treason and parting.  
The nocturnal pearl bathes with its light  
the petals of the oleander.

Apostle inclines toward apostle.  
The Christ has silvery hands.  
The candles pray lucidly, and on the table  
creep the winged insects of night.<sup>17</sup>

It is apparent that Leonardo da Vinci’s celebrated mural served Nabokov as the visual impetus. In particular, the poem may be linked to it through the line “Apostle inclines toward Apostle.”<sup>18</sup> The most intriguing aspects of the poem, however, lie in its differences from Leonardo’s masterpiece. While Leonardo depicts the biblical scene at daylight, Nabokov places the event in the night setting, thereby departing considerably from the illustrious Italian. This change enables Nabokov to include the shining full moon which he dubs “the nocturnal pearl.” The Last Supper is widely believed to have taken place on the eve of Passover (the 14th of Nissan), and according to the Hebrew lunar calendar, this is the night when the moon is at her fullest.

---

<sup>16</sup> For an earlier analysis of the poems, see Shapiro, “Pictorial Origins of Three Biblical Poems by Vladimir Nabokov.” For a discussion of “The Word,” see Schuman, “Nabokov’s God; God’s Nabokov,” 77–79. For an examination of “Christmas,” see Bethea, “Izgnanie kak ukhod v kokon”; Shroyer, *The World of Nabokov’s Stories*, 33–38; and Dillard, “Nabokov’s Christmas Stories.” For a study of “Easter Rain,” see Polsky, “Vladimir Nabokov’s Short Story ‘Easter Rain’”; Shroyer, “Nabokov’s Use of Hebrew in ‘Easter Rain.’”

<sup>17</sup> Nabokov, *Selected Poems*, 6. «Час задумчивый строгого ужина... / Предсказанья измен и разлуки... / Озаряет ночная жемчужина / олеандровые лепестки. // Наклонился апостол к апостолу... / У Христа–серебристые руки. / Ясно молятся свечи, и по столу / ночные ползут мотыльки»; Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 535. It seems more accurate to render the last line of the poem as “the nocturnal moths are crawling.”

<sup>18</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the mural, see Steinberg, *Leonardo’s Incessant “Last Supper”*; Marani and Barcilon, *Leonardo*.

By positioning the Last Supper in the nighttime moonlit setting, Nabokov apparently intended to underscore an anticipation of the subsequent event: Christ's retreat to the Gethsemane Garden wherein he prayed before his arrest. Known in Christian iconography as the Agony in the Garden, the scene is occasionally depicted with full moonlight, as for example, in the Studio of El Greco's replica of the eponymous painting (the 1590s), which has been part of the National Gallery collection since 1919.<sup>19</sup> Nabokov could notice the canvas during his forays into London when studying at Cambridge University (1919–22).

The night setting allows Nabokov to introduce additional components in his depiction of the scene. Taking a cue from Leonardo who, while drawing the spectator's attention to the gestures of all the participants, manifestly focuses on the hands of Christ, Nabokov utilizes the nocturnal moonlit setting to highlight Christ's "silvery hands." In so doing, Nabokov evidently alludes to Christ's purity and to the divine wisdom of his teachings.<sup>20</sup>

Further, Nabokov exploits the verbal chiaroscuro on two different planes: on the one plane, he juxtaposes the moonlight with darkness, thereby spotlighting Christ's "silvery hands," on the other plane, he contrasts the candlelight with the darkness when pointing out that "the candles pray lucidly." This candlelight illumines diminutive objects such as the oleander petals and the moths on the table.

By including "the petals of the oleander," Nabokov achieves at least three objectives: an expert entomologist, well versed in world flora, he offers the only marker to indicate the poem's biblical locale, since oleander has been among the most widespread plants in the Land of Israel, and specifically in Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, by referring to the nocturnal moths shortly after the oleander petals, Nabokov perhaps alludes to the Oleander Hawk Moth, which he later mentions in "The Aurelian."<sup>22</sup> In addition, by way of oleander, Nabokov once again alludes to Leonardo and his immortal mural, as the adjectival plural form of the plant, which he employs in the original Russian ("oleandrovye"), contains the full anagram of the painter's given name.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, in

---

<sup>19</sup> Wethey, *El Greco and His School*, 2: 29. The original painting is part of the Toledo (Ohio) Museum of Art collection.

<sup>20</sup> Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, 883.

<sup>21</sup> Tristram, *The Natural History of the Bible*, 416–18; Zohary, *Plants of the Bible*, 133.

<sup>22</sup> I am indebted to Robert Dirig for this suggestion. See Nabokov, *Stories*, 254; Zimmer, *A Guide to Nabokov's Butterflies and Moths*, 140.

<sup>23</sup> I am grateful to Becky Bowman for this idea. Leonardo da Vinci had a great appeal to Nabokov by means of both

mentioning the oleander petals, the poet evokes the legend about Christ's divine origin: the plant miraculously burst into blossom when St. Joseph was chosen to take the Virgin Mary into matrimony. The blossoming oleander as St. Joseph's distinctive feature transpires, for example, in the painting attributed to Giovanni Cariani, *The Virgin and the Child with Saints Joseph and Lucy and a Woman and a Boy at Prayer* (ca. 1540). The National Gallery acquired the painting in 1886, and Nabokov could view it there at the time of his studies at Cambridge.<sup>24</sup> "The winged insects of night" ("the nocturnal moths" in the poem's Russian text), similarly to butterflies, signify the ensuing Resurrection.<sup>25</sup> Altogether, Nabokov depicts a highly original verbal painting of this renowned biblical event.

The following year, Nabokov composed a poem, with the opening line "Through a garden Christ walked with his disciples..." in which he once again displays an unusual approach to another Jesus-related episode. Looking at the carcass of a dog, one of the apostles says, "Evil was the dog" and finds its death "bare and abominable," whereas "Christ simply utters: 'its teeth are like pearls.'"<sup>26</sup> On November 6, 1921, immediately after completing the poem, Nabokov commented in a letter to his mother: "Today my Muse broke her fast with a poem whose symbol is: and in unsightliness it is possible to detect beauty."<sup>27</sup> It bears noting that Nabokov portrays Jesus as the paragon of aesthetic sensibilities, perhaps even a poet, who not only pays close attention to the minutiae of details but also sees beauty where ordinary people do not—in unprepossessing, commonly perceived things.<sup>28</sup>

---

his magnificent art and breathtaking scientific explorations. While teaching at Wellesley College (1941–48), Nabokov gave a talk on the renowned Italian. It appears that the text of this talk, entitled "Leonardo the Great," has not survived. Delivered on February 23, 1942, and sponsored by the Italian Department and the Circolo Italiano, it was announced and summarized in the Wellesley College newspaper. In this lecture, Nabokov says about Leonardo: "Harmony is the only true greatness; Leonardo's personality was a blend of humanity's choicest ingredients"; he also remarks that Leonardo's painting represents "a search for harmony, controlled movement [...], and a unity of genius"; Nabokov, *Think, Write, Speak*, 205.

<sup>24</sup> Levi D'Ancona, *The Garden of Renaissance*, 256–57 and 259; Penny, *Sixteenth-Century Italian Paintings*, 45–47.

<sup>25</sup> Murray, *The Oxford Companion to Christian Art and Architecture*, 69. Since Nabokov was an accomplished lepidopterist, these moths are perhaps one of the earliest manifestations of his authorial presence.

<sup>26</sup> «Говорил апостолу апостол: / «Злой был пес; и смерть его нага, / мерзостна» . . . Христос же молвил просто: / «Зубы у него как жемчуга . . . »»; Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 448.

<sup>27</sup> «Сегодня же, муза моя разговелась стишком, символ которого: и в уродстве можно приметить красоту»; as cited in Nabokov, *Stikhotvoreniia*, 543.

<sup>28</sup> For the perception of Jesus as a poet, see Missick, *Jesus the Poet*; Barnstone, *The Poems of Jesus Christ*.

“The Glasses of St. Joseph” is yet another poem, in which Nabokov exhibits a singular, somewhat polemical attitude:

Wipe off your teardrops and listen: One sunny midday, an aged  
carpenter forgot his glasses on his workbench. Laughing,  
a boy ran in; paused; espied; sneaked up;  
and touched the airy lenses. Instantly  
a sunny shimmer traversed the world, flashed across distant,  
dreary lands, warming the blind, and cheering the sighted.<sup>29</sup>

It is worth noting here Nabokov’s creative approach. One is mindful that in Russian Orthodoxy, there was a prevalent attitude that considered laughter sinful.<sup>30</sup> This attitude was put across by Vasily Rozanov in his 1907 lecture “On Sweetest Jesus and the Bitter Fruits of the World” (published in 1911): “Christ never *laughed*. Is it not obvious that all Gogol’s laughter would be criminal in him as a Christian? I do not remember whether Christ *smiled*. The stamp of sorrow, of ashy sorrow, is evident in the Gospels.”<sup>31</sup> By contrast, Nabokov depicts a laughing, mischievous boy Jesus. The child’s playful touching of the glasses, while metaphorically alluding to his later teachings, draws the reader’s attention to the joyous facet of Christianity.

Similarly to the hitherto discussed poems, Nabokov offers an unconventional attitude to Christianity in “The Mother”:

---

<sup>29</sup> Nabokov, *Selected Poems*, 9. «Слезы отри и послушай: в солнечный полдень старый / плотник очки позабыл на своем верстаке. Со смехом / мальчик вбежал в мастерскую; замер; заметил; подкрался; / тронул легкие стекла, и только он тронул,—мгновенно / по миру солнечный зайчик стрельнул, заиграл по далеким / пасмурным странам, слепых согревая и радуя зрячих»; Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 604. There are at least two visual antecedents of this poem. The laughing boy Jesus is portrayed in the sculpture *The Virgin with the Laughing Child* (ca. 1472, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London), attributed to the young Leonardo as early as 1899; see Phillips, “Verrocchio or Leonardo da Vinci?,” 39; this attribution was reiterated in Sirén [the surname which Nabokov could find undoubtedly curious], *Leonardo da Vinci*, 28. The carpenter’s shop as the poem’s setting may allude to John Everett Millais, *Christ in the Carpenter’s Shop* (1850, the Tate Gallery, London). Nabokov could see both works of art while studying at Cambridge.

<sup>30</sup> Likhachev, Panchenko, Ponyrko, *Smekh v Drevnei Rusi*, 122.

<sup>31</sup> Rozanov, *Temnyi lik*, 254; for the English translation, see Rozanov, “On Sweetest Jesus and the Bitter Fruits of the World,” 94.



Night falls. He has been executed.  
From Golgotha the crowd descends and winds  
between the olive trees, like a slow serpent;  
and mothers watch as John downhill  
into the mist, with urgent words, escorts  
gray, haggard Mary.

To bed he'll help her, and lie down himself,  
and through his slumber hear till morning  
her tossings and her sobs.  
What if her son had stayed at home with her,  
and carpentered and sung? What if those tears  
cost more than our redemption?

The Son of God will rise, in radiance orbéd;  
on the third day a vision at the tomb  
will meet the wives who bought the useless myrrh;  
Thomas will feel the luminescent flesh;  
the wind of miracles will drive men mad,  
and many will be crucified.

Mary, what are to you the fantasies  
of fishermen? Over your grief days skim  
insensibly, and neither on the third  
nor hundredth, never will he heed your call  
and rise, your brown firstborn who baked mud sparrows  
in the hot sun, at Nazareth.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Nabokov, *Selected Poems*, 76. «Смеркается. Казнен. С Голгофы отвалив, / спускается толпа, виясь между  
олив, / подобно медленному змию. / И матери глядят, как под гору, в туман, / увещевающий уводит Иоанн /

Nabokov imbues the poem's opening line with a metaphoric meaning: the death of Jesus suggests the world falling into darkness not only for the generations of his followers, who have been mourning his Crucifixion, but for his disciples and family, his mother, first and foremost. Nabokov's rather personal approach to this biblical subject finds its expression in his focusing not on the canonical aspect of the Crucifixion and its aftermath, but rather on the individual tragedy—the maternal bereavement of the Virgin Mary over the loss of her son, Jesus. This focus is distinctly noticeable in the second and the fourth (last) stanzas of the poem.<sup>33</sup>

It is obvious that in describing Mary's inconsolable grief over the death of her son, Nabokov greatly empathized with this emotion. The writer implicitly conveys here *his* inconsolable grief over the loss of his father to an act of violence only three years earlier. Vladimir Dmitrievich died while shielding the longtime friend and the then political opponent, Pavel Miliukov, from the assassins' bullets, thereby fulfilling the Christian commandment, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15: 13).

Nabokov seems to attach a great significance to the fact that his father's death occurred close to Easter. This conjecture is supported by the poem "Easter" ("Paskha," 1922), which

---

седую, страшную Марию. // Уложит спать ее, и сам приляжет он, / и будет до утра подслушивать сквозь сон / ее рыдания и томленье... / Что, если у нее остался бы Христос, / и плотничал, и пел? Что, если этих слез / не стоит наше искупленье? // Воскреснет Божий Сын, сиянием окружен; / у гроба, в третий день, виденье встретит жен, / вотще купивших ароматы; / святящуюся плоть ощупает Фома; / от веянья чудес земля сойдет с ума, / и будут многие распяты... // Мария, что тебе до бреда рыбарей? / Неосвязаемо над горестью твоей / дни проплывают,—и ни в третий, / ни в сотый, никогда не вспрыгнет он на зов,— / твой смуглый первенец, лепивший воробьев / на солнцепеке, в Назарете...»; Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 564–65.

Approximately ten years later, in *The Gift*, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev comments on Chernyshevski: "never did he learn [...] to fashion sparrows out of clay," thereby poking fun at the Russian radical intelligentsia that viewed Chernyshevski as "Christ the Second"; Nabokov, *The Gift*, 213 and 215. The account about the boy Jesus bringing clay birds to life is familiar from the so-called Infancy Gospel of Thomas, also known as the *Paidika*; see Davis, *Christ Child*, 47–63.

As I demonstrated elsewhere, iconographically, the poem's visual imagery, namely, that John the Evangelist accompanies the devastated, grieving Virgin Mary from the scene of the Crucifixion, conjures up Nikolai Ge's *Return from Christ's Entombment* (1859, the State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow); see Shapiro, "Pictorial Origins of Three Biblical Poems by Vladimir Nabokov," 52–53.

<sup>33</sup> Likewise, Stanislav Shvabrin perceptively avers with regard to the poem's last stanza that "he [Nabokov] held in high regard the flight of imagination, unauthorized by dogma, that fills pious canonical lacunae with desacralized human meaning and individual human content" («он высоко ставил полет несанкционированного догмой воображения, наполняющего благочестивые канонические лакуны десакрализованным человеческим смыслом и индивидуальным человеческим содержанием»); Shvabrin, "Pechat' neprekhodiashego: Nabokov-Sirin o Pushkine, Bloke—i o sebe," 193.

Nabokov dedicated to his father's memory and published in *Rul'* on the Orthodox Easter Sunday. (V. D. Nabokov died on March 28, 1922; that year, the Orthodox Easter Sunday fell on April 3 by the Julian and on April 16 by the Gregorian calendars.) It is, therefore, by no means accidental that Nabokov published "The Mother," too, on the Orthodox Easter Sunday, April 6 (19), 1925.<sup>34</sup>

Focusing on the personal tragedy of the Virgin Mary, Nabokov rhetorically inquires, "what if those tears cost more than our redemption?" By posing this question, the poem's narrator casts doubt on the worthiness of the Crucifixion sacrifice in view of the maternal sorrow. In this poem, Nabokov pursues the humane, emotional, and aesthetic rather than the conventional aspect of the biblical narrative and expresses a uniquely personal outlook.

Now, after demonstrating Nabokov's ingenious treatment of biblical motifs in his earlier poetry, let us turn to the writer's belief system. It appears that it is comprised of the following three main components: the existence of the otherworld, human creativity as analogous to that of the Almighty, and trust in the Divine.

It was Véra Nabokov who first brought to light the utmost importance of otherworldliness (*potustoronnost'*) for the writer's world perception, which "as a certain watermark symbolizes all his creation"—the subject that Nabokov scholars have explored ever since.<sup>35</sup> This attitude of the writer is corroborated on many occasions and particularly in his diary entry for February 16, 1951, in which he notes down, "Consciousness without Time (the future of the immortal soul)."<sup>36</sup>

The earliest recorded references to otherworldliness in Nabokov's oeuvre appear in his 1917–18 translation of Émile Verhaeren's poem "Les Voyageurs" as well as in his 1922 essay on Rupert Brooke's poetry.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps one of the earliest manifestations of this precept in Nabokov's

---

<sup>34</sup> Cf. the opening line of the poem "Hexameters," written in commemoration of the first anniversary of V. D. Nabokov's death, "Death is a morning ray, spring awakening" («Смерть—это утренний луч, пробуждение весеннее»). In commenting on this line, Maria Malikova asserts that "in Nabokov's artistic world, his [father's] death is steadily connected with resurrection [sic]" («в художественном мире Набокова его [отца] смерть устойчиво связана с воскресением»); see Nabokov, *Stikhotvoreniia*, 583.

<sup>35</sup> «как некий водяной знак, символизирует все его творчество»; Véra Nabokov, "Predislovie," 3. For a comprehensive discussion of otherworldliness in Nabokov's works, see Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*.

<sup>36</sup> Barabtarlo, *Insomniac Dreams*, 161.

<sup>37</sup> See, respectively, Shvabrin, *Between Rhyme and Reason*, 43–47; Johnson, "Vladimir Nabokov and Rupert Brooke," 187 and 190. For Nabokov's essay on Rupert Brooke, see Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 728–44 and *Think, Write, Speak*, 7–24.

own corpus arises in his heretofore-untranslated poem “Oh, how you are raring to go on the winged voyage” (“O kak ty rvesh’sia v put’ krylatyi,” 1923):

Oh, how you are raring to go on the winged voyage,  
my insane soul,  
from the sunniest ward  
in the bright hospital of being!

And, raving about the steep flight,  
how you are stomping and writhing  
in the feverish straitjacket of flesh,  
in the angst of bodily tightness!

Or, quiet, in subtle insanity,  
you are buzzing and humming with yourself,  
imagining yourself a child,  
a pine, a nightingale, an owl.

Put trust in nightingales and owls,  
endure, loving self-deception,—  
death will rumble with a tight bolt  
and will let you out into eternity.<sup>38</sup>

Here Nabokov intimates that earthly existence is transient, as death liberates a human soul from its corporeal constraints and allows it to enter the hereafter.

---

<sup>38</sup> «О, как ты рвешься в путь крылатый, / безумная душа моя, / из самой солнечной палаты / в больнице светлой бытия! // И, бредя о крутом полете, / как топчешься, как бьешься ты / в горячечной рубашке плоти, / в тоске телесной тесноты! // Иль, тихая, в безумье тонком / гудишь-звенишь сама с собой, / вообразив себя ребенком, / сосною, соловьем, совой. // Поверь же соловьям и совам, / терпи, самообман любя,— / смерть громыхнет тугим засовом / и в вечность выпустит тебя»; Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1: 608.

A better-known display of this notion comes into view in *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935–36). It is evident already in the novel’s epigraph: “Comme un fou se croit Dieu, nous nous croyons mortels.—Delaland [sic]: *Discours sur les ombres*” (“As a madman believes himself to be God, [so] we believe ourselves to be mortal.—Delalande, *Discourse on the Shadows*”).<sup>39</sup> Here Nabokov employs the *e contrario* device, which Quintilian defines as belonging to “figures of thought” in which “arguments are drawn from opposites.”<sup>40</sup> Semantically inverted, this syllogism suggests that humans erroneously believe in their mortality. It is instructive that Cincinnatus’s last written word is “death” which he instantaneously crosses out.<sup>41</sup>

A concurrent perspective on the subject surfaces in the novel in the twice-sung quasi-operatic phrase “*Mali é trano t’amesti!*”<sup>42</sup> Gennady Barabtarlo anagrammatically deciphered the phrase as the Russian dictum, “Smert’ mila[;] éto taina,” which he rendered as “Death is sweet, [but] it’s a secret.”<sup>43</sup> This dictum tallies well with Cincinnatus’s observation, which he jots down in his diary: “I know that the horror of death is nothing really, a harmless convulsion—perhaps even healthful for the soul,” and he muses over “sages who rejoiced at death.”<sup>44</sup>

What sages could Cincinnatus have in mind? It is quite possible that Nabokov, inter alia, alludes here to Socrates who was sentenced to death by the Athenian court for his alleged impiety. Rather than renounce his beliefs, Socrates reputedly drank the poisonous hemlock of his own accord, or, to quote Plato’s *Phaedo*, “he seemed to me to be happy, both in his bearing and his words, he was meeting death so fearlessly and nobly.”<sup>45</sup> Nabokov could visualize this deed by

---

<sup>39</sup> Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Quintilian, *The Institutio Oratoria*, 3: 498–501.

<sup>41</sup> Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 206. Intriguingly, in a poem included in *The Empyrean Path* collection (1923), Nabokov advises his reader: “Live. Don’t complain, don’t count / either years past or planets, / and harmonious thoughts will merge / into the single answer: there is no death” («Живи. Не жалуйся, не числи / ни лет минувших, ни планет, / и стройные сольются мысли / в ответ единый: смерти нет»); *Ssoch*, 1: 468. This notion is echoed months later in Nabokov’s short story “Gods,” in which the narrator declares: “There is no death [...] There can be no death” (*Stories* 50).

<sup>42</sup> Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 103.

<sup>43</sup> Barabtarlo, *Aerial View*, 194. It seems more accurate to translate the Russian phrase as “Death is nice—it’s a secret.” Barabtarlo aptly observes with regard to the desirability of death that “this scrambled formula is paraphrased in a number of Nabokov’s writings, from his early short stories [...] to his very last, unfinished creation, the first working title for which was *Dying Is Fun*; Barabtarlo, *Aerial View*, 195. Nabokov later used this working title as the subtitle for *The Original of Laura*.

<sup>44</sup> Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 193.

<sup>45</sup> Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, 1: 58e. On the affinity between Cincinnatus and Socrates, see Babikov, *Prochtenie Nabokova*, 151–53.

means of Jacques-Louis David's famous painting *The Death of Socrates* (1787, since 1931 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City).<sup>46</sup> We are mindful that Socrates is referred to in Nabokov's dystopia in the announcement that "the new comic opera *Socrates Must Decrease*" to be performed shortly after Cincinnatus's execution, presumably serving as an additional stern warning to the "townspeople."<sup>47</sup>

Socrates, it is important to note, was perceived as a forerunner of Christianity. A Christian apologist Justin Martyr promulgated this idea as early as the second century. This notion found support in modern times in the works of Søren Kierkegaard and Paul Carus.<sup>48</sup> Nabokov could also have in mind Christian martyrs-saints who met their tragic fate with joy. Such facial expressions may be found, for example, in Antonio Allegri da Correggio's *Martyrdom of Four Saints* (1524–26, Galleria Nazionale, Parma), as well as in the study for the painting (Musée du Louvre, Paris), in which one of the martyrs is shown being beheaded with the sword. Nabokov could see both the painting and the preparatory study reproduced in Henry Thode's *Correggio* which was available to him at his father's library.<sup>49</sup>

The negation of death and longing for it may present a seeming contradiction. The latter may be reconciled, if one considers, similarly to the "Oh, how you are raring to go on the winged voyage" poem, that physical death in Nabokov's dystopia sets a human soul free from its bodily limitations, thereby allowing its transition to the hereafter. Already at the beginning of the novel, Cincinnatus feels happy upon imagining this transformation:

He took off his head like a toupee, took off his collarbones like shoulder straps, took off his rib cage like a hauberk. He took off his hips and his legs, he took off his arms like gauntlets and threw them in a corner. What was left of him gradually dissolved, hardly coloring the air. At first Cincinnatus simply reveled in the coolness; then, fully immersed in his secret medium, he began freely and happily to...<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> The writer could also have in mind Mark Antokolsky's eponymous sculpture (1875, the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg), mentioned in *The Gift* (Nabokov, *The Gift*, 56).

<sup>47</sup> Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 220.

<sup>48</sup> Cantrell, "Was Socrates a Christian Before Christ?"; Carus, "Socrates a Forerunner of Christianity."

<sup>49</sup> Thode, *Correggio*, 86 and 87; *Sistematischeskii katalog*, 48, no. 1086.

<sup>50</sup> Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 32.

This passage suggests that the body merely serves as a knightly armor designed to protect and preserve the essential part of a human being—the soul.<sup>51</sup> This felicitous exercise may also be perceived as a rehearsal of the novel’s finale when, upon presumable beheading, Cincinnatus “made his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him.”<sup>52</sup> The latter action seems to indicate that Cincinnatus departs from the disintegrating surroundings, from “the horrible ‘here,’ the dark dungeon, in which a relentlessly howling heart is incarcerated [sic],” and crosses over to “*there*, [where] everything pleases one’s soul”—the empyrean realm populated by immortal spirits of other humans.<sup>53</sup> As in the poem, this “dungeon” also refers to the rib cage to which a human soul is confined and from which it is liberated upon death. In retrospect, it becomes clear that Cincinnatus refers to his soul within his corporeal self when he speaks of “a pearl ring embedded in a shark’s gory fat” and dubs it “my eternal.”<sup>54</sup> It is also obvious that he firmly believes in the otherworld. When the librarian expresses regret that Cincinnatus will have no time to learn “the Oriental languages” because of the approaching date of his execution, Cincinnatus replies, “It’s all right. My soul will make up for it.”<sup>55</sup>

The hereafter also plays a notable role in *The Gift* (1937–38; 1952). Earlier in the novel, we learn that Alexander Yakovlevich Chernyshevski served as “Chairman of the Society for Struggle with the Other World,” thereby de facto acknowledging its existence.<sup>56</sup> When Fyodor visits him in a mental institution, Alexander Yakovlevich not only mistakes Fyodor for a ghost but also infers that two ghosts already occupy the chair Fyodor is about to take.<sup>57</sup> However, toward the end of the novel, on his deathbed, Alexander Yakovlevich becomes wholeheartedly convinced that there was no life after death. Lying in the room with the lowered blinds, he exclaims, “What nonsense. Of course there is nothing afterwards [...] It is as clear as the fact that it is raining.”<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> I am grateful to Bailey Regan, a student in my fall 2020 Nabokov seminar, for bringing this knightly armor imagery to my attention.

<sup>52</sup> Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 223.

<sup>53</sup> Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 93 and 94.

<sup>54</sup> Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 90.

<sup>55</sup> Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 179.

<sup>56</sup> Nabokov, *The Gift*, 91.

<sup>57</sup> See Nabokov, *The Gift*, 91.

<sup>58</sup> Nabokov, *The Gift*, 312.

Nabokov repudiates this allegation by way of Fyodor's remark: "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."<sup>59</sup> As with Delalande's epigraph to *Invitation to a Beheading*, Nabokov resorts here once again to the *e contrario* device bordering on the *reductio ad absurdum*: inasmuch as Alexander Yakovlevich's supposition about the rain is incorrect so is his assertion about the nonexistence of the afterlife.<sup>60</sup> Finally, in Nabokov's last English short story, "Lance" (1952), there is a direct reference to the hereafter: "There, to the right, is the Bridge of the Sword leading to the Otherworld."<sup>61</sup>

Another facet of Nabokov's belief system is his view that a creative person, specifically a writer, emulates the Almighty: just as God created the Universe, so does a writer who creates his fictional universe. Nabokov was well aware of the resemblance between a creator and the Creator. Thus, he writes to his mother on October 13, 1925, while at work on his first novel, *Mary*, "I understand how God as he created the world found this a pure, thrilling joy. We are translators of God's creation, his little plagiarists and imitators, we dress up what he wrote, as a charmed commentator sometimes gives an extra grace to a line of genius."<sup>62</sup>

Years later, in his monograph on Gogol, Nabokov maintains that artistic creation involves "trespassing upon the rights of the deity and creating, as God creates, perfectly imaginary people."<sup>63</sup> In the same manner, in his Cornell lectures on Dostoevsky, Nabokov argues that "art is a divine game [...] because this is the element in which man comes nearest to God through becoming a true creator in his own right."<sup>64</sup> Nabokov also avers that "the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world," and that "the writer is the first man to map it and to name the natural objects it contains."<sup>65</sup> Further, in his lectures on Dickens's *Bleak House*, he quotes Flaubert as

---

<sup>59</sup> Nabokov, *The Gift*, 312.

<sup>60</sup> On the device, see Rescher, "Reductio ad Absurdum."

<sup>61</sup> Nabokov, *Stories*, 637.

<sup>62</sup> As cited in Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 245 and 562. Nabokov seems to bestow this ability not on writers alone but also on the characters who possess artistic sensibilities. Thus, the *Mary* narrator comments on Ganin's capacity to reproduce the events of the past: "He was a god, re-creating a world that had perished" (Nabokov, *Mary*, 33).

<sup>63</sup> Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, 40.

<sup>64</sup> Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 106.

<sup>65</sup> Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 1 and 2.



remarking “that, like God in His world, so the author in his book should be nowhere and everywhere, invisible and omnipresent.”<sup>66</sup> Lastly, as the writer articulates in one of his interviews: “I make the design of the world, and it’s inscribed in a universe.”<sup>67</sup>

Nabokov also conveys this idea in his fiction, as for example, in the poem “Tolstoy” (1928), composed on the centenary of the author of *War and Peace*:

The mystery is almost superhuman!  
I mean the nights on which Tolstoy composed;  
I mean the miracle, the hurricane  
of images flying across the inky  
expanse of sky in that hour of creation,  
that hour of incarnation... For the people  
born on those nights were real... That’s how the Lord  
transmits to his elected his primeval,  
his beatific license to create  
his worlds, and instantly to breathe into  
the new-made flesh a one-and-only spirit.<sup>68</sup>

In the aborted novel *The Bird of Paradise* (*Raiskaia ptitsa*, ca. 1931), which eventually morphed into *Kamera obskura*, Nabokov’s narrator, a painter, admits, “And the main thing is this: I paint, letting matters take their course.” The original Russian sentence contains a double entendre as it literally means, “And the main thing is this: I write / paint as God puts it on [my] soul,” that is, following the design of the Almighty.<sup>69</sup> Nabokov underscores that human creativity is

---

<sup>66</sup> Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 97.

<sup>67</sup> Nabokov, *Think, Write, Speak*, 279.

<sup>68</sup> Nabokov, *Selected Poems*, 60. «Почти нечеловеческая тайна! / Я говорю о тех ночах, когда / Толстой творил; я говорю о чуде, / об урагане образов, летящих / по черным небесам в час созиданья, / в час воплощенья... Ведь живые люди / родились в эти ночи... Так Господь / избраннику передает свое / старинное и благостное право / творить миры и в созданную плоть / вдыхать мгновенно дух неповторимый»; Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 2: 593–94.

<sup>69</sup> «А главное вот что: я пишу, как Бог на душу положит»; see Babikov, *Prochтение Nabokova*, 201; on the novel’s metamorphosis see *ibid.*, 193.

reminiscent of the Divine creation in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), when Sebastian remarks upon completing a novel, “I have just finished building a world, and this is my Sabbath rest.”<sup>70</sup>

In *Bend Sinister* (1947), Nabokov refers to himself as “an anthropomorphic deity.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed, upon experiencing “a pang of pity,” the author appears in the novel in the deus ex machina fashion and liberates Krug who “returns unto the bosom of his maker.”<sup>72</sup> The narrator, who assumes the authorial voice, enunciates this action toward the end of the novel: “I felt a pang of pity for Adam and slid towards him along an inclined beam of pale light—causing instantaneous madness, but at least saving him from the senseless agony of his logical fate.”<sup>73</sup>

Similarly to the Almighty Who reveals His presence by way of the Burning Bush (Exod. 3: 1–4) or the Annunciation (Luke 1: 26–38), Nabokov manifests his authorial presence in a variety of ways, such as fatidic dates, anagrams, penname, and chromesthesia.<sup>74</sup>

It appears that Nabokov, who repeatedly compared a creator to the Creator, had faith in God. We witness this phenomenon in his correspondence and interviews as well as in his literary works, both poetry and prose. Yet in his 1970 interview with Alfred Appel, Jr., Nabokov dubs his initial biblical descriptions “Byzantine imagery (this has been mistaken by some readers for an interest in ‘religion’ which, beyond literary stylization, never meant anything to me).”<sup>75</sup> Several years prior, in his 1964 interview with Jane Howard for the *Life* magazine, Nabokov makes it clear that his indifference to organized religion is similar to his “dislike of group activities in the domain of political or civic commitments.”<sup>76</sup> (Religion, however, above all in its institutionalized form, should not be confused with faith.)

---

<sup>70</sup> Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, 88.

<sup>71</sup> Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, xviii.

<sup>72</sup> Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, xviii and xix.

<sup>73</sup> Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, 233.

<sup>74</sup> For a discussion on the subject, see Shapiro, “Setting His Myriad Faces in His Text.”

<sup>75</sup> Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 160. I share the viewpoint of Thomas Karshan who asserts that “it would be incautious to take this statement on trust,” when referring to Nabokov’s calling his biblical subjects “Byzantine imagery,” and argues that “many of these poems express simple pious sentiments.” See Karshan, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play*, 61. I also agree with David Bethea who maintains that “the presence of Divine Providence is more noticeable in the religiously colored poems which Nabokov wrote in the late 1910s—early 1920s in Cambridge and Germany” («Присутствие Божественного промысла более заметно в религиозно окрашенных стихотворениях, которые Набоков писал в конце 1910-х—начале 1920-х годов в Кембридже и в Германии»); see Bethea, “Izgnanie kak ukhod v kokon,” 174n22.

<sup>76</sup> Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 48.

How to account for these pronouncements? It looks like over the course of time, as the writer became better known, and especially upon attaining fame, his persona began to attract more and more attention, even scrutiny. An intensely private individual, Nabokov grew uncomfortable with his earlier declarations of piety, perhaps feeling that they make him vulnerable by exposing his most intimate outlook. That may explain why he preferred, similarly to his frequent treatment of the otherworld, to allude to his faith by dint of the *e contrario* device.

A case in point is his novel *Despair*. There, Hermann, its narrator and protagonist, avers that “The nonexistence of God is simple to prove [...] All this divine business is, I presume, a huge hoax.”<sup>77</sup> He goes on to infer that “If I am not master of my own life, not sultan of my own being, then no man’s logic and no man’s ecstatic fits may force me to find less silly my impossibly silly position: that of God’s slave [...] There are, however, no grounds for anxiety: God does not exist, as neither does our hereafter, that second bogey being as easily disposed of as the first.”<sup>78</sup> Hermann’s contention is no more than braggadocio and brings to mind Blaise Pascal’s assertion that “Nothing is more dastardly than to act [with] the bravado before God.”<sup>79</sup> Hermann unwittingly refutes his own claim of God’s nonexistence when demonstrating by the end of the novel that he is not the master of his own life.<sup>80</sup> His fatal mistakes lead to the abject failure of his murderous scheme, which he boastfully conceived as a perfect crime, and to his imminent arrest.

While in his adult years Nabokov was not a churchgoer and did not belong to any institutionalized religion, he nonetheless seemed to have faith in the existence of the Supreme Being. As the protagonist of his first English novel intimates, “Thus, shining giants of our brain as science, art or religion fell out of the familiar scheme of their classification, and joining hands,

---

<sup>77</sup> Nabokov, *Despair*, 101.

<sup>78</sup> Nabokov, *Despair*, 102.

<sup>79</sup> Pascal, *Thoughts, Letters, and Minor Works*, 75.

<sup>80</sup> In *The Master and Margarita*, on whose composition Mikhail Bulgakov worked at the same time as Nabokov did on *Despair*, the writer addresses the very same subject matter by way of Voland, the Satan in disguise, who visits the Moscow of the 1930s with his entourage. As Voland puts it in his conversation with the two Soviet literati, Mikhail Berlioz and Ivan Homeless (Bezdomnyi), “But here is a question that is troubling me: if there is no God, then, one may ask, who governs human life and, in general, the whole order of things on earth?” In accordance with the communist doctrine, the atheistic literati claim that “Man governs it himself.” Voland, however, casts doubt on this assertion by reminding his interlocutors that humans are not only mortal but also “sometimes unexpectedly mortal.” He presents an irrefutable proof of the latter when shortly after the conversation, consistent with his pithy prediction, Berlioz is run over by a tram-car. See Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, 13, 15, and 42–46. For an extensive analysis of affinities between the two writers, see Bethea, “Bulgakov and Nabokov,” 187–209.

were mixed and joyfully levelled.”<sup>81</sup> In his “American years,” the writer’s faith transpires, for instance, in *Pale Fire* (1962), in which John Shade and Charles Kinbote conduct theological discussions. Nabokov discloses one such conversation, in which Kinbote, although largely a buffoon figure, evidently serves in this case as an authorial mouthpiece. This becomes clear when he argues that “a serious conception of any form of afterlife inevitably and necessarily presupposes some degree of belief in Providence; and, conversely, deep Christian faith presupposes some belief in some sort of spiritual survival,” or as he put it differently, “For a Christian, no Beyond is acceptable or imaginable without the participation of God in our eternal destiny.”<sup>82</sup> Kinbote further asserts, “How much more intelligent it is,—even from a proud infidel’s point of view!—to accept God’s Presence.”<sup>83</sup> He goes on to suggest, “I know also that the world could not have occurred fortuitously and that somehow Mind is involved as a main factor in the making of the universe. In trying to find the right name for that Universal Mind, or the First Cause, or the Absolute, or Nature, I submit that the Name of God has priority.”<sup>84</sup> These pronouncements echo Pascal’s musings, “If there never had been any appearance of God, this eternal deprivation would have been equivocal, and might have as well corresponded with the absence of all divinity, as with the unworthiness of men to Know Him; but His occasional, though not continual, appearances remove the ambiguity. If He appeared once, He exists always; and thus we cannot but conclude [...] that there is a God.”<sup>85</sup>

A few years after composing *Pale Fire*, in his 1964 interview with Alvin Toffler, reasserting his earlier discussed idea about the affinity between a creator and the Creator, Nabokov

---

<sup>81</sup> Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, 177. Nabokov’s trust in both God and science is evocative of Isaac Newton’s world perception; see Janiak, “God” in his *Newton*, 139–76.

<sup>82</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 219 and 223. On the theological discourse in *Pale Fire*, see Eklund, “The Gist of Masks.”

<sup>83</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 227.

<sup>84</sup> Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 227. It is worth recalling Kinbote’s remark at the end of his Commentary, “I shall continue to exist. I may assume other disguises, other forms, but I shall try to exist. I may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art”; Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 300–1. About Kinbote’s sharing some opinions with his creator, specifically on faith, see Alter, “Autobiography as Alchemy in *Pale Fire*,” 139 and 141. Robert Alter posits a valid question: “How does a figure so spectacularly different from its author end up speaking—resonantly if intermittently—in its author’s voice?” The scholar astutely observes that “Fictional invention is usually a playing out by the writer of alternate lives, which quite often means—manifestly, I think, in Nabokov’s case—a bringing to the light of the buried underside of the writer’s self”; Alter, “Autobiography as Alchemy in *Pale Fire*,” 139. In this regard, one wonders whether, as manifestly different as Kinbote and his maker are, Nabokov deliberately chose the character’s seven-letter surname, equal in size to his own, with four letters to match.

<sup>85</sup> Pascal, *Thoughts*, 187.

avers, “A creative writer must study carefully the works of his rivals, including the Almighty.”<sup>86</sup> Later in the same interview, when asked directly whether he believes in God, Nabokov appears to respond affirmatively, albeit in an intricate, circumlocutory manner. The writer admits: “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.”<sup>87</sup> In this response, Nabokov employs chiasmus, “a rhetorical term to describe a construction involving the repetition of words or elements in reverse order [...] It is often used for witty or aphoristic effect: so Michelangelo is reputed to have said: *Trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle.*”<sup>88</sup> Nabokov would have undoubtedly seconded this adage of the great Italian.

In conclusion, Nabokov was raised as an Eastern Orthodox Christian in a family of true believers and practitioners of the faith. Although not a churchgoer in his adulthood, Nabokov imbibed from his parents the theological tenets that served him as the moral compass throughout his life. At first, Nabokov manifested his trust in God overtly. The analysis of the above-quoted poems, all biblical in their content and pious in their tone, makes evident that Nabokov approached the Scriptures creatively. In each case, Nabokov pursues the humane and emotional rather than the conventional side of the biblical narrative and presents a highly original, personal point of view. As often the case, Nabokov employs visual imagery as a springboard, and then, by virtue of his poetic powers, recreates the evangelical event within his own artistic universe, thereby showing it in a new light, or imbuing it with an additional, previously unnoted meaning. In later years, with the rise of fame that resulted in his high exposure, Nabokov, a very private individual, communicated his faith in God in the circuitous (chiastic) and even *e contrario* manner. In addition, Nabokov’s oeuvre demonstrates his firm belief in the otherworld and his full awareness of the similitude between the Creator and a creator of the unique fictional universe.

---

<sup>86</sup> Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 32.

<sup>87</sup> Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 45.

<sup>88</sup> See Paul and Wiseman, “Introduction: Chiasmus in the Drama of Life,” 2. I am indebted to Robert A. Kaster for bringing this rhetorical device to my attention.

WORKS CITED

- Alexandrov, Vladimir E. *Nabokov's Otherworld*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Alter, Robert. "Autobiography as Alchemy in *Pale Fire*." *Cycnos* 10.1 (1993): 135–41.
- Babikov, Andrei. *Prochtenie Nabokova: Izyskaniia i materialy*. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Ivana Limbakha, 2019.
- Barabtarlo, Gennady. *Aerial View: Essays on Nabokov's Art and Metaphysics*. New York: Lang, 1993.
- . *Insomniac Dreams: Experiments with Time by Vladimir Nabokov*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018.
- Barnstone, Willis. *The Poems of Jesus Christ*. New York: Norton, 2012.
- Bethea, David M. "Bulgakov and Nabokov: Toward a Comparative Perspective." *Transactions of the Association of Russian-American Scholars in the U.S.A.* 24 (1991): 187–209.
- . "Izgnanie kak ukhod v kokon: Obraz babochki u Nabokova i Brodskogo." *Russkaia literatura* 3 (1991): 167–75.
- Bobrovskaia, Liudmila. "V gostiakh u Eleny Vladimirovny Sikorskoi (Nabokovoi)." *Kontinent* 123 (2005). <https://magazines.gorky.media/continent/2005/123/v-gostyah-u-eleny-vladimirovny-sikorskoj-nabokovoj.html>.
- Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The Master and Margarita*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. London: Penguin, 1997.
- Cantrell, Michael A. "Was Socrates a Christian Before Christ? Kierkegaard and the Problem of Christian Uniqueness." *Faith and Philosophy* 31.2 (April 2014): 123–42. <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol31/iss2/1>.
- Carus, Paul. "Socrates a Forerunner of Christianity." *The Open Court* 21 (1907): 523–27.
- Chevalier, Jean, and Alain Gheerbrant. *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*. Trans. John Buchanan-Brown. London: Penguin, 1996.
- Davis, Stephen J. *Christ Child: Cultural Memories of a Young Jesus*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.
- Davydov, Sergei. "Faith." In *Vladimir Nabokov in Context*, ed. David M. Bethea and Siggy Frank, 219–27. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Dillard, R. H. W. "Nabokov's Christmas Stories." In *Torpid Smoke: The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin, 35–52. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000.
- Eklund, Erik. "The Gist of Masks: Notes on Kinbote's Christianity and Nabokov's Authorial Kenosis." *Nabokov Online Journal* 15 (2021): 1–29. [https://www.nabokovonline.com/uploads/2/3/7/7/23779748/1-1\\_eklund\\_gist\\_of\\_the\\_matter\\_final.pdf](https://www.nabokovonline.com/uploads/2/3/7/7/23779748/1-1_eklund_gist_of_the_matter_final.pdf).
- . "'A Green Lane in Paradise': Eschatology and Theurgy in *Lolita*." *Nabokov Studies* 17 (2020–21): 35–60. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/841822>.
- Hart, David Bentley. "Nabokov's Supernatural Secret." *First Things*, March 2014. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/03/nabokovs-supernatural-secret>.
- Janiak, Andrew. *Newton*. Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2015.
- Johnson, D. Barton. "Vladimir Nabokov and Rupert Brooke." In *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives*, ed. Julian W. Connolly, 177–96. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Kahn, Peter. Untitled [under the rubric of "Remembering Nabokov: Cornell Colleagues and Others"]. In *The Achievements of Vladimir Nabokov: Essays, Reminiscences, and Stories from the Cornell Nabokov Festival*, ed. George Gibian and Stephen Jan Parker, 229–30. Ithaca: Center for International Studies, Cornell University, 1984.

- Karshan, Thomas. *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Levi D'Ancona, Mirella. *The Garden of Renaissance: Botanical Symbolism in Italian Painting*. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1977.
- Likhachev, D. S., A. M. Panchenko, and N. V. Ponyrko. *Smekh v Drevnei Rusi*. Leningrad: "Nauka," 1984.
- Marani, Pietro C., and Pinin Brambilla Barcilon. *Leonardo: "The Last Supper."* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Missick, Stephen Andrew. *Jesus the Poet: Christ's Words as Hebrew Poetry*. n. p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011.
- Murray, Peter and Linda. *The Oxford Companion to Christian Art and Architecture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Nabokov, Véra. "Predislovie." In Vladimir Nabokov, *Stikhi*, 3–4. Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1979.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Annotated Lolita*. Ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. New York: Vintage, 1991.
- . *Bend Sinister*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- . *Despair*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- . *The Gift*. New York: Vintage, 1991.
- . *Invitation to a Beheading*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- . *Letters to Véra*. Ed. and trans. Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd. New York: Knopf, 2015.
- . *Mary*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- . *Nikolai Gogol*. New York: New Directions, 1961.
- . *The Original of Laura (Dying Is Fun)*. New York: Knopf, 2009.
- . *Pale Fire*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- . *Pnin*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- . *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. New York: Vintage, 1992.
- . *Selected Poems*. Ed. Thomas Karshan. New York: Knopf, 2012.
- . *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*. 5 vols. St. Petersburg: Simpozium, 1999–2000.
- . *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- . *Stikhi*. Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1979.
- . *Stikhotvoreniia*. Ed. Maria Malikova. St. Petersburg: "Akademicheskii proekt," 2002.
- . *Strong Opinions*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- . *Think, Write, Speak: Uncollected Essays, Reviews, Interviews, and Letters to the Editor*. Ed. Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy. New York: Knopf, 2019.
- Pascal, Blaise. *Thoughts, Letters, and Minor Works* (Harvard Classics 48). Trans. W. F. Trotter et al. New York: Collier, 1910.
- Paul, Anthony, and Boris Wiseman. "Introduction: Chiasmus in the Drama of Life." In *Chiasmus and Culture*, ed. Anthony Paul and Boris Wiseman, 1–16. New York: Berghahn Books, 2014.
- Penny, Nicholas. *Sixteenth-Century Italian Paintings*. London: National Gallery, 2004.
- Phillips, Claude. "Verrocchio or Leonardo da Vinci?" *The Art Journal* 61 (1899): 33–39.
- Plato. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*. Trans. Harold North Fowler. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966.
- Polsky, Svetlana. "Vladimir Nabokov's Short Story 'Easter Rain.'" *Nabokov Studies* 4 (1997): 151–62.
- Quintilian. *The Institutio Oratoria*. 4 vols. Ed. H. E. Butler. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976.
- Rescher, Nicholas. "Reductio ad Absurdum." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://iep.utm.edu/reductio>.
- Rozanov, Vasily [sic] V. "On Sweetest Jesus and the Bitter Fruits of the World." In *A Revolution of the Spirit: Crisis of Value in Russia, 1890–1924*, ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal and Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, 91–103. New York: Fordham University Press, 1990.

- . *Temnyi lik: metafizika khristianstva*. Würzburg: Jal-Reprint, 1975.
- Schuman, Samuel. “Beautiful Gate: Vladimir Nabokov and Orthodox Iconography.” *Religion & Literature* 32.1 (Spring 2000): 47–66.
- . “Nabokov’s God; God’s Nabokov.” In *Nabokov and the Question of Morality*, ed. Michael Rogers and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, 73–86. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Shapiro, Gavriel. “Pictorial Origins of Three Biblical Poems by Vladimir Nabokov.” *Slavic Almanac* 15.1 (2009): 43–58.
- . “Setting His Myriad Faces in His Text: Nabokov’s Authorial Presence Revisited.” In *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives*, ed. Julian W. Connolly, 15–35. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Shrayer, Maxim D. “Nabokov’s Use of Hebrew in ‘Easter Rain.’” *Nabokov Online Journal* 4 (2010). [https://www.nabokovonline.com/uploads/2/3/7/7/23779748/v4\\_4\\_shrayer\\_final\\_m.pdf](https://www.nabokovonline.com/uploads/2/3/7/7/23779748/v4_4_shrayer_final_m.pdf).
- . *The World of Nabokov’s Stories*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1999.
- Shvabrin, Stanislav. *Between Rhyme and Reason: Vladimir Nabokov, Translation and Dialogue*. Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2019.
- . “Pechat’ neprekhodiashego: Nabokov-Sirin o Pushkine, Bloke—i o sebe.” *Novyi Zhurnal* 277 (2014): 189–217.
- Sirén, Osvald. *Leonardo da Vinci, the Artist and the Man*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1916.
- Sistematicheskii katalog biblioteki Vladimira Dmitrievicha Nabokova*. St. Petersburg: “Tovarishchestvo Khudozhestvennoi Pechati,” 1904.
- Skonechnaia, Ol’ga. “Nabokov v Tenishevskom uchilishche.” *Nashe nasledie* 1 (1991): 109–12.
- Thode, Henry. *Correggio*. Leipzig: Velhagen & Klasing, 1898.
- Tristram, Henry Baker. *The Natural History of the Bible: Being a Review of the Physical Geography, Geology, and Meteorology of the Holy Land; With a Description of Every Animal and Plant Mentioned in Holy Scripture*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1867.
- Wethey, Harold Edwin. *El Greco and His School*. 2 vols. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962.
- Zimmer, Dieter E. *A Guide to Nabokov’s Butterflies and Moths*. Hamburg: n. p., 2001.
- Zohary, Michael. *Plants of the Bible: A Complete Handbook to All the Plants with 200 Full-Color Plates Taken in the Natural Habitat*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Zolotusskii, Igor’. “Puteshestvie k Nabokovu. Iz dnevnika odnoi televizionnoi poezdki.” *Novyi Mir* 12 (1996). <http://nabokov-lit.ru/nabokov/kritika/zolotusskij-puteshestvie-k-nabokovu.htm>.

