

NABOKOV AND RELIGION
Forum

PART TWO

Erik Eklund
Christopher Link
Mary Ross
Matthew Roth
Michael Wood

Organized by Erik Eklund and moderated by Yuri Leving

Yuri Leving: While Nabokov includes the New Testament in a list of “the best and most successful work of literature,” it remains a widely held belief among scholars that Nabokov viewed the biblical and theological imagery of the Christian tradition as something from which a mature stylist must necessarily graduate and, more significantly, as an exclusively literary artifact which he had no interest in approaching as a wellspring of religious and mystical insight. Maxim Shroyer claims “Nabokov’s use of biblical mythopoetic in the short stories” ceased after the publication of “The Thunderstorm” in 1924, and Sergei Davydov similarly asserts “the Christian topoi all but vanish from the poet’s repertoire” from the moment of Nabokov’s civil marriage to Véra Slonim in 1925. Are there examples to the contrary? Are matters different for Nabokov *the novelist*?

Mary Ross: I disagree with both Shroyer and Davydov; I think that as Nabokov *matured* he simply became less transparent, more ambiguous, more mysterious, more sophisticated, more demanding, and found more authentic and original ways to express the same mores. I don't think his central concerns changed much through the course of his work (with the exceptions of *Look at the Harlequins!* and *The Original of Laura*, which have such tired despondent tenors). I think his reason for abandoning his youthful blatant Christian imagery is stated in his short story "A Forgotten Poet," "...the grotesque attempt at combining an authentic lyrical spasm with a metaphysical explanation of the universe" (*The Short Stories* 565).

Nabokov's burying of the religious themes might partly be due to avoidance of the intellectual antagonism towards religion of the 20th Century. It might also be that he found it more effective to convey the actual sense of ambiguity, questioning, uncertainty, and mystery that is necessary for sparking religious inquiry.

As for his marriage to Véra affecting his overt use of Christian motifs, I would say, that may be so, but I doubt it would have been because she was Jewish. Before they ever met, Véra was the number one fan of his early poetry. By all accounts she was not raised in a religious atmosphere and by all accounts she remained his most ardent fan. It was she, after all, who let us know that his abiding theme and interest was *potusoronost*. The Christian motifs never really stopped.

Matthew Roth: It is true that outward displays of religious imagery are few and far between, as are outwardly religious characters, with the exception of Charles Kinbote in *Pale Fire*. To note this fact is not the same, however, as saying that Nabokov has no interest in spiritual or theological ideas. My own sense is that Nabokov wanted to be careful not to associate his theological ideas with any particular tradition, for fear that the specific flavor of his theological imagination would be replaced by readers with a bland, prefabricated image.

Christopher Link: Well, this is, to a large extent, the topic I take up in my long essay "Recourse to Eden" (*Nabokov Studies*, Vol. 12), which examines Nabokov's lifelong use of Edenic and Adamic motifs, which, I argue, enrich and complicate his fictions to the very end. I won't attempt

to recapitulate my argument from that piece in any detail here. I will note, however, that, moving well past the so-called “Byzantine” period of the early, more overtly religious poetry and fiction, one finds in such later works as *Lolita* and *Ada*, and further onward, through *Transparent Things* and *Look at the Harlequins!*, an allusive reliance on biblical subtexts that has actually grown and deepened, I think, rather than atrophied. It certainly never disappeared!

What is the infamous scene on the davenport (sofa) in chapter 13 of *Lolita* without its “Eden-red apple”? Well, it is, we might say, a grotesquely boastful scene vividly depicting child molestation and Humbert’s unchecked desire for sexual gratification at any cost. (Humbert tellingly admits towards its crescendo, with utter disregard for the ethics of the situation, “I entered a plane of being where nothing mattered, save the infusion of joy within my body” [*Lo* 60].) But, imbued, as the scene is, with the mythic imagery, overtones, and themes of the primordial Edenic transgression, Humbert’s fateful transgression becomes much larger and more meaningful—more broadly human, in a sense, for all its monstrosity. The scene of Humbert’s moral crime opens up, through the unmistakable biblical allusions of that set-piece, to the more sprawling abyss of humankind’s fundamental capacity for sin. All the language at the start of that episode about Humbert wanting the reader to “participate” in the scene, etc., is part and parcel of the ways that we are *all* implicated in and by Humbert’s wickedness in this replay of the Edenic transgression, with H.H. in the dual role of Adam *and* serpent. And this is just *one* scene from one of the many later, more sophisticated, post-“Byzantine” fictions!

Ada, frankly, is unthinkable without its biblical allusions—which turn out to be not so much allusions, *per se*, but, rather, in-world references to a fictional space in which even the most mythic elements of Scriptural tradition are understood to be a living part of the diegesis, including, most notably, the “real” Tree of Knowledge, said to be transplanted to the garden at Ardis from “Eden National Park” in Iraq (*Ada* 95). The last novels, *Transparent Things* and *Look at the Harlequins!*, continue to rely, at least in passing, upon Adamic and Edenic imagery (with *LATH* even throwing in an allusion to Cain and Abel [164; Vintage ed. 194], for good measure). Subsequently, when *The Original of Laura* was finally published in 2009, I was more delighted than surprised to discover that, even there, in the final work, the figures “Eva” and “Adam” appear in chapter two (41ff)—proving, in a sense, that I was not *wholly* deluded and that this Edenic

material really was, always, significantly and inextricably woven into the stuff of Nabokov's imagination.

Erik Eklund: I will mainly defer to Christopher Link on this point, since his *Nabokov Studies* article ("Recourse to Eden") demolishes the idea that Nabokov departed from the biblical mythopoetic after 1924. He rather seems to have returned to it again and again. My only addition will be to observe that while Link focuses only on Nabokov's use of the Adamic and Edenic imagery of the Old Testament (and Nabokov seems to have seen "the Bible" precisely as that, as composed of the Old Testament and the New Testament, rather than as Torah, on the one hand, and the New Testament, on the other), there are a variety of allusions to the New Testament throughout Nabokov's work. *Invitation to a Beheading* seems to resemble a radical retelling of the Johannine passion narrative: "Socrates must decrease" always struck me as reminiscent of John the Baptist's "He must increase, but I must decrease"; chapter 17 seems in many ways a parody of Christ's meeting with Pilate and the Jewish religious leaders; and the apocalyptic "Everything was finished!" at the close of the novel is as close as one gets to Christ's proclamation from the cross: "It is finished." Similarly, *Pale Fire*'s theological aspect can be reduced to 1 Cor 13.12: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face." Professor Hurley quotes the phrase to describe how Shade perceived his poem, and the less-than-gnostic idea that this world is a mirror of the higher realm (which is implicit to *Pale Fire*) suggests reading Shade's comment "Crystal to crystal" (which he makes when he sees a snowflake settle on the face of his wristwatch) as a less than parodic allusion to St. Paul's promise of a vision "face to face" in the eschaton. Again, that this world is a mirror image of a higher one is an idea Nabokov could have received quite easily from the Fourth Gospel and, one presumes, from the liturgical theology of the Greek Catholic Church (the human liturgy is a mirror image of the angelic one) which the young Nabokov surely absorbed however unwittingly.

Christopher Link: While my focus, here and elsewhere, has been on the especial role of the biblical Edenic narrative in Nabokov's works, I do think—as it has been posed here—that it remains a real and interesting question whether any of this recourse to biblical tradition is emphatically *Christian* in nature or outlook. For this reason, I am really grateful for the eye-opening critical work Erik has

been doing to answer this question in a number of different contexts. My sense has always been that explicitly Christian (i.e., New Testament) material is somewhat less widespread and self-evident in Nabokov's later works, but it is by no means lacking. It has struck me, moreover, that the most explicit instances of Christian discourse to appear in Nabokov's later works are often (though not always) curiously tethered to some of the author's most dubious characters. Humbert's invitation to the reader, for example, at the very opening of *Lolita* to "Look at this tangle of thorns" (9) seems intended, by the villain-narrator, to paint himself casually in the mode of a suffering Christ-upon-the-cross, complete with crown of thorns (though he does, of course, say "tangle" and *not* "crown," so perhaps the imagistic association is strictly my own—though it bears, I think, some sacrilegious resemblance to Van Veen's mocking demonstration, arms outstretched, of crucifixion in *Ada*). Towards the end of *Lolita* (Part Two, Chapter 31), Humbert notes his (failed) attempt to "[turn] over a Protestant's drab atheism for an old-fashioned popish cure" (282)—the upshot of which is his moral epiphany that his own penitential absolution would be meaningless (or worse), since it would fail to make amends at all for his years-long abuse of Dolores. Here—as later, in mad Kinbote's pious Christian pronouncements in *Pale Fire*—the appearances of explicitly Christian material seems to be aimed at exposing and underlining the moral *hypocrisy* that often accompanies an accentuated religiosity. But what could be more in keeping with the New Testament? It is the singular sin of hypocrisy which Jesus castigates time and again throughout the Gospels, and Nabokov's use of this tradition seems intent on doing the same.

Mary Ross: I have to disagree with you here, Chris. I see more of the New Testament, especially in the apotheoses of *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Bend Sinister*, and *Pale Fire*. I believe that goes for Humbert's epiphany, too. It makes sense actually that the "sinful" characters are the ones in need of salvation. "Salvation" is the "crux" of the New Testament. Whether or not the characters actually achieve salvation I believe Nabokov offers dual solutions. As for other novels, both *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Despair* have Christian "brotherhood" motifs, and a fair amount of Christian allusions (and the "merging" theme).

Michael Wood: I need to do a bit of re-reading in order to say anything much about this. The general claim seems to be true, and *Ada* is a sort of dictionary of atheistic correctness. This is

where ‘dissident Christians’ turn into ‘dizzy Christians’, where Van speaks of ‘cranks and Christians’, and Ada refers to the ‘*opéra bouffe* of the Christian eternity’. But then this a whole culture speaking, not the author. The culture is taken more seriously in *Pnin*, at least as an educational prop, and we perhaps need to return to Kinbote. Surely it’s too simple to regard his Christianity as *only* an aspect of his mania? He can be very eloquent: “the very earth seemed to be sighing after our Lord Jesus Christ. On such sunny, sad mornings I always feel in my bones that there is a chance yet of my not being excluded from Heaven, and that salvation may be granted to me despite the frozen mud and horror in my heart.”

***Yuri Leving:* Where in Nabokov’s work might you locate the apex or clearest expression of his concern with religious or theological questions?**

Michael Wood: The obvious answer seems to be “Solus Rex” and “Ultima Thule,” where a man who has had a nervous breakdown has become a quack or a seer. Could he be both? Neither? Nabokov suggests that “perhaps, had I finished my book, readers would not have been left wondering” about things. This seems like out and out mischief. As if he didn’t want us to wonder. But Falter does speak of “a fringe of absolute insight.” Still this would have to be compatible with his certainty that the question ‘Does God exist?’ is the least relevant one we could ask. Many possibilities here. Too many, perhaps. It may be that Van Veen’s reflections on time would be closer to the mark, to the zones of religion and theology.

Erik Eklund: *Pale Fire*. While the note to line 549 marks the apex of the theological theme in the novel, I see the reader’s search for the author within the confines of artifice matched in Kinbote’s belief that nature is monogrammatic (as Sebastian Knight had it) and that God cannot be identified with any thing in the created world. The entire novel is an exercise in learning to read well, whether that be a text or the wider world, in the hope of brushing up against the absolute eschatological reality at the heart of every “reality.” “One can know what the Author is not; one cannot know what He is” — something like that.

Matthew Roth: Nabokov's theological imagination is often connected to questions of authorship, control, and free will. While these themes are present in works as various as *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Bend Sinister*, and *Look at the Harlequins!*, I think they are most generatively and enjoyably explored in *Pale Fire*, where the concerns of John Shade's poem radiate into the structure of the novel itself.

Mary Ross: "[T]he glory of God is to hide a thing, and the glory of man is to find it" (*Bend Sinister*, 102, from Proverbs 25:2). *Bend Sinister*, without a doubt is the most Christian, going from the Garden to Golgotha (and "beyond"). I don't think Nabokov even hid this very deep. It surprises me that the Christian transparency has remained nearly unrecognized in favor of the political interpretation. In his intro he even makes explicit that the novel is *not* about a police state, but "Krug's loving heart" (i.e. "sacred heart"). Nabokov is rather uncharacteristically profligate with his clues as to how the novel should be read and understood, the clearest being the Christian mythos that "Krug returns unto the bosom of his maker." Nevertheless, Nabokov typically dissembles from any "carriers of this or that 'idea'." He refrains from mentioning anything specifically Christian, yet there are numerous obvious allusions to death and resurrection, redemption/salvation, as well as specific Biblical references. He gives his clearest intention of the Christian mythos as literary device in a letter to his editor:

"...Krug, who in the months following his wife's death, had begun to work at a book about death and resurrection, has a most prodigious illumination (coinciding with his imprisonment after the boy's death), the dawning of a certain great understanding – and this is the most difficult bit to explain – but to put it bluntly, he realizes suddenly the presence of the Author of things, the Author of him and of his life and of all the lives around him, – the Author who is myself, the man who writes the book of his life. This singular apotheosis (a device never yet attempted in literature) is, if you like, a kind of symbol of the Divine power. I, the Author, take Krug to my bosom and the horrors of the life he has been experiencing turn out to be the artistic invention of the Author." (*Selected Letters 1940-1977* 49-50, my emphasis)

These uncharacteristic arrant disclosures may cause one to wonder if the Christian tropes aren't themselves a dodge and deceit. Or, perhaps he thought *Bend Sinister* was *too* transparent

with a kind of Sunday school theology and it was better to admit it as his intention. It is as if he needs to make it known that “This Christian stuff is really all a trick – get it? – nothing to do with my personal beliefs, just having a bit of authorial fun here.” If that were indeed the point, one might also wonder then why Nabokov consistently through his work employed the theme of transcendence, particularly the ambiguity of insanity vs. transcendence.

Most obvious of the many Christian allusions is the name “Adam Krug.” In the Old Testament, “Adam” the first man, is thus “everyman.” Jesus Christ is known as the “New Adam,” everyman redeemed (“Krug” means “circle” in Russian and “vessel” in German. A circle is a common symbol of wholeness and return and the Gnostics claimed that though the body was evil, every person had within their heart a “vessel” for the “divine spark” of God’s radiance). Adam Krug finds himself thrown out of the Paradise of his life with his wife and child and tries with his intellect to comprehend this cruel and alienating world he is now faced with. After suffering the worst loss imaginable (loss of innocence) he is “saved” by the “grace” of his Creator. There are too many other allusions to Christian words and concepts to go into at length here.

Christopher Link: I think it is fascinating and probably quite telling that, while we have all independently arrived at rather definitive answers to this question, we are naming such a relatively broad range of texts and not unanimously gravitating towards only one, even if *Pale Fire* earned two solid votes. For my part, I mentally selected, almost immediately, two key occasions in Nabokov’s work which I would choose, for differing reasons: (1) the conclusion of the 1942 poem “Fame” [“*Slava*”] and (2) the remarkable line in *Pnin* which asserts that “The history of man is the history of pain!” (168).

In the first passage, Nabokov teases, in the poem’s penultimate stanza, a dismissive, blithely independent atheism before permitting, in its concluding stanza, a surprising denouement that ultimately (in my reading) refutes or upends the purported “godlessness” of the speaker:

Trusting not the enticements of the thoroughfare
or such dreams as the ages have hallowed,
I prefer to stay godless, with fetterless soul
in a world that is swimming with godheads.

But one day while disrupting the strata of sense
and descending deep down to my wellspring
I saw mirrored, besides my own self and the world,
something else, something else, something else.
(“Fame,” lines 117-124)

While careless readers might selectively glom onto the assertion “I prefer to stay godless” (line 119) as sure proof of Nabokov’s atheistic leanings, the poem’s conclusion suggests, quite to the contrary, the very heart (or “apex”) of Nabokov’s carefully guarded theology—namely, that tripled “something else” about which the speaker repeatedly claims in the poem (as if in anticipation of that enshrouded “something else”), “I must not be overexplicit” (“Fame,” lines 106 and 116). The uncanny “mirrored” vision of “something else”—discovered deeply within the interior self (that “wellspring”), but distinct from both ego and the external world—might be as close as we come to a description of an (ineffable) encounter with the divine as Nabokov is willing to permit himself. So much for Nabokovian theology, which seems, repeatedly, to imply, in myriad painstaking articulations, that the best way to discuss the divine is to refrain from naming it.

Erik Eklund: That concluding stanza to “Fame” is so tantalizing. It is almost perverse in its refusal to tell it straight—whatever *it* is. A perfect example of what Michael has already described as Nabokov’s “orchestrated hesitation,” his “insist[ence] on failing to answer.” Now, I have absolutely no evidence for this as an intertext, but ever since first reading the poem several years ago, I could not (and still cannot) help but think of the conclusion to the *Commedia*, where Dante sees in the Trinity (which he describes as three encircling spheres mirroring one another) an image of “our form” (*nostra effigie*):

Within the being—lucid, bright and deep—
of that high brilliance, there appeared to me
three circling spheres, three-coloured, one in span.
And one, it seemed, was mirrored by the next
twin rainbows, arc to arc. The third seemed fire,
and breathed to first and second equally.

...

An inter-circulation, thus conceived,
appears in you like mirrored brilliancy.
But when a while my eyes had looked this round,
deep in itself, it seemed—as painted now,
in those same hues—to show our form [*nostra effige*].

(115–20, 127–31, Kirkpatrick trans., trans. altered)

Dante was a good medieval, and so, after St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure especially, he conceived the mind as well as the world as two distinct mirrors of the divine. And because the mind, in particular, with its three (Augustinian) faculties of memory, intellect, and will is a mirror of the Trinity, there is a sense in which Nabokov’s “Fame” and Dante’s *Commedia* end in something of the same vision.

Christopher Link: I absolutely agree that Nabokov’s image at the end of “Fame” echoes the conclusion of the *Commedia*—succinctly, of course, but it even includes an evocation of the Trinity in that thrice-uttered “something else.” With respect to “religion,” over against theology *per se* (effectively, formalized God-talk), I would turn to Timofey Pnin’s heartbreakingly incisive observation that “The history of man is the history of pain!” With this striking assertion within *Pnin*, Nabokov singularly indicates, most directly and concisely, how his lifelong literary project may be said to intersect with the diverse views, writings, and practices of the world’s sacred traditions—everything, in short, that we might, broadly and collectively, name as “religion.” In brief, it is my suggestion that any spiritual, theological, or philosophical outlook worthy of our attention as “religious” *must* engage the primordial and perennial problem of pain: from the most “primitive” animistic traditions grappling with the pain of lost loved ones to the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths, beginning with the declaration that *all is suffering (dukkha)*, to the eschatological hopes for redemption and justice in late Jewish and Christian traditions, we repeatedly find the core religious significance of *pain*—and the attempts to overcome it—at the heart of each sacred tradition. Nabokov’s Pnin himself is well-acquainted with pain but, importantly, makes this particular assertion not at a moment of despair or acute suffering, but, rather, at a forward-looking moment of hope (this, however, just before discovering he is to be fired!). By recognizing and

addressing human existence as the “history of pain” (while nevertheless “saving” poor Timofey at the end of the novel by permitting his escape from the vexing narrator), Nabokov, I believe, signals that his many depictions of cruelty, madness, monstrosity, and heartache across many works appear in an essentially religious or quasi-religious context. The inevitability of pain (as drawn in many or indeed most of his fictions) is principally to be *countered* or defeated, as it were, in the real world through a cultivated curiosity about, and subsequent care and concern for, the Other: noticing details, including, especially, the suffering of others, is at the heart of Nabokovian morality and, at the same time, opens the possibility to perceiving a hidden, spiritual Otherworld, similarly suffused with tenderness and care.

***Yuri Leving:* What is the value of reading Nabokov in view of the Christian imagery — its calendar, texts, symbols, and themes? What are some key religious, mystical, or otherwise theological texts or (lower-case) traditions which will best illuminate the theological aspect of Nabokov’s work? To what extent can religious sources enrich our understanding of the conflation of metaphysics and metafiction in Nabokov’s work?**

Matthew Roth: There is an unresolved tension in many of Nabokov’s works between the controlling hand of unseen forces and the free will of characters to act. How can Nabokov at once assert, as he seems to do, that free will is an absolute moral and ethical imperative while also suggesting that unseen forces lie just beyond his characters’ understanding and even shape their destinies? This tension reminds me of nothing so much as the debate between Calvinist and Arminian Christian theologians, who have been troubling these same questions for centuries. Reading Nabokov in light of these theological debates allow us to draw on the refinements of thought and argument that theologians have developed over centuries.

Michael Wood: This seems to be the same question as no 5, except that it presumes a positive answer of some kind. We might think again of the precision of Adam Falter’s reply to the query. He doesn’t say yes or no in answer to the narrator’s question of whether God exists. He says, ‘Cold’, and the narrator doesn’t understand the metaphor or reference. Here’s what Falter then says: ‘I said “cold”, as they say in the game, when one must find a hidden object. If you are

looking under a chair or under the shadow of a chair, and the object cannot be in that place, because it happens to be somewhere else, then the question of there existing a chair or a shadow has nothing whatever to do with the game'. There is a negative theology here of some kind, perhaps, a sense of theological value even if all theologies are misplaced. Maybe the very name of God is wrong. As Falter also says, 'All I do is deny'.

Erik Eklund: Reading Nabokov in view of the Christian imaginary makes us better readers of Nabokov. Barabtarlo has shown (and Matthew Roth has corroborated it) that Nabokov had recourse to Sabine Baring-Gould's *Lives of the Saints*, and H. Peter Kahn's oft-quoted recollection that Nabokov listed some fifty-five sainted Johns and their associated symbols and iconography surely encourages readers to further consult Baring-Gould's text, which, lucky for us, is organized by feast day. Book eight of Augustine's *De Trinitate* and selections from the *prima pars* of the *Summa Theologiae* of Aquinas are important works. They are subtextually present in the note to line 549, when Kinbote talks about what God is not, and will help scholars to conceptualize apophatic aspects of Nabokov's theological sense, which he keeps pretty well hidden. Augustine's *Confessions*, of course, and the New Testament. The works of Dionysius the Areopagite are also important as relates to a broad thematics of Nabokov's theological sense. Indeed, one could argue that the entire Christian tradition ("East" and "West") owes its mirror mysticism to Dionysius — Dante says as much in his letter to Nabokov's direct ancestor, Cangrande della Scala, and Aquinas quotes him only less than Aristotle. At the recent "Hidden Nabokov" conference (2022), I argued that the cult of St. Antony of Egypt, from Athanasius of Alexandria's *Vita Antonii* through the Northern Renaissance and even to Gustave Flaubert's *La Tentation de saint Antoine* is an important subtext of *Bend Sinister*'s self-reflexive theatricality and mysticism.

Mary Ross: I would say the calendar, texts, and symbols, are merely ornamental indicators of the themes: Death and resurrection, sin and salvation, brotherly love – the basics, the core tenets for which, I presume, he called the New Testament the best and most successful literature. Easter and Christmas occur with some frequency in the short stories. Easter is calendrically important in *Mary* (the April 1 calendar page as door number coinciding with Easter) and in *Pale Fire* (Balthasar moves in "just after Easter"). Christopher Link's most excellent *Recourse to Eden* demonstrates

the pervasive theme of the Old Testament's *Genesis*: sin and exile. Just as pervasive is the New Testament's corollary and answer: return and redemption/salvation.

We have not discussed the oft-mentioned Neo-platonism, but he is not strictly that, either. He outright denies it, for one thing; but definitely he has the sense of a parallel supernal Source of this world. This is true also of Hermeticism's aphorism, "As above, so below," as already noted by Erik Eklund. These concepts may explain the parallel fictive planes in most of the later novels. We have also not discussed Western Esotericism, Spiritualism, and even Freemasonry (which is based on all of these) that play into Nabokov's imagery and allusions, particularly in *Pale Fire*'s meta-fictive levels.

As for the value of the mystical, metaphysical aspects of Nabokov's oeuvre, just as pun and puzzle fans feel that dismissing that aspect of Nabokov means missing out on a gratifying metafictional part of his work, the same could be said of depreciating or denying Nabokov's essential spiritual concerns. I think resurrecting the word "allegory" would be helpful in understanding the plot levels of the text and characters.

Christopher Link: Just as Mary was, I, too, am immediately reminded—in response to the first part of this large and challenging multi-part question—of the recurring calendrical theme of Nabokov's *Mary*, first underscored by the vivid detail that each room number of the squalid *pension* where Ganin lives is marked by "leaves torn off a year-old calendar—the first six days of April, 1923" (*Mary* 5). While we are, of course, invited in that novel to see Alfyorov, who occupies room number "1," as a great April fool, pointedly omitted by Nabokov is any *overt* mention of the fact that April 1, 1923, was Easter Sunday in the West and Orthodox Palm Sunday for Eastern churches. Was this sly evocation of Easter or Orthodox Holy Week a haphazard choice by Nabokov? I think not—especially since the anticipated arrival of Mary herself is also set, portentously, across the judiciously measured span of one week, from the Sunday that Alfyorov first announces her coming to the Saturday when her train is due (*Mary* 2). I treat this "calendar" theme at greater length in "Recourse to Eden," but, for me, the key to all of this is decidedly liturgical and Scriptural: namely, at the bottom of all the calendar play stands the fact that a key, traditional reading at the solemn Easter service—across both Eastern and Western denominations—is the opening of Genesis 1 ("In the beginning..."), kicking off the well-known

week-long biblical creation account which, I believe, functions as an important subtext or intertext for *Mary*. (Incidentally, all we know of the timeline of *Mary* is that it takes place during a single week in April of 1924. While I have previously speculated that it likely took place during *either* Western Holy Week [April 13-19] or during Orthodox Holy Week [April 20-26] of 1924, I am now even more strongly inclined to think the novel probably concludes on April 19th, because in 1924 that was “Lazarus Saturday”—a most fitting feast day in Orthodox tradition for Ganin’s return to renewed life!)

I do feel that liturgical calendars—feast days, fast days, saints’ days, holy days—held, for whatever reason, some mysterious sway over Nabokov’s imagination. In *Pale Fire*, Gradus is said to have sold his Cartesian devils during Catkin Week (once again, the sacred week preceding Easter, by a different name); in *Ada*, the title character’s ostensible parents, Dan Veen and Marina Durmanov, marry on St. Adelaida’s Day; and so forth. Towards this end, it has been fairly well established that a key source text for Nabokov was Sabine Baring-Gould’s multi-volume *Lives of the Saints*, and, because this idiosyncratic and learned reference work is arranged chronologically by saints’ days (in discrete, thickly informative volumes devoted to each month of the year, with some months requiring two such tomes), it appears to have been an indispensable guide to the author for determining the special significance of any date he wished to employ in his fiction.

Erik Eklund: Christopher is right that Nabokov’s use of dates, particularly in relation to the Christian liturgical calendar, is significant. Christopher’s list is clear evidence of this, to which I would like to add some brief examples from *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. In *Lolita*, Dolores Haze is born January 1, 1935, the feast of the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (according to the Roman Rite) and died on Christmas Day 1952. Moreover, when recounting the day that he and Dolores drove past Edusa Gold (Dolores’ acting coach who played Joan of Arc in a performance at the local theater), Humbert observes that May 30 is a “Fast day by Proclamation in New Hampshire” (*Annotated Lolita* 40). May 30 is also Joan’s feast day, and we must remember that *Lolita*’s working title for sometime, *Juanita Dark*, is a latinized rendering of Jeanne d’Arc. In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote and Shade have a conversation about God, religion, sin, and the dualism of chance and fate (and their possible reconciliation at a higher level of “providence”) on June 23, 1959 (note to line 549). During this conversation, Kinbote describes “God’s Presence” in terms reminiscent of

the title of Shade's poem: "a faint phosphorescence at first, a pale light in the dimness of bodily life, and a dazzling radiance after it." These fiery metaphors are particularly apt on June 23, the eve of St. John's Day. Throughout European and Slavic countries (of which Zembla is a conglomeration), St. John's Day is customarily celebrated on the day before (June 23) by lighting bonfires or torches as an emblem of St. John the Baptist, whom Jesus calls a "burning and shining lamp" (John 5:35). The coincidence seems less than coincidental, especially as Kinbote elsewhere (note to line 181) situates the beginning of Canto Two, which was begun on July 5, 1959, in explicitly liturgical terms. Instead of pointing out that July 5 is his and Shade's birthday, he says only that it was "the sixth Sunday after Trinity." And if we check the lectionary for that Sunday, we see that the New Testament reading is taken from Romans 6:3–11, where St. Paul tells the church at Rome that, since they have participated in Christ's death in the sacrament of baptism, they have also already been raised with him to newness of life—shadows, perhaps, of the waxwing slain and resurrected in the commentary and wherever else. I have also pointed out (in my article, "The Gist of Masks," *NOJ* 15) that Disa's letter to Kinbote (received on April 6, 1959), in which she quotes Shade's resurrection imagery in his collection *Hebe's Cup* ("The gingko leaf, in golden hue, when shed, / A muscat grape, / Is an old-fashioned butterfly, ill-spread, / In shape") was written either in the immediate lead up to the feast of the Annunciation or during the first week of Eastertide, depending on whether Zembla follows the Julian or Gregorian calendars (respectively). To be perfectly honest, I do not think we have to choose, since Nabokov was fond of offering such instances of double-vision, especially since the Annunciation (the immovable feast of March 25 in both calendars) is also said to be the date of the creation of Adam, his fall, Abel's murder, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, the beheading of John the Baptist, and the crucifixion.

Christopher Link: Apart from Baring-Gould and liturgical calendars, there is, of course, the Bible itself—which Nabokov appears to have known quite well, with some sophistication—as well as the recondite material found outside the Bible in Jewish and Christian Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. I am thinking, in particular, of Nabokov's poem "The Mother" which appears to borrow its concluding image from the apocryphal Infancy Gospel of Thomas and its vivid story of the young child Jesus making birds out of clay and miraculously breathing them into life (a tale

also briefly related in the *Quran*). This demythologizing poem about a “gray, haggard Mary” (“The Mother,” line 6), devastated by the crucifixion of her son on Golgotha, poignantly concludes:

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.

(“The Mother,” lines 19-24)

It strikes me that knowing the original apocryphal tale is essential here, since the fact that these “mud sparrows” are *not* brought to life in this version underlines the poem’s focus on the unrelieved, inconsolable grief of Mary.

If one were to go on cataloguing the works worth knowing to “illuminate the theological aspect of Nabokov’s work” (ancient Mesopotamian literature, Greek and Roman myth, the Church Fathers, works of Kabbalistic mysticism, Dante, Milton, Spinoza, grimoires and goetic magic, etc.), one’s labors would likely never come to an end. I am strongly inclined, nonetheless, to mention before concluding here the mystical works of the so-called *Via Negativa*—i.e., the venerable apophatic tradition informed by such spiritual thinkers as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa. This theological tradition, which Michael also evoked above in reference to the short story “Ultima Thule,” seems, to me, best to frame and “illuminate” the mode of theology—often mistaken as a species of atheism—which Nabokov cagily employs: sidestepping or willfully refusing to make particular affirmations concerning Deity so as to avoid the grave theological blunder of delimiting God (understood to transcend infinitely human understanding) through proscriptive language.

***Yuri Leving*: Nabokov’s works seem to cover a wide range of multi-confessional motifs and these include not just Christianity, but also elements of Eastern religious practices and ancient mythologies, as well as incorporate characters of Jewish descent (mostly secular but marked by their status of Otherness). Would you comment on the hybrid quality of**

Nabokov's artistic worlds? Does the eclectic engagement with various beliefs make his prose fragmentary or polysemantic?

Matthew Roth: By engaging with such a variety of traditions, Nabokov seems both to affirm the very human urge to give our spiritual yearning shape and direction, while at the same time conceding that the human imagination cannot fully comprehend what lies beyond the veil.

Michael Wood: It's true that Sebastian Knight takes a 'marcopolian journey', and that his friend Clare studies Eastern languages – 'of all things', the narrator says in surprise – but it's hard to find real otherness in this book. And John Shade, although well-meaning, is pretty provincial about racial prejudice. Most of the cases of 'otherness' I can think of in Nabokov point very swiftly back towards an Anglo-European origin. This is to say, I guess, that I am not at the moment finding much of a 'hybrid quality' in Nabokov's worlds, but there is obviously a lot I need to learn, and to rethink.

Erik Eklund: Denys Turner says somewhere (reasonably, I think) that every atheism is but the inversion of a rejected theism, and every theism, the inversion of a rejected atheism. I think we can see this in the difference between Shade and Kinbote. Notwithstanding their many differences, much of their way of being-in-the-world, not least the way they both privilege texture over text (Shade reads his fountain/mountain problem in much the same way that Kinbote reads Shade's poem), is similar. Both indict the Institute along similar lines, and the heart of their theological or religious sense lies in a fundamental negativity, that what is ultimate in what we can know about "the otherworld," "God," whatever it is we want to call it is that we cannot know it according to the terms of earthly life, which, of course, is all we have. So, too, Fyodor's mysticism, his desire to offer thanks to some "Person Unknown" for "the gifts... behind the play, the sparkle, the thick, green greasepaint of the foliage[.] For there really is something, there is something!" (*Gift* 328), is the antithesis of Alexander Yakovlevich Chernyshevski's deathbed assertion:

"What nonsense. Of course there is nothing afterwards." He sighed, listened to the trickling and drumming outside the window and repeated with extreme distinctness: "There is nothing. It is as clear as the fact that it is raining." And meanwhile outside the spring sun was playing on the roof

tiles, the sky was dreamy and cloudless, the tenant upstairs was watering the flowers on the edge of her balcony, and the water trickled down with a drumming sound. (*Gift* 312)

Not that Fyodor can prove his case, nor that he cannot, for that matter, because Nabokov insists on the inevitable failure of empirical science to rule out (or rule in) something that would necessarily transcend the capabilities and purview of empirical science. Though it must be granted that Alexander's fundamental lack of imagination is a direct result of his scientism. So, at least as far as the polyphony or dualism between "faith" (however broadly conceived) and non-faith goes, I think Nabokov's insistence on refusing to disclose the "absolute solution" or at least refusing to provide what might be called "evidence" in its favor works to maintain the polysemy of Nabokov's work, giving credit often to perspectives that he does not share.

Christopher Link: If I understand the crux of the question aright, I would argue that Nabokov's wide-ranging erudition ultimately permits a higher degree of mimesis or, as the kids might say these days, "world-building" that is more authentically and broadly reflective of the great diversity of lived human experience than it would be if shorn of such diverse elements. This certainly tends, in Nabokov's case, toward producing a "polysemantic" whole—a "live" and unified (if fictional) world comprised of many minds—rather than a fragmentary representation of a cosmos in which there is never anything akin to a (dare I say "ecumenical"?) meeting of minds.

Let us consider, for example, three choice pages of *Pnin*, when the titular protagonist is living at the home of Joan and Laurence Clements, and examine three distinct perspectives on Timofey that combine in a coherent, though diversified, unity. On page 40 of the text we read,

Desdemona, the old colored charwoman, who came on Fridays and with whom at one time God had gossiped daily ("Desdemona, the Lord would say to me, 'that man George is no good.'"), happened to glimpse Pnin basking in the unearthly lilac light of his sun lamp, wearing nothing but shorts, dark glasses, and a dazzling Greek-Catholic cross on his broad chest, and insisted thereafter that he was a saint. (40)

The character of Desdemona appears to be a Christian (implied) and either a mystic or a zealous crackpot who, at some previous period, "gossiped daily" with God. Her declaration that Timofey

is a “saint,” however, though cloaked in dismissive humor, renders fully explicit in the text the substantial hagiographic imagery and thematization that attends Pnin throughout the whole of the book. An apparently eccentric “figure of fun,” Desdemona vitally succeeds in articulating the essentially “saint-like” character of Pnin. Immediately after this passage we read,

Laurence, on going up to his study one day, a secret and sacred lair cunningly carved out of the attic, was incensed to find the mellow lights on and fat-naped Pnin braced on his thin legs serenely browsing in a corner: “Excuse me, I only am grazing,” as the gentle intruder (whose English was growing richer at a surprising pace) remarked, glancing over the higher of his two shoulders; but somehow that very afternoon a chance reference to a rare author, a passing allusion tacitly recognized in the middle distance of an idea, an adventurous sail descried on the horizon, led insensibly to a tender mental concord between the two men, both of whom were really at ease only in their warm world of natural scholarship. (40-41)

Laurence does not perceive Pnin as a saint—rather, he views him as a nuisance. Yet, curiously, Nabokov’s word choices here (“sacred,” “incensed”) set the scene of the two men’s unexpected “tender mental concord” in the sphere of the saintly or church-like, even as their bond is achieved in the “warm world of natural scholarship” rather than via any theological or religious point of contact.

Finally, on the last of our three pages we read that the graduate student Betty Bliss, watching the film Laurence Clements made of Pnin’s demonstrations of various national gestures, “announced that Timofey Pavlovich looked exactly like Buddha in an oriental moving picture she had seen in the Asiatic Department” (42). In what sense does Timofey look like the Buddha? In his paunch? In his ideal baldness? Is the resemblance merely physical and impressionistic, or somehow spiritual and more-or-less objective? Would she have had such a thought if not for her viewing of that previous film? All we can say for sure is that, to Betty’s mind, Pnin “looked exactly like Buddha,” just as to Desdemona “he was a saint.”

In the span of three pages we see good evidence of the “wide range of multi-confessional motifs” posited by this question. Far from resulting in a fragmentary puzzle-world of differing viewpoints, however, we see a clear harmony in which Pnin the “saint,” Pnin the scholar, and Pnin the would-be “Buddha” cohere in a singular character whose suffering never eclipses his

gentleness and attentiveness to the needs of others before his own. Whether any of this marks Nabokov's art as "hybrid" or not is unclear to me, but it does imply a world (both in the fiction and, ideally, beyond it as well) in which every individual can maintain an independency of worldview—resulting in a plurality of beliefs—while nevertheless achieving, at least on occasion, "a tender mental concord" with other minds.

Mary Ross: I am not much aware of Nabokov's use of Eastern religious practices. The only thing that comes to my mind is from *Pale Fire*: The Zemblan islands of Nitra and Indra seem to refer to the Indian words for the Hindu creator-god, Indra, and the goddess of sleep, Nitra (a.k.a. Nidra). Indra is cognate to the Gnostic demi-urge creator god. Western and Northern mythologies he borrowed in the same way that poets have for centuries – as romantic metaphor. As for Jewish influences, there is, of course, the Old Testament. Perhaps there may be some Kabbalah. "Mr. Silberman," the rather magical man on the train in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is a positive character; unusual, but not "Other." Franz's landlord/conjuror in *King, Queen, Knave* is named "Menetek El-Pharsin," which is the "writing on the wall" in the book of Daniel. Daniel, who was a magus, deciphered the strange words to mean a warning that the King would be killed unless he changed his evil ways. Daniel was given the name "Balthasar" which means "King's savior," but the King died anyway (Lots of allusions here for *Pale Fire*). Menetek El-Pharsin seems to believe that *he* is the creator of Franz – so a stand-in for Nabokov (the conjuror). There is no transcendence in the end in *King, Queen, Knave* – just insanity. El-Pharsin apparently decides none of the characters are worth it. The old couple of *Signs and Symbols* are straight from central casting, but play their parts so authentically you can almost hear the Yiddish accents. There is perhaps a Kabbalistic numerological meaning to the story's mystery. In fact, numerology, and other occultic arts occur throughout Nabokov's oeuvre.

Overall, I would agree that Nabokov's "religion" is polysemantic. Ultimately, he makes everything his own, whether as cryptomnesia, paean, or parody. It seems to me that the missing piece in a syncretic look at Nabokov's metaphysics is the Western esoteric tradition: Hermeticism, alchemy, the occult, spiritualism and Freemasonry. These appear most elaborately in *Pale Fire*, but also in a number of short stories, such as *The Vane Sisters*, *Signs and Symbols*, and others. In *Pale Fire*, he pokes fun at this sort of syncretism in the earnest new-agey IPH. I get the sense that

the occult, spiritualism etc. was a sort of ineradicable, anti-rational, guilty pleasure for Nabokov. He seems to have experienced the bliss of egoless mystical Oneness but also seems to desperately have wanted, like John Shade, to retain the personal in an afterlife. Nabokov's ghosts seem to retain their personalities.

Yuri Leving: In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov appears to suggest that, “in the spiral unwinding of things,” religion may be found to be but another expression or grammar for speaking of whatever it is that science and art seek to express in their respective vocabularies: “Thus, such shining giants of our brain as science, art or religion fell out of the familiar scheme of their classification, and joining hands, were mixed and joyfully levelled.” At what point does literature become theology in Nabokov's work, and vice versa? Does Nabokov's work present its own “theology,” even if that “theology” might require redefining what makes theology, theology?

Michael Wood: Just before this passage from *The Real Life*, the narrator describes Sebastian's last book as offering ‘thoughts’ that are ‘poetical, religious,’ only to say that ‘the dying man’ (in the book) ‘knew these were not real ideas’. Why? Because ‘only one half of the notion of death can be said to exist: *this side* of the question’. Doesn't a dying man get to glimpse ‘the other side’? ‘No, not quite – if he was still thinking’. It is in this context, this world of the not quite, that the shining giants drop out of their taxonomy, or seem to. Still, Sebastian is putting the giants on the same level – as each other, but also as ‘other ideas, once denied any importance’. So the question might be not so much ‘at one point does literature become theology, and vice-versa’ as what happens when both of them lose their identity and start keeping strange company? There could certainly be a literature of theology and a theology of literature in such a world, but we might have some difficulty in recognizing them, and we might not know whether we want keep the old names for the new entities, or ‘translate’ them into a new idiom.

Mary Ross: This appears to be a typical way in which Nabokov insinuates a realm without categories, without even words, just ineffable wonder. It is the wonder that is the same. However, he does not deny our giant brains which make usage and expression on the earthly side of the

question. I don't think we need to redefine "theology" for the sake of Nabokov. I think we should be careful when using the word with him. To me, "theology" has a bit too much sense of a rational working out of a religious doctrine, especially to define "God" – ideas which, after all, would not be "real" ideas.

Erik Eklund: Nabokov certainly has a theology, or at least a theological sense, though this sense is best understood in a broadly Platonic or Plotinian sense, as a discourse or posture oriented toward "the One" or "God" – or maybe in a vein closer to that of Nicholas of Cusa, for whom God is so absolutely Other that "God" is other even than otherness, before the "difference" of identity and difference. The form of this theology is not merely negative, however. It is not simply that we cannot know what "God" is (and I am using the word "God" rather loosely here as denoting whomever it is that we can thank or blame for the world), but that we *can know* what "God" is not. This, to me, is at issue in the difference Nabokov makes between his mother's theological sense and his own. For while he claims to inherit his mother's "healthy distaste for the ritual of the Greek Catholic Church and its priests," he ultimately distinguishes her more negative mysticism – which he compares to someone who is able to "perceive in their deepest sleep, somewhere beyond the throes of an entangled and inept nightmare, the ordered reality of the waking hour" – from his own rather apophatic, diurnal mysticism: "It is certainly not then – not in dreams – but when one is wide awake... that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits." When Nabokov makes denials, he makes them as the reverse side of deeper affirmations and even deeper denials, because whatever denial he makes, he also denies. I think we can even see this in Nabokov's receding worlds and false bottoms, as every apparent backstop in the regression gives way to an "evermore" of what can be seen, known, and about which we can speak. But this also means that the finality of what we had at first thought to be an end, a conclusion, a fulfilment, must be denied, but only to make way for plunging deeper in. The fun and the frustration is that it never really ends, at least not on this side of sanity. Moreover, the idea that the world is a divinely ordered text where we catch traces of "Person Unknown" (as Fyodor had it) or "the contrapuntal genius of human fate" (as Nabokov had it) or "God" (as Kinbote had it) is a basic tenet of both revealed and natural religion. And it seems to me that Nabokov's thoughts on science and art correspond to this basic theological sense. Nabokov's belief that we can get nearer and nearer to absolute, unfettered reality

without having any chance of exhausting it applies as much to a-theological notions of evolutionary development as to the reader's approach to the work of art as to the mystic's search for God. So, in short, I think that D. Barton Johnson's point about the mystical sense with which Nabokov imbued the alphabet is apposite, from which we may conclude that for Nabokov, fiction is a species of theology (or vice versa, I'm not sure the order matters much) in the sense that Jorge Luis Borges said the *Summa Theologiae* is a work of fantasy.

Michael Wood: But what if need, rather than belief, creates gods? This would be one reading of Erik's great phrase about 'the true purpose of eschatology.' We find a stronger argument for faith, I think, in science and nature, as Erik also suggests, because they offer patterns and phenomena that are infinitely richer and more deceptive (and more pointless) than anything a novelist could conceive. Erik's thought about 'evolutionary development' continues this thought.

Christopher's sense of the plethora of biblical allusions, and the 'tethering' of quite a few of them to 'some of the author's most dubious characters' is very intriguing, and it would be great to think in more detail about this. And Erik's citation of Nicholas of Cusa is terrific. Are we sure Nabokov didn't make this guy up?

Christopher Link: Ultimately, I think it is probably both useful and wise to maintain a distinction between literature and theology, and that this holds true for Nabokov as much as it does for, say, Dante or Milton. Literature may convey theological content—and may, at times, even do so more successfully or compellingly than any theologian's treatise—but it is, I think, neither reducible to nor identical with theology. Having said this, I am certain that in my previous responses I have nevertheless suggested some of the many ways in which Nabokov's works imply a theology: principally through the tacit analogy between the metafictional and the metaphysical, the author and the divine, but also through the demands Nabokov places upon the reader to notice and "fondle" details—and thus be prepared for the epiphanies that attend not only the reading of elaborately constructed fictions but also those that open up a sense of the sublime or the spiritual in everyday life. Towards this end, I find that Erik's astute evocation of "Nabokov's belief that we can get nearer and nearer to absolute, unfettered reality without having any chance of exhausting it" is really quite compelling in establishing, as it does, an elegant continuum between "the reader's

approach to the work of art” and “the mystic’s search for God.” All such truth-seekers might readily be called, in a Nabokovian turn of phrase, “Enchanted Hunters,” but, in the end, I would still caution against assuming all such human endeavors, such hunts, to be one and the same activity—even if a singular and ultimate Enchanter is finally discovered to stand at the center of it all.

Matthew Roth: One can read Nabokov generatively and enjoyably through a theological lens, but once one starts to talk about a novel *becoming* theology, one risks a kind of myopia that allows only a few shades of color to be seen, when in fact the available spectrum is both richer and more various.

Mary Ross: I don’t believe Nabokov ever set out to be “theological” in the traditional sense of exegesis, hermeneutics, teleology, ontology, etc. It may even be dangerous to use the term. I think we should take him at face value when he declares he his not this or that category or when he says he has “no general ideas to exploit, I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions.” (*Strong Opinions* 16) etc. Nabokov writes on the things that interest him; more than “interest,” the things which elevate his perception, tingle his spine, as well as the human condition problems which could be called “sin.” The quote above from *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* seems a very apt description for the impetus behind Nabokov’s writing. This could be what he means when he states that he is an “indivisible monist.” All human experiences that expand consciousness to an elevated perception of the transcendent realm are in essence the same experience of Oneness.

In brief summary, I would venture that Nabokov was ecumenical in his literary spiritual allusions, based upon his own very personal mystical experiences. His personal beliefs may be syncretic with other systems but not founded on them. In other words, where he saw reverberations of his own numinous experiences in various versions of the “perennial philosophy” he used them as short hand pieces of the puzzle to express his particular abiding interest in *potustoronost*, the beyond, transcendence.

