



NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY
**STUDIES IN RUSSIAN
PHILOSOPHY, LITERATURE,
AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHT**

Volume 1 (2024)

ISSN 3065-0755

Northwestern

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

Le style c'est l'homme
Sergii Bulgakov, Vladimir Nabokov, & the Artist's *Podvig*

by Daniel Adam Lightsey

Abstract

What affinities might Russian Orthodox theologian Sergii Bulgakov and poet, lepidopterist, and master prose stylist Vladimir Nabokov possess? I argue that both writers, for all their practical, biographical, and conceptual differences, help to develop what I term "the artist's *podvig*": the creation of poetic exploits in loving, awe-full response to and further discovery of the mysterious depths of reality. By analyzing aspects of Bulgakov's sophiological aesthetics as well as close readings of Nabokov's fiction and class lectures, we see how both writers describe the exploits of the artist, arguing for the preeminent value of personal creativity in humanity's response to the many layers of reality. Furthermore, both writers goad us to sense the world and all its mysterious depths and heights with keener awareness to its poetic achievement, perhaps especially in those moments of Nabokovian timeless singularity.



Keywords: Sergii Bulgakov, Vladimir Nabokov, *podvig*, exploit, art, aesthetics, theological senses



Le style c'est l'homme

Sergii Bulgakov, Vladimir Nabokov, & the Artist's *Podvig*

Daniel Adam Lightsey

It is difficult to express the joy of the practice in words, he then says, if there is a rehearsal ... then he breaks free from all indirectness and he is absolutely active, immersed, totally identified with what he is doing; ... in a word if he is rehearsing, as he has been just now with Seiobo, or if he is continuing the Seiobo rehearsal, ... then he feels in the deepest of depths that there is a soul.¹

Everything, finally, was a source of wonder, not to say love.²

What affinities might Russian Orthodox dogmatician Sergii Bulgakov and poet, lepidopterist, and master prose stylist Vladimir Nabokov possess? I argue that both writers, for all their practical, biographical, and conceptual differences, help to develop what I term "the artist's *podvig*": the creation of poetic exploits in loving, awe-full response to and further discovery of the mysterious depths of reality. In keeping within the ambit of "the nature of reality and how it can be known" as well as reflecting upon "the transcendent in modernity,"³ this essay is an extended *marginalia* of sorts to Charles Taylor's judgment that one keen form of resistance to the concept of a buffered-self entrapped within a metaphysically mechanistic "Immanent Frame"⁴ comes by way of the arts. Furthermore, this form of resistance can, though not exhaustively or *only* or perhaps even primarily, aid late moderns in how to perceive that "the

1. László Krasznahorkai, *Seiobo There Below*, trans. Otilie Mulzet (New York: New Directions, 2013), 236.

2. Patrick White, *Riders in the Chariot* (New York: New York Review Books, 2002), 596.

3. The two quotations were key thematics from the inaugural Northwestern University Research Initiative in Russian Philosophy, Literature, and Religious Thought conference held at Northwestern University in April 2023, at which this essay was originally presented in a condensed form.

4. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), esp. 25–89, 539–776.

world contains living depths in which its being is seen to spring from something that lies beyond it."⁵

At first glance, the linking together of the Marxist economist later turned Russian Orthodox theologian and arguably the greatest novelist of the 20th century might seem rather hasty or forced. After all, one might declare, Bulgakov surely does not need a Nabokovian "enhancement."⁶ And, conversely, Nabokov betrays no trace of Bulgakov, does he?⁷ The ostensible danger here is that one replaces Nabokov's "magic" with "maggots"⁸ by situating him in a sophianic straitjacket and thus reading his texts too "illustratively." Furthermore, did not Nabokov himself critique those who mistook his development of "Byzantine imagery" in his earlier poetry for "an interest in 'religion,' which, beyond literary stylization," he later in life asserts, "never meant anything to me."⁹ This and other explicit repudiations for possessing any interest in "organized mysticism, [or in] religion, [or in] the church—any church"¹⁰ have led some to conclude that Nabokov was a kind of immanentized aesthete, not concerned with any sense of transcendence, and thus his fiction can be read as endorsing, tacitly or not, a charming "nihilistic flux [in] all things."¹¹ However, this judgment is mistaken, one might

5. Semyon Frank, *Reality and Man*, trans. Natalie Duddington (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1966), 212.

6. The obvious answer is of course not. One motivation for this kind of essay, though, is to work towards a greater understanding of how Bulgakov's use of and encounters with the arts shaped his own philosophical-theological imagination. Bulgakov's theologically inflected literary criticism (especially his "period" of thought from approximately 1900–1920) has yet to receive an exhaustive treatment. Throughout his works and life, Bulgakov interacts with and extensively calls upon poets, prose-writers, painters, sculptors, composers, etc. to explore *theological* and philosophical problematics, even after his disclosure in a 1926 letter that he had moved away from such topics, see *Тихие думы* (Moscow: Республика, 1996), 460. For example, Bulgakov, often from memory seemingly, and oftentimes without direct attribution, calls upon the works of (or knew personally), to name only a few, Alexander Pushkin, William Shakespeare, (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin) Molière, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Antonio Salieri, Hans Holbein the Younger, Matthias Grünewald, Heinrich Heine, Giacomo Leopardi, Lord Byron, Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens, Friedrich Schiller, Fyodor Tyutchev, Ivan Turgenev, Charles Baudelaire, Nikolai Gogol, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Lev Tolstoy, Pablo Picasso, Anton Chekhov, Guy de Maupassant, Afanasii Fet, Richard Wagner, A. S. Golubkina, Wassily Kandinsky, Julia Nikolayevna Reitlinger, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Andrei Bely, Alexander Blok, Aleksei Tolstoy, Mikhail Lermontov, Angelus Silesius, Alexander Bogdanov.

7. Or some might object to such a project as this after the fashion of Georges Florovsky, who asks, "Can artistic intuition penetrate the spiritual world?" Ultimately, Florovsky says no, "artistic vision cannot replace faith. Neither meditation nor rapture may be substituted for religious experience." See Florovsky, "From the Ascetic Mystics of Soloviev to the Mystical Romance of Blok," in *Theology and Literature*, trans. Robert Nichols (Vaduz: Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1989), 148. In this brief piece, Florovsky is specifically responding to certain Silver Age artists and poets who, he believes, possess a flimsily crafted approach to the spiritual life. Regardless, faith and artistic vision are not rival powers in competition for a person's soul. To perceive them in such a combative fashion is to misunderstand, perhaps completely, their very natures.

8. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), 305.

9. Vladimir Nabokov, *Poems and Problems* (New York: McGraw-Hill Company, 1970), 13–14.

10. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 39.

11. Nicholas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward, *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11. For an especially apt critique of this sentiment, see Erik Eklund, "A green lane in Paradise': Eschatology and Theurgy in *Lolita*," *Nabokov Studies* 17 (2020): 35–60. Philosophical theologians are not the only ones to misunderstand the nature of theological, metaphysical, and spiritual aspects in Nabokov's work, however. Another misleading opinion, if not greatly qualified, is that

even say *willfully* so as regards some commentators, as has been demonstrated by a host of Nabokovian scholars. To take but four examples, demonstrated by Johnson, Alexandrov, Barabtarlo, Link, Eklund, and many others, Nabokov possesses a kind of personal form of metaphysics and/or spirituality, showed great attention to the notion of life after death, consistently played with scriptural imagery/thematics, and, according to his wife possessed as his "main theme" the notion of "потусторонность" (variously translated as "otherworld," "the hereafter," "the beyond").¹²

In nuce, Nabokov's self-confessed disinterest in "organized mysticism," "religion," or "church" certainly does not equate to a denial of interest in the mysterious depths of the world that consistently, creatively disclose themselves to those with eyes to see and ears to hear, whether it be, for instance, in mind, consciousness, memory, mimetic peculiarities found in nature—all of which greatly marked Nabokov and all of which he persistently explores in his prose, poetry, classroom lectures, and scientific exploits. After all, to promiscuously prooftext *Look at the Harlequins*, "the brook and the boughs and the beauty of the Beyond all began with the initial of Being."¹³ It is perhaps not so curious, then, that at the conclusion of a January 1964 published interview, when asked if he believed in God, Nabokov responded—with his

Nabokov "always believed that fiction was neither moral, social, nor psychological but a sensuous exercise in style," Morris Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction 1945–1970* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 124. Also, the eminent Nabokov scholar Brian Boyd asserts that as regards "Слово," one of Nabokov's early short stories, Nabokov "sets the human and the transcendent too starkly together ... [leading] to a blind corner," *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 203. This is a failure to understand that the truly transcendent cannot, in fact, be set over and against the immanent. Concerning how "the transcendent" or "infinite" is (mis)classified, this error can be assuaged by returning to the basic apprehension of many ancients, perhaps nowhere better crystalized than Augustine of Hippo's description of the divine life as *interior intimo meo et superior summo meo* (*Conf.* 3.6.11). For a magisterial contemporary take on this issue, see Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018).

12. Véra Nabokov, "Предисловие," in *Стуху*, by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Ardis, 1979), 3. Cf. Vladimir Alexandrov, who points out that "otherworld" is not a wholly satisfactory translation of *потусторонность* because it is a "noun derived from an adjective denoting a quality or state that pertains to the 'other side' of a boundary separating life and death," *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 3. Perhaps only worthy of a passing aside: Bulgakov too employs the word in a 1937 essay during his concluding description of Nabokov's beloved Pushkin: "Кончина Пушкина озарена потусторонним светом," "Жребий Пушкина," in *Тухие думы*, 269. For but a small sampling of the vast secondary literature on these issues, see D. Barton Johnson, *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), esp. 155–223; Gennady Barabtarlo, "Nabokov's Trinity: On the Movement of Nabokov's Themes," in *Nabokov and his Fiction: New Perspectives*, ed. Julian W. Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 109–138; Christopher A. Link, "Recourse to Eden: Tracing the Roots of Nabokov's Adamic Themes," *Nabokov Studies* Volume 12 (2009): 63–127; Eklund, "A green lane in Paradise"; *idem.*, "The Gist of Masks: Notes on Kinbote's Christianity and Nabokov's Authorial Kenosis," *Nabokov Online Journal* Volume XV (2021): 1–29; *idem.*, "Rereading the World: A Theological Appraisal of Vladimir Nabokov's Metaliterary Eschatology," *Religion and Literature* Volume 57, Number 1 (2025): forthcoming. As far as plucky originality, precision of close reading, and sheer output, Eklund is arguably *the* leading contemporary scholar with regards to demonstrating Nabokov's importance for explicitly *theological* discussions, not only or merely *spiritual*, *mystical*, or *metaphysical* ones—and all without doing violence to Nabokov's seemingly *non-theological* self-stance.

13. Vladimir Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins*, in *Novels 1969–1974*, ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 577.

penchant for titillation—"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."¹⁴

Подвиг (*Podvig*)

It is generally remarked that *podvig* enjoys no one-for-one English equivalent, although those that come nearest the mark are *exploit*, *extraordinary deed*, *gallant feat*, all the while possessing an adventurous quality constitutive to the endeavors of an intrepid hero of renown. The term itself is well known in Russian poetry and literature. One literary example that Bulgakov directly cites¹⁵ (and Nabokov had almost certainly encountered) is Vladimir Solovyov's 1882 poem "Три Подвига" ("Three Exploits").¹⁶ This poem progresses through three feats from the classical Greco-Roman mythological imagination, from Pygmalion to Perseus to Orpheus. With each movement, the reader senses a victory of sorts is near, yet the poem warns one not to stop short, not to anticipate too early that the exploit is fully accomplished. To do so will only culminate in one's jubilee quickly shifting to mourning. And yet, in the final progression of the poem, Solovyov exhorts the intrepid reader to "rise up," to "call death to fight to the death!" And in so doing, a victory is near at hand.¹⁷

Bulgakov employs the term throughout his literary career, though it often possesses a fugitive presence. One place *podvig* indispensably appears is in his famous 1909 *Vekhi* essay. Bulgakov positions the term, as well as others from its word family—*podvizhnik* and *podvizhnichestvo* (both can be used to express a kind of ascetic zealousness towards a certain selfless project)—as a corrective to the perceived revolutionary, maximalist heroism of the so-called intelligentsia, the latter of which Bulgakov judged to sacrifice tomorrow for the

14. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 45.

15. For two examples, see Sergii Bulgakov, "Природа в философии Вл. Соловьева," in *Сочинения в двух томах*, ed. S.S. Khoruzhii (Moscow: Наука, 1993), 1:40; Sergii Bulgakov, *Философия хозяйства*, in *Сочинения в двух томах*, 1:146.

16. Vladimir Solovyov, *Стихотворения и шуточные пьесы* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1968), 77–78. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. My gratitude to Vladimir Marchenkov for pointing me toward this poem.

17. Although he later cooled in his intellectual affections for Solovyov, Bulgakov nevertheless designated him a great modern Russian "поэт-философ" ["poet-philosopher"], see Sergii Bulgakov, "Без Плана. Несколько замечаний по поводу статьи Г.И. Чулкова о поэзии Вл. Соловьева," in *Тихие думы*, 216–233; and "Стихотворения Владимира Соловьева," in *Тихие думы*, 51–55. What's more, Bulgakov declares, "I regard Solovyov as having been my philosophical 'guide to Christ' at the time of a change in my own world outlook," *Sophia: The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, trans. Patrick Thompson, O. Fielding Clarke, and Xenia Braikevitch (Hudson: Lindisfarne Press, 1993), 10. Moreover, while there does not seem to be any direct textual evidence of Nabokov citing Solovyov, it is frankly unthinkable to imagine he did not read Solovyov, the latter being indispensable for much of the Russian Silver Age imaginative harvest. Thus, while Nabokov does not directly cite "Три Подвига" like Bulgakov does on multiple occasions, it is certainly not unfitting to imagine he came across it, perhaps even during those heady summer days "when the numb fury of verse-making first came over" him. See Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, in *Novels and Memoirs 1941–1951*, ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 542. Cf. Dana Dragunoiu, who suggests that Nabokov's "encounter with Kant's third critique ... may have been mediated by Vladimir Solovyov," *Vladimir Nabokov and the Arts of Moral Acts* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021), 8–9. Many thanks to both Joshua Heath for kindly directing me to Bulgakov's "Без Плана" and Erik Eklund for our exchanges concerning Nabokov and Solovyov.

present moment, inevitably devolving into atomistic endeavors of Luciferian arrogance.¹⁸ The *podvizhnik*, on the other hand, is one who humbly attends to love of God, neighbor, environment, history, etc. in the *present moment*, keeping her eyes on her "immediate work," shunning the "pretensions" of the intelligentsia's hero.¹⁹

Make no mistake, Bulgakov's *podvizhnik* is no shy subservient, but an active, dynamic, and creative shaper of a faithful life of love, humility, and "self-mastery,"²⁰ challenging any consequentialist ethic that utilizes past and present sufferings as "manure for someone's future harmony."²¹ One sees this quite clearly, for example, in his 1933 oration on St. Seraphim of Sarov. Bulgakov uses the term in relation to the life of the revered saint to spur listeners on to receive God's grace for "exploits of faith and love, by efforts of heart and will."²² What's more, Bulgakov pursues the notion of "ascetic exploit"²³ in a more developed Pneumatological vein in his 1936 *The Comforter*, and in so doing, he widens his description of the *podvizhnik* to include the "creative self-determination and audacity" of the individual person pursuing a life in the Spirit.²⁴ Enlivened by this sense of "renewed theological creativity,"²⁵ Bulgakov even extends these notions of expedition, humble audacity, and creativity to the development of Christian theology itself, arguing that—in vehement contrast to any theory of dogma as a static deposit of fixed propositions—"the very foundation of dogma assumes," among other characteristics, "a combination of effort [and] *creative intuition*," and, furthermore, that at the "heart of dogmatic theology lies dogmatic *quest*."²⁶

Nabokov too knew *podvig* well—being, of course, the title of his fifth Russian novel, published in 1932. In *Podvig*, the reader encounters Martin Edelweiss, a youthful émigré forced to flee the Crimea during the time of Russian revolutionary tumult. Alighting upon an understanding that "human life flowed in zigzags,"²⁷ Martin is consistently "stirred ... deeply"

18. Sergii Bulgakov, "Героизм и подвижничество," in *Сочинения в двух томах*, ed. I. B. Rodnianskaia (Moscow: Наука, 1993), 2:302–342.

19. Bulgakov, "Героизм и подвижничество," 2:324–25.

20. Bulgakov, "Героизм и подвижничество," 2:331.

21. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 244.

22. Sergii Bulgakov, "Уголь пламенеющий," in *Церковная Радость (проповеди)* [Paris, 1938], 30, in *Автобиографические статьи: заметки, статьи* (Orel: Орловской государственной телерадиовещания, 1998), 329–330.

23. Sergii Bulgakov, *Утешитель: О богочеловечестве: Часть II* (Moscow: Общедоступный православный университет, 2003), 345. Cf. 348 where Bulgakov again returns to developing his notion of the *podvizhnik*.

24. Sergii Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 306.

25. Sergii Bulgakov, "Dogma and Dogmatic Theology," in *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time*, ed. Michael Plekon (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 74.

26. Bulgakov, "Dogma," 68, emphasis mine.

27. Vladimir Nabokov, *Glory*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov and Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Vintage International, 1991), *Glory*, 8–9. As a structural schematic for the novel, tracing the initial "zigzags" through to the novel's concluding "picturesque and mysterious windings" (205) is worth some stress, as is the enchanting similarity to how Bulgakov describes the journey of a free spiritual being: "This curved, zigzag ascent is a search for oneself,

by "immemorial and tender banalities," enchanted with "glory, love, tenderness for the soil, a thousand rather mysterious feelings," and oftentimes, as when he was a child, experiences an "unbearable intensification of all his senses, a magical and demanding impulse, the presence of something for which alone it was worth living."²⁸ More and more, this sensual intensification begins to mark, and haunt, Martin with a specific pull towards *home*: as he becomes "familiar with that *special smell*, the *smell* of prison libraries, which *emanated* from Soviet literature," or his mother's use of the unique "*sounds* used in Russia," or being caught off guard by "[a]nother trifle, but somehow that stick seemed *to smell* of Russia."²⁹

The *podvig* that Martin shapes—and is thus shaped by—is ostensibly simple enough: cross illegally into Russia from Latvia and then walk back after only the space of a day. The entire novel acts as a *dénouement* of sorts to the *podvig* in question, as the work abruptly ends soon after Martin heads off for the border, leaving the reader in a state of uncertainty as regards his fate, although one suspects his demise. As the novel unfolds, the reader experiences how Martin becomes increasingly captivated with this "secret exploit"³⁰ of a twenty-four-hour jaunt, but the so-called *purpose* of it escapes those closest to Martin, nowhere better witnessed than Martin's last exchange with his good friend from Cambridge, Darwin.

[Darwin] "Only I do not quite see what's the purpose of it."

[Martin] "*Give it a little thought, and you will.*"

"Some plot against the good old Soviets? Want to see someone? Deliver a secret message, rig up something? I confess that as a boy I rather fancied those gloomy bearded chaps who threw bombs at the troika of the ruthless governor."

Morosely, Martin shook his head.

"And if you want to visit the land of your fathers—although your father was half-Swiss, wasn't he?—still, if you want to see it so badly, would it not be simpler to obtain a regular soviet visa and cross the border by train? Don't want to? Perhaps, after the assassination in that Swiss café, you think you won't be given a visa? All right, I'll get you a British passport."

"What you're imagining is all wrong," said Martin, "I expected you'd understand everything at once."

[...]

an effort to disclose the unique fact of individuality in creation as well as its place in the whole, in the pleroma, in the sophianic proto-image of being. Even when it is submerged in the ocean of universal being, no streamlet of life loses its identity," Sergii Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 143–144.

28. Nabokov, *Glory*, 82, 156, and 20, respectively.

29. Nabokov, *Glory*, 140, 173, respectively, emphasizes mine.

30. Nabokov, *Glory*, 172.

"If, finally, what you are after is just pure risk, there's no need to travel so far. Let us invent something unusual, something that can be executed right now, right here, without overstepping the windowsill."

Martin remained silent, and his face looked sad.

"This is absurd," reflected Darwin, "absurd and rather peculiar. Stayed quietly in Cambridge while they had their civil war, and now craves a bullet in the head for spying. Is he trying to mystify me? What an idiot conversation."³¹

Darwin's disbelief and, in the end, irritation with Martin's decision to risk so much for seemingly so little is in keeping with the nature of the *podvig* itself, as Nabokov understands it. In his foreword to the 1971 English edition of *Podvig*, tweaked in translation to *Glory*, Nabokov elaborates upon why the modified title: "if you once perceive in 'exploit' the verb 'utilize,' gone is the *podvig*, the inutile deed of renown. The author," he continues, "chose therefore the oblique 'glory,' ... the glory of high adventure and disinterested achievement; the glory of this earth and its patchy paradise; the glory of personal pluck; the glory of a radiant martyr."³² Thus, while mystifying to one such as Darwin (and perhaps some readers as well), it is "the glorious exploits of disinterested curiosity" that drive Martin's desire for a "distant perilous journey,"³³ something that eludes the designs of utility, practicality, or a purely mechanistically materialistic calculus.

Darwin's bewilderment—shared more or less by others throughout the novel who, for example, think a person with such plans should "stay home and find something *constructive* to do" or "simply refuse to believe that a young man, pretty much removed from Russian political problems and more of a foreign cut I'd say, could prove capable of—well, of a *high deed*, if you like"³⁴—is understandable, especially according to any sort of logic of utility.³⁵ If Martin was crossing the border for some relatively reasonable purpose ("Some plot against the good old Soviets? ...") then all would at least *make sense*, despite the many dangers he would undoubtedly face. But why play coy about the purpose? Darwin seems to ponder. Moreover, why not simply utilize the traditional conventions of international crossings, either by way of a Soviet or British passport? Or, barring these, why not simply contrive an uncommon deed to achieve in the relative safety of Berlin, something that may possess the sensation of risk "without overstepping the windowsill," as it were? These are all, of course, well-meaning queries proffered by a dear friend who does not wish to see his companion go through with

31. Nabokov, *Glory*, 199–200, italics added.

32. Nabokov, *Glory*, xii–xiii.

33. Nabokov, *Glory*, 126, 185, respectively.

34. Nabokov, *Glory*, 178, 204, respectively, emphasis added.

35. Also, as is noted in Nora Buhks, *Эшадот в хрустальном дворце: О русских романах В. Набокова* (Moscow: Новое литературное обозрение, 1998), 65, Darwin's misunderstanding could be due in part to his own youthful experiences, as Martin learns that Darwin's college studies were interrupted by "[t]hree years in the trenches, France and Mesopotamia, the Victoria Cross ...," all of which began when he was but eighteen, *Glory*, 58–59.

a seemingly suicidal feat. But they also reveal, consciously or not, a kind of consequentialist paradigm that the novel consistently attempts to problematize, "suggesting that the expected futility of Martin's exploit is the very ground of its virtue."³⁶

To be clear, however, the inutility of a *podvig* is certainly not a celebration of some kind of inane nihilistic purposelessness, at least not according to Nabokov and Bulgakov. Disclosed in his 1971 English foreword, Nabokov reveals that *Glory* was, in fact, his *only* novel written with a "purpose," namely, "in stressing the thrill and the glamour that my young expatriate finds in *the most ordinary pleasures* as well as in *the seemingly meaningless adventures of a lonely life*."³⁷ This commentary resonates with Bulgakov's charge to approach the mundanity of *today* with humble creative audacity. While neither Bulgakov nor Nabokov combines their usage of *podvig* with an explicit theory of the artist and her poetic exploits,³⁸ we find ample evidence from their respective literary corpuses to suggest this kind of imaginative speculation is not untoward.

Bulgakov: Sophiological Aesthetics

To build a theological grounding for the artist's *podvig*, we first turn to Bulgakov's theological anthropology and sophiological aesthetics. Bulgakov argues that humanity should be classified primarily as a "существо питическое" ["poetical creature"],³⁹ an "artistic being,"⁴⁰ a "ζῷον ποιητικόν" ["poetic animal"].⁴¹ As such, human persons are free, dynamic creators in the world—"gods by grace,"⁴² in fact—actively mirroring the Divine's transcendent act of creation in-and-beyond the cosmos. Germane to these claims is, of course, Bulgakov's Sophiology, the knotty minutiae of which need not detain us too long although a digest is instructive, at least as regards Sophia's relation to beauty, the artist, and the making of art.⁴³ Why this *recherché* system matters for the argument at hand is that Bulgakov himself believed that it could give "strength for new inspiration, for new creativity, for the overcoming of the

36. Dragunoiu, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Arts of Moral Acts*, 40.

37. Nabokov, *Glory*, x, emphasis added.

38. Although Bulgakov comes the closest in at least using some of these thought forms in the same essay, see "Трун красоты," in *Сочинения в двух томах*, 2:537.

39. Sergii Bulgakov, "Догматическое обоснование культуры," in *Сочинения в двух томах*, 2:637.

40. Sergii Bulgakov, *Icons and the Name of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 43.

41. Sergii Bulgakov, "Religion and Art," in *The Church of God: An Anglo-Russian Symposium*, ed. E. L. Mascall (London: S.P.C.K. 1934), 181.

42. Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 87.

43. Bulgakov developed his Sophiological "system" over many years. For some of his major texts on his Sophiology, see Bulgakov's *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household*, trans. and ed. Catherine Evtuhov (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), esp. 123–156; *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans., Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), esp. 181–283; *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), esp. 89–211; *The Comforter*, esp. 177–218; *Sophia: The Wisdom of God*; and *The Bride of the Lamb*, esp. 3–250.

mechanization of life and of human beings."⁴⁴ (Nabokov himself was inspired by a similar intuition when writing *Podvig*, which he previously thought of entitling *Романтический Бек* [*Romantic Times*], due in part to hearing too often that "Western Journalists call our era 'materialistic,' 'practical,' 'utilitarian,' etc."⁴⁵). Furthermore, as we will see, beauty and artistic *poiesis* are not *only* relevant for delighting the senses, though they certainly do in many instances; when they are situated within Bulgakov's Sophiological musings, a kind of "aesthetic apocalypse" occurs, by which "Sophia's manifestation *is* the experience of participating in *beauty*"—allowing for artist and participant observer to "share a common connection with Sophia, the divine as revealed in the order of creation."⁴⁶ However, all of this requires some unpacking.

While Bulgakov's Sophiology is multifaceted, at its heart is a pursuit of a Christian cosmology, specifically as regards the Creator-creation relation. To craft a faithful Christian cosmology, Bulgakov is resolute one must avoid two pitfalls. On the one hand, one must take care to evade the Scylla of pantheism—a plastic term which can rear many heads but, at root, identifies the world with God or the Divine as the world *tout court*, oftentimes devolving into a thinly guised atheism. On the other hand, one should give a wide berth to the Charybdis of diverse dualisms, all of which invariably fall prey to the various whirlpools of ontologizing evil and violence, or advancing another (sub)divine entity alongside Creator-Divinity (usually as either diametric oppositions of "good" versus "evil" or as a subordinate demiurge who creates, however remarkably, with haphazard adroitness), or positing the world to be *outside* of God, which, at its worst, suggests the Creator as a rival power to creatures who must, in the end, 'kill' the former in order to make a secure place for themselves in the void. Other cosmologies, of course, exist, but be that as it may, Bulgakov argues that these sundry forms of pantheism and dualism are, inevitably, too crude to understand adequately the grandeur of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.

Creation out of nothing, for Bulgakov, is *creatio ex Deo* whereby God, eternally possessing the divine world, or Divine Sophia, as His own nature, *releases* it from the depths of hypostatic being, making it the cosmos in the true sense, *creating* the world 'out of nothing,' " that is, out of divine content, formally and finally grounded in God's *love*. God's mode of relation

44. Bulgakov, *Sophia: The Wisdom of God*, 21

45. Nabokov, *Glory*, x.

46. J. R. Seiling, "From Antinomy to Sophiology: Modern Russian Religious Consciousness and Sergei Bulgakov's Critical Appropriation of German Idealism," PhD Dissertation (University of Toronto, 2008), 263, emphases mine. For a brief selection of the growing body of secondary literature on Bulgakov and beauty, see Katharina Breckner, "Beauty and Art in Solovjev (1850–1903) and in Bulgakov (1874–1948): Does Beauty Save the World?" *Logos i Ethos* 1 32 (2012): 7–17; Bruce Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), esp. chapter 5; Jennifer Newsome Martin, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Critical Appropriation of Russian Religious Thought* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), esp. chapter 2; Aidan Nichols, *Redeeming Beauty: Soundings in Sacral Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2021), esp. chapter 4; Brandon Gallaher, "All Things Shining: Sergii Bulgakov's Theology of Beauty," *The Wheel* 26/27 (2021): 42–49; Daniel Adam Lightsey, "'The Human Thirst to See Heavenly Azure': Sergii Bulgakov, 'Holy Anamnesis,' and Beauty," in *Moral Conversion in Scripture, Self, and Society*, eds. Krijn Pansters and Anton ten Klooster (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), 225–237.

in the act of creation is yet a further manifestation of this ontology of love, whereby the trihypostatic Person relinquishes possession of the divine world, giving it room, as it were, to have its own self-being, releasing it as a kenotic act of love to possess "divinely extra-divine and even non-divine being,"⁴⁷ namely, creaturely Sophia. To be sure, ontologically there is no separation between God and *anything* (Bulgakov consistently cites Acts 17:28 in this regard); thus, Divine Sophia is the "very *foundation* of the world, and the divine world [Divine Sophia] is the essence of the creaturely world [creaturely Sophia]."⁴⁸ However, lest the apparition of pantheism manifest itself, Bulgakov makes clear that just as one must understand the sense of *identity* regarding Divine and creaturely Sophia, one must recognize Divine and creaturely Sophia's *difference* as the latter is to be understood in the light of its *createdness*. Creation *is*, therefore, a "supra-eternal act of God's self-determination," founded upon the kenotic love of the Triune Person who ecstatically donates "creaturely, non-divine being, given to itself"⁴⁹ in all its genuinely diverse multiplicities, thematic possibilities, ontic potentialities, and concrete connections between all the individual members of being—all the while united, in its creaturely *limitedness*, to the all-unity of integral wisdom.

As such, Bulgakov continues, the creaturely world contains no "ontological novelties" in relation to God because, channeling St. Irenaeus of Lyons, "revealed in this world are the same words of the supra-eternal Word that make up the ideal content of the Divine Sophia, the life of God. ... And this is the same life-giving power of the Holy Spirit that clothes the words of the Word with life and beauty."⁵⁰ And yet, while no ontological novelties appear on the so-called transcendental horizon, "Art itself, its element, is deeper, more general, more original than all particular arts, ... through the inspiration of Beauty and participation in it all humanity is called to art."⁵¹ Thus, humanity's practices of *poiesis* and artistic exploits command considerable theological attention from Bulgakov.

Bulgakov on Nature, Beauty, and Art

As we see clearly from several illuminating passages from his 1917 treatise on the philosophy of religious consciousness, *Unfading Light*, Bulgakov argues that art is a "sensing of the ultimate depth of the world and that trembling which it arouses in the soul," leading to the potentiality of an "eros of creativity," an "erotic encounter of matter and form, their enamored

47. Bulgakov, *Bride*, 50.

48. Bulgakov, *Bride*, 50, emphasis original.

49. Bulgakov, *Bride*, 51.

50. Bulgakov, *Bride*, 50.

51. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 402.

confluence."⁵² As such, art can be thought of as "life in beauty."⁵³ According to Bulgakov, the artistic endeavor, including but not limited to the traditional art forms themselves, is part and parcel of being human. Through the inspiration of Beauty as such, humanity is compelled to join this creative dance.

Furthermore, in describing nature vis-à-vis human artistry and creativity, Bulgakov argues that "Nature is a great and wonderful artist"⁵⁴ who "reveals its 'secrets' only to those who know where to look for them and would remain impenetrable to [humanity] if [one] did not possess a certain intuition in [one's] search."⁵⁵ Bulgakov's notion of a "certain intuition" in the human search is crucial for our notion of the artist's *podvig*. He asserts, "An idea senses itself in beauty [and is], attracted to itself with an erotic attraction, in a certain cosmic amorousness ... [where] nature [is] in love with its own loveliness. ... Only poets and artists see and know this cosmic Aphrodite, ... [where] nature [is] in love with its own idea, [and] creation [is] in love with its form."⁵⁶ Bulgakov relates this to the image of the Shulamite and Bridegroom from the *Song of Songs*. "Does not all of nature in its erotic fatigue and its amorous rapture whisper these passionate confessions of the one enamored," he asks. "And does not the poet overhear these sighs and murmuring, does not an artist see these embraces opening out" in a kind of "eros of creativity" in the world below and the "erotic interpenetration of form and matter" in heaven: "Such is the pan-eroticism of nature,"⁵⁷ he declares.

The poet and artist do not *only* sense nature as in love with itself but also participate in this pan-eroticism by way of personal poesis. This is plainly witnessed in Bulgakov's philosophical treatise concerning the nature of the word. Written sporadically from roughly 1917 to 1921, *Philosophy of the Name* was in part a reaction to the Имяславие ("Name-glorifiers") controversy that came to a boil in the early 20th century.⁵⁸ Well into the work, Bulgakov begins to contemplate the "beauty of a word," especially those "primordial words" that constitute the language and root things, their power and meaning—of which, with "childlike, deep wisdom,

52. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 395. While most of what follows by way of an analysis of Bulgakov's views regarding nature, beauty, and art stems from his "earlier" texts—from the 1910s and early 1920s—nearly all of these thought forms concerning the nature of art and the place of the artist are recapitulated in one of his later essays from 1937, occasioned by the centennial of Alexander Pushkin's death in a duel, see "Жребий Пушкина," in *Тихие думы*, 251–269.

53. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 261, respectively. To anticipate, this is strikingly similar to Nabokov's description, see below.

54. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 261

55. Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy*, 144.

56. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 260.

57. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 261.

58. For an insightful overview, see Scott Kenworthy, "The Name-Glorifiers (Imiaslavie) Controversy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, eds. Caryl Emerson, George Pattison, and Randall Poole (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 327–342.

the poet" knows.⁵⁹ In considering the art of the word to be poetry, Bulgakov rhapsodizes concerning how the poet's exploit of images can

take possession and subjugate us, and independently of the direct meaning, with its descants and accompanying sounds, in them, or rather with them, the voices of the universe sound for us, the sounding of the cosmos is audible. In poetry a word ceases to be only a sign that it uses for signaling meaning, 'concepts'; here it appears as itself, i.e., as a symbol, and waves ripple away from it as a cosmic surge. It seems that one more moment and the lyre of Orpheus will tame wild animals and move mountains—the word will receive its efficacy, for it touches the root of being. Poetry immediately borders on the magic of a word; it is to a certain degree already magic in the sense that every powerful word is magical.⁶⁰

Thus, in part, the vocation of the poet (as well as the prose writer⁶¹) is to make oneself open to "the power to know the language of [the] 'flame of things,' " namely, the soul and life of the creaturely world, creaturely Sophia, which was originally gifted a "life-giving principle" by the "Giver of Life" who does not create death.⁶²

From this perspective, and to tie it all together, the artist's *podvig* is therefore animated by an erotic striving of creativity where art aids humanity in a "path towards the discovery of beauty."⁶³ Bulgakov characterizes this path of discovery by utilizing Viacheslav Ivanov's pithy phrase: "*a realibus ad realiora*" ("from the real to the more real"), by which Ivanov meant for Symbolist art to remain connected to material reality even while aspiring towards the disclosure of a more real reality.⁶⁴ Bulgakov explores this idea within the context of art's relationship to beauty as such, where the former gives prophetic witness to the latter, where, for example, a poet is "obedient to the commands of the muse, forget[s] about himself, by surrendering to inspiration, and strive[s] to cross beyond the barrier of personal limitation."⁶⁵

59. Sergii Bulgakov, *Philosophy of the Name*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2022), 152, 143, respectively.

60. Bulgakov, *Philosophy of the Name*, 161. Much has been made of Bulgakov's interaction with 18th-19th century German Idealists and Romantics such as Kant and Hegel and especially Schelling and Fichte. One figure who has yet to receive a thorough comparative analysis in relation to Bulgakov on these issues is the 18th century genius, Johann Georg Hamann, who considers poetry "the mother-tongue of the human race," while rhapsodizing that God is the "poet at the beginning of days" who reveals himself "to creatures through creation." From the essay *Aesthetica in Nuce* (1762) in Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, trans. Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 63, 75, 78, respectively.

61. Bulgakov, *Philosophy of the Name*, 160.

62. Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 81. Bulgakov quotes here from the apocryphal Book of Wisdom 1:13.

63. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 383.

64. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 383. See Viacheslav Ivanov, *Selected Essays*, trans. Robert Bird, ed. and intro. Michael Wachtel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 28, 35, 56. Bulgakov too seems to suggest this: "it must remain art [doing the work of *this* world's creativity: writing novels, making visual art, composing music, etc.], for only by *being itself* is it news of the empyrean world, the promise of Beauty," *Unfading Light*, 404, emphasis mine.

65. Bulgakov, *Philosophy of the Name*, 159.

To be sure, Bulgakov was no naïf. He knew the potential for corruption, distortion, and the propagandizing of art in the pursuit of counterfeit beauties; in fact, he sharply critiques those he judges to moralize art or commit other utilitarian violences that often lead to a kind of ossification.⁶⁶ All the while, Bulgakov maintains that art, though fraught, has the potential to acquire for itself "an unfathomable depth" as Beauty is further revealed. Art is, argues Bulgakov, "the key that opens this depth ... [calling all] to a life in beauty and giv[ing] prophetic witness about it."⁶⁷ As a "regal vocation,"⁶⁸ art is concerned first with erotic longing. This "being in love," he continues, "this eros of being, gives broth to [the artist's] inspiration," to her "creative fire,"⁶⁹ to which the "spiritual limitedness of positivism remains alien."⁷⁰ In other words, the arts in part help to continually, progressively reveal the authentic nature of creation and the many spheres of reality.

Nabokov: Art as Creation

In his lectures on Dostoevsky, Nabokov contends, "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."⁷¹ Furthermore, he elaborates in another address that this sort of striving towards a poetic activity is akin to a creator deity fashioning a cosmos, arguing, "the real writer [is] the fellow who sends planets spinning and models a man asleep and eagerly tampers with the sleeper's rib."⁷² What's more, the adventurous quality of the artist's *podvig* is witnessed in the artist's poetic deed and the reader's search: "[T]he glory of God is to hide a thing, and the glory of man is to find it,"⁷³ per *Bend Sinister*, which is certainly echoing Proverbs 25:2. Mirroring this deity—and Nature, who possesses a "marvelous system of spells and wiles" to which "the writer of fiction" is but a follower of its lead⁷⁴—the artist, in a "fit of lucid madness," poised

66. For example, Bulgakov insists that art "exists only in an atmosphere of freedom and disinterestedness. It must be free also from religion (of course this does not mean from God), and from morality (although not from the Good). Art is autocratic, and by its premeditated subordination it would only show that it does not believe in itself and is afraid of itself. But what is fainthearted art capable of? Then instead of creative quests the convention of stylization makes a home for itself, and instead of inspiration, correctness of canon," *Unfading Light*, 394.

67. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 383.

68. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 383.

69. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 382–383

70. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 395.

71. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Boston: Mariner Books, 2002), 106.

72. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Boston: Mariner Books, 2002), 2.

73. Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 106.

74. Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 5. Cf. Bulgakov's affinity with these thoughts regarding his speculations on Nature as "a great and wonderful artist" (*Unfading Light*, 261) who "reveals its 'secrets' only to those who know where to look for them and would remain impenetrable to [humanity] if [one] did not possess a certain intuition in [one's] search," (*Philosophy of Economy*, 144).

to make individuated feats of renown, possesses "the zest of a deity building a live world from the most unlikely ingredients."⁷⁵

One must, of course, note how Nabokov spurned any instrumentalization of the artist's role in society—such as being held responsible for reporting "on the topics of the day," or serving as "a social commentator, [or] a class-war correspondent." In short, the exploit of the artist, for Nabokov, cannot be reduced to exploring the "general ideas" of "national, folklore, class, masonic, religious, or any other communal aura" that in all likelihood distract the *good* reader from tasting "the nectar of possible talent" a writer might possess.⁷⁶ To use a Nabokovism, "true art deals not with the genus, and not even with the species, but with an aberrant individual of the species."⁷⁷ Of course, this kind of statement could be seen to encourage an array of potential interpretations, including a lethargic misapplication of *l'art pour l'art*, arguably further linking the artist to an atomistic, and truly nihilistic, *incurvatus in se*. But this is not the only, nor even the best understanding; better would be simply to read this as another declaration (very similar to Bulgakov, in fact) of the impossibility of diminishing the artist and her work(s) to an easily definable classificatory system that can, in the wrong hands, reduce the particular genius of an artist to labels such as American Southern Gothic or French *Nouveau Roman*.

Importantly, as we see from Nabokov's creature Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's "joyous energy ... [in] looking for the creation of something new, something still unknown, genuine, corresponding fully to the gift which [is] felt like a burden,"⁷⁸ the artist's *podvig* begins with the artist's joyous burden to create, but it is not a solipsistic endeavor; instead, it entails participation by others who, in the case of the fiction writer, read and, more importantly, *re-*

75. Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 290–291. It is again worth some stress how pervasively Nabokov's use of scriptural, liturgical, and theological stylizations is exploited. On this note, see Link's brilliant point, "Even as a sincere disavowal of any so-called 'interest in religion' (which may be fully granted), [Nabokov's] statement is, importantly, not a denial of the genuine role such 'Byzantine' materials self-evidently play in his literary inventions, especially in the 'private curatorship' of his formative years; to the contrary, it is a clarifying admission indicating, at the very least, an extensive aesthetic and thematic assimilation of such materials, obviously viewed by the author as worthy of literary treatment, ripe for continual reworking—though always on fresh canvases, as it were, under the distinctive strokes of his own brushes, in vibrant hues inimitably mixed on his own palette," "Recourse to Eden," 115.

76. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 112–113. Bulgakov too was concerned about the petrification of words when they lose their "taste, smell, color" to the "verbal husk" of a utilitarian theory of language: "The magical use of a word, of course, is other than semantic or logical because the guiding aim here is not to express a thought but to unleash energy, to manifest the nocturnal, underground, concealed energy of a word," *Philosophy of the Name*, 162, 164, respectively. Even given their differences here, both writers are concerned with artists and words *not* being reduced to generalized, perfunctorily communicatory ends.

77. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 155. Or, as he never tired of telling his students, one must attend to "the supremacy of the detail over the general, of the part that is more alive than the whole, of the little thing which a man observes and greets with a friendly nod of the spirit while the crowd around is being driven by some common impulse to some common goal," Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 373.

78. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*, trans. Michael Scamell and Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 94.

read.⁷⁹ Nabokov describes the dance of artist and participant, as seen in his lecture "Good Readers and Good Writers," as like "the master artist" trekking "up a trackless slope ... and at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever."⁸⁰ From this linkage, the artist's *podvig* takes on a further dimension than encountered previously, namely, the potentiality of a jubilant dilation of artist and "re-reader," embracing in their quest for the "aesthetic bliss" of a realm "where art"—which Nabokov describes as, "curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy" as well as more succinctly: "Beauty plus pity"⁸¹—is the norm."⁸²

Thus, as described above, in Nabokov's judgment, poetic making is firstly about the individual artist herself—and certainly not about contributing general ideas to a group or to the "public." And yet, Nabokov demonstrates a fierce attentiveness to the infinite mysteries of otherness throughout his works, a kind of ethos grounded in the cultivation of a profound willingness to compassionately see and sense the depths of exterior and interior reality (or *realities*). Thinking reality to be "a very subjective affair," Nabokov imagined *reality* as something to which one "can get nearer and nearer"; but, as he says in one interview, "you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable."⁸³ Going further, in another interview, Nabokov challenges the use of 'reality' by the interviewer, arguing that, "To be sure, there is an average reality, perceived by us all, but that is not true reality. ... Paradoxically, the only real, authentic worlds are, of course, those that seem unusual. ... Average reality begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture."⁸⁴ One could speculate that this kind of logic is pertinent to Ivanov's phrase "*a realibus ad realiora*" that Bulgakov so often quotes: an understanding that compels re-readers to progress beyond the "average" *reality* of the so-called first look at the text, fostering a careful

79. See Tom Whelan, " 'And So the Password Is—?': Nabokov and the Ethics of Rereading," in *Nabokov and the Question of Morality: Aesthetics, Metaphysics, and the Ethics of Fiction*, eds. Michael Rodgers and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 21–32. Whelan argues that Nabokov's insistence upon good readers being re-readers is attributable to "Nabokov's generosity" and "sympathy" as a writer (24, 28, respectively).

80. Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 2.

81. Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 251.

82. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1991), 315. Cf. Eklund's argument, "true creativity requires not only an intentional orientation toward participation in transcendence and goodness ... but an intentional denial of immanentized or solipsistic beauty," "Eschatology and Theurgy in *Lolita*," 52. Eklund's analysis of Nabokov and Berdyaev, especially as regards *theurgy*, is compelling. One future point worth considering between Nabokov vis-à-vis Berdyaev and Nabokov vis-à-vis Bulgakov would be Bulgakov's critique of *theurgy* (as developed by Solovyov and Berdyaev) as in need of a good washing within a sophiurgic "metacritical tub."

83. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 11.

84. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 118. Cf. 154. Also see Michael Wood's brilliant meditation on the nature of "the real" in Nabokov's fiction, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), chapter. 2: "The real is a banality and a longing. It is what we hold in our hands, often without knowing it, and what always escapes us; what is there and what can't be there; what we would miss if we lost it, what we miss and dream we have lost," 30.

consideration to the ever-more *real* particularities of work of art (and, more grandly, *other life* before them). At any rate, the seeming uncircumscribable variability of *reality* does not lead Nabokov the fiction writer away from mundane particularities but further up and in, so to speak. Examples are abundant. For instance, as the narrator's half-brother in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* declares,

It has always distressed me that people in restaurants never notice the animated mysteries [of other persons], ... I once reminded a businessman with whom I had lunched a few weeks before, that the woman who had handed us our hats had had cotton wool in her ears. He looked puzzled and said he hadn't been aware of there having been any woman ... [and later, he continues] a person who fails to notice a taxi-driver's hare-lip because he is in a hurry to get somewhere, is to me a monomaniac.⁸⁵

Mayhap there is no distinguishable utility in deliberately looking for and remembering those countless idiosyncrasies that make up the "animated mysteries" in one's midst, but therein lies a *podvig* of sorts, one that is founded upon an "ethics of inutility"⁸⁶ that senses otherness as entirely singular and therefore unconditionally valuable. Take, for example, "The Vane Sisters," the narrator begins his story with an enthusiastic description of seemingly normal icicles "drip-dripping," and the experience of "[t]his twinned twinkle was delightful but not completely satisfying; or rather it sharpened [the narrator's] appetite for other tidbits of light and shade, and [he walked] on in a state of raw awareness that seemed to transform the whole of [his] being into one big eyeball rolling in the world's socket."⁸⁷ This intimate attentiveness to the apparently mundane helps to discipline the careful re-reader to the hidden layers present in the work itself (e.g., the famous ghostly acrostic closing out the story), making something as seemingly whimsical as beholding the thawing of icicles a worthwhile activity with which to be enamored and formed. As such, the true creator, the individual artist—and the participative re-reader—gropes toward surprise, awe, kindness, astonishment, discovery, and compassion, all in response to the gift of intimately strange, "unquenchable, unattainable" otherness.

To conclude, both writers describe the exploits of the artist in Romantic terms, arguing for the preeminent value of personal, individual creativity in humanity's response to the many layers of reality. Furthermore, both writers goad us to sense the world and all its mysterious depths and heights with keener awareness to its poetic achievement, perhaps especially in those moments of Nabokovian timeless singularity. As he dreamily muses in *Speak, Memory*, in these moments of "timelessness" a kind of "ecstasy" occurs, and "behind the ecstasy is

85. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: Vintage International, 1992), 106–107.

86. Dragunoiu, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Arts of Moral Acts*, 22: "As a moral impulse that has no recognizable utility but has discovered a graceful means of expression, Nabokovian courtesy is an art of the moral virtues."

87. Vladimir Nabokov, "The Vane Sisters," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 619.

something else ... like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern—to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal."⁸⁸ With an almost uncanny affinity Bulgakov too describes these moments of overwhelming unity in his Prague spiritual diary, whereby one's loving attention to the detail of the present becomes ever more finely attuned. Recording his impressions from a June morning in 1924, after waking to streets "made fresh after the night," Bulgakov muses how one can easily "attend to the song of the world borne to you from all sides, ... the immovable *here* and *now* ... an unceasing *now*. And what a sin against oneself and against the world," he continues, "what cowardice you expose in yourself when you escape to the *then*."⁸⁹ This revealing passage subtly recapitulates the argument of his *Vekhi* essay, where Bulgakov, on the one hand, critiques the intelligentsia revolutionary hero for sacrificing today for the sake of a better world tomorrow and, on the other, hails the *podvizhnik* who is "freed from heroic postures and pretensions," instead, fondly attending to her "immediate work."⁹⁰ Bulgakov reflects in his diary, "How to feel this in a single moment, the beating of the world's heart and myself as a drop of the warm blood of the world making through the world's body?"⁹¹ This feeling to which Bulgakov points presumes a kind of porosity of being, a sort of Nabokovian oneness with sun and stone, which can overwhelm one, as the narrator of "Beneficence" relays it, with a sense of "the blissful bond between me and all of creation,"⁹² a sense that is perhaps never truly lost, even if one finds oneself entangled within an immanentized, physicalist metaphysic. Both writers aid us in imagining, as the narrator of *Bend Sinister* intimates, "a rent" in our world "leading to another world of tenderness, brightness, and beauty,"⁹³ and in purposely making these realities all the more real in the here and now.⁹⁴



88. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 479. Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical "friend" of Nabokov's (who, just so, happens to have an anagrammatic name of Vladimir Nabokov), evidently helped him to develop a sense of "cosmic synchronization," especially as regards the far-reaching, far-seeing of the poet: "the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time. ... [where] trillions of ... trifles occur—all forming an instantaneous and transparent organism of events, of which the poet ... is the nucleus," Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 544.

89. Sergii Bulgakov, *Spiritual Diary*, trans. Roberto De La Noval and Mark Roosien (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2022), 59. One can hear in the distance Nabokov's narrator of "The Fight," who concludes the short-story by ruminating, "perhaps what matters is ... the play of shadow and light on a live body, the harmony of trifles assembled on this particular day, at this particular moment, in a unique and inimitable way," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, 146.

90. Bulgakov, "Героизм и подвижничество," 2:324–325.

91. Bulgakov, *Spiritual Diary*, 60.

92. Vladimir Nabokov, "Beneficence," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, 77.

93. Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, in *Novels and Memoirs 1941–1951*, ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 165–66.

94. Especial thanks to Celeste Jean, Danny Sebastian, Steve Long, and the two anonymous reviewers for making this labor more generative; any errors of substance, style, or syntax, of course, remain my own.

Daniel Adam Lightsey is a doctoral candidate in religious studies at Southern Methodist University. His current work has to do mostly with Sergii Bulgakov's theology of beauty in relation to his metaphysics of personhood, all with a wider view to how creativity and artistic *poiesis* were understood within twentieth-century Russian religious-philosophical-literary milieus. Some of his other recent work can be found in *Moral Conversion in Scripture, Self, and Society* (De Gruyter, 2024) and *Art, Desire, and God: Phenomenological Perspectives* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).