

## **Comment on Brian Boyd, “Nabokov and Popper: Convergences and Divergences”**

Akiko Nakta

I learned many important things from your comprehensive and illuminating paper on the similarities and differences between Nabokov and Popper. One point that impresses me is that their attitudes towards God were surprisingly close, but Nabokov's esoteric and mystical remarks are not found in Popper.

Popper's remarks you cite, “Any discussion of God somehow is in a sense unpleasant. When I look at what I call the gift of life, I feel a gratitude which is in tune with some religious ideas of God. However, the moment I even speak of it, I am embarrassed that I may do something wrong to God in talking about God,” “I think that all theology is blasphemy” and “My objection to organized religion is that it tends to use the name of God in vain” might have sounded offending to traditional believers in those days, but today many people with religious sensibilities would agree with him.

It is hard to imagine the same with Nabokov's remarks on God, answering to an interviewer's question if he believed in God, “To be quite candid—and what I am going to say now is something I never said before, and I hope it provokes a salutary little chill—I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more.” Nabokov's idea of the hereafter is inaccessible to the readers. We can only imagine that Nabokov knew something about God and the hereafter no one else knew and that he hid the key to that something in his works, but even if we are aware of such keys in his works, we still do not know exactly about his idea.

I believe that Nabokov's awareness of death and the afterlife, given he originally had it since his childhood, was intensified by the loss of his homeland, of his father assassinated and brother killed in a concentration camp, and the separation with his mother and siblings. Many details of Nabokov's life are reflected in his works to be shared with the readers, but some of his thoughts remain exclusive.

On the other hand, Popper's thoughts on God and religion seem open to the others. Is it because he faced his belief in the same way as he explored theories in philosophy and science?

*Wittgenstein's Poker: The Story of a Ten-Minute Argument Between Two Great Philosophers*<sup>1</sup> explains the reason Popper was more highly estimated in continental Europe than in England, citing Ralf Dahrendorf, as follows:

Popper was very happy in England because he felt safe. It was a country in which a man who was immune to the great passions of the century—notably communism and fascism—could feel that he wasn't challenged. But, precisely because England was such a country, Popper was too normal to be interesting. Now the Continent has the opposite story. The great passions threatened every single country. And there Popper stood, a tower of reason in the midst of turmoil. And that, over time, commanded enormous respect. More than that, it was regarded as the great answer to the destructive and disastrous consequences of the passionate policies from 1917 to Stalin's death, and that includes the whole of the Nazi period. (217)

I am convinced by this passage, which seems to give me the proper image of Popper for Europe in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I would like to ask you whether you agree with the statement? And do you think that the book treats Popper fairly?

The book also mentions Popper's influence on the University of Canterbury, citing its official history reports, "Popper's impact on academic life was greater than that of any other" (218). Did you feel that when you were a BA and MA student at the university?

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<sup>1</sup> Edmonds, David, and John Eidinow. *Wittgenstein's Poker: The Story of a Ten-Minute Argument Between Two Great Philosophers*. Ecco, 2001.