

exemplary possessor—a Christlike Emperor and continuator of ancient Rome.”

Suddenly, just as Lady Murasaki concluded her learned discourse, a huge cat wearing a monocle and a bow tie jumped up on the table, then onto Bolcitan's left shoulder. “You can take me for a hallucination,” said the cat in what sounded like either Russian or Danish, “but then who's to say whether we're all dreaming or not?”

Lady Murasaki smiled her sweet smile and clasped Prince Towa no Ai's hand. Before anyone could utter a word, the catular apparition vanished together with its master. The pilgrim's visage grew even more severe than usual. They were enshrouded by silence.

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40. Rare Things

A neighbor's cat interloping in the garden that does not skitter off when caught in the act.

A young man who takes off his baseball cap upon entering the house where he has been invited to dinner.

An Israeli woman of a certain age who does not point her index finger in one's face when making an assertion.

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41. One Evening During the Reign of the Kartvelian Dictator

One evening during the reign of the Kartvelian dictator, Bolcitan got an urgent call from Dr. Peire Turbinov, a friend of long standing. Dr. Turbinov sought urgently to consult Bolcitan about the tumult the physician's book had precipitated. All the critics were clamoring for an explanation, and Dr. Turbinov was in a quandary. He acquiesced without demur in Bolcitan's suggestion that Lady

Murasaki and Prince Towa no Ai come too. The trio had dined together the previous evening at the Ukraina and laughed over the elaborate menu on which every conceivably edible dish was asterisked as unavailable. But the stolid peroxide-blonde diva with the potato nose ululating into the microphone had served up a risible divertissement for the otherwise glum diners.

Dr. Turbinov's apartment was in a pile on Garden Street, not far from the accursed depot next to the Akademicheskaya, where day and night trolleys screeched in and out of their sheds, causing the hotel dwellers' hair to stand on end and their armoires to pop open randomly. Bolcitan and his two friends ascended a winding staircase to the third floor past tumuli of refuse on the landings. In this city of toil and trouble, middens were not confined to kitchens.

The quartet sat down in the host's spacious study.

"My attackers are single-mindedly cretinous as usual," began Dr. Turbinov, "and I must somehow disabuse them of their quest for the single answer that would unite the book's disparate worlds. As true believers they are furious that God the Father has absented himself, as it would be perceived through his works, from the sublunary world. How to defang the crocodiles, that is the question, Bolcitan!"

"You must make them see that absence can be part of coherence, my dear Dr. Turbinov," answered Bolcitan. "You've both read the book," he added, turning to Lady Murasaki and Prince Towa no Ai. "Have I set the task correctly?"

"Yes, you certainly have," answered Lady Murasaki. "Here's how I would frame my counter-attack. Start by getting them to see that this self-absenting permeates the principal figurative aspect of the entire book and creates a distance between the material events and the emotional targets towards which readers are almost irresistibly directed to marshal their own longings. Neither the Symbolist's indefiniteness nor simply any kind of semantic cipher—which would be finally guessed—can be at issue here, since your allegory, Dr. Turbinov, adumbrates ideal meaning without elaborating access to it. The figurative aspect simultaneously creates channels for emotional intensity and directs them to endpoints, yet

the dynamic power of longing is aided by the absence just the way a vacuum is produced by a draft. It pulls the reader along on a trajectory classifiable as a nexus of sheer longings which are matched by the feelings induced in the characters.”

Dr. Turbinov allowed the shadow of a smile to appear on his monocled face. “I couldn’t have put it better myself,” he said. “I’m so happy that Bolcitan had the foresight to bring you along.”

Prince Towa no Ai extended Lady Murasaki’s line. “Ideal meaning not only supersedes but may effectively cancel out the objective correlative. For example, the devil’s famous line, ‘manuscripts don’t burn,’ an apodeictic generality for which I understand you’ve been variously praised and taken to task, displays not mere indifference but actually an eradication of the literal sense of the proposition it makes. In contrast to our Jerusalem friend, whose poetics would be at pains to justify the statement’s literal sense—if necessary, by constructing a possible world in which it would emerge as objectively true—for you, Dr. Turbinov, the ‘ideal’ and metaphysical meaning would be the only one, canceling the requirement of objective or plausible veracity. The rhetorical power of the statement would derive not from its participation in an experienced literal truth but in its expressive articulation of a superseding desire—be it for the eternity of art or the hope of universal love.”

“I now see why Bolcitan insisted on bringing you both,” said Dr. Turbinov, taking advantage of a momentary hiatus in the discussion occasioned by the appearance out of nowhere of a large cat.

“May I join the discussion?” asked the cat in Russian-accented English, assuming a seat next to Bolcitan. “I feel that I can make a contribution.” A Byzantine crucifix hung from the cat’s stiff white clerical collar. His manifestation did not occasion the slightest discomfiture among the human discussants.

“Our catular friend’s apparition and his insignia,” continued Lady Murasaki, “prompt me to mention a collateral line of argumentation. The theological syncretism of your treatment, Dr. Turbinov, makes doctrinal certainty generally unavailable and, when occasionally present, unreliable as a key to the one meaning. All the would-be critics have striven to link the Yershalayim story to

antecedents Hebraic, Gnostic, and Manichean, and to proceed from there to graded interpretations of truth conditions, and from these to a unified reading. But many of these have proven paradoxically to be all plausible, since you've entwined elements from each conception in ways that encourage multiple interpretations, as your critics have demonstrated. We do not know for certain who wrote the Yershalayim narrative; therefore even the logical priority of Yeshua's story to the Moscow narrative, which would derive from certainty of authorship, remains in doubt. Is the Yershalayim narrative a fiction whose 'author' has guessed what happened in reality? Are the chapters apparently narrated by the devil objective reality as he witnessed or intuited it? At the same time, this Satan-figure who dominates 27 out of the 32 chapters and epilogue—which add up to the number of years Jesus lived, 33—cannot claim final authority over the entire work. So, in parallel formation, the absence of an author 'outside' the Yershalayim narrative and the absence of God the Father 'within' it are the very factors which will permanently block the search for a unified reading of the whole."

"It should be made clear just what is to be gained by resorting to theological argumentation as far as the interpretation of the book is concerned," interjected Dr. Turbinov.

"That shouldn't be difficult," said Prince Towa no Ai. "One can argue that far from constituting the key to the book, theology furnishes a system of meanings and significances that can be drawn on for key *analogies* to the form of Dr. Turbinov's masterpiece, very much in the spirit of CSP's idea that those who know the structure of the Christian trinity know his semeiotic." Prince Towa no Ai took for granted that there was no need to decipher the initials by which he had invoked the creator of the modern theory of signs.

"In evaluating the validity of my thesis, it's important to bear in mind that patterns of thought are at issue which might be quite independent of any expressed—or even conscious—design of the author, whether we understand this to be Dr. Turbinov himself, with all the paraphernalia of his biography, or characters who are commonly taken to be his mouthpieces. In this sense, theological analysis will function as a heuristic through which the specific interpretation being advanced will be shown as centrally relevant."

"I can second that," said the cat, his whiskers twitching with excitement. "Moreover, we should avoid joining in the critics' efforts to normalize Dr. Turbinov's theological underpinnings. His Devil cannot be proven to act in earthly matters in concert with—much less on the authority of—a higher power. One might be encouraged to take him for a devil in the tradition of an Old Testament and Judaic Satan who is not all evil, a messenger of God the Father and not an autonomous agent. But on closer examination"—here the cat adjusted with his paw the monocle lodged firmly in his left eye socket—"his actions and decisions do in fact appear autonomous, accomplished without consultation or orders, whether 'good' or 'bad.' To be sure, he does not give, take away, or transfer 'supernatural' power as a true usurper of divine authority would be able to do. However, nor does he act intelligibly as a special emissary for a particular purpose—that is to say, as a messenger bearing God's express command to the 'natural' world. Thus he is neither a 'vicar' nor a messenger."

Bolcitan nodded at the cat with evident approval. Just then an insistent triple knock was heard at the door. The host rose to let in a newcomer whose disfigured appearance left no doubt as to his identity. They recognized Yeshua.

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42. Sympathy Is the Most Splendid of All Qualities

Sympathy is the most splendid of all qualities. It need not be so grandiloquent as compassion or keenly felt as pity. It is the unreflective oneness of feeling with a fellow creature's pathos not susceptible of argument. English lacks the emotional intensity, honesty, and abnegation of German *Sympathie*—the ruth, which we no longer say—nor the harmony of souls, the instinctive tug of self toward other of French *sympathie*. Only the Japanese *dôjô* can proclaim itself the equal of Greek *sympatheia*. So much for the residue of our Judaeo-Christian patrimony.