

**Panelist:** Stephen Blackwell, University of Kentucky

**Title:** "Revisiting *The Gift's* Narrator"

The notoriously mercurial narrative perspective in *The Gift* has generated lively debate and a number of conflicting theories over the course of the past thirty-six years. In the most recent summation of these debates, Yuri Leving weighed the evidence and endorsed those who assert that Fyodor is not the source of the entire text as utterance, but rather, an implied author-creator figure weaves in and out of Fyodor's discourse and provides some independent perspective and knowledge. While I do not find the evidence for this claim compelling, for reasons to be demonstrated briefly in the body of this presentation, that is not the main point I wish to raise.

After demonstrating several reasons why one cannot conclusively discount Fyodor as a plausible source for the entire text, this paper undertakes a careful examination of what such a narrative voice represents, in itself and in its relation to the literary traditions Nabokov was drawing upon and extending in his work. An important feature of this narrator is its paradoxicality: once we allow that it could be Fyodor, we must allow that it both is and is not Fyodor, simultaneously. This result is a necessary consequence of his claim that he will "retwist, re chew, and rebelch everything so that nothing will remain of the autobiography but dust." This embedded "liar's paradox" undermines the specificity of both Fyodor as character and Fyodor as narrator, for both are necessarily fictionalized within the very work they imagine and utter. In the past, this anomaly was either overcome (by those who invoke an "author figure" who is not Fyodor) or celebrated (by those, like myself, who saw the paradox as an emblem of complexity and elusive reality). What no one, including me, noticed, was that in fact this paradox points toward a new model of narrative perspective and even a new type of narrator as representational character. Building upon innovations by Pushkin in *Evgenii Onegin* and Dostoevsky in *Dvoynik*, Nabokov creates a narrator who imbues his text with himself by describing a distortion of that self. The result is narrative as self-revelation, rather than narrative as self-description. With his text, the narrator "shows," rather than "tells," who and what he is.