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The Ins and Outs of *Invitation to a Beheading*

But if you read anything of Sirin, through to
the end, all at once, so to speak—particularly
Invitation to a Beheading—it turns itself inside out.
(P.M. Bitsilli, review of *Invitation to a Beheading*, 59/143)

Of all Nabokov's famously fertile works, *Invitation to a Beheading* has yielded perhaps the greatest bounty of plausible interpretation. Good critics have argued convincingly that the novel is ultimately about the life of the artist, or about totalitarianism, or about fiction as such, or about artistic structure, or about literary heritage. Leona Toker notes that on any of these levels, the novel is characterized simultaneously by "overdetermination" and "indeterminacy"—the text gives strong reasons for one or another interpretation while also giving strong reasons to doubt or even reject the interpretation. I will argue that this restless shift in meaning is itself what the text is most crucially about: it is a text about "about."¹

Lest this interpretation appear hopelessly scholastic, I want to point out the true horror that attends Nabokov's project, at least as he carried it out here, with its nauseating infinite regresses and head-splitting conundrums. There is no solid ground in this novel, where settings collapse, words rebel, and personal histories are faked. Nabokov removes the reliability of things and minds with a distinctly Cartesian thoroughness, and he shares Descartes' dread at the abyss of meaning that lies just beyond or beneath unreliable appearances. Even more consistently than Descartes, in fact, he makes the mind doubt itself, and his path up from the abyss inspires even less confidence.

1. Leona Toker, *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures*. In this interpretation I am in agreement with Toker. However, her focus is on the humanistic implications of this indeterminacy, while my concern here is the abstract form and dynamics of this style of thought.

Nabokov arrived at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1919: three years too late to attend (if he had been interested) the lectures of a man who had concerned himself with just this problem: the reliability of thought as such, or at any rate in its most rarefied forms of logic and mathematics. Earlier still (in 1901), that man, Bertrand Russell, had written a letter to Gottlob Frege about the prospects for reducing mathematics to a branch of logic depending only on the properties of being a member or not a member of a set. Russell turned his attention to sets of sets (a relatively untroublesome phenomenon), and then to sets that include themselves as members. Thus, the set of all sets is itself certainly a set, and it therefore includes itself as a member. The set of all noses, by contrast, is not itself a nose, and thus does not include itself as a member. No problem so far—plenty of infinities, but no contradiction. However, what of the set of all sets that do *not* include themselves as members? If that set *does* include itself as a member, then it is certainly *not* a set that does *not* include itself as a member, and this rules it out as a member of itself. On the other hand, if it does *not* include itself as a member, then it is most assuredly a set that does not include itself as a member, and thus it is a member of the set of all such sets—in other words, a member (like it or not!) of itself. Thus, if it is, it isn't, and if it isn't, it is, a member of itself. Therefore the quality of being inside or outside a set is not absolutely consistent in all cases. This conundrum became known as "Russell's paradox."²

Russell's paradox threatened the project of subordinating mathematics to logic. That was evidently a reasonable goal in these fields, and continued to be pursued (by Russell among others), until 1931, when Kurt Goedel published his incompleteness theorem. Goedel proved that mathematics could never prove every true mathematical statement—in some sense, that math (and any other axiomatic system) was not perfectly comprehensive and consistent. For mathematicians and logicians, this extremely important result did not have the apocalyptic effects which popularizing works suggested might ensue—the disintegration of those fields, for example—but it was something like the discovery and charting of an abyss within those fields.

There is no reason to assume that Nabokov knew Russell's work, much less that he patterned his own after it. Yet Russell's paradox is a powerful heuristic model for the dynamics of *Invitation*. This convergence can be explained in

2. Another paradox, formulated by Lewis Carroll and discussed by Pavel Florensky, informs Gennady Barabtarlo's interpretation of *Pnin*. See Barabtarlo, "A Resolved Discord (*Pnin*)," *Aerial View* 143–92. That article and the present one share the assertion that fictional worlds can differ from the ordinary world not only in matters of fact, but also in the workings of logic.

several ways, though it is difficult not to perceive a "spiritual affinity" of the sort that Nabokov rejects wholesale in the foreword to the English translation of this novel (*Invitation* 6).³ Though his discipline was manifestly different from Russell's, he shared the same passion for order. In his indignant criticism of shoddy literary work and in the intricate structures of his own work, he appeals to the (usually tacit) assumption that consistency is both obvious in its meaning and attainable in literary works. He seems constantly drawn to the matter of what does and what does not belong where—in other words, to the construction of consistent sets. And as every reader of Nabokov's writings on literature is aware, he loved to count. He loved it best, though, when the counting revealed inconsistencies. $A=A$ is a dull story, after all, a prison that is hardly more livable than the chaos of $A\ A$. As determined to build structures as he was to escape them, Nabokov pushed the concept of literary consistency to its breaking point.

Invitation to a Beheading was written in a "fortnight of wonderful excitement and sustained inspiration" (*Strong Opinions* 68) in the midst of Nabokov's work on his great novel *The Gift*. It is hard not to think of this uncharacteristically rapid process as an exorcism, and once it was through he was able to resume his writing on the other novel. *Invitation* practically wrote itself, powered, it seems to me, by Nabokov's consistency/inconsistency-dynamo. The dynamics are remarkably similar to Russell's, if we consider a member of a set to be somehow "in" the set, and a non-member to be "out." For all its bizarre ambiguity, *Invitation* is essentially an extended fugue on the theme of in versus out.

Order and Chaos

"In accordance with the law the death sentence was announced to Cincinnatus C. in a whisper" (11/25). Thus begins our novel, on a strong note of regulation. Cincinnatus C.'s cell is furnished with a list of rules for prisoners (14/28), the spider is the "official friend of the jailed" (13/27). Everything, it would seem, is either mandated or forbidden. Actions and individuals can be either within or outside a prescribed order, and at the beginning of *Invitation* the order appears pervasive and rigid. Cincinnatus C. has been sentenced to death for his "gnostical turpitude," an offense that is suggestive in its verbal components but only minimally elaborated within the novel. What we know for sure is Cincinnatus C.'s "basic illegality" (30/42), his refusal or inability to remain within the system of codes and regulations that appear to govern the novel.

3. Subsequent page references will be to the English version of the novel followed (where applicable) by the corresponding page in the Russian text.

One can be either within or outside an order, and outside lies chaos. Discomfited by the death sentence, Cincinnatus C. temporarily loses the ability to impose order on his words. “In spite of everything I am comparatively” (12/26), he writes, failing to complete his verbal structure with the anticipated adjective. A bit later, he tells the prison director “Kind. You. Very,” to which Nabokov adds parenthetically, “this still had to be arranged” (15/29).

Orders and chaos, then—and it takes work to create and maintain order. Unable to perform this work at the beginning of the novel, Cincinnatus C. later regains the ability to bring seemingly isolated elements into a structure. Lying on his cot he “help[s] patterns form” on the wall (124/126). I say “regains” because he seems always to have had the conception of patterns: in a mental address to his unfaithful wife Marthe, he dreams that “perhaps we shall fit together, you and I, and turn ourselves in such a way that we form one pattern, and solve the puzzle: draw a line from point A to point B ... without looking, or, without lifting the pencil ... or in some other way ... we shall connect the points, draw the line, and you and I shall form that unique design for which I yearn” (60/69—the Russian names the points not “A” and “B,” but rather “such-and-such” and “such-and-such”). Love is a pattern, and in this case a pattern that cannot be maintained (if indeed it was ever truly formed) because of the tremendous entropic force operating against it.

Despite the initial emphasis on order, *Invitation* is a novel of entropy. The order of the prison, which may at first seem inevitable and eternal, turns out to be arbitrary and transitory. The books in the prison library are catalogued not according to title, but rather by the number of pages (55/65). They might just as well have been catalogued by weight, or color, or author’s name, or subject: there is no obviously essential order here, only an ordering algorithm that may be more or less convenient to the purposes of the person trying to look something up.

The whole material world of *Invitation* succumbs gradually to this entropy: the set falls apart, the characters get sloppy with their lines and costumes, and by the end Cincinnatus C.’s cell has disintegrated. The novel is falling outside its own order, at least apparently. But this was never the novel’s order, this world of regulations, elaborate cruelty, and extermination of outliers. It is just one order within the novel, and it is remarkable precisely for its shoddiness (the key difference between *Invitation* and its false cognates *We*, *Brave New World*, *The Trial*, and *1984*). The number of pages in a book is significant in this novel (and has been from the novel’s first page), but it requires an external perspective to perceive its significance. Within the horizon of meaning available to the characters, everything tends toward chaos.

Escape Plots

The novel's thematic order is built on the motif of confinement and escape, and many kinds of escape appear (at first, anyway) possible. In Chapter 6, Cincinnatus C. is led along a winding path that, for all we and he know, may take him outside. Instead it ends back at his cell. Later (Chapters 13 through 15), he is taunted with the possibility of digging his way out, only to discover that the tunnel and the tunneling are part of his loopy imprisonment. Everything in the book is in the book—there is no escape.

These are only the most physical forms of possible—but then impossible—escape. Other paths, more mental or metaphorical, would seem to hold greater promise, and yet even they must follow a chain of words that loops relentlessly, even redundantly, back to confinement (they were always part of the confinement, as it turns out). During his stroll in Chapter 6, Cincinnatus C. performs an imaginary escape, but the train of his thought, and of the sentence expressing it, offers no opening: by the end of the sentence he is back in prison. In case the reader has missed the point, Nabokov follows this sentence with another, even longer, on the same theme (both too long to quote here, but they can be found on pages 72–75 in the English, and on pages 79–82 in the Russian—the trick is used in both languages). The verbal device here—a long string of words mimicking the long path of his imaginary escape—emphasizes the fact that even his fantasies must end in confinement, and are in fact *part* of his confinement. The words themselves are within this pattern: they do not comfortably denote or point to the theme; they enact it simultaneously with the imagined escape to which they refer. Everything in the book is in the book; there is no escape. This means, incidentally, that Rodion, Rodrig, Roman, and company are only his accidental tormentors. We readers are the true inquisitors, unwinding and rewinding the verbal yarn which binds his world.

It is horrible to be a Nabokov hero: to suspect, however dimly, that there is an outside world, and never to reach it. The suspicion that there *is* such a world is what makes life *here* (inside the fictional world) intolerable; it is why Cincinnatus C. is so desperate to know the scheduled time of his execution, and it is what makes him vulnerable to the repeated sham escapes. Cincinnatus C. is *nearly* able to pull himself out of the world of absurd regulations and farcical justice, this “false order of things,” as he puts it (213/208; in the Russian it's “lozhn[aia] logik[a],” “false logic”), but up to the moment of his execution his fear continues to draw him “into a system that was perilous to him. He fully understood all this, but, like a man unable to resist arguing with a hallucination, even though he knows perfectly well that

the entire masquerade is staged in his own brain, Cincinnatus tried in vain to out-wrangle his fear ..." (213/208). He knows that there is a larger, different world, one he experiences in dreams of "coalescence" and "disintegration," though he finds these words inadequate (205/200, where the words are "soedineni[e]" and "raspad"). He just cannot quite attain the position of the reader and the author, who are free to contemplate the interplay of order and chaos. He is not entirely within his own world, and yet not quite outside it either. He is not deceived by his jailors' crude tricks (not for long, anyway), but he cannot quite understand that, in this novel at any rate, death is kind.⁴

As he is led to his execution, Cincinnatus C. repeatedly says "by myself" (218–21/213–16). This is apparently a plea to walk on his own two feet, to preserve some tiny semblance of autonomy within this overbearing world. Yet those words also signal his desire to exit the whole order to which the novel has subjected him.

Invitation to an *Invitation*

In 1959, Nabokov revisited that particular fictional order, created by him nearly a quarter century earlier, and wrote a foreword to the English translation of the novel. So powerful was the tug of this pattern of thought (perhaps *he* never really escaped it) that it spilled outside the novel proper and into the introduction, which reads like a fresh improvisation on the same theme. For Nabokov's foreword to the English edition of the novel concerns itself primarily with ins and outs, with questions of the type "does element x belong to set A?" The author's political views, he tells us, are out of bounds: "the question of whether or not my seeing both (USSR and Nazi regimes) in terms of one dull beastly farce had any effect on this book, should concern the good

4. See Barabtarlo, "The Main Secret," *Aerial View* 193–97. Also see Nabokov's introduction to *Bend Sinister*, xi–xviii, especially the last page. On the topic of two incommensurable worlds, see D. Barton Johnson, "The Two Worlds of *Invitation to a Beheading*" (*Worlds in Regression* 157–69). Johnson defines the two worlds as "tut" (here) and "tam" (there), and reveals with great ingenuity the novel's many cryptic references to this theme. Johnson's primary emphasis is on the separateness of those two worlds, whereas mine here is on their paradoxical interpenetrations. The "two worlds" theme is also important to Gnosticism, the locus of turpitude that ostensibly lands Cincinnatus C. in his predicament. On the topic of Gnosticism in this novel, see Alexandrov—but note that he considers "Neoplatonism" a somewhat better rubric for Nabokov than Gnosticism (88). The difference—relevant to our theme here—is that Gnosticism posits a nearly total separation between two worlds, whereas Neoplatonism posits a certain connection.

reader as little as it does me” (5). Nor should any of the posited “influences” on Nabokov be considered part of *Invitation*, notwithstanding any apparent “spiritual affinities.” The author’s own intentions (past and, perhaps, present), on the other hand, are clearly portrayed as belonging to the set of legitimate components of the novel: the author is part of the work.⁵ The reader may enter it too, as long as he obeys the rules and leaves all perishable, nonessential, and otherwise contraband items at the border. The English reader’s invitation to the work, in other words, comes primarily as an exercise in inclusion and exclusion.

As is often the case with Nabokov, his playfulness is more subtle and trustworthy than his categorical assertions. At the end of his energetic rejection of predecessors, Nabokov pretends to make one small concession.

One author, however, has never been mentioned in this connection—the only author whom I must gratefully recognize as an influence upon me at the time of writing this book; namely, the melancholy, extravagant, wise, witty, magical, and altogether delightful Pierre Delalande, whom I invented. (6)

So, first: no one has influenced me, but I *have* influenced myself. But I have done this through an intermediary, an invention of mine who is in at least some respects different from me. To “influence” means to flow in, or more broadly to affect the inside from the outside, but here the outside came from the inside, and the statement is directed to the outside, the world of beings akin to the author—beings who, on the other hand, are being invited and incorporated into the work and the author’s imagination. With this bit of levity Nabokov invokes the paradoxical conversions of outsides to insides, and ins to outs, that occur within and extend beyond the novel at hand, *Invitation to a Beheading*.

The conversion most immediately on his mind is from Russian to English. The task of the translator, evidently, is to create a new set of words—English words, in this case—that includes as many meanings as possible that are included in the original, and that excludes as many as possible of those that are excluded from the original. Translation therefore involves a judgment about what is “in” the original work, and what is extraneous to it. Nabokov informs us that almost nothing in the original work was extraneous ... *almost* nothing, but not quite nothing:

... when my son gave me to check the translation of this book and when I, after many years, had to reread the Russian original, I found with relief

5. The reverse is also true.

that there was no devil of creative emendation for me to fight. My Russian idiom, in 1935, had embodied a certain vision in the precise terms that fitted it, and the only corrections which its transformation into English could profit by were routine ones, for the sake of that clarity which in English seems to require less elaborate electric fixtures than in Russian. (7)

The original “idiom” (by which we may understand the set of all words and ways of using those words) “fits” the “vision” with “precision,” and the only improvement permissible to the translator is to take advantage of the special efficiencies of the target language, removing unnecessary “electric fixtures” and thereby reducing impedance.

And yet it is by no means obvious what the nature of the whole electrical device—the novel—really is: which “fixtures” are necessarily elaborate and which are superfluous. Nor is it clear what is the nature of the charge that animates this device. Nor, finally, is it easy to distinguish the “charge” (which presumably corresponds to the “certain vision” Nabokov has) from the device. After all, when sensitive readers come into contact with the device (the book), Nabokov predicts that they “will jump up, ruffling their hair” (8). It would seem that much of the device is charged and uninsulated, ready to transform an apparently external reader into an integral component of its electrical circuit.

The task of translating a book, then, forces an indefinite (but enormous) number of judgments as to which components of the work are essential, and which are unnecessary. And notwithstanding his occasional heated, polemical appeals to “literalness” as a clear and overriding criterion for such judgments, Nabokov understood very well that the literary mechanism is much more complicated than that. Readers familiar with his militant literalism will receive a shock from the very first words of the foreword:

The Russian original of this novel is entitled *Priglasenie na kazn'*. Notwithstanding the unpleasant duplication of the suffix, I would have suggested rendering it as *Invitation to an Execution*; but, on the other hand, *Priglasenie na otsechenie golov'i* (“Invitation to a Decapitation”) was what I really would have said in my mother tongue, had I not been stopped by a similar stutter. (5)

“What I really would have said” if unencumbered by linguistic stutters is apparently the standard against which the translation should be measured. This is clearly different from “what I literally did say.”

The first person is important: it may be that such judgments are permissible to the author and, by extension, those who can ask him, but to no one else.

Perhaps any other translator is obliged to use the words of the original as the *only* guide, not because they perfectly embody the ideal work, but because no one save the author can see that ideal directly. This is a question for the theory of translation; for our purposes, Nabokov's comments reveal a conception of the text as a mechanism that embodies—with greater or lesser efficiency, but never perfectly—an animating vision. The work of art is almost but not quite equal to itself.

Nabokov's preferred Russian title (if not for that pesky stutter) is *priglasenie na otsechenie golovy*. He rejects the duplicated suffix, but we might turn our attention instead to the prefixes, "pri" and "ot," which denote closeness and distance. They offer a telegraphic hint at the novel's core theme of in and out, and when he rejects that Russian title Nabokov settles on something less revealing.⁶

Fictional Fiction

Can we imagine any escape from the claustrophobia of being a literary character? Perhaps one might escape by using words. Nabokov and some of his contemporaries were fascinated with the notion that characters might write themselves out of their predicament. Flann O'Brien takes this logic to its extreme: in *At Swim-Two-Birds* the characters of a story take over the writing and begin to torment their author in the most merciless, humiliating manner. Yet it need not go this far. A character might merely make some sense of his world, reorder it in his mind, or even console himself with a brief verbal escape from it.

Cincinnatus C. cannot do even this. In Chapter 13 he composes a lengthy mental letter to Marthe, his unfaithful wife, in which he seems to succeed in expressing certain ideas that are important to him. However, the tug of his semiotic cell is too strong, and his string of words turns on him. "... it is I, Cincinnatus, who am writing, it is I, Cincinnatus, who am weeping; and who was, in fact, walking around the table, and then, when Rodion brought his dinner, said: 'This letter. This letter I shall ask you to ... Here is the address'" (143/143). This last event, starting with Rodion (or perhaps with "walking"), occurs in "reality," and the story continues unbroken. What started as an emphatically personal utterance ends as yet one more thread in the narrative web of Cincinnatus C.'s entrapment. The most basic prerequisite of verbal autonomy—the ability to say that it is *I* who speak these words—is withdrawn

6. "Invitation to an Execution" would have had even more revealing prefixes.

here, and Cincinnatus C. has no possibility of writing or thinking his way out of his situation.⁷

For these reasons, Cincinnatus C.'s fate *after* the final words of the novel is a curiously compelling question. This is not always the case: usually a work of fiction presupposes or builds an imaginary level on which its events and characters are to be taken as real. "And they lived happily ever after" is one indication of this arrangement; it is both a farewell to the reader and a sign that the characters are to be conceived as something other than strictly fictional characters, but rather as beings that continue to exist after we close the book. Most books end (whether happily or otherwise) on a similar note.

Invitation, by contrast, offers no level on which the events and characters seem real and at least partially independent from the book. Even within the novel everything must be taken as fiction: the charges against Cincinnatus C., the apparently solid cell in which he is imprisoned, the characters, the books, everything. Do we take it all as a dream? Only if we are inordinately committed to establishing a "real" background against which everything in the novel can be set (i.e., a dreaming "real" person). This interpretation arbitrarily freezes the fundamental dynamism of the novel, which turns insides to outsides and outsides to insides. The fictionality of *Invitation* both does and does not include itself as a member: it is a real fiction and a fictional fiction.

Cincinnatus C. is a character whom we are meant to experience *as a character*: this is the surprisingly difficult task Nabokov sets his reader.⁸ As a character, Cincinnatus C. does not exist outside the time or space of the novel. This means that he will go on being tortured by his unfaithful wife, by the unctuous sadism of the prison officials, and by us, his curious observers, whenever we reanimate the whole mechanism with our attention. If we take seriously the ontological looping in this novel, we cannot *assume* that there is anything outside it. At the end, Cincinnatus C. gets up from the chopping block and moves toward voices that sound like they are made by beings akin to him. But of all the novel's ambiguities, the nature of Cincinnatus C.'s "being" is the most ambiguous. If the ending seems to promise an escape, it is not

7. For another interpretation of this episode, see Alexandrov, 96–97. Alexandrov emphasizes the possibility of an "occult force" at work in Cincinnatus C.'s writing.

8. To my knowledge, P.M. Bitsilli was the first to make this point, in his essay "Vozrozhdenie Allegorii," published in English translation as "The revival of allegory." Bitsilli asserts that Nabokov's characters "can never and nowhere, not in any epoch, be real, concrete people. They are allegorical figures—incarnations of 'ideas'" (117/218—using the same numbering system for Bitsilli as for Nabokov).

possible to specify what is being escaped or where the escape route will lead. It is difficult to imagine that it will lead out of fiction itself. “Beings akin to him” seems at first to mean “unlike the artificial characters that populate *Invitation* (all other characters).” However, it is much more consistent to assume that this is just one more false promise of escape, and that “beings akin to him” means “unlike us.” For Cincinnatus C. is surely unlike us. He is a fictional character and can never stop being one, and for him there can be no “ever after.” As P.M. Bitsilli remarks, “immortality” in this setting is merely “the endless continuation of what there was here, in this ‘life’” (114/216). “Here” and “there” may turn out simply to be two sides of a Möbius strip from which there can be no departure.

Near the beginning of Gogol’s story “The Overcoat,” Akaky Akakievich’s mother tries desperately to exercise a modicum of choice in finding a name for her baby boy, but she soon succumbs to a feeling of inevitability that he must, after all, be an Akaky like his father. Cincinnatus C.’s name recapitulates this minor tragedy: the reticent second initial appears to offer the hope of a bit of freedom, but deep down we all know that he must be Cincinnatus Cincinnatus, son of Cincinnatus, equal to Cincinnatus, as little suited to his world, and yet as thoroughly trapped in it, as Gogol’s Akaky Akakievich. There is a curious tautological quality to the other names in this novel as well. Rodrig, Rodion, and Roman are apparently separate characters, but with the identical beginnings of their names Nabokov emphasizes the fact that they are all synonyms, all part (despite his protestations) of a “dull beastly farce.” On the other hand, the three Ro’s are not quite identical to one another, and Cincinnatus C. is not even perfectly equal to himself: from very early in the novel, Nabokov speaks of “two Cincinnatuses” at odds with one another. When Nabokov decided to avoid duplicating suffixes in the title, even at the expense of semantic rigor, his choice must have been motivated by something more than stylistic considerations. Having written a novel where fiction is real *and* fictional, where C is only approximately equal to C and Ro Ro Ro, he was, I think, trying to escape a trap he himself had set. He was trying to create a space for his novel between tautology and contradiction, between a=a and a a, between enie=enie and pri ot, between in and out—a space, like fiction and perhaps thought itself, that simultaneously includes and excludes itself.

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