"Invitation to a Beheading: "Nameless Existence, Intangible Substance"

The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement.

Henry David Thoreau, Walden

The first draft of Invitation to a Beheading (Priglashenie na kazn', 1935, published in 1938) was written "in one fortnight of wonderful excitement and sustained inspiration" (SO, 68). Like most products of a great writer's burst of creative energy, this novel is characterized by a strong element of overdetermination. Cincinnatus C., a citizen of a totalitarian anti-science-fictional dystopia, is accused of an obscure crime called "gnostical turpitude" (IB, 72) and described as "opacity" (IB, 21). He is imprisoned in a fortress, condemned to death by beheading, and invited to collaborate in his own execution. The Kafkaesque situation lends itself to a variety of complementary readings—political, metaphysical, aesthetic—but in all these readings Cincinnatus emerges as a Nabokovian avatar of the artist in conflict with his environment.

Cincinnatus is not trained for any recognized form of art. What makes him worthy to be called an artist is not even his attempt to produce a written account of his experience; it is his wish to live authentically despite the pressures of the environment on which he depends for the satisfaction of his desires. One by one the objects of his desires fail him, yet their treason also signifies his liberation from commitments and his ultimate freedom to reach out to the transcendent dimension of whose presence he has long been sporadically aware. This is a significant shift in Nabokov's imagination: whereas in his earlier books the people who betrayed human commitments suffered defeat, in Invitation a victim of betrayal wins a victory.
The shift may be related to the predicament of Russian emigrants in Europe. The life of Russian émigré intellectuals was characterized by their "utter physical dependence on this or that nation, which had coldly granted [them] political refuge" and by "material indigence and intellectual luxury, among perfectly unimportant strangers, spectral Germans and Frenchmen in whose more or less illusory cities" they happened to dwell (SM, 276). Yet a sense of "fragile unreality" kept haunting the émigré literature: "The number of titles was more impressive than the number of copies any given work sold, and the names of the publishing houses—Orion, Cosmos, Logos, and so forth—had the hectic, unstable and slightly illegal appearance that firms issuing astrological or facts-of-life literature have" (SM, 280). That which seemed real, moreover, would suddenly exchange places with that which seemed illusory. "Quite often in fact," Nabokov recollects in Speak, Memory, "the spectral world through which we serenely paraded our sores and our arts would produce a kind of awful convulsion and show us who was the discarnate captive and who the true lord" (SM, 276). The shuttling of the sense of unreality between Cincinnatus and his tormentors in Invitation may reflect these convulsions, but the tormentors themselves are presented as recognizable philistine Russians rather than "formless and faceless" transparent "aborigines" (SM, 276).

In the mid-thirties Nabokov had already lost his hope of ever returning to a "hospitable, remorseful, racemosa-blossoming Russia" (KQK, vii). The political realities of Germany were taking a grimly grotesque shape; emigration from Russia had been discontinued; and it was becoming clear that the Russian émigré audience was a doomed enclave. It was then that Nabokov apparently began to consider shifting to another language. One is tempted to regard this crossroads situation as a reason why the overdetermination in Invitation to a Beheading combines with a no less pronounced element of indeterminacy: no single component of the novel's multiple meaning is granted supremacy over other components; words constantly reveal the limitations of their power; and the text attempts to compensate for their insufficiency by a number of nonverbal means. Yet indeterminacy need not be considered a reflection of any biographical fact; rather, it is a technique that reflects the novel's deliberate subversion of the distinction between the illusory and the "real."
I

The indeterminacy of *Invitation to a Beheading* is interpretive, lexical, and structural. The interpretive indeterminacy consists in the incompleteness, the noncomprehensiveness, of each layer of significance. The structure of the novel's meaning cannot be described by the conventional pattern of peeling layers. Far from invoking Peer Gynt's onion (with its residual tear), Nabokov devises his own model of relationships between the multiple meanings of his text. This model can be inferred from the following *mise-en-abîme* passage:

“What a misunderstanding” said Cincinnatus and suddenly burst out laughing. He stood up and took off the dressing gown, the skullcap, the slippers. He took off the linen trousers and shirt. He took off his head like a toupee, took off his collarbones like shoulder straps, took off his rib cage like a hauberk. He took off his hips and his legs, he took off his arms like gauntlets and threw them in a corner. What was left of him gradually dissolved, hardly coloring the air. At first Cincinnatus simply reveled in the coolness; then, fully immersed in his secret medium, he began freely and happily to...

The iron thunderclap of the bolt resounded, and Cincinnatus instantly grew all that he had cast off, the skullcap included. Rodion the jailer brought a dozen yellow plums in a round basket lined with grape leaves, a present from the director's wife.

Cincinnatus, your criminal exercise has refreshed you. [*IB*, 32–33]

The clothes and the parts of the body removed for a blissful respite may be understood as layers of significance that hide “the secret medium” of Cincinnatus, the invisible intangible core that paradoxically produces his illegal “opacity.” None of these layers, however, envelops the whole of Cincinnatus. The “philosopher’s skullcap” (*IB*, 121) points to the metaphysical allegory of a gnostic imprisoned in the material universe (for many readers it is also a prophetic reminder of the Jewish holocaust). The dressing gown is as ample as the novel’s political allegory: the so-called “extrinsic genre” of *Invitation* is that

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1See Chapter 5, n.9.
4See the discussion of the extrinsic and the intrinsic genre in E. D. Hirsch, *Validity
of a dystopia; the combination of the Russian and German elements in the setting suggests a caricature of Stalin’s and Hitler’s regimes; and the name Cincinnatus alludes to an Everyman who is called to leadership from his plough and who returns to the plough when his mission has been accomplished. The other items of clothing and parts of the body may be read as symbols of the oppressiveness of “dead, ready-made art,” of the pressure of bourgeois society on an authentically living individual, of the stifling effect of a consumer audience, of the consciousness of the prison house of language and literary history, or of reading.

Not a single one of these quasi-allegories is comprehensive or definitive; nor is it possible to sustain a one-to-one correspondence between the literal details of Cincinnatus’s disrobing and the figurative meanings of his plight—the edges of the allegory soon become blurred. Moreover, each separate image may turn out to be as overdetermined as the conglomerate whole. The episode is of crucial importance to the gnostic allegory, one of the main interpretive planes; through one of Nabokov’s “strange loops” it is made to participate in both the embedded and the embedding level of significance.

in Interpretation (New Haven, Conn., 1967), pp. 68–110.


7 See Johnson, Worlds in Regression, pp. 28–46.

8 Many elements of the novel’s setting and external action test and reject products of other people’s imagination. Random examples include knocking on the prison wall in Korolenko, secret passages in Dumas, spiders in the kinds of books of which Tom Sawyer remembers too many when he exploits Jim’s imprisonment at the end of Huckleberry Finn, the jailer’s daughter and the tryst in prison before the execution in Stendhal. Dystopic reality, used up by literary precedent, is thin and threadbare. The parodic element, some aspects of which are discussed in Stuart, Nabokov, pp. 55–85, is thus a means of laying emphasis on the fragility of the “hastily assembled and painted world” (IB, 51) into which Cincinnatus has been thrust. More subtly submerged, less parodistic allusions are studied by Gavriel Shapiro in “Russkie literaturnye alliuzii v romane Nabokova Priglashenie na kazn’,” Russian Literature, May 1981, pp. 369–78.


10 See the reference to the “disrobing” scene in Davydov, Teksty-Matreshki, p. 121. I do not, however, agree with a number of minor interpretive points made in Davydov’s study.

11 “The ‘Strange Loop’ phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started” (Douglas R. Hofstadter, Gödel, Escher, Bach: An
For every possible allegorical reading of the novel there are portions of material that fail to fit. For instance, the treatment of Cincinnatus is largely an exploration of a fictional character’s predicament: a “galley slave” is imprisoned in his text, doomed to die so that the predatory reader may extract the meaning of his life, and then saved from “execution” as “beheading” by “execution” as “artistic performance.” This interpretation, however, leans on a rather small number of episodes and is irrelevant to the understanding of large narrative blocks. Conversely, Cincinnatus stands not only for a character in fiction but also for an artist; the persecution he endures often unmistakably evokes the oppressive demands made on artists by the philistine audience on which they depend for a living. Particularly suggestive here is Pierre’s “temptation” speech in chapter 13 (an appropriate number): sell your soul, and you will have it all. Yet Cincinnatus’s horror is clearly caused not by moral oppression but by the literal gory details of his imminent beheading. Thus, the material that does not lend support to a specific interpretation either remains neutral or threatens the validity of this interpretation. Another example: Cincinnatus’s ultimate achievement of freedom through an effort of imagination and will is a suitable ending to the story of a young gnostic’s rebellion, yet it clashes with the political interpretation of the novel: a dissenter in a totalitarian regime can attain neither liberty nor *consolatio philosophiae* through denying the reality of the regime.

Least vulnerable is the metaphysical interpretation: the dystopic fictional universe is the work of a Demiurge; the protagonist’s “gnostical turpitude” is his awareness of belonging to a spiritual reality beyond the “hastily assembled and painted world” of matter (*IB*, 51) and of preserving a fragment of that reality within himself. His experience throughout the novel is the accumulation of “Gnosis,” the mystical knowledge that is itself salvation. According to Robert Haardt, Gnosis is knowledge of the benign acosmic Godhead; his emanations (Aeons); the Realm of Light (Pleroma) and simultaneous knowledge of the private,

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*Eternal Golden Braid* [Harmondsworth, 1980], p. 10). In our case the hierarchical system is that of the levels of meaning. The self-referential allegory on the structure of the novel’s meaning ought to be the metalevel, but (the hierarchy being tangled) it does not take supremacy over the metaphysical or other levels of interpretation.

12For this observation I am indebted to Peterson, “Nabokov’s *Invitation.*”

13The possibility of resisting tyranny by denying its existence in one’s private world is treated seriously in Nabokov’s 1938 short story “Tyrants Destroyed”; its insufficiency is eventually explored in *Bend Sinister.*
divine spirit-self of man, which has been imprisoned by the world of demons and the creator thereof.

The summons which goes out from the Realm of Light to the Gnostic, plunged into a stupor of self-forgetfulness by the powers which created this world, awakens him out of his erstwhile condition and enables him to realize his own true situation in the world, as well as the pre-history of his existence, and the path of ascent into the Realm of Light.¹⁴

Cincinnatus's walking away from the scaffold at the end of the novel, a gesture similar to Alice's somewhat retarded realization that her Wonderland enemies are just a pack of cards,¹⁵ is a sign of his complete awakening. Such an interpretation of his story is the easiest to reconcile with most other readings; nevertheless, there are episodes to which it does not apply. The most suggestive is "the moment of truth" at the end of his mother's visit to Cincinnatus in his cell:

[Cincinnatus] suddenly noticed the expression in Cecilia C.'s eyes—just for an instant, an instant—but it was as if something real, unquestionable (in this world, where everything was subject to question), had passed through, as if a corner of this horrible life had curled up, and there was a glimpse of the lining. In his mother's gaze, Cincinnatus suddenly saw that ultimate, secure, all-explaining and from-all-protecting spark that he knew how to discern in himself also. What was this spark so piercingly expressing now? It does not matter what—call it horror, or pity... But rather let us say this: the spark proclaimed such a tumult of truth that Cincinnatus's soul could not help leaping for joy. [IB, 136]

At first glance the "glimpse of the lining" may appear to be a brief vision of the spiritual plane from which man is separated by the wall of his material existence. This reading, however, neglects the central and the most moving issue of the episode: the momentary eruption of authentic maternal anguish in a world where feelings have been replaced by conventional postures, and genuine communication by an exchange of clichés. What is here revealed to Cincinnatus is not transcendent reality but the possibility of authentic relationships in "this world."

¹⁵The analogy with the ending of *Alice in Wonderland* was, to my knowledge, first commented on by Gleb Struve; see "Notes on Nabokov as a Russian Writer," in Dembo, *Nabokov*, p. 48.
The gnostic cosmology of the novel may turn into a Procrustean matrix if forced to accommodate every portion of the narrative. It frequently functions as a metaphor for the distinction between the fake and the authentic, the stagnant and the creative, rather than as a uniform layer of meaning. Neither the metaphysical nor the moral levels of meaning in *Invitation* can be regarded as the bottom line. If the novel does contain a residual statement, it is that ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics shade into one another, that borderlines between them do not exist.

The language of Cincinnatus's enemies tends to fizzle out; "matter [is] weary" (*IB*, 43); and the whole "average reality" (*SO*, 118) collapses in the end precisely because, as in the world of Borges's Tlön, it has ceased to be the subject of authentic and hence creative perception. In the world of *Invitation to a Beheading*, authenticity is creativity. Noncreative conventional behavior is expressed in the use of ready-made formulas, which at times Cincinnatus fails to combine in the proper order ("Kind. You. Very,") he says in answer to the prison director's speech, feeling that his reply must still be "arranged": *IB*, 15). The prevalence of such behavior turns the world around Cincinnatus into a collection of the "nonnons" with which his mother remembers having played as a child. Nonnons are absurd, "shapeless, mottled, pockmarked, knobby things" (*IB*, 135) that converge into the representation of a definite object when reflected in a special mirror sent over from the factory. The mirror, as noted in the preceding chapter, is obviously an anamorphoscope, and Cecilia's memories are an indirect commentary on the novel that records them—or rather an anticommentary: *Invitation* presents a beautiful account of the "absurd, knobby, pockmarked" figures surrounding Cincinnatus but refuses to supply us with an anamorphoscope. Instead, it challenges us to come up with not one but many anamorphoscopes of our own, because each separate perspective and interpretation is indeterminate, has blurred contours, and leaves some portions of the material outside its scope.

II

The element of lexical indeterminacy in the texture of *Invitation* is related to the ineffability of hypostasis; the spiritual essence, the "secret medium" of Cincinnatus is not available to what Tennyson called "matter-molded forms of speech." Gnosis itself is characterized by a high degree of indefiniteness; it is the approximation of the
unknowable frequently achieved via negationis. "Nameless existence, intangible substance" says the (eventually erased) writing on the wall of Cincinnatus's cell (IB, 26). Aware of the "intangible substance" within himself and beyond his experience, Cincinnatus also becomes aware of its "namelessness," of the catachretic gap in the prison house of language.

This catachretic gap is often made explicit. Cincinnatus is aware of his lack of words to express what he knows: "I know something. I know something. I know something. But expression of it comes so hard! . . . I am frightened—and now I am losing some thread, which I held so palpably only a moment ago. Where is it? It has slipped out of my grasp! . . . I repeat: there is something I know, there is something I know, there is something . . . (IB, 91, 95; my italics). A much more tranquil echo of these words can be heard in Nabokov's attempt to answer an interviewer's question about his religious beliefs: "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" (SO, 45).

The word "something," when used by Nabokov to signal a catachretic gap, refers not only to metaphysical insight but also to genuine emotional life. These two kinds of ineffability converge in the Russian word dusha, meaning not just "soul" but also something like "emotional warmth." This word is overused in philistine conversation, however, and smacks so strongly of "human humidity" (KQK, viii) that Nabokov carefully avoids it. Instead of resorting to the easy if ambiguous label, he chooses the word "something" (more indefinite and less obtrusive than the formulaic je ne sais quoi) to register his awareness of the unknowable. It is with this word that he pays homage to his Swiss governess Mademoiselle O.:

Just before the rhythm I hear falters and fades, I catch myself wondering whether, during the years I knew her, I had not kept utterly missing something in her that was far more she than her chins or her ways or even her French—something perhaps akin to that last glimpse of her, to the

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16See Davydov, Teksty-Matreshki, p. 133.
17Catachresis is a notion or a phenomenon that in a given language can be expressed only by a metaphor; see "Catachrèse de métaphore," in Pierre Fontanier, Les figures du discours (Paris, 1977), pp. 215–19. "To fall in love," for instance, is catachresis in English; the concept is expressed by one word in most other languages and does not require a metaphorical idiom. Certain meanings, however, cannot be expressed by a word or a conventional formulation in any language. The bridging of these catachretic gaps is what "effing the ineffable" is all about.
radiant deceit she had used in order to have me depart pleased with my own kindness, or to that swan whose agony was so much closer to artistic truth than a drooping dancer's pale arms; something, in short, that I could appreciate only after the things and beings that I had most loved in the security of my childhood had been turned to ashes or shot through the heart. [SM, 117; my italics]

When the ineffable is the force of Cincinnatus's physical fear, the catachretic gap turns into a black hole: “Still I am afraid! One cannot write it off so easily. Neither is it good that my thoughts keep getting sucked into the cavity of the future—I want to think about something else, clarify other things... but I write obscurely and limply, like Pushkin's lyrical duelist” (IB, 92; my italics).

The novel's repeated references to gaps, cavities, chunks, lacunae are reminders both of Cincinnatus's ability to catch glimpses of the "different dimension" and of the patchiness of his vocabulary, its insufficiency for rendering profound experience. When this experience is of an emotional nature, the novel (especially in the passages ascribed to Cincinnatus) often registers it by aposiopesis, inviting the reader, as if were, to fill the gap nonverbally. For example: “Oh, my anguish —what shall I do with you, with myself? How dare they conceal from me... I, who must pass through an ordeal of supreme pain, I, who, in order to preserve a semblance of dignity (anyway I shall not go beyond silent pallor—I am no hero anyway... ), must during that ordeal keep control of all my faculties, I, I... am gradually weakening... the uncertainty is horrible—well, why don't you tell me, do tell me—but no, you have me die anew every morning... ” (IB, 51).

On two occasions Nabokov uses a structural counterpart of aposiopesis, breaking short (or ending in medias res) episodes that promise to lead to momentous revelations. Just as the intrusion of a squirrel in Pnin sabotages the maturing of a metaphysical insight (see P, 58), so the entrance of Rodion puts an end to the "criminal exercise" of Cincinnatus in the disrobing scene and interrupts the narrator's sentence—and so we never learn what it is that Cincinnatus begins "freely and happily" to do. In another crucial episode Rodion turns off the lights just in time to deny us the account of the young Gnostic's triumph over gravity. Cincinnatus has recollected (or imagined) the day when an aggressive teacher ordered him to get off the windowsill and go to the garden; with somnambulistic yet unconventional com-
pliance, Cincinnatus then took the step which his "matter-molded" common sense would have rejected as suicidal:

In my sadness, in my abstraction, unconsciously and innocently, instead of descending into the garden by the stairs (the gallery was on the third floor), not thinking what I was doing, but really acting obediently, even submissively, I stepped straight from the window sill onto the elastic air and—feeling nothing more than a half-sensation of barefootedness (even though I had shoes on)—slowly and quite naturally strode forward, still absently sucking and examining the finger in which I had caught a splinter that morning... Suddenly, however, an extraordinary, deafening silence brought me out of my reverie, and I saw below me, like pale daisies, the upturned faces of stupefied children, and the pedagoguette, who seemed to be falling backward; . . . I saw myself, a pink-smocked boy, standing transfixed in mid-air; turning around, I saw, but three aerial paces from me, the window I had just left, and, his hairy arm extended in malevolent amazement, the—"

(Here, unfortunately, the light in the cell went out—Rodion always turned it off exactly at ten.) [IB, 97]

The material reality and the conventional arbitrariness of the language thus block one's access to the essence that is beyond things and words. The trope that often signals the catachretic gap is extended simile. The momentary look in Cecilia C.'s eyes expresses "Something real, unquestionable . . ., as if a corner of this horrible life had curled up, and there was a glimpse of the lining" (IB, 136; my italics). In trying to explain her experience of what Mircea Eliade would call hierophany,18 Cecilia uses the more cautious "it seems to me that " as a synonym for "as if": "When I drive across the fields in the little old gig, and see the Strop gleaming, and this hill with the fortress on it, and everything, it always seems to me that a marvelous tale is being repeated over and over again, and I either don't have the time to, or am unable to grasp it, and still somebody keeps repeating it to me, with such patience!" (IB, 134; my italics).

The description of Cincinnatus's appearance likewise combines extended similes and similes-within-similes with hints at or references to vagueness, elusiveness, ineffability, incompleteness:

18Mircea Eliade defines hierophany as "the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world" (The Sacred and the Profane [New York, 1959], p. 11).
The subject will now be the precious quality of Cincinnatus: his fleshy incompleteness; the fact that the greater part of him was in a quite different place, while only an insignificant portion of it was wandering, perplexed, here—a poor, vague Cincinnatus, a comparatively stupid Cincinnatus, trusting, feeble and foolish as people are in their sleep. . . . Cincinnatus's face, small and still young despite all the torments, with gliding eyes, eerie eyes of changeable shade, was, in regard to its expression, something absolutely inadmissible by the standards of his surroundings. . . . The open shirt, the black dressing gown that kept flying open, the oversize slippers on his slender feet, the philosopher's skullcap on the top of his head and the ripple . . . running through the transparent hair on his temples completed a picture, the full indecency of which it is difficult to put into words—produced as it was of a thousand barely noticeable, overlapping trifles: of the light outline of his lips, seemingly not quite fully drawn but touched by a master of masters; of the fluttering movements of his empty, not-yet-shaded-in hands; of the dispersing and again gathering rays in his animated eyes; but even all of this, analyzed and studied, still could not fully explain Cincinnatus: it was as if one side of his being slid into another dimension, as all the complexity of a tree's foliage passes from shade into radiance, so that you cannot distinguish just where begins the submergence into the shimmer of a different element. It seemed as though at any moment . . . Cincinnatus would step in such a way as to slip naturally and effortlessly through some chink in the air into its unknown coulisses to disappear there with the same easy smoothness with which the flashing reflection of a rotated mirror moves across every object in the room and suddenly vanishes, as if beyond the air, in some new depth of ether. [IB, 120–21; my italics]

The image of Cincinnatus's “fleshy incompleteness” is significant on the (a) metaphysical, (b) political, and (c) aesthetic planes. That “the greater part” of him is in “a quite different place” means that (a) the “secret medium” of Cincinnatus is namelessly present in a transcendent dimension; (b) the jailers have power over his body but not over his spirit; and (c) the unique visual form he takes in the imagination of his author is inaccessible to the reader. The lexical meanings of the words that describe him are types.¹⁹ Hence, words by themselves are powerless to conjure up Nabokov's own Cincinnatus rather than Everyman's Cincinnatus—any small, delicate man with translucent hair and mustache who is forced to become gently and sullenly . . . heroic.

¹⁹On verbal meaning as type, see Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, pp. 49–67.
A literary artist, however, does not merely depend on words; he commands and combines them so as to obtain compensation for their insufficiency. Catachretic gaps are bridged by tropes such as the extended similes quoted above; the rigidity of meaning as type is reduced by collocation, iconism, synaesthesia—all the things that “one must do for a commonplace word to come alive and to share its neighbor’s sheen, heat, shadow, while reflecting itself in its neighbor and renewing the neighboring word in the process, so that the whole line is live iridescence” (IB, 93). The word “iridescence” is here used not only in the figurative but also in the literal sense. Nabokov possessed a developed *audition colorée*: that is, he associated sounds with colors. I believe that a study of the polychromatism of his Russian texts, combined with an examination of alliteration, assonance, anagrams, and “ghost words,” might reveal subliminal visual effects that extend the power of his language beyond the scope of lexical meaning. His use of alphabetic iconism and the skill with which he endows the graphical shapes of letters (particularly of the Church Slavonic alphabet) with polysemy have already been studied by D. B. Johnson. Johnson also discusses Nabokov’s anagrammatic games: for example, the way the words *tut* (“here”) and *tam* (“there”), which stand for the two worlds to which Cincinnatus belongs, haunt longer letter sequences in the Russian original of the novel. This is another compensation for the indeterminacy of conventional verbal meanings. Additional emphasis should be placed on the role of ghost words produced by anagrams and puns. In the disrobing episode, for instance, we read that upon Rodion’s intrusion Cincinnatus “instantly grew all that he had cast off, the skullcap included” (IB, 33). The word “included” translates the Russian *vplot* do (*Pr*, 45); the word *vplot*, as a pun on “into flesh” (*v plot*), smuggles in the not irrelevant associations of birth, incarnation, and the prison house of clay. To retain this effect in the translation would require a linguistic miracle.

Nabokov’s conscious awareness of the role of ghost words is already evident in *The Gift*. While composing his poem in the first chapter of...

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20 Guidelines for such a study are presented in Johnson, *Worlds in Regression*, pp. 10–27, 43–45.
21 See ibid., pp. 28–46.
22 Such a miracle happens in the translation of Nabokov’s 1932 short story “Lebeda” (“Orache”). “‘Lebeda,’” Nabokov notes in his preface to the English version of the story, “is the plant *Atriplex*. Its English name, orache, by a miraculous coincidence, renders in its written form the ‘ili beda,’ ‘or ache’, suggested by the Russian title” (DS, 44).
that novel, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev notices that the combination of the words *i krylatyi* ("and winged") yields two inappropriate paronomastic ghost words, *ikry* ("calves of legs") and *laty* ("armor"). "Calves. Armor. Where has this Roman come from?" wonders Fyodor and rejects the word "winged" (see *Dar*, 36), unaware of the value of his gesture to modern criticism. The English version of the novel omits this brief episode; in this instance Nabokov failed to coax a parallel wordplay out of the English language.

Nabokov's reliance on what may be called "translexical" devices in *Invitation* is indirectly commented on in *The Gift*. In Godunov-Cherdyntsev's imagination his mysterious rival and friend Koncheev offers him an unofficial diagnosis of some shortcomings of his prose. The first of these is "an excessive trust in words. It sometimes happens that your words in order to introduce the necessary thought have to smuggle it in. The sentence may be excellent, but still it is smuggling, and moreover gratuitous smuggling, since the lawful road is open. But your smugglers under the cover of an obscure style, with all sorts of complicated contrivances, import goods that are duty free anyway" (*G*, 351). Ironically, however, "the excessive trust in words" is its opposite—a dissatisfaction with words as self-contained arbitrary signs and the resulting exploration of their valence and multilevel iconicity for the purpose of adding an unfamiliar dimension to the not always "duty free" goods they import.

III

The structural indeterminacy of *Invitation to a Beheading* consists in recurrent fantastic transformations of characters, situations, and themes; in conflicts between the details of the plot; in logical incompatibility of contiguous scenes. Each case of instability, plurality, or ambiguity has a local rhetorical effect: it redirects the reader's attention and highlights a particular component of the episode's complex meaning. We must examine some examples before discussing the cumulative impact of structural indeterminacy.

When Cincinnatus returns from his trial, Rodion invites him to waltz. They dance around the corridor and glide back into the cell, and then Cincinnatus regrets "that the swoon's friendly embrace [has] been so brief" (*IB*, 14). It is not clear whether "the swoon" has given rise to the hallucinatory dance (Cincinnatus was feeling sick, or rather
“seasick,” before Rodion’s entrance) or whether it has been caused by whirling in the arms of a foul-smelling partner. The ambiguity cannot be resolved on the literal plane, but on the moral plane the episode is univocal: Cincinnatus is still accepting invitations; the surrogate friendliness of the jailers does not yet repel him. The local effect of the ambiguity consists in the redirection of the reader’s attention from the literal to the moral meaning of the scene.

When later in the first chapter Cincinnatus is shown leaving prison, walking through the town, coming home, reaching the door of his room, and then entering his prison cell through this door (see IB, 18–20), it likewise does not matter whether he is supposed to be awake or asleep and dreaming of the adventure. What matters is the suggestion that his jail is not confined to the fortress on the hill: he is a prisoner in his home, his society, his language, literary history, material existence. An additional reminder of the metaphorical function of the fortress comes in another ambiguous episode. In the hope to get a look through the window of his cell, Cincinnatus moves a table toward it and climbs up, but the view is still inaccessible; the only thing he can see is an inscription made by a previous frustrated prisoner. He is taken down by Rodion, only to find, on trying to move the table for the hundredth time, that “the legs [have] been bolted down for ages” (IB, 30). Yet we cannot say that Cincinnatus has dreamed of moving the table, because in a later scene Rodion recounts his doing so to the prison director though he distorts a few details). Again, the contradiction is resolved on the symbolic plane: there are no physical approaches to the view of transcendent reality; if one obstacle is removed, another will take its place.

The same ambiguity likewise makes an indirect comment on Invitation to a Beheading as an allegory on reading. The nature of the protagonist’s experience takes precedence over its sources. It does not matter whether these sources are fiction or fiction-within-fiction. In Nabokov’s 1943 short story “That in Aleppo Once...” the narrator’s wife is a compulsive liar, yet her tales evoke the same kind of response in the listeners as if they were truthful. In most cases, however (as in Borges’s “Emma Zunz”), her stories are morally true, even though they have never happened. The epistemology of Cincinnatus’s moving the table to the window is of minor moment: his despair and anguish are what we recognize as true.

The ambiguity culminates in the last scene of the novel, the purported execution scene. Having already knelt by the block on the scaffold, Cincinnatus gets up and calmly walks away, wrecking the
whole routine. The setting then collapses like jerry-built scenery, and all that remains of the fictional world is a jumble of “rags, chips of painted wood, bits of gilded plaster, pasteboard bricks, posters.” Amidst this movie-set disaster, Cincinnatus “[makes] his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, [stand] beings akin to him” (IB, 223). Critics have offered conflicting accounts of this ending. Some maintain that it is the soul of the beheaded Cincinnatus making its exit to a different dimension; others note that the execution never takes place; still others acknowledge the ambiguity of the passage.

The ending is indeed ambiguous and at the same time highly overdetermined. The ambiguity stems from three sets of conflicting clues.

First, there are clues with contradictory connotations. The protagonist’s movements away from the block are presented in a concrete visual manner: he stands up, looks around, walks down the steps and away over the debris. In the last sentence of the novel, however, his motions lose their visual quality, and the “voices” that mark his direction seem to have supernatural overtones. Accordingly, the text tells us that Cincinnatus goes toward “beings” (sushchestva: Pr, 218) rather than “people” akin to him.

Next, there are doubly directed clues: that is, clues that can be read in mutually excluding ways. “Come back,” cries the jailer after Cincinnatus declines the invitation to his own beheading, “lie down—after all, you were lying down, everything was ready, everything was finished” (IB, 223). The words “everything was finished” may be synonymous with “everything was ready” for the beheading, but they may also mean that the beheading has taken place. This alternative meaning is stronger in the Russian “vsio bylo koncheno” (Pr, 217), a phrase often used to express a sense of finality or loss of hope.

Finally, there are singly directed clues: that is, clues that not merely support one hypothesis but also deny its opposite. Thus, when Cin-

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23E.g., W. W. Rowe, Nabokov and Others: Patterns in Russian Literature (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1979), p. 182; and Hyman, “The Handle,” p. 61 (this is the only issue on which I disagree with Hyman’s essay).


26For a discussion of singly and doubly directed clues as causes of ambiguity, see
Cincinnatus rises from the block, the headsman's hips are still swinging, as if gathering momentum for the blow that has not yet been dealt. At the same time, the pale librarian, whom the reader may suspect of carefully disguising his own "opacity," is vomiting in the audience—suggesting that the gory spectacle has taken place.

What, then, does happen at the end of *Invitation to a Beheading*? To answer this question, one must once again abandon the literal for the figurative. On the moral plane the tormentors of Cincinnatus lose their power over him as soon as he refuses to play by their rules. In the terms of any orthodox religion, "the powers that be" have control over Everyman's body but not over his soul. In the terms of the metaphysics specifically alluded to in the novel, explains Julian Moynahan, "death for a gnostic is always ambiguous. On the one hand, it is the toll he pays to materiality, . . . on the other, it is the only viable release from benightedness and into the 'involute abode.'"

Crucial for placing *Invitation* within the Nabokov cannon is the interpretation of the ending as the climax of the self-referential game in which Cincinnatus emerges not as Everyman but as Every-Fictional-Character.

Lying in bed after one of his frustrated attempts to escape, Cincinnatus cried, "Will no one save me?" As if in answer to this appeal "there fell and bounced on the blanket a large dummy acorn, twice as large as life, splendidly painted a glossy buff, and fitting its cork as snugly as an egg" (*IB*, 125–26). This parody of an acorn falls down from the title oak of the pseudo-realistic novel *Quercus* that Cincinnatus has been reading. Unlike Newton's apple, the acorn is governed not by the law of gravity but by the counterlaw of involution: that is, metaleptic transgression, or the blurring of borderlines between the universe of the author and that of the character. By means of the larger-than-life acorn, the novelist sends Cincinnatus a message promising help. The novelist's other message, often noted, is the beautiful moth that escapes both Rodion and that cellmate spider without which a parody on stories of captivity would be incomplete.

In tune with the artificiality of the acorn, the author's assistance to Cincinnatus takes a frankly *deus ex machina* form. In his lectures


28On "metalepsis" and "involution," see Chapter 2, n. 4 and Chapter 6, n. 3.
on James Joyce, Nabokov maintained that the Nighttown scenes of *Ulysses* are not the hallucination of either Stephen or Bloom but the fantasy of the novelist, a "nightmare evolution" of some of the characters, objects, and themes (*LL*, 350). Something similar occurs at the end of *Invitation*. Instead of telling us what is supposed to have happened to Cincinnatus, Nabokov presents a fantastic evolution of the theme of the protagonist's double. At the beginning of the novel this double was described as one that "accompanies each of us—you, and me, and him over there—doing what we would like to do at that very moment, but cannot" (*IB*, 25). In the fantasy of the "finale" ("the book itself is dreaming": *LL*, 350) Cincinnatus merges with this double, this trespassing "gangrel" (*IB*, 25) who ignores conventions, limitations, and rules. The novelist then dismantles the nightmare setting (thus forestalling the blow of the ax) and smooths the protagonist's exit to the "involute abode" where complete novels and their characters properly belong.

This interpretation of the ending (one of at least four that coexist on different planes of significance) explains but does not resolve the ambiguity. The lexical indeterminacy still remains: who are the "beings" akin to Cincinnatus, and what is "that direction" from which their "voices" come? So does the structural indeterminacy: though the headsman does not seem to have struck, the pale librarian is still vomiting. Here again, however, Nabokov's synaesthetic devices in the Russian original are a partial compensation for the indeterminacy: the alliteration and assonance in "the pale librarian was vomiting"—"bleval blednyi bibliotekar'" (*Pr*, 217; my emphasis)—produce a comic effect that controls the potentially horrifying implications of the image. The color values associated with the Russian letters for *b, l, and e* could, perhaps, significantly influence the visual impression of the flattening and disintegrating dystopia.

The common denominator of the local rhetorical effects of ambiguity in the novel is their redirection of the reader's attention from the literal to the figurative. The reader is thus made to reenact the protagonist's growing disdain for his material environment as well as his growing awareness that an infinitely greater significance is shining through the gaps in the texture of the quotidian. This analogy between the recurrent element in the protagonist's experience and the reader's response also extends to the *cumulative effect* of structural indeterminacy.

Cincinnatus makes a self-defeating mistake when he inadvertently grants reality to his tormentors:
Involuntarily yielding to the temptation of logical development, involuntarily (be careful, Cincinnatus!) forging into a chain all the things that were quite harmless as long as they remained unlinked, he inspired the meaningless with meaning, and the lifeless with life. With the stone darkness for background he now permitted the spotlighted figures of all his usual visitors to appear—it was the very first time that his imagination was so condescending toward them. . . . by evoking them—not believing in them, perhaps, but still evoking them—Cincinnatus allowed them the right to exist, supported them, nourished them with himself. [IB, 155-56]

Cincinnatus ultimately learns that he can escape his predicament by denying that it is real, but the author knows this all along; therefore, he makes constant use of ambiguity to knock the foundations from under the phenomena that to Cincinnatus seem real. "It is frightening," says the narrator of The Eye, "when real life suddenly turns out to be a dream, but how much more frightening when that which one had thought a dream—fluid and irresponsible—suddenly starts to congeal into reality!" (E, 108). The novelist therefore has to prevent the fictional world into which he has thrust Cincinnatus from congealing into a semblance of reality.

This is not an easy task. Despite grotesque imagery and serene absurdities, the social setting of Invitation keeps gaining substance because the reader knows that certain regimes—and not only of times gone by—surpass the gloomiest dystopian fantasies. The strong element of parody on different artistic and pseudoartistic genres suggests, among other things, that Nabokov disowns responsibility for having invented a dystopia. He refuses to compete with the imagination of either Stalin, Hitler, Orwell, or Zamiatin; what he produces is a debunking, a parody on their inventions. Moreover, he knows that the modern reader, who is accustomed to seeing absurd and incredible things actually come to pass in his own world, may, like Cincinnatus, suspend his disbelief too readily, may take the parodies at face value and, "yielding to the temptation of logical development," confuse them with "reality." To prevent this from happening and to render the story as "fluid and irresponsible" as a dream, the author brings an arsenal of local ambiguities and metamorphoses into action. The dreamlike insubstantiality of the fictional world is the cumulative effect of structural indeterminacy.

Whereas classical novelists raised moral problems and supplied readers with systems of values within which they would be invited to
formulate solutions, *Invitation* relies on its pervasive indeterminacy to defer a residual statement. Accustomed to look for bottom lines despite discouragement, we will not fail to come away from *Invitation* with neat carry-home conclusions, handy souvenirs of the unpackageable experience of our encounter with the novel. These conclusions will be of our own making, however. In addition to reflecting the theme of deliberate acknowledgment or denial of "reality" to the world into which one has been cast, indeterminacy functions as a rhetorical device: it denies prescriptiveness to the novel's system of values.

"Cincinnatus" is, after all, not "Everyman"; he is an ordinary person in extraordinary circumstances. His definite though not quite intelligible moral and metaphysical victory (particularly appealing to the postwar audience, which has to believe in the ultimate moral victory of the victims of wartime crimes) is made possible by that rare luxury—freedom from commitment. Paradoxically, this luxury is a result of emotional privation and painful loneliness—the losses become compensations for themselves.

No matter how humanly recognizable Cincinnatus's predicament may be, his case is unique and his example not general. The moral freedom that he achieves in the end has the absolute purity of the laboratory experiment. The best commentary on *Invitation* is provided by Nabokov's second major dystopia, *Bend Sinister*, a much less ecstatic and much more sober inquiry into the limits of moral freedom. *Bend Sinister*, however, was written some years after Nabokov had learned exactly what kind of persecution had fallen to the lot of millions and millions of captives in camps and prisons much bigger than the Gothic fortress of Cincinnatus.