Reimagining Nabokov

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Good Readers, Good Writers: Collaborative Student Annotations for *Invitation to a Beheading*  
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**Introduction**
A perennial question: Do our students complete the reading? Many instructors, I’d wager, would say no, that students would rather read 280 characters in their spare time than to get to know Tolstoy’s dozens. Undoubtedly, aside from the present novelty of TikTok clips and Instagram stories, this has been a charge lobbied at every generation from A to Z. But is it true? Does it hold up today in any meaningful way, especially if, indeed, it is a *perennial* question?

For my part, I’m inclined to disagree, and following Nabokov’s lead, I’d rather not generalize too much. The debate has already launched enough thinkpieces reflecting on alleged patterns in reading among young readers and even some gift guides targeting those same generations.¹ I linger on this stereotype of the average student, however, to situate my approach to teaching Nabokov, to consider the real issues that undergird it, and to propose at least one method to encourage an interactive form of reading in today’s classroom. This method involves asking students to engage deeply with Nabokov’s work by becoming annotators using Scalar, a digital publishing tool. In doing
so, it likewise alters the terms of our shared work in the classroom—between student and instructor, between student and author—granting those we teach greater autonomy over their learning and inviting them to wield interpretative power often left to others. In this way, the annotations encourage better, more consistent reading, yes, but they also become a matter of shifting the power dynamics in the room and on the page. Students become the arbiters of significance and interpretation, to some extent, in this exercise.

**Contexts**

If students “aren’t doing the reading,” it’s because there’s a complex set of factors that are frequently elided in conversations about this issue. In fact, the vast scholarship on the subject suggests that often a combination of conflicting expectations, frequently unaddressed individual difficulties, and institutional exigencies lead to questions regarding student reading habits.² Pamela Howard and her colleagues, for instance, found “a paradox” in their study of student and faculty perceptions regarding the value of academic reading. While both groups agreed that a college education should make better readers of students, “data from this study indicate that practice and pedagogy related to academic reading do not align with this belief.”³ In some cases, it’s the stark contrast between expert faculty readers, who “possess abundant knowledge about their content and understand the lexicon,” and students, who wield less knowledge in particular domains, that may drive misunderstandings about how and why to read.⁴ Researchers also cite the Dunning-Kruger effect, “which is characterized by an overestimation of competence based on the fact that individuals do not know what they do not know,” as well as concerns among faculty over poor course evaluations for assigning “lots of reading.”⁵ Such matters, among others, can make reading a thorny subject for students and instructors alike. Furthermore, finding a functional praxis that helps resolve this tension and that allows students to begin reading according to disciplinary standards is no less complicated.

The Decoding the Disciplines model developed by Joan Middendorf and David Pace feels apposite here. Teachers often assume that reading across disciplines is the same and doesn’t require special instruction even in courses that draw students from all over a campus, not just specific majors. That is, we often fall into the trap of thinking that because they can read, students may adapt to new lexicons and styles on their own without much trouble. Instead, the Decoding the Disciplines approach outlines why instruction should
“match the specific conditions of each academic field.” It does so through a seven-step process: identifying bottlenecks to learning; asking how an expert does these things; considering how tasks can be explicitly modeled; providing practice and feedback; factoring motivation; reflecting on how well students are mastering tasks; and sharing the resulting knowledge. In Nabokov’s case, students can often become overwhelmed by the density and allusiveness of his writing, and it’s no surprise, as “students must be given a chance to perfect [reading] skills and to receive feedback that clarifies where they are and are not succeeding,” to borrow Middendorf and Pace’s words. Although not an exact match for this pedagogical framework, my Scalar project achieved comparable goals by giving students a way “into” Invitation to a Beheading by providing a model for this work and by allowing students to regularly perform the kind of reading that experts do to make sense of texts such as Nabokov’s novel (or, at least, one possible version of that work).

Along these lines, I had a conversation with a colleague not long ago in which we were clearly showing our age by waxing poetic about our relationship with books—their feel, their smell, their pull. They suggested that our reading was qualitatively (not to mention quantitatively) different than that of our students, who, in their and many others’ view, require something else to become entranced by a novel, namely, a communal experience of reading a book together. While I find that students generally “do the reading” (even if there are, indeed, challenges), I firmly believe that this communal experience can be a beneficial frame to keep in mind when teaching how to read complex writers such as Nabokov. By community, I want to stress, I don’t simply mean a group of bodies in the same room, whether virtual or physical. Rather, I have in mind work that is interactive and rooted in mutual, active exchange. It is also a process by which each contributor feels responsible for a portion of knowledge that can be shared to generate greater understanding among the collective.

Methods/Logistics
What my colleague said made me think of the annotations project I had recently completed while reading Invitation to a Beheading in a course on the twentieth-century Russian novel. To begin, I designed a website using the open-source publishing platform Scalar to have students share their work publicly. As its developers put it, Scalar “enables users to assemble media from multiple sources and juxtapose them with their own writing in a variety
of ways, with minimal technical expertise required.” Likewise, this digital tool “gives authors tools to structure essay- and book-length works in ways that take advantage of the unique capabilities of digital writing, including nested, recursive, and nonlinear formats. The platform also supports collaborative authoring and reader commentary.” In other words, Scalar is a bit Nabokovian in design functionality, as it allows for nonlinear writing whereby readers can—and are even encouraged—to consider a digital book from multiple angles, finding and following paths that can be grouped thematically and via tags, for instance, rather than a single linear path forward. It embraces the concept of hypertext to reimagine the possible outcomes of scholarly work, and it can be used to cultivate communities of readers and writers.

I divided the site into sections based on the authors we read, from Mikhail Kuzmin to Evgeny Vodolazkin, and further subsections for each writing assignment: author biography; analysis of a short story or close reading of a passage from a novel; essay; and annotations. If a way to harness students’ minds and attention is a more clearly communal experience, then I can think of no better combination than Nabokov and annotations, particularly when paired with a flexible tool such as Scalar.

To prepare students to take on such a novel, multifaceted task, I asked the digital librarian, Roberto Vargas, at the institution where I was teaching at the time to visit my class at the beginning of the semester and introduce the platform. I took the opportunity to ask students to share what they consider annotations to be. Their responses varied: “a useful comment, an addition to a text to clarify, notes about the reading, reflections, additional facts, context, explanatory devices in a text, a note to elaborate on something that is mentioned or referenced in the text, any additional information added near text, further information, a word definition, a response to a particular part of text, a comment on the text, a note made about a certain portion of the text, something added to add to or comment on something in text, a short description to give more info/afterthought on a topic, and more detail.” In general, such responses suggested that they understood annotations as something factual or contextual, rather than interpretive. With these ideas in hand, we could then talk about how they might come up with annotations as they read Invitation and the other novels. Later in the semester, we would return to this question, using the work on the Scalar project to consider how it had complicated our understanding of annotations. Naturally, such tools come with a learning curve, so it was important to scaffold the assignment properly. To
that end, to close out this introductory session, students practiced building a page, placing text, and linking and importing media (photo, videos, and so on). During the semester, we also twice held open lab hours at which students could ask technical or conceptual questions.

To be sure, we didn’t exactly set ourselves the goal of breaking scholarly ground through the practice of writing these annotations. Olga Skonechnaia’s excellent notes on The Nabokovian website already exist. Julian Connolly’s Nabokov’s “Invitation to a Beheading”: A Critical Companion, Gavriel Shapiro’s Delicate Markers: Subtexts in Vladimir Nabokov’s “Invitation to a Beheading,” and, of course, the annotations in the Russian collected works are also terrific resources. Nonetheless, the annotations produced by my students, while not as extensive (yet!), are open-access—an important and pedagogically useful concept that likewise challenges established academic structures. For the most part, my students didn’t make use of these previous commentaries either, opting instead to conduct their own research about various references in the novel. Furthermore, making use of the medium, they were able to incorporate materials not necessarily available in other commentaries (images, videos, and so on) that can expand readers’ understanding of a work’s subtexts, contexts, and allusions.

As with the rest of the novels we read, I carved Invitation to a Beheading up into page ranges based on the enrollment so that each student covered roughly the same amount of material from each book. When we reached those pages, students posted draft annotations, which included page numbers and references to characters, people, places, events, and items that a reader may not be familiar with, on a shared Google Doc on the respective days that students had been assigned. Of course, some books and pages generated more annotations than others. To ensure that we did not double up on annotations for a given text, students had to take a glance at the referents (e.g., a character or location) that their peers had already added. When a referent did reappear in their assigned section, they could simply add their commentary to the initial annotation and/or refer readers to earlier or later page(s).

After receiving my feedback and considering comments and ideas provided by other contributors on the Google Doc, students then expanded their annotations into a second-stage form on Scalar by midnight on the following Saturday each week. For the sake of consistency, the annotation pages had to follow the same preset style, unlike other sections of the website that permitted greater flexibility and personalization in design and formatting.
I requested that these annotations be no more than two paragraphs, but they could be significantly shorter depending on the topic. In this expanded iteration, the annotations included the page number, referent (word or phrase), the student’s explanatory and/or interpretive annotation, and any relevant media. Where applicable, students were to add hyperlinks between pages on Scalar, demonstrating, first, the connections within individual novels and, second, how these works are also interrelated. I asked them to keep track of potential connections, with concrete examples, that they identified as the class progressed (either on a personal document or by commenting on the collective Google Docs). This process made it easier for them to identify ways to revise annotations and to link them to one another.

**Results**

What was most exciting to see was how students cross-referenced their pages to find those links organically. With Nabokov, these narrative connections can be difficult to spot, at the very least upon first reading. Rather than reveal them in a top-down, instructor-led fashion (whether exclusively or primarily), students can come to discover some for themselves, which is all the better to “Find What the Sailor Has Hidden,” Nabokov’s metaphor from his autobiography *Speak, Memory* for discovering hidden patterns not only in literature but also in life. As they’re already reading closely for details for their annotations, they’re also more apt to feel out those links on their own as they make their way through the pages of *Invitation*. It’s a reminder that puzzle-solving sometimes involves subjective decision-making; some literary puzzles, even Nabokov’s, are less straightforward, more open-ended than other kinds. The work was in this way recursive, as by the time they revised their first-draft annotations, they had read more of the novel and could expand their analysis, make more connections, and relate their work to that of their peers.

The resulting annotations covered everything from the characters (their names, appearances, personalities) to historical contexts (conditions in the Soviet Union and Germany at the time of writing, Pushkin’s life and death), from the French and Russian words that Nabokov weaves into the text to obscure items (the meerschaum pipe) and curious modifiers (lyrate). My students by and large resisted the temptation to turn into budding Kinbotes, but I was struck by certain annotations. For instance, one student described Cecilia C. on the website as an “extremely erratic and questionable woman.” In class, I used this and other annotations to hold another discussion,
returning to what it means to perform such editorial work. By this point in the semester, some saw it as “reader’s notes,” which better reflected the subjective nature of annotating. In general, they had clearly become attuned to how the annotator’s positionality, perspective, and preferences give shape to another reader’s experience of a text, which nicely dovetailed with topics that Invitation raises: the nature of writing, the power of art, transparency and opacity. They wrestled with various related questions: How much context is necessary for a reader? What qualifies for an annotation? What should our sources be, and to what extent should we turn to the author’s own statements for insights into the novel? Which aspects of Invitation should we elucidate? Which of them can or must we leave obscure?

Naturally, the annotation pages varied a great deal. Some grew into discursive explorations of themes and images with numerous entries, while others remained relatively more straightforward, factual, or technical. In terms of style, a couple students opted to use a more humorous tone, particularly when it came to image captions. There was also natural variation depending on the ranges assigned for Invitation; some sections are simply richer in allusions and references than others. Again, these circumstances, partly a matter of chance, opened possibilities when it comes to studying Nabokov not in a hierarchical manner but in one that allows for individual decisions and a mix of approaches. This doesn’t mean other pedagogical models don’t or can’t do the same, but rather that this one foregrounds and fosters that style of learning to good benefit.

Particularly with a writer such as Nabokov, who wields immense authorial power, supercharged through a historical critical reception that emphasizes the author’s tight narrative structures and control over his material, this approach can create a more inclusive, egalitarian classroom. First, students are granted greater agency in their learning, as they choose (to some extent) which words “matter” for the annotations. They become critics who unearth meaning from the text, taking apart the novel to unpack its structures, layers, and references and editors who curate their findings for a potentially wide audience. They can thus pursue their interests, following threads that grab them. Along these lines, one student wrote:

As someone who is not Russian, not steeped in Russian culture, and not yet steeped in literature either, writing annotations for each of the books in our class was extremely helpful. Partially it just helped me to learn
some things about Russian culture and some landmarks in Russia. More interesting, though, was the web of references that the Scalar annotation project allowed me to see, both within novels and between them. An author references an obscure opera—suddenly, I am down a rabbit hole of investigating the final sequence of this opera which mirrors the end of the novel. Nabokov referenced Pushkin several times, whom I knew nothing of before this course, and learned about mainly through other authors’ references. Mainly, the annotations helped to situate these often-confusing novels within time periods, cultures, and inspirations, and thereby made me feel less unmoored than I would have felt if thrown in headfirst to a world I only half-understood.

This is not to suggest that we, as instructors, abandon our position as the literary expert in the classroom. Instead, approaches such as this one permit us to collaborate, to co-create, to support students’ individual learning strategies and preferences while still both highlighting what we deem most important about the texts to share with students and helping develop their critical interpretation and domain-specific reading skills. When it comes to Nabokov’s dense Invitation, there’s plenty to explore through this student-centric approach. My hope was that this process would allow students to gain a deeper understanding of and appreciation for these works and their contexts, and this collaborative project would serve as a valuable resource for others reading these writers and novels in future classes and beyond. Likewise, this assignment benefited students in numerous other ways. For instance, they explored the possibilities of curation and gained or developed skills in storytelling, project management, and the use of digital tools.

The Scalar project drew their attention to the details of the text, always crucial when it comes to reading Nabokov. The details. The repetitions. The texture and substance of the work. It’s a commonplace of Nabokovian criticism to cite the author’s imperative to “caress the details,” but how to best do that with novice readers of this literature? These annotation projects offer one direct, effective means to do so.16 On this note, when I asked my students to share their thoughts on the project, one responded: “The annotations were an engaging way to get me thinking about recurring motifs. It was very satisfying to see it all come together at the end, and it helped me understand some of the more complex themes at play.” The assignment thus broke down
the reading into small steps and an approach that felt more manageable and, indeed, shared.

Not only that, but it allowed students to do more of their own learning, even if only for their allotted page range. They took ownership over what they were reading. At the same time, the practice cultivated a useful broader practice of digging up information rather than skipping an unfamiliar word or potential allusion no matter the page:

Reading and going through the annotations not only forced me to understand what I read (such as learning about operas or even simple terms like dachas), it also intrinsically prompted my mind to try to draw connections between various elements within the story that I’ve read while researching/writing the annotations. Because of this aspect, I felt much better prepared going into class and participating. Often when I read for pleasure and I happen to stumble across a word I’m unfamiliar with or a mention of a painting/book title/opera/pop-culture or any other references, I gloss over them, potentially losing out on much of the important literary elements that can enhance my reading experience (especially with texts like Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*). Doing the annotations really helped me comprehend and gather my thoughts, forcing me to slow down my reading and analyze line by line to figure out potential connections.

The project’s scaffolded structure thereby motivated students to read Nabokov in a productive manner that involves paying attention to the unfamiliar and revealed to them the benefits, both individual and communal, of doing so.

It’s here, too, perhaps that we also see a shift away from an affirmation of Nabokov’s authorial control and the instructor’s ensuing position of authority when teaching him. This method makes excavators of the students, who prod and poke and peel back *Invitation*’s many discrete parts to see the wider picture. In this way, they’re not dependent on the instructor for total clarity and meaning but rather take on this responsibility (a right, in other words) for themselves and share it with others, both within and without the class since their work is publicly available on the Scalar site.17

Furthermore, in yet another potential challenge to authorial power, this assignment grants these readers, often new to Nabokov studies, the freedom to deem something significant—or not. I realize that this is a precarious
position, but it levels the playing field to an extent in positive ways. As I describe the goals of the project on the assignment guidelines for students, it may be tempting to view annotations as strictly “factual” definitions and descriptions. However, annotations, while offering context (historical, political, biographical, etc.), are also analytical and intended to clearly illuminate the connections between complex ideas, themes, metaphors, and symbols. A good annotation in some way explicates the importance of its referent to the novel, both as a whole and on a particular page. It might highlight the presence of a repeated motif. Annotations, in short, are subjective, interpretive, and dependent on what the editor (here: the student!) chooses to underscore. In this course, I stressed that my students also didn’t need to write an annotation for every unfamiliar word as if for a dictionary. It seems to me that this methodology is a novel concept to most students, especially those who are not literature majors, as evidenced by their initial responses to my question regarding the nature of annotations. In short, the project encouraged fresh readings and creative explorations of the material, because it trusted the student-researchers and ensured close attention.

One of the greatest benefits of this project was certainly its community-building aspect. This aspect of the assignment was particularly important as I launched the Scalar project in our first semester of entirely remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since everyone was contributing to the same Google Docs and Scalar site, a sense of camaraderie naturally emerged amid the challenging era of “Zoom University.” Students could learn from one another’s work actively and regularly or, looking at things more cynically (for the sake of argument), feel compelled to generate solid work since it was all there for their peers to see.

In a similar vein, I believe that the awareness that these annotations could potentially later be accessed by a wider readership in most cases motivated the students to generate their best work. It strikes me that so much of what students produce in our classes is essentially writing for the drawer. It appears on our desk or our content learning system, and from there, maybe one or two people read it, then unfortunately, it dies on the same platforms. Undergraduate work obviously requires different attention, particularly when it comes to research that will be made available online, but what is the point of all we do if not to put it in dialogue with other scholars and readers of these works? Here that sense of a much wider community of readers that can appeal to all readers of all generations who engage with the material in a meaningful way emerges.
Regardless of my students’ motivations, the conversations we held regarding the novel bloomed thanks in part to this approach. They were generally focused on the nuances of the text, and we were still able to discuss key aspects of *Invitation*—the otherworld, the female characters, narrative tricks, and so on—that I consider critical, but students were consistently better equipped to contribute since they had each developed a minor expertise of sorts on their allotted page range—but usually even more. In a novel that features what one student playfully called a “mindscape bending” adventure, having these anchors and research practices helps tremendously. The students themselves recognized this, too:

Writing annotations for various Russian works, including those by Nabokov, was a unique experience that not only was a fun course assignment, but also provided me with an opportunity to deeply engross myself in the texts. Some of the annotations were simple definitions, while others explored the significance of different parts of the novels, such as locations, names, artistic references, etc. I appreciated having this to look to when I was confused about a particular piece of the reading. The annotations overall provide a great library of information that can be used to understand the intricacies of the novels.

Perhaps the question should then not be, “Do our students read?” but rather, “How can we motivate deep reading of Nabokov, the kind of reading that carries over into discussions and writing and, most importantly, that will leave lasting impressions?” This community of annotators of *Invitation to a Beheading* didn’t necessarily enter Nabokov’s world on steady footing, but ultimately, they became assured readers of a highly complex work through a fruitful, dynamic interplay of individual research and communal exchange.

Notes


3 Howard et al., “Academic Reading,” 199.
4 Ibid., 201.
5 Ibid., 201, 204.
7 Ibid.
9 Ibid.

10 For context, in this survey course, alongside *Invitation to a Beheading*, we also read Mikhail Kuzmin’s *Wings*, Yury Olesha’s *Envy*, Liudmila Chukovskaya’s *Sofia Petrovna*, Anna Akhmatova’s *Requiem*, portions of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago*, Sasha Sokolov’s *Between Dog and Wolf*, Chingiz Aitmatov’s *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, Liudmila Ulitskaya’s *Sonechka*, and Evgeny Vodolazkin’s *The Aviator*.

11 Skonechnaia’s annotations to *Invitation to a Beheading* are available, in English and in Russian, here: https://thenabokovian.org/annotations.


13 The nature of the project means that students in future iterations of the course can expand and supplement the current notes.


17 Students were given the option to share their work with their names attached (first, last, or both) or submit the commentary anonymously or withhold their work entirely. Almost all students, in my case, opted for some version of the former.

18 As Middendorf and Pace write, “It is not sufficient to assume that the structures of learning created by this process will automatically motivate students. Conscious effort needs to be dedicated to making the students partners in the learning process. The nature of this process allows an instructor to present himself or herself as an ally who has devoted considerable energy to creating a course in which success is possible and who really wants students to do well.” Middendorf and Pace, “Decoding the Disciplines,” 8.