

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

Hostos Community College

2015

A Reader's Beheading: Nabokov's Invitation and Authorial Utopia

Aaron Botwick

Hostos Community College, CUNY

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ho_pubs/91

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

Nabokov Studies

Nabokov Studies

Volume 13, 2014/2015

International Vladimir Nabokov Society and Davidson College

Article

[Viewed](#) | [Save](#)

[View Citation](#)

A Reader's Beheading:

Nabokov's *Invitation* and Authorial Utopia

“A Reader's Beheading: Nabokov's *Invitation* and Authorial Utopia” argues that *Invitation to a Beheading* polemically outlines Nabokov's position on the relationship between reader and writer: in other words, that writing and reading are difficult, elite pursuits whose meanings should necessarily be available only to those willing to face and surmount the magician's challenges. Narratively, it operates as a kind of roman à clef in which Cincinnatus C. follows a trajectory towards artistic freedom (or authorial utopia) where he is liberated from the constraints of poor readers—among them literalists and Freudians—while Nabokov, ever the unaccommodating creator, frustrates that progression with the help of a haphazard narrator. The novel is ultimately a statement of artistic intent, one that grants the pleasures of the author's puzzles to a select few. Nabokov, it seems, would rather be a “violin in a void” than a popular author misused and abused by his audience.

In his 1959 foreword to *Invitation to a Beheading*, Vladimir Nabokov writes, “I composed the Russian original exactly a quarter of a century ago in Berlin, some fifteen years after escaping from the Bolshevik regime, and just before the Nazi regime reached its full volume of welcome. The question whether or not my seeing both in terms of one dull beastly farce had any effect on this book, should concern the good reader as little as it does me” (5). Dale Peterson describes Nabokov's introductions as being written by “a notoriously intimidating receptionist” (_____ **66**), so it is no surprise that some of his readers have responded with equally stubborn interpretations. Most notably, Vladimir E. Alexandrov's reading of Gnosticism in *Beheading* is so convincing to him that it “preempts any necessity of trying to understand the [book's] contradiction in terms of either absurdist or metaliterary

criteria” (*ibid* 99), while Alexander Moudrov chimes in, arguing for a Neoplatonic interpretation of *Beheading* and scoffing at the “easy” reading of the book “as a sterile allegory of artistic creation.” Others have chosen to dismiss Nabokov’s warnings—for example, Margaret Byrd Boegeman’s “*Invitation to a Beheading and the Many Shades of Kafka*,” which challenges the author’s insistence that, when writing his novel he “had no German, was completely ignorant of modern German literature, and had not yet read any French or English translations of Kafka’s work” (6). This is not quite unfair, since Nabokov himself would later ignore his own anti-political reading of *Beheading*, writing in 1969 that the book, along with *Bend Sinister*, were his “absolutely final indictments of [End Page 53] Russian and German totalitarianism” (_____ ¹ 156). And Julian Moynahan, while acknowledging the author’s misgivings about “publicistic” readings of his book, still insists on mentioning Eichmann, Auschwitz, and Dachau in his Russian preface of *Beheading* (16). Only Timothy Langen, playing the diplomat, concedes, “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” (59).

This bullying and combative tone surrounding *Beheading* is fitting. Nabokov continues,

My favorite author (1768–1849) once said of a novel now utterly forgotten ‘*Il a tout pour tous. Il fait rire l’enfant et frissonner la femme. Il donne à l’homme du monde un vertige salutaire et fait rêver ceux qui ne rêvent jamais.*’ [‘It has something for everyone. It makes the baby laugh and women shudder. It gives the man a healthy and dizzy dream for those who dream forever.’] *Invitation to a Beheading* can claim nothing of the kind. *It is a violin in a void.* [Emphasis added] The worldling will deem it a trick. Old men will hurriedly turn from it to regional romances and the lives of public figures. No clubwoman will thrill. The evil-minded will perceive in little Emmie a sister of little Lolita, and the disciplines of the Viennese witch-doctor will snigger over it in their grotesque world of communal guilt and *progresivnoe* education ... I know (*je connais*) a few (*quelques*) readers who will jump up, ruffling their hair,

(7–8)

In a few short pages, Nabokov has mapped out a major thematic concern of *Beheading*: this is a novel about writing novels, and one which asserts that the pleasures of reading should be limited to good readers. He claims that the only author who has influenced his writing is “Pierre [End Page 54] Delaland, whom I invented”² and he lists “Sebastian Knight” as an influence erroneously hurled at him by reviewers looking to find “passionate comparison” (6), failing to mention that Knight is *also* a product of his fiction. Furthermore, the dates listed for his unnamed “favorite author” coincide only with the birth and death of one person of note: Dolley Madison, wife of the fourth president of the United States. Here, he is playing the intellectual prankster, setting traps for the casual reader and jokes for the close reader — “[Nabokov] is often most deadly serious when he is making a joke,” writes **Moynahan (13)**;

“serious and playful; serious because playful” adds **Michael Wood (6)**—but nonetheless asserting an important point: for Nabokov, the act of reading and writing is a difficult, elite pursuit, and he quickly dismisses the types who will not understand his meaning or meanings, taking a typical shot at his pet enemies, literalists and Freudians. Cincinnatus C., I will then argue, assumes the role of an author in *Invitation to a Beheading*, a novel that proves to be as much an autobiography as *Speak, Memory*, a less literal roman à clef than *Look at the Harlequins!* I will trace Cincinnatus’ progression towards artistic freedom, or authorial utopia, while outlining the ways in which Nabokov, the narrator, and the novel’s characters work to frustrate that progression. The novel is ultimately a statement of artistic intent, one that grants the pleasures of the author’s puzzles to a select few. Nabokov, it seems, would rather be a violin in a void than a popular author misused and abused by his audience.

To begin with *Beheading* is also to end with *Beheading*. The full title³ is **[End Page 55]** somewhat misleading: *Invitation to a Beheading* almost warrants an exclamation point; it is a welcoming grin to the drooling and bloodthirsty masses, the kind of readers who would yawn at most literary fiction but who would lunge for a *Peyton Place*, a *Valley of the Dolls*, or who might pick up Henry Miller or D.H. Lawrence for the dirty bits. Nabokov is promising a certain type of content that is entirely absent from his novel. The beheading in question is relegated to one, obscure, metafictional paragraph: the “platform had long since collapsed in a cloud of reddish dust . . . The fallen trees lay flat and reliefless, while those that were still standing, also *two-dimensional*, with a lateral shading of the trunk to *suggest* roundness, barely held on with their branches to the ripping *mesh* of the sky. Everything was coming apart. Everything was falling” (223; emphasis added). It is as if some wild stagehand has come to disassemble the set before the performance was over, or as if the magician were explaining his tricks as he performs them. It is Derridean counterfeit money: Nabokov is destroying the verisimilitude of his scene and we are being cheated out of the agreed upon experience. In the final line, Cincinnatus leaves behind the scenery and “makes his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him” (*ibid*). The concluding joke of the novel is that this invitation extends to no one *except* Cincinnatus and the beheading is of the uninspired reader, for it is at the beheading that the cardboard fictional recedes into nothing and Cincinnatus is able to run towards those who may **[End Page 56]** read and understand his writing. As Nabokov writes in *Strong Opinions*, “[The author] clashes with readerdom because he is his own ideal reader and those other readers are so very often mere lip-moving ghosts and amnesiacs” (183). This is the central drama of *Beheading*.

The title is followed by an epigraph attributed to the fictional author Delaland: “COMME UN FOU SE CROIT DIEU, NOUS NOUS CROYONS MORTELS.—Delaland: *Discours sur les ombres*,” which in English reads, “As a madman believes himself to be God, we believe ourselves to be mortal.—Delaland: *Shadow Discourse*.” Typically, there is no translation offered, and the audience is required either to breeze past it or do the work itself; the ideal Nabokovian reader is one whose intellect is powerful enough to box with the author or who is willing to do their

homework. Our attention is directed to the latter clause—thus, we are mad to believe that we are mortal, as Vladimir E. Alexandrov believes (_____ **95**). Peterson, in turn, argues that we should “have the humility and the hard sense to recognize that the real world always escapes us” (*ibid* 89). Nabokov, of course, was obsessed with consciousness: when asked by an interviewer what surprised him, he replied, “the marvel of consciousness—that sudden window swinging open on a sunlit landscape amidst the night of non-being” (**Feifer 22**). Thus, it is natural to interpret this epigraph as a reflection on our perception of “the real world.” But I would suggest that it is more fruitful to read the epigraph backwards, that is, to focus on the madman who believes he is God. After all, this is a perfect description of Nabokov, who, like God, begins with nothing: a blank page. In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with Nabokov, and the Word was Nabokov.⁴ Delaland, invented by the author, is a permutation of Nabokov and yet lends authority to the novel he is about to give us. This slight move sets the tone for the rest of the novel where we have Cincinnatus C., the frustrated artist in a world that does not understand his language, and **[End Page 57]** above him, Nabokov, also an artist, and one who is performing a kind of literary masochism by punishing a kindred spirit. He jokes in *Strong Opinions*, “My characters are galley slaves” (95), but what does it mean, though, when the galley slave, like Cincinnatus, is a version of himself?

Shapiro argues that Delaland is in fact a reference to Jérôme Lalande, an astronomer and writer who is mentioned in a rough draft of Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*: “He read Herder, Rousseau, Lalande, Gibbon, Camfort” (132). He continues by mentioning Pushkin’s drawing for *Eugene Onegin* in which the author is pictured with his protagonist. Nabokov was familiar with this drawing, and even discussed it in *The Gift*, which he was writing at the same time as *Beheading*: “the Neva’s granite parapet on which one can scarcely discern today the imprint of Pushkin’s elbow” (*ibid*). Shapiro concludes that the allusion functions as a reference to Nabokov’s “authorial presence in *Invitation to a Beheading*” (133), but he does not spend much time on the drawing itself. In it, Pushkin’s back faces the audience, while Onegin stands slightly taller than him, his profile in full view. If Nabokov was indeed considering this picture while writing *Beheading*, it is a fertile allusion: Not only does it evoke “authorial presence,” but the character has superseded his author; Onegin ultimately dominates Pushkin, just as Cincinnatus will break free of Nabokov’s invented world and escape into one of his own.

But let us now begin at, or return to, the beginning, which establishes both Nabokov’s reading of narrative truth as well as the literalism of his world and the kind of dull art this literalism produces. The second paragraph opens, “So now we are nearing the end,” a typical Nabokovian trick (12). Surely, with over two hundred pages remaining, we could be nowhere near the end. But while this is *literally* false it is *narratively* correct. Indeed, the first paragraph, a mere ten sentences, contains almost the entire story of the novel: a judge passes sentence on Cincinnatus; he is taken to his cell by his jailer Rodion, and is met by his lawyer, Roman. With the exception of his executioner, M’sieur Pierre, and the director of the jail, Rodrig, no

other [End Page 58] narratively significant character will be introduced after this point.⁵ The remainder of the text concerns the purgatory of Cincinnatus' thoughts. The first paragraph also contains a nice summation of the novel's central thematic concern: "He was calm; however, he had to be supported during the journey through the long corridors, since he planted his feet unsteadily ... like a man who has dreamt that he is walking on water only to have sudden doubt" (11). It is not important to draw the connection to Jesus, but only to a God-like figure, to one who can manipulate the laws of physics—in other words, an author. *Invitation to a Beheading*, after all, is the story of a man struggling with his fictional prowess, of a man who discovers that his dreams can indeed imbue him with the power to walk on water, and to spread the gospel of the arts to a readerdom that will understand him.

The second paragraph continues, "The right-hand, still untasted part of the novel, which, during our delectable reading, we would lightly feel, mechanically testing whether there were still plenty left (and our fingers [End Page 59] were always gladdened by the placid, faithful thickness) has suddenly, for no reason at all, become quite meager: a few minutes of quick reading, already downhill, and O—horrible!" (12). This is a metafictional nudge, the use of the archaic "O" drawing our attention to the written nature of the story; but it is also, once again, a narratively true statement. Nabokov twice refers to the sense of taste: the "untasted" part of the novel, and our "delectable" reading, and in the next sentence he employs a metaphoric fruit: "The heap of cherries, whose mass had seemed to us of such a ruddy and glossy black, had suddenly become discrete drupes: the one over there with the scar is a little rotten, and this one has shriveled and dried about around its stone (and the very last one is inevitably hard and unripe)" (*ibid*). So, for the type of reader who metaphorically consumes or, more appropriately, devours novels, for whom, once the book is read, it is disposable, never to be picked up again—for these readers the novel is already disappointing. The delicious romance of the title has already begun to disappoint. The meal is already over. In a later scene, the narrator will note that Rodrig has a voice marked by a "fruity bass" (15), a redundant description except that it recalls this poor reader—and indeed, Rodrig mostly ignores Cincinnatus' questions, instead *eating his prisoner's untouched food*. This metaphorical fruit extends also to Rodion, another poor reader, who interrupts Cincinnatus' first experiment with imagination by bursting into his cell bearing a dozen yellow plums (33).

When Rodrig enters Cincinnatus' cell, we are introduced to the protagonist's first poor reader. He wears a "perfect toupee," a strange description since a "perfect toupee" would be an unmentioned or unnoticed one; it is a mark of dishonesty and therefore of his suitability in a world in which appearances are more important than reality. His face is "selected without love" (14), a description that quickly establishes Nabokov's disdain. (As God of the narrative, he did the selecting.) Rodrig, who at this point remains unnamed, has wrinkles that are "enlivened in a sense by two, *and only by two*, bulging eyes" (15; emphasis added), indicating

an absence of the Third Eye, or the eye of wisdom. Almost immediately he vanishes, **[End Page 60]** dissolving “into the air” (*ibid*), but quickly returns to the cell. His presence, then, is distracted and partially absent; he is no dedicated reader.

The worst reader in the novel, however, is Cincinnatus’ narrator. As has been extensively noted, Cincinnatus’ jailors are named interchangeably (_____ **12, Pifer 49**); *Beheading* “looks as sketchy as a rough draft by an incompetent novelist” (Peterson in _____ **73**) or “produces the impression that the narrator is forgetting which characters he is dealing with” (Alexandrov *ibid* 101), so while Nabokov is unquestionably concerned with his characters, the narrator he has chosen is another one of Cincinnatus’ poor readers—absent-minded, only casually paying attention. He does not belong to the intended audience.

Appropriately, then, Cincinnatus must become a good reader—unlike his narrator—before he becomes a good writer, and his thinking is critical before it is creative. Examining a magazine published “once upon a time,” he romanticizes its images of the past: “everything gravitated passionately toward a kind of perfection whose definition was absence of friction” (50). He is, however, an astute reader:

But then perhaps ... I am misinterpreting these pictures. Attributing to the epoch the characteristics of its photograph. The wealth of shadows, the torrents of light, the gloss of a tanned shoulder, the rare reflection, the fluid transitions from one element to another—perhaps all of this pertains only to the snapshot, to a particular kind of heliotypy, to special forms of that art, and the world really never was so sinuous, so humid and rapid—just as today our unsophisticated cameras record in their own way our hastily assembled and painted world.

(51)

In this vision on an older time, photojournalism is a form of art, and one that is more effective, more convincing—in effect more deceptive, hinted at by the presence of shadows—than the hastily assembled, “theatrical, pathetic stuff” of Cincinnatus’ age (204). The prefix of “heliotypy,” a rather unusual word, links it to the sun, or that which transcends the earth. His **[End Page 61]** initial idea, of course, is ridiculous: friction (or conflict) is the foundation of art, thus a world without friction cannot be perfect, especially to a mind like Cincinnatus’. But the magazine provides an important example for Cincinnatus. Produced in a world that may be no different from his own, it nonetheless liberates its reader, allowing him to fantasize and escape, to imagine that even in a situation like his, the world can be sinuous, humid, and rapid. But as a *reader* he will remain skeptical; as a *writer* he can become God in his own imagination.

His age, of course, *is* theatrical, it *is* a work of art—just a bad one. Supporting characters often wear makeup and costumes, especially M’sieur Pierre, who appears late in the novel donning a “little yellow wig” (159). Chuckling to himself, he tells Cincinnatus, “It’s us, it’s us, it’s us” (*ibid*), not realizing his prisoner recognized him the minute he squirmed into the cell, “twisting and threshing like a fat fish among the dust” (158). He doesn’t have the power of the pictures in the magazine to present a false, cheerful representation. In an earlier scene, Cincinnatus asks Emmie, “Tell me on what day I shall die . . . tell me, when shall I die?” as if the answers were readily available; and of course, they are—in the back of the book. Cincinnatus seems to be aware of his position as a character in a novel. Later, we are given a telling example: “It seemed as though at any moment, in the course of his movements about the limited space of the *haphazardly invented* cell, Cincinnatus would step in such a way as to slip naturally and effortlessly through some chink of the air into its unknown *coulisses* to disappear” (121; emphasis added). And he is right: when the reader finishes the book, Cincinnatus *will* disappear.

With this in mind, we might ask, like Julian Connolly, “What kind of *literature* can such a society produce?” (_____ **22**; emphasis Connolly’s). We only twice get an answer to this question. The first is the “photohoroscope” (the second half of this portmanteau should clearly indicate Nabokov’s feelings), “a series of photographs depicting the natural progression of a given person’s entire life,” assembled by M’sieur Pierre. In the photohoroscope, “extensively retouched snapshots of [the warden’s **[End Page 62]** young daughter] Emmie’s present face were supplemented by shots of other people—for the sake of costume, furniture and surroundings—so as to create the entire *décor* and stage properties of her future life” (170). In other words, it is a temporal Panopticon, and one that outlines the conformity that is expected; appropriately, the poses are described as “horizontal,” consistent with that image of the passage of time. But the pictures are somewhat confused: Emmie is seen with an attaché case at fourteen and in tights and a tutu at eighteen, reminding us that these creators are not entirely aware of the meaning of their productions: M’sieur Pierre is not quite sure *why* Emmie is matched with each surrounding: associations between childhood and tutus, adulthood and attaché cases are mixed up because, in forgetting why they were paired in the first place, their initial meaning is lost. Robert Alter reads this scene as “an ultimate achievement of anti-art, using purely mechanical means to produce a patently false contrivance, impotent to cope with the rich enigma of experience in time, blind to the dimension of consciousness, profaning the mystery of human life” (_____ **59**). But it is not the *mechanical* that is problem. ⁶ In fact, *mechanical* could almost be synonymous with *structure*, a word Nabokov adores. It is that the mechanisms have become automated, the scenarios written long ago and reenacted without thought. No art, after all, is entirely able to cope with the rich enigma of experience in time or the mystery of human life. It is only that it has been done so poorly. At first sight, the images are “sharp and . . . genuine,” but after scrutiny, “it became repulsively obvious how trite was this parody of the work of time” (170). The objection is with the artistry and the illusion: “The Emmie who was leaving by the stage

door, in furs, with flowers pressed to her shoulder, had limbs that had never danced.” The metafictional staging of an invented character playing another invented character is not to be missed; compounding falseness triumphs in the photohoroscope. Furthermore, Emmie, standing in her bridal veil, finds a **[End Page 63]** husband in M’sieur Pierre, his face plastered over a tall and slender body. Here, the author is (to use the vernacular) fucking his characters. The relationship between the creator and the created is incestuous and sexually violent.

The second work of art in *Beheading* is the famous novel *Quercus*, “unquestionably the best that his age had produced,” that Cincinnatus checks out of the prison library (123). “Its protagonist was an oak. The novel was a biography of that oak. At the place where Cincinnatus had stopped the oak was just starting on its third century; a simple calculation suggested that by the end of the book it would reach the age of six hundred at least” (122). The repetition of the word “oak” in a series of utilitarian sentences points to the profoundly unaesthetic qualities of this realist novel, and the calculation Cincinnatus could perform recalls the opening of *Beheading*, in which the “still untasted” part of the novel tricks us and suddenly what we are left with is “quite meager” (12). Thus, the “mechanical testing” that fails with *Beheading* works perfectly with *Quercus*, a novel that is entirely predictable and whose narrative progress corresponds consistently with page numbers.⁷

Beheading continues, “The idea of the novel was considered to be the acme of modern thought.” Essentially, the author follows the oak and “all the historic events—or shadows of events—of which the oak could have been a witness” (122), but these events are hardly the stone-cold realism we might expect: “a dialogue between two warriors ... the song of a wild-haired damsel ... the hasty passage of a lord escaping from royal wrath” (123). They sound like episodes out of a mock *Don Quixote*, which was, according to Nabokov, “a cruel and crude old book” (___ **103**). Furthermore, there **[End Page 64]** “was a paragraph a page and a half long in which all the words began with ‘p,’” a limp gimmick that Nabokov would seem to disdain and parodies two paragraphs later with the alliteration “distant, deceitful and dead” (Nabokov *ibid*), using *d*, the inverted *p*.

“The normal periods of inaction were filled with scientific descriptions of the oak itself, from the viewpoints of dendrology, ornithology, coleopterology, mythology—or popular descriptions, with touches of folk humor” (*ibid*). In David Lodge’s campus novel *Changing Places*, an English professor, Philip Swallow, nursing a deep hatred for academic books, attempts to write one that would analyze Jane Austen’s bibliography from every conceivable vantage point:

The object of the exercise, as he had often to explain with as much patience as he could muster, was not to enhance others' enjoyment and understanding of Jane Austen, still less to honour the novelist herself, but to put a definitive stop to the production of any further garbage on the subject ... [thereby] inexorably reducing the area of English literature available for free comment, spreading dismay through the whole industry, rendering scores of his colleagues redundant: periodicals would fall silent, famous English departments be left deserted like ghost towns...

(44, 45)

Essentially, he is wiping out all thought by predicting it. *Quercus*, too, in its three thousand pages, seems to say everything that could be said about itself. It is a closed book, complete without the reader, who is there only to witness its existence. To paraphrase Connolly, what kind of *criticism* can such a society produce? In *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov claims, "There is no science without fancy, and no art without facts" (____79), and yet *Quercus*, almost impossibly, is exactly that: there is the "behavior of the weather" (science without fancy), "shadows of events" (art without facts), and, indeed, "a detailed list of all the initials carved in the bark with their interpretations" (art without fancy). And yet, it "seemed as though the author were sitting with his camera somewhere among the topmost [End Page 65] branches of the *Quercus*, spying out and catching his *prey*" (emphasis added). Is this not the perfect description of Nabokov, who takes malicious pleasure in punishing his galley slave, Cincinnatus, thus reinforcing the idea that any artist, however lame, still assumes a hostile position in relation to their subject?

Against these odds, and emerging in this context, Cincinnatus' artistic development is gradual and wrought with resistance from his fellow characters. But while it prepares him for the final scene of execution, progress is slow. When Cincinnatus arrives in prison, there "glistened [on his table] a clean sheet of paper and, distinctly outlined against this whiteness, as long as the life of any man except Cincinnatus, and with an ebony gleam to each of its six facets. An enlightened descendent of the index finger. Cincinnatus wrote: 'In spite of everything I am comparatively. After all I had premonitions, had premonitions of this finale'" (12-13). This piece of paper offers us what is actually as yet unwritten, the novel of Cincinnatus' mind. Cincinnatus, whose first sentence is unfinished, is as yet unable to articulate himself; he is "comparatively" *what*? Still, the potential is there—the pencil is as long as a man's life—and the narrator argues that the written is an extension of the self, the instrument a form of the finger. We will see, however, that the self is not especially transparent. Rodion peers "with a skipper's stern attention through the peephole" (13), causing Cincinnatus to feel a chill on the back of his head and cross out what he has written. Just as *Beheading* has welcomed an inappropriate audience, Cincinnatus has not found a suitable reader; he must mask his writing until later. It is unfortunate timing, since he is in a state of profound self-awareness, feeling "the rootlet of every hair." His lonesomeness is underlined by the presence of a spider, "official

friend of the jailed” and the absence of any other prisoners, “in such an enormous fortress!” (*ibid*). Later, the jail will assume the metaphorical space of Cincinnatus’ mind, so it is appropriate that he remains its only prisoner. Still, he is twice reminded of the passage of time —“A clock struck ... with **[End Page 66]** the vibrations and reverberations proper to a prison” (*ibid*), “[w]ith banal dreariness the clock struck again” (14)—thus, there is a countdown, even if the exact amount of time remaining is unknown. If the pencil is longer than Cincinnatus’ life, he must hurry to wear it down to the nub.

Cincinnatus’ first spoken line of the novel, “Kind. You. Very,” is followed by the odd parenthetical, “(This still had to be arranged)” (15). As a writer, or a communicator, he has progress to make before he can coherently articulate his thoughts; he has some editing to do. These words are like Nabokov’s famous index cards, only shuffled into the wrong order or missing chunks, like *The Original of Laura*. Cincinnatus begs for a concrete execution time, complaining, “I have in my head many projects that were began and interrupted at various time ... I simply shall not pursue them if the time remaining before my execution is not sufficient for their orderly conclusion” (16; ellipses Nabokov’s), though, really, no project is guaranteed completion before death. Rodrig recites a standard declaration—“Prisoner! In this solemn hour, when all eyes ...”—but quickly interrupts himself, adding, “I think we had better stand” (17). His notion of reading is ceremonial, traditional, and meaningless; he gets halfway through a sentence before realizing even its most surface significance and corrects his appearance accordingly, just as M’sieur Pierre seems to assemble his photohoroscope haphazardly and without attention to detail. Roland Barthes notes in *Camera Lucida* that functions are really a form of alibi (28). Likewise, Rodrig is not accountable, either legally or intellectually, for his actions while following procedures. He has given his prisoner good food and tobacco—that is, sensual and not intellectual or emotional satisfaction—and concludes, “I shall therefore be glad to devote all possible attention to any expression of thy gratitude, preferably, however, in written form and on one side of the sheet” (17), the “thy” another archaic move that distances Cincinnatus, Rodrig, and the reader from the meaning of Rodrig’s text. Furthermore, our protagonist is already being censored. His writing, like a junior high composition assignment, is restricted and its answers already established—no better than the prompt, **[End Page 67]** “Why is America the greatest country in the world?” Call it the revenge of the poor reader.

Cincinnatus recalls his trial, a phantasmagoric scene populated by conformity that confirms the legal suppression of creativity in his world even when creative tools are generously employed: both the prosecutor and the defense council wear makeup, for the law dictates they should be “uterine twins” (21) but, as that is not always possible, makeup is used. The judge tells the convicted, “[Y]ou will be made to don the red tophat,” an unexplained idiom whose meaning is nonetheless “known to every schoolboy” (*ibid*). Cincinnatus has been thrust into a place that is routine to its inhabitants but foreign to us. Eugene Ionesco was inspired to write *The Bald Soprano* after learning English through the Assimil method, listening to

colloquialisms and idioms that sounded ridiculous to the uninitiated ear (**Esplin 137**); the same is happening here, where language is a panoply of gobbledygook, where Nabokov satirizes its glib assumption of meaning despite its consistent failure as a means of communication. The phrase “uterine twins” suggests two people who were born of the same mother, in the same womb, but who do not share the same father. This is the world where even the different are the same, and when they are not, special effects are employed in order for them to *appear* so. Except, of course, for Cincinnatus, who insists on his uniqueness: “I have been fashioned so painstakingly,” he cries, “The curvature of my spine has been calculated so well, so mysteriously” (21–2). (Unlike with Rodrig, his author has crafted him lovingly.) But at this moment, he has neither the words to express this, nor the audience to listen to him, even if he did.⁸ **[End Page 68]**

The next morning, Cincinnatus reads the papers: the “local sheet” *Good Morning Folks* and “the more serious daily” *Voice of the Public* (23). The former has a patronizing title and the latter, with its singular *Voice*, indicates that this world, even if it contains people who *think* like Cincinnatus, is unified in what they *say*. In both papers, the journalists are participants in the events they are reporting: Cincinnatus spots a picture of “a photographer looking out of [his wife] Marthe’s window” and another of “the photographer shooting the façade” (23). Like Nabokov, whose malicious hand intrudes on the narrative of *Beheading*, these men are altering the narrative with their presence. The first is standing in Cincinnatus’ bedroom, indicating that he has slept with Marthe, who has never been shy about her promiscuity. Just as Nabokov cuckolds Cincinnatus with his pen and as M’sieur Pierre imaginatively sleeps with Emmie, the reporter, a supposedly objective presence who is meant to tell *others* the story of Cincinnatus, is cuckolding his protagonist. Here we have a microcosm of *Beheading*, with narrators inserting themselves into the narrative, often to torture the poor man at the center.

Though Cincinnatus “did not crumple the motley newspapers, did not hurl them,” his “double did (the double, the gangrel, 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 . . .)” (25). Admittedly, the narrator assigns a double to each of us—the person filled with *l’esprit de l’escalier*, the one who acts when we are too timid—but the word “gangrel” proves especially important for Cincinnatus. Synonymous with “vagrant,” “drifter,” or, most interestingly, defined as “a child just able to walk,” this is in stark contrast to the imprisoned, the physical Cincinnatus, and yet aptly describes his budding creative abilities, as the novelist can escape to any location imaginable, can drift away from “real” circumstances. When he escapes his beheading at the end of the novel, Cincinnatus is a literary child **[End Page 69]** finally able to walk. Later, the double will step on Rodion’s “attractive Russian countenance” (29), an act of defiance that is not available to the *schlemiel* Cincinnatus.

Cincinnatus' status as an outsider and thus as a potential artist is established early in his life, which Cincinnatus extensively recalls. He "was the son of an unknown transient" (23), only later meeting his mother, Cecilia C., who had conceived him in her teens. When she visits him, several chapters later, he will ask her to tell him again "the legend about my father" and she replies, "Only his voice—I didn't see the face" (133). Cincinnatus himself, like his novel, is a violin in the void, the product of a mysterious voice, an absent mother, and a "legend," the choice of the last word underscoring his fictional creation. Does the faceless voice belong to Nabokov, who, as God has been known to do, impregnated a woman (here, Cecilia) for the purpose of birthing a martyred son? The absence of a physicality but the presence of a voice encourages this kind of comparison, though I mention this not to draw any tired comparisons to Jesus or the New Testament—Nabokov himself "remained completely aloof from 'Christianism,' as he called it" (**Boyd 72**) and "denied any inclination toward Christianity in the occasionally biblical scenes and tropes of his next ten years [1918–1928] of verse" (*ibid* 152)—but to stress the author's God-like presence, his *ever partially revealed* God-like presence in *Beheading*. The use of the last name "C." unfortunately evokes the unrelated heroes of Kafka, but in Nabokov's own, non-referential terms, it has three purposes: it stresses the absence of a history or heritage for Cincinnatus (he may as well have no belly button), his opaqueness to his peers, and his own legendary status. Nabokov uses him as a kind of literary cautionary tale, or as a figure in a fantasy of unknowing, one who doesn't have the same (mimetic) purpose as a character in a nineteenth-century realist novel. As in many stories of creation, Cincinnatus is mythic and allegorical rather than realistic. The fact that "C" is also the first letter of his first name only helps to blur the two together.

Cincinnatus was raised "beyond the Strop River," and perhaps it is **[End Page 70]** the distance from this place that makes his initial art dull instead of sharp. "From his earliest years" Cincinnatus realized he was different. However,

by some strange and happy chance comprehending his danger, [he] carefully managed to conceal a certain peculiarity. He was impervious to the rays of others, and therefore produced when off his guard a bizarre impression, as of a lone dark obstacle in this world of souls transparent to one another; he learned however to feign translucence, employing a complex system of optical illusions, as it were—but he had only to forget himself, to allow a momentary lapse in self control, in the manipulation of cunningly illuminated facets and angles at which he turned his soul, and immediately there was alarm. In the midst of the excitement of a game his coevals would suddenly forsake him, as if they had sensed that his lucid gaze and the azure of his temples were but a crafty deception and that actually Cincinnatus was opaque.

Nabokov, of course, was “a little conjuror” when he was a boy and was ardent in his belief that “all art is deception ... all is deception in that good cheat” (____ **11**). Like his narrator, who confuses the supporting characters in *Beheading*, young Cincinnatus was a haphazard magician, unable to maintain the illusion that he was normal. His artistic creation was his own personality, and in this world, the necessary illusion is not of wonder but of banality. Though we often conceive of art as an act of revelation, of exposure, the author making his thoughts and emotions transparent (i.e. Proust, an indefatigable chronicler of his interior), here a more interesting, but dangerous, move would be to conceal. In Nabokovian terms, this is what an author does, he is a magician whose ostensible or partial absence in the structure of the novel is a sign of virtuosity. Cincinnatus’s narrator and, for the time being Cincinnatus, are sloppy creators and their inability to hide their indifference (in the narrator’s case) or their opaqueness (in Cincinnatus’) is a weakness, like a film director who allows the boom mike to float lazily in and out of frame. Here, the audience desires to be lost in the card trick—one may look but never see when the performer is palming **[End Page 71]** cards or stuffing them up his sleeves—and Cincinnatus’ “coevals,” once they realize they are dealing with a magician, abandon him. Crucially, this is how Cincinnatus’ audience differs from Nabokov’s: we delight when the magician offers us a knowing wink, when he pretends to show us what is behind or when he “slips,” when he deliberately puts the boom mike in the frame—this is all part of the game. But in the world of *Beheading*, there is only room for crypto-magicians. At this early stage, we have a failure of both the performer and his audience: Cincinnatus is an inexperienced conjuror, his “readers” unable to engage with the conjuring act altogether. Later, in becoming a Nabokovian writer, he can *deliberately* show his hand, all the while hiding from the ostensibly knowing reader that he has half a dozen other hands yet to be played: the “momentary lapse,” then, becomes feigned and is itself part of the trick. The “lone dark obstacle” is also important, since here and elsewhere it is associated with ignorance, light with knowledge. But Nabokov fiddles with these basic metaphors, and later Cincinnatus will want his language to allow him to share both the “heat” and the “shadow” (93) of his experience; his writing will account for the range of human consciousness and transcend the tired binary of dark obstacles and immediately accessible transparency, just as Delaland’s *Shadow Discourse* illuminates from the darkness, as the title suggests.

In Cincinnatus’ moments of exposure, his teacher “would gather up all the reserves of skin around his eyes [and] gaze at him for a long while.” Returning to his shell, Cincinnatus would remove himself to a “safe place.” However, “the safe places became ever fewer: the solicitous sunshine of public concern penetrated everywhere, and the peephole in the door was placed in such a way that in the whole cell there was not a single point that the observer on the other side of the door could not pierce with his gaze” (24–25). Here, Nabokov evokes the Panopticon and Foucault’s writing on the building design prove useful: “They are like so many cages, so many small theaters, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible ... it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its function—to enclose, to deprive of light, and to hide—it preserves only the **[End Page 72]** first and eliminates the other

two ... Visibility is a trap” (200; emphasis added). The teacher’s “reserves of skin” suggest crow’s feet from a lifetime of watching, of squinting. This is a culture obsessed with viewing others, but one that expects every small theater and every actor to put on the same show. Aware of this, Cincinnatus does not hurl the newspapers but calmly sets them aside and tries to eat a bit of chocolate, but “the brown skim ... became shriveled scum on his lips” (25). He is not ready to write, to produce, nor is he ready to read, to consume as he will later with the photojournalism magazine.

Continuing his recollection, Cincinnatus remembers that others understood each other at the first word, since they had no words that would end in an unexpected way, perhaps in some archaic letter, an upsilamba, becoming a bird or a catapult with wondrous consequences. In the dusty little museum on Second Boulevard, where they used to take him as a child, and where he himself would later take his charges, there was a collection of rare, marvelous objects, but all the townsmen except Cincinnatus found them just as limited and transparent as they did each other. *That which does not have a name does not exist.* Unfortunately everything had a name.

(26)

Thirty years after the publication of *Beheading*, Nabokov would answer Edmund Wilson’s accusation that he had an “addiction to rare and unfamiliar words” by responding that he “may have rare and unfamiliar things to convey” (____**250**). “Poor little Cincinnatus” (65), who exists in a world without Nabokov’s beloved multi-volume dictionary and is stuck with his detested, abridged, pocket version, cannot articulate rare and unfamiliar things. The “upsilamba” he fantasizes about appears to be a Nabokovian invention, a combination of the eleventh letter of the Greek alphabet, Lambda, and the twentieth, Upsilon, suggesting a condensed letter or diacritic that traverses almost half of the letters available to the Greeks. Greek art is later evoked when Cincinnatus writes of “the ancient, **[End Page 73]** inborn art of writing [which] is long since forgotten—forgotten are the days when it needed no schooling, but ignited and blazed like a forest fire” (93). Cincinnatus would have found a cozy home in that world of Western drama and literature, a world in which everything was being named, in which even the simplest of words had rare and unfamiliar things to convey. Here, unfortunately, he is left with a language that is lacking.⁹ Significantly, Nabokov himself emphasizes the line, “*That which does not have a name does not exist,*” which not only reminds us that Cincinnatus exists at the discretion of the narrator—we must always be reminded that he is a fictional creation, only present in our minds because he has been named—but also, bearing just a single letter for a patronymic, that he only partially exists at that; without his voice, he is an incomplete figure.

Punctuating this sorry realization, Cincinnatus reads three unfinished sentences on the wall: “Nameless existence, intangible substance,” “Perpetual name-day celebrants, you can just...” and “Note that when they address you ...” their erased endings explained by a warning: “I will

collect fines from writers,” signed in “clumsy, childish letters” by the director of the prison (26). But who has written these lines, in a prison that has only one occupant and indeed seems built just for Cincinnatus? Are these projected variations of his own helpless thoughts, unfinished because, as the narrator noted earlier, they still have to be arranged? “Perpetual name-day celebrants” mocks Cincinnatus for his own namelessness—or his *current* namelessness, before he has written his own narrative—and “Note when they address you” emphasizes the distinction between identification and self-identification, significant because Cincinnatus makes out “yet another line, an ancient and enigmatic one: ‘Measure me while I live—after it will be too late,’ ” and he replies, “In any case I have been measured” (*ibid*). Cincinnatus *has* been measured (by both Nabokov and his lazy narrator) but this is not quite the story that he deserves. His presence on **[End Page 74]** earth has been written in clumsy, childish letters (which, more literally, are an indication of the near-illiteracy of his peers); before the beheading, he must pick up the pencil himself.

As a child, Cincinnatus built “rag dolls for schoolgirls” of famous Russian authors: Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Dobrolyubov “in spectacles without lenses” (27). Philip Roth once said, “To become a celebrity is to become a brand name. There is Ivory soap, Rice Krispies, and Philip Roth. Ivory is the soap that floats; Rice Krispies the breakfast cereal that goes snap-crackle-pop; Philip Roth the Jew who masturbates with a piece of liver” (_____ **120**). Here, too, great writers have been drained of their meaning and repackaged as emblems of the state instead of complex thinkers; appropriately, Dobrolyubov, a revolutionary democrat, is left unable to read even his own work. But Cincinnatus’ genuine love for these writers is interrupted when he meets Marthe, his future wife, who calls him “Cincinnati”—even his lover cannot get his name right and reduces it to a unloving, diminutive nickname. Furthermore, neither of Marthe’s children are his: “The boy was lame and evil-tempered, the girl dull, obese and nearly blind” (31)—i.e., the girl not only lacks a Third Eye, but she barely has her first two. Cincinnatus’ only progeny will be his work.

Trapped in his cell, he waxes poetic: “And so began those rapturous wanderings in the very, very spacious (so much so that even the hills in the distance would be hazy from the ecstasy of their remoteness) Tamara Gardens, where, for no reason, the willows weep into three brooks, and the brooks, in three cascades, each with its own small rainbow, tumble into the lake, where a swan floats arm in arm with its reflection ... If only one could see from here—at least the treetops, at least the distant range of hills” (27–28). Cincinnatus’ mistake is that one *can* see Tamara Gardens from the prison, if only through imagination and some rather striking, well-written memories. Still not the writer he will become, Cincinnatus is too literal, **[End Page 75]** trying vainly to peek through the barred windows of his cell.¹⁰ He should know better, since the swan in this passage both is and is not alone—the shadow poetically providing it with a companion. His creativity, obviously feeling “the prefatory glow [of inspiration]” (_____ **309**), could do the same.

Rodion enters the cell for no reason other than to sing in his bass-baritone, “having assumed the imitation-jaunty pose of operatic rakes in the tavern scene” (29). He is, like all supporting players in *Beheading*, a stock character—here compounded, since he is a stock character playing a stock character, and one whose fakery suggests a carefree atmosphere absent in the prison. He moves the table, which makes a “violinlike sound” (*ibid*), linking Cincinnatus’ writing desk to Nabokov’s own effort as the author of a “violin in a void.” Appropriately, when Cincinnatus tries to move the table, unlike Rodion, he finds that “the legs had been bolted down for ages” (30). Ripping his artistic endeavor from the manacles of cliché, from those *opera buffa* tropes that have dominated his world, will be a difficult task. Twice in this scene the word “ancient” is used, first to describe the final line Cincinnatus reads —“Measure me while I live” (26)—and second in reference to the books Cincinnatus idly laps up in the Floating Library while demeaning them in his work as an assembler of rag dolls. Like Homer or Milton evoking the muse, Cincinnatus must call out to his predecessors, must clear the air before his own aesthetic renaissance.

A sudden flight of fancy overtakes him, and for the first time since childhood he conflates creativity with material change, an important stage in his artistic development: “He took off his head like a toupee, took off his collarbones like shoulder straps, took off his rib cage like a hauberk ... What was left of him gradually dissolved, hardly coloring the air” (32). He is beginning to explore the possibilities of fiction, and the use of the simile “like a toupee” distances his honesty from Rodrig’s false, “perfect toupee.” **[End Page 76]** But, when “fully immersed in his secret *medium* ... The iron thunderclap of the bolt resounded, and Cincinnatus instantly grew all that he had cast off” (32–33), for Rodion has reentered his cell. Nevertheless, he begins to transcribe his thoughts, a series of ellipses indicating that his writing has not yet become fluid, that he is still unable to translate ideas into fiction. He asks, rhetorically, “But how can these ruminations help my anguish?” and then continues, vaguely, “Oh, my anguish—what shall I do with you, with myself? ... [W]ell, why don’t you tell me, do tell me—but no, you have me die anew every morning” (121). Who is he addressing here? His narrator? Nabokov? He admits, “I am no hero anyway,” a statement that can be read as an admission of cowardice, but more likely affirms his self-conscious anti-heroism; it is a tepid declaration of war against the writer who is treating him so miserably. In the surreal Chuck Jones cartoon “Duck Amuck,” the eponymous Daffy Duck battles with his animator, a “slop artist” who does not listen to reason, who will not negotiate, and who unleashes a barrage of plane crashes, anvils, and exploding artillery shells into the path of his character. The same is going on here, except that Cincinnatus is not as aggressive as his cartoon kindred spirit. Furthermore, Daffy Duck does not have a pen; Cincinnatus realizes his pencil is his salvation.

“On the other hand,” he keeps writing, “were I to know, I could perform ... a short work ... a record of verified thoughts ... Some day someone would read it and would suddenly feel just as if he had awakened for the first time in a strange country. What I mean to say is that I would make him suddenly burst into tears of joy, his eyes would melt, and, after he experiences this,

the world will seem to him cleaner, fresher” (51-2; ellipses Nabokov’s). The choice of the word “perform” is curious, and it links the theatrics of his world with his own artistic endeavors; it makes his writing material instead of intangible, meaning they could have real-world (or, more accurately, fictional-world) consequences. Were he to find the right readers, he could escape from Nabokov’s cruelty and become a liberated artist in his own right, living in a utopic (as compared to his dystopic) **[End Page 77]** universe. This is in great contrast to most of the books he is exposed to in prison, tedious volumes that parrot the party line and whose “sickle-shaped letters ... reminiscent of the inscriptions of museum daggers” (125) point to the reverse, deadly, but equally real ends that art can lead one to—as well as kindling the image of the Soviet Union, for Nabokov the ultimate artistically repressive state. Cincinnatus’ mention of the reader can obviously be seen as a desire for his audience to have the same experience with his work that he had, temporarily, with the magazine. But I would suggest that *he* is the reader he is writing about, that the situation mentioned is literal instead of metaphoric. For in finding his voice, in preparing his artistic career and stumbling onto an intelligent readership, Cincinnatus can quite literally wake up in a strange world, one that is cleaner and fresher than the one of his prison cell.

Cincinnatus begins to mark a separation between himself and his creator. “I am the one among you who is alive,” Cincinnatus writes, then relates a story: “Once, when I was a child, on a distant school excursion, when I had got separated from the others—although I may have dreamt it—I found myself, under the sultry sun of midday, in a drowsy little town ... [when a man] at last got up to help me find my way, his blue shadow on the wall did not immediately follow him” (52). Odd that this letter, addressed to his creator—either the narrator or Nabokov—would involve a story that presumably both Nabokov and the narrator would already be familiar with—except, perhaps, that this invention of Cincinnatus’ marks a distinct artistic voice and therefore a kind of separation from his creators; though Nabokov insists that his characters never end up “taking over and dictating the course of his novels” (**95**), here Cincinnatus seems to be stretching his legs in a space where his author has less control. The shadow, not conforming to the laws of physics, or even to the internal laws of a realistic novel, share the drowsiness of the town—Cincinnatus’ fictional consciousness is beginning to wake up.

“[B]ut here is what I want to express: between his movement and the movement of the laggard shadow—that second, that syncope—there is the **[End Page 78]** rare kind of time in which I live—the pause, the hiatus, when the heart is like a feather” (53). The “syncope,” of course, is Nabokov’s, the moment when he is briefly absent in his speech, and the omission provides space for Cincinnatus’ freedom. He would also like to write about “the invisible umbilical cord that joins this world to something” (*ibid*)—that is, the cord that joins an author to his subject. “And I’m wrong when I keep repeating that there is no refuge in the world for

me. There is! I'll find it! A lush ravine in the desert! A patch of snow in the shadow of an alpine crag!" (*ibid*). These are the fantasized crevices in which the careless narrator may lose Cincinnatus, allowing him to practice his art freely.

The next morning, Cincinnatus studies a drawing made by Emmie: "a set of pictures, forming (as it had seemed to Cincinnatus yesterday) a coherent narrative, a promise, a sample of phantasy." For him, it is an escape. He sees "an eyeless (hence, sleeping) jailer," a hand reaching for a key ring, and "the form of a plan" (61). Of course, he is projecting, and quickly admits, "this was only self-deception" (62), for his salvation will not come through the *interpretation* of art but through its *creation*. Still, his reading of the pictures proves telling. He is rendered with "commas on his head instead of hair" (61)—the use of the punctuation mark indicating that he must become a writer himself but that his thinking must cohere, that he must abandon his sketchy sentences connected by ellipses and produce a work that is fluidly linked with commas, and that his physical body is beginning to imitate his intellectual fancy. Furthermore, beyond the open door of the cell he makes out "something looking like a bird's spur" (*ibid*). As Shapiro points out in *Delicate Markers*, Nabokov was extremely self-conscious about his *nom de plume*, V. Sirin (9–29), which was used at the time of *Beheading's* writing. The "Sirin" is, among other things, a mythical Russian bird with the head and chest of a woman and the body of an owl. This is a sly hint to Cincinnatus from Nabokov that he must take up the pen and find his own "Sirin" in order to achieve salvation.

"Trying to think of a way to enliven the listless hours" (62), he sits down at the desk, which is now "a little wobbly" instead of bolted down—our **[End Page 79]** "poor little Cincinnatus" is on his way. His writing is cleaner now—eight ellipses in two and a half pages, compared to twenty-one in roughly the same amount of space last time (next time, there will be twenty ellipses in eight and a half pages). He composes a letter, which at first appears to be addressed to Marthe, but whose addressee quickly becomes confused: "We used to go to the workshops by two different staircases ... but would meet on the penultimate landing. No longer can I conjure Marthe as she was when I first met her, but I can recall having noticed at once that she opens her mouth a little an instant before laughing, and the round hazel eyes, and the coral earrings—oh, how I should like to reproduce her as she was, all new and still solid" (62–3). He continues to recall her infidelities, and no doubt by this point the letter does not have any specific intended reader, except the general reader, the one who shares "the bliss, the felicity of a phrase" with the author (___ **40**).

Later, in the paragraph that leads into Chapter Eight, his task becomes more urgent. Cincinnatus leans over a book: "A drop had fallen on the page. Through the drop several letters turned from brevier into pica, having swollen as if a reading glass were lying over them" (88). In other words, the universe is emphasizing his need to write by magnifying the text before him; time is running out. Furthermore, the drop of water, while briefly enlarging the text, will also ultimately destroy or at least fray the paper it is printed on, underlining the limited

amount of time he has to produce his writing. Incidentally, his pencil has now “lost more than a third of its length” (89), though if we count the pages, Cincinnatus is well over a third into *Beheading*, meaning that Nabokov does not abide by the same rules as the books his protagonist reads in prison. We are told, “There are some who sharpen a pencil towards themselves, as if they were peeling a potato, and there are others who slice away from themselves, as though whittling a stick ... Rodion was of the latter number” (*ibid*; ellipsis Nabokov’s). Presumably, Cincinnatus belongs to the former category, one who directs the knife inwards, who, in writing, pushes the blade into his heart. **[End Page 80]**

The letter he writes is furious, frenetic, and requires quite careful parsing. Here Cincinnatus is engaging both with himself and his future reader. He begins with “a strange sensation [I had] last night—and it was not the first time—: I am taking off layer after layer, until at last ... I do not know how to describe it, but I know this: through the process of gradual divestment I reach the final, indivisible, firm, radiant point, and this point says: I am!” (90; ellipsis Nabokov’s). This sentence recalls the earlier experience in which Cincinnatus took off his head like a toupee but was interrupted before the transformation was complete. “This painted life” (92) necessitates stripping—he must reach his inner quark, a point that is so purely his own that it cannot be divided. Though he doesn’t have the language or the proper frame of mind yet—“I mean much more besides, but lack of writing skill, haste, excitement, weakness...” (91)—he senses “with my criminal intuition how words are combined” (93) and will, unlike Rodrig, “evolve a third eye on the back of my neck, between my brittle vertebrae” (92), his weak spine suggesting an inverse relationship between strength of body and strength of mind—in the end, the ultimate destruction of his body (decapitation) will result in intellectual liberation; furthermore, Cincinnatus’ earlier notion that “[t]he curvature of my spine has been calculated so well, so mysteriously” suggests that its disintegration is significant. Indeed, well does he remember the day “when I first understood that things which to me had seemed natural were actually forbidden, impossible, that any thought of them was criminal,” because it was the day where he “just learned how to make letters” (96). Writing, any sort of expression beyond regurgitating old phrases, is unacceptable. Yet he knows that “what we call dreams is semi-reality” (92) and insists, “It exists, my dream world, it must exist, since, surely there must be an original of the clumsy copy” (93). “I myself picture all this so clearly,” he writes in frustration, “but you are not I, and therein lies the irreparable calamity.” At this moment he still believes that only *he* can read himself, that **[End Page 81]** consciousness is a prison in which one can never truly understand his senses, affections, and passions.¹¹ What he desires is “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” (*ibid*). Though he is literally writing about juxtaposition—a commonplace word taking on new and interesting meaning by appearing next to another commonplace but unexpected word—it is in fact *his* neighbor (his reader) with whom he would like share his sheen, heat, and shadow. And though he believes he isn’t there yet, the irony is that Cincinnatus in fact *does* have a reader—actually, several of them: Nabokov, who is

no less a member of the audience for having written him, Nabokov's narrator, and us. The violin is *not* playing a void, and the "music that once used to be extracted from a monstrous pianoforte, music that would nimbly ripple or suddenly hack the world into great, gleaming blocks" (*ibid*), that is, *his* music, will soon destroy the gallows meant to silence his playing, while it meanwhile destroys those gallows in our estimation by undermining their meaning.

Evoking Plato's allegory of the cave, Cincinnatus predicts his failed beheading, the moment when he will emerge from a world of shadows and see reality (which, in his case, are dreams) fully and for the first time—except, instead of shadows, he employs a different metaphor: "there shines the mirror that now and then sends a chance reflection here" (94; emphasis Nabokov's), something far grander than the "hand-mirrors" he rails against when thinking about women whose "faces were indistinct" (21); Marthe herself is occasionally described with a hand mirror, and Cincinnatus, while imprisoned, is given a paltry pocket mirror, an insult to the one he will eventually stand before. In this new world, "time takes shape according to one's pleasure, like a figured rug whose folds can be gathered in such a way that two designs will meet—and the rug is once again smoothed out, and **[End Page 82]** you live on, or else superimpose the next image on the last, endlessly, endlessly" (94). "Two designs will meet" is an important phrase, as Cincinnatus uses this as shorthand for creation twice in *Beheading*. First, in Chapter Five, when he idealizes a relationship with Marthe in which "[we] turn ourselves in such a way that we form one pattern, and solve the puzzle: draw a line from point A to point B ... we shall connect the points, draw the line, and you and I shall form that unique design for which I yearn" (60)—but such a union with Marthe is impossible. Later, in Chapter Eleven, this time alone, he "lay down on the cot and, turning toward the wall, for a long, long time helped patterns form on it" (124)—as Langen notes, he "gains the ability to bring seemingly isolated elements into a structure" (62). As an artist, he will be able to revise endlessly by superimposing one image over another, folding the rug of his experience into a coherent narrative. He has done this at least once before—in childhood, embarrassed to be left out of a game and fleeing from "the senior educator," he "stepped straight from the window sill onto the elastic air and—feeling nothing more than a half-sensation of bare-footedness (even though I had shoes on)—slowly and quite naturally strode forward" (97). His ability to manipulate space, then, already exists; he has just been held back by "bookish words" (95) and "corpses of strangled words, like hanged men ... evening silhouettes of gammas and gerunds, gallow crows" (90; ellipsis Nabokov's). But is he not ready? His magical transformation of grammar, of letters into living creatures should be evidence enough that he is truly a writer, that he is ready to express himself "in defiance of all the world's muteness" (91). Importantly, he claims to prefer the hangman to the axman—for the hangman can only *attempt* to strangle words, while the axman, in taking his life, would most certainly suffocate his language. Nabokov may also be referring to the pencil and paper word game "Hangman" (sometimes called "Gallows") in which one player thinks of a word and the other tries to guess it by picking

letters, each wrong letter resulting in his being one step closer to the gallows. What better metaphor for Cincinnatus, who has to work against time to discover his own letters before he faces the hangman? **[End Page 83]**

Considering his place as an author, he supposes, “Perhaps [I am] as a citizen of the next century” (90), thereby affirming his belief in the notion that art succeeds physical death—after all, the end is near: he has been “chewing the pencil through to the lead” (91). Echoing his thoughts about the author of *Quercus*, he writes, “I think I have caught my prey” (94; emphasis added), finally realizing that his relationship to Nabokov is comparable to the relationship between his (future) characters and he. But, ultimately, he has no audience: “there is in the world not a single human who can speak my language; or, more simply, not a single human who can speak; or, even more simply, not a single human; I must think only of myself, of that force which urges me to express myself” (95). But is this a problem? Nabokov claims, “I’m all for the ivory tower, and for writing to please on reader alone” (___**37**)—and what if that reader is also the author, playing a violin in the void? In his preface to *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi writes, “The need to tell our story to ‘the rest,’ to make ‘the rest’ participate in it, had taken on for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs. The book was written to satisfy this need: first and foremost, therefore, *as an interior liberation*” (9; emphasis added). Likewise, Cincinnatus, the ultimate survivor of another, albeit less horrific, totalitarian state, writes first for his interior liberation—and later, in the next century, perhaps, for others. Even so, we are here with him, reading his writing.

“I am here through an error,” Cincinnatus writes. Beginning to become aware of Nabokov’s meddling presence, he continues, “not in this prison, specifically—but in this whole terrible, striped world; a world which seems not a bad example of amateur craftsmanship” (91).¹² Like Plato’s philosopher freed from the cave, he is ready to squash Nabokov’s shadows **[End Page 84]** and emerge into reality, recognizing that he has had this ability for some time: “How I wriggled out, slippery, naked! Yes, from a realm forbidden and inaccessible to others, yes. I know something, yes” (90), the repetition of the word “yes” creating a similar, liberating, life-affirming effect that Joyce employed thirteen years earlier with Molly Bloom. Grasping at the air, the truth on the tip of his brain, like an incantation he writes, “I knew without knowing, I knew without wonder, I knew as one knows oneself, I knew what it is impossible to know—and, I would say, I knew it even more clearly than I do now” (95), the use of the tetracolon demonstrating that he is becoming a sharper, more talented writer, albeit one who has replaced ellipses with comma splices. The chapter ends with Cincinnatus recalling the time he stepped out of a window and defied the laws of gravity—“I saw below me, like pale daisies, the upturned faces of the stupefied children” (97)—and at the end of the memory, he turns to the window to see “his hairy arm extended in malevolent amazement” (*ibid*). This arm ostensibly belongs to the “senior educator” who had followed him, though the memory is cut short: “(Here, unfortunately, the light in the cell went out—Rodion always turned it off exactly at

ten)” (*ibid*). Nabokov’s creation is reaching his epiphany too early, and the author forces the elements to block any further progress. The hairy arm belongs just as much to Nabokov as it does to the philistine senior educator. “Not yet,” he seems to be saying to his precocious protagonist.

Having found his voice, and nearing his beheading, Cincinnatus begins to make contact with “that direction,” and Chapter Thirteen opens with strange, untraceable noises, while the shift to the first person indicates Cincinnatus briefly seizing control of the narrative:

He waited and waited, and now, at last, in the stillest hour of night, the sounds got busy once again. Alone in the dark, Cincinnatus smiled. I am quite willing to admit that they are also a deception but right now I believe in them so much that I infect them with truth ... they no longer were hacking away blindly; how [End Page 85] could one doubt their approaching, advancing movement? How modest they were! How intelligent! How mysteriously calculating and insistent! ... [W]hatever it was, he knew that someone, somehow, was cutting a passage.

(138)

Chapter Twelve likewise begins with “a muted tapping” (127), Chapter Fourteen with the sounds “still closer” (147), and Chapter Fifteen with their making “the transition from background to foreground” (157).¹³ Cincinnatus “picked up the submissive chair and brought it down hard, first on the floor, then several times on the wall, trying at least by means of rhythm, to impart meaning to his pounding. And, in fact, the one who was tunneling through the night first paused, as if trying to decide whether the answering blows were friendly or not, and suddenly renewed his labors with such a jubilantly animated sound that Cincinnatus was certain his response had been understood” (139). This chair has consistently and quietly been established as a tool of Cincinnatus’ liberation: earlier, he placed it on top of the table and stood on it in an attempt to see through the window but could glimpse only “the hot sky with a few white hairs thinly combed back” (28), the view’s baldness an emblem of its vapidness which links it to Rodrig’s bare skull; while standing on it on his tiptoes, he spies an inscription: “You cannot see anything. I tried too” (29); later, while once again standing on top of the chair, he is described as a “fledgling crow on a stump ... motionlessly gazing up at the beggarly ration of sky” (49). This crow, certainly, is no Sirin. Finally, the chair plays the part of a pencil, a loud instrument whose music can be heard by the others beyond the world of cheap photohoroscopes. Furthermore, he is learning that by infecting deception with truth—the choice of the word *infect* is important, since here [End Page 86] the truth is anathema—he can create his own reality; these are the thoughts of not a fledgling crow but of a fledgling, promising conjuror.

The next day, Emmie appears in his cell. He asks her again when he will die and she replies, “Tomorrow,” but quickly adds, “No, I’ll rescue you” (148). These childish notions are almost immediately undermined by Emmie dancing like a ballerina and speaking about her upcoming school year, the first action indicating she will indeed fit perfectly into the cardboard life predicted by the photohoroscope that dresses her in tights and a tutu and that she is therefore an unreliable accomplice. And just as he projected his fantasies on her earlier drawing, Cincinnatus wishfully behaves as if this child’s gibberish means anything—“I’m counting on this very much” (150), he says to himself. But when he asks her to tell him how she will do it, she provides nothing: “[S]he made a hot, moist and utterly unintelligible noise in his ear” (149). Drifting off to sleep, “he could feel her climbing over him, and then it seemed dimly to him that she or someone else was folding some shiny fabric, taking it by the corners and folding, and stroking it with the palm, and folding it again” (150). The nearly unconscious Cincinnatus seems unable to connect this to a previous thought of his when, while speaking with M’sieur Pierre, he asks, “But what if this is only deception, *a fold of fabric mimicking a human face*” (114; emphasis added). Emmie is a deception, and one that cannot be infected with truth.

On the day of his execution, Cincinnatus writes for the last time in this world. “Everything has fallen into place,” he begins optimistically, but continues, “that is, everything has duped me—all of this theatrical, pathetic stuff—the promises of a volatile maiden, a mother’s moist gaze, the knocking on the wall, a neighbor’s friendliness, and, finally, those hills which broke out in a deadly rash” (204–5). He is both right and wrong: everything *has* fallen into place, but he was not duped by the knocking on the wall; soon, whoever or whatever was burrowing its way into his life will lead him out of it. “Oh, if only I had known that I was yet to remain here for such a long time ... my soul would have surrounded itself with a **[End Page 87]** structure of words” (205)—that is, if he had learned sooner that he could use language as a shield against the dangerous banality of his peers, that he could build his own “enormous fortress” and thus free himself from “this world of souls transparent to one another”—“[N]ow, when I am hardened, when I am almost fearless of...” (*ibid*), but this thought is cut off by the end of the page. He writes “death” on the next sheet of paper, but crosses it out, looking for something more precise: *execution*, perhaps, *pain*, or *parting*. Nabokov was well aware of the trickiness of this word and its synonyms: in his Foreword, he notes that *Invitation to an Execution* would be the most appropriate translation of the title, if not for the “unpleasant duplication of the suffix,” while, in Russian, *Priglasenie na otsechenie golovi* (*Invitation to a Decapitation*) would have been best had he not “been stopped by a similar stutter” (5). At one point, he even considered calling it *Welcome to the Block* “with its splendidly gruesome double entendre,” but apparently dropped the idea (_____ **276**). His protagonist, too, learns that language is not the most malleable of mistresses, and leaves the writing untouched, so the single crossed out word is his last. This is more fitting than he can know, since in seventeen pages he will appear to die before Nabokov crosses out—or rewrites—*those* words.

Now a true artist, Cincinnatus is ready for his execution and to transition into the afterlife of good readers. M'sieur Pierre, Rodrig, and Roman enter his cell to lead him to his beheading, though the latter two “without any makeup, without padding and without wigs” (207) are unrecognizable; M'sieur Pierre reads a list of “à la carte” last wishes, but erupts in fury when he realizes that “composing an address to the director expressing ... expressing gratitude for his considerate ...” (208; ellipses Nabokov's) has been added without permission. An indefatigable professional, he is outraged that his two companions have been improvising or fooling around, as if they were taking off their costumes and throwing away the script—and right when the performance is about to reach its climax! They are like two high school students not fully invested in the spring play. **[End Page 88]**

However, this is not outrageous because of its content—which fully conforms in spirit with Rodrig's earlier allowance that Cincinnatus may write “expression of thy gratitude, preferably, however, in written form and on one side of the sheet”—but because it has not been previously approved; therefore, being read for the first time, its meaning is apparent and understood yet still confusing. M'sieur Pierre has no time for such things, only talking points and ceremonies that have been repeated into a meaninglessness which thereby expedite the procedures. “The public idolizes you,” Roman says apologetically, “We beseech you, be calm, maestro ... Won't the pet of women, the darling of everyone, put aside that wrathful expression for the smile with which he is wont to drive to distraction...” (209). Roman has chosen his words well: calling the man with the “comic falsetto” (207) a “maestro” is just the right kind of flattering exaggeration, while invoking the public's idolization and M'sieur Pierre's wrath promotes his superior to the status of deity when, on Nabokov's terms, nothing could be further from the truth. M'sieur Pierre doesn't interpret like a conductor but performs a hack role, the juvenile; he doesn't create, he regurgitates.

Cincinnatus asks to “finish writing something,” but “suddenly understood that everything had in fact been written already.” He has finally wholly realized that he is a character in a novel, that the ending by Nabokov will greet him in only a few pages. “I don't understand what he is saying,” says M'sieur Pierre, “Perhaps someone understands, but I don't,” a reference to Nabokov's good readers. Instead, Cincinnatus is granted three minutes of “intermission” (209), and Rodrig begins cleaning out his cell with a broom. “First of all, with the end of the broom, he knocked out the whole grating in the recess of the window; there came a distant, feeble ‘hurrah,’ as if from an abyss, and a gust of fresh air entered the cell—the sheets of paper flew off the table, and Rodrig scuffed them into a corner” (210). This feeble hurrah no doubt originates from beyond the fourth wall—the audience dutifully applauding during Cincinnatus' intermission—and, unsurprisingly, all of his writing is swept up with the **[End Page 89]** rest of the trash, the sum total of his intellectual work disposed of in a single sentence which is buried in the middle of the paragraph. Rodrig tries to pull out the drawer of the table: “[He] tugged with all his strength, budged it, and the table split in two” (210–11) while “[p]laster began to fall from the ceiling. A crack described a torturous course across the wall. The cell, no longer

needed, was quite obviously disintegrating” (211). Cincinnatus’ “violinlike” table cannot be moved by automannequins like Rodrig and has been smashed, indicating his work will no longer be that screeching “violin in a void” but an explosive orchestra whose music even reaches anti-intellectuals like M’sieur Pierre, his chair responding by emitting a “plaintive sound” and causing him to nearly drop his watch. That awful instrument of measurement, here only to count down Cincinnatus’ life, is at least momentarily disrupted. The stage is falling apart, and he exits: “Cincinnatus, trying not to brush against anyone or anything, placing his feet as if he were walking on bare, sloping ice, finally made his way out of the cell, which in fact was no longer there” (*ibid*). Having served its narrative purpose—and with Nabokov no longer directing our mind’s eye there—the prison has indeed *literally* disappeared, thus underlining the power of our imagination. And Cincinnatus, who began “like a man who has dreamt that he is walking on water only to have sudden doubt,” has now earned some confidence, walking on ice if not yet water.

The narrator has become, like Rodrig and Roman, bored with his job: the fortress “already stood quite poorly, the perspective was disorganized, something had come loose and dangled” (215), the clouds “moved jerkily across the whole sky,” the latter observation followed oddly by, “I think the same ones pass over and over again, I think there are only three kinds, I think it is all stage-setting, with a suspicious green tinge” (218). These three thoughts are not attributed to Cincinnatus, but seem to be his as well as the narrator’s, who idly notices that the props are scant and cheaply manufactured. The color green is associated with many of this world’s falsenesses, from the “disappointingly fallacious” (“**Nabokov and Pellico**” 60) Tamara Gardens, that “green turfy tamarack park” (19) and its [End Page 90] “bright green park bench” (21), to the “green armchair with an antimacassar” (167) that the director asks Cincinnatus to sit in, using a fruit knife as a pointer—fruit, as has already been noted, acting as a recurring reminder of poor readers. But most recently, it recalls M’sieur Pierre, whose “pea-green hunting habit” (207) and “pea-green hat” (214) provide the most garish articles of his costume. Presumably, the readers in this world either do not notice the paltry props or simply do not care.

“By myself,” Cincinnatus says five times in response to commands given to him by M’sieur Pierre, Rodrig, and Roman, affirming that he is the only one here who will, like the philosopher in Plato’s cave, walk out into the daylight. He sees “the shadow of his [M’sieur Pierre’s] swing” (222) but the narrator never mentions the ax that has been anticipated for the entire novel: Cincinnatus has won this game of Hangman; the implement of execution has become irrelevant. By now we are well aware that a shadow does not necessarily reflect reality—whether it is the swan whose reflection provides it with a companion or the man whose shadow does not immediately follow him—and therefore Cincinnatus is able to manipulate physical laws with the ease of God. Further, we recall that the *Shadow Discourse* has informed us that we are mad to think ourselves mortal. “[B]ut then suffusing him with joy, he reflected: why am I here? Why am I lying like this? And, having asked himself these simple questions, he

answered them by getting up and looking around” (*ibid*). A vomiting librarian provides some ambiguity: is he disgusted by the brutality of the execution, or by its failure? Like the word death, which is both present and absent on Cincinnatus’ paper, our protagonist seems to have died and been born in the same scene—thus, both answers are correct.

A Gulliver in Lilliput, Cincinnatus is confronted with “Roman, who was now many times smaller” (222–3) and “the tiny executioner” (223). He has made the full transformation into author and, like Nabokov, can treat these philistines like galley slaves. He brushes Roman aside and makes “his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him” (*ibid*). He has finally triumphed over the prison of consciousness, **[End Page 91]** discovering an audience that is not *alike* but *akin* to him. That is, they are his family. Nabokov was never fond of interpretations of his work that did not align with his own—he often prefaced his novels by pointing out clever tricks that had not been observed by previous readers or by dismissing readings which were absolutely wrong. Furthermore, he saw family as a means of overcoming the gap between consciousnesses: “in love, and especially faithful married love ... behind the barrier of privacy two people can afford to open themselves in complete intimacy and trust” (**Boyd 283**). These kin are a utopic fantasy: they are *other* enough to appreciate the work of an author but *still so similar* that they wholly understand him. It’s not an ivory tower, but an ivory castle, packed with what would be impossible under any terrestrial circumstances—banquets of consciousnesses mingling and sharing in the joy of creation. When asked if he believed in God, Nabokov answered, “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” (___ **45**). This is that “more” than he cannot express in words. Appropriately, then, this is where Nabokov’s novel ends and Cincinnatus’ begins.

Aaron Botwick
Brooklyn, NY

Aaron Botwick

Aaron Botwick is a Ph.D. candidate in English at The Graduate Center, City University of New York. His research interests include British modernism, Holocaust fiction, genre fiction, and the histories of suicide and antisemitism. He teaches literature and composition at Lehman College and Borough of Manhattan Community College.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010.

Google ScholarOpenURL

Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990.

Google ScholarOpenURL

Connolly, Julian W. “Cincinnatus and Différance: Subversive Discourse in *Invitation to a Beheading*.” *Cynco* 12.2 (2008): n. pag. Web. 10 August 2013.

Google ScholarOpenURL

Conversations with Philip Roth. Ed. George J. Searles. Oxford: UP of Mississippi, 1992.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. New York: Vintage Classics, 1993.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. New York: Vintage, 2004.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

Feifer, George. "Vladimir Nabokov." *Saturday Review* 27 November 1976: [End Page 92] 20–26. Print.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage, 1979.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

Langen, Timothy. "The Ins and Outs of *Invitation to a Beheading*." *Nabokov Studies* 8 (2004): 59–70. Print.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

Levi, Primo. *Survival in Auschwitz*. New York: Touchstone, 1996.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

Lodge, David. *Changing Places*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

Moudrov, Alexander. "Nabokov's Invitation to Plato's Beheading." *Nabokov Online Journal* 1 (2007): n. pag. Web. 10 August 2013.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

Moynahan, Julian. "A Russian Preface for Nabokov's 'Beheading.'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 1.1 (1967): 12–18. Print.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

Nabokov's "Invitation to a Beheading": A Critical Companion. Ed. Julian W. Connolly. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1997.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Bend Sinister*. New York: Time Life Books, 1964.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

———. *The Gift*. London: Penguin Books, 2001.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

———. *Invitation to a Beheading*. New York: Vintage International, 1989.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

———. *Lectures on Literature*. San Diego: Harvest/HBJ, 1980.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

———. *Lectures on Russian Literature*. Orlando: Harvest, 1981.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

———. *The Luzhin Defense*. New York: Vintage International, 1990.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

———. *Selected Letters: 1940–1977*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1989.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

———. *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Vintage International, 2008.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

———. *Strong Opinions*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

Pifer, Ellen I. “Nabokov’s ‘Invitation to a Beheading’: The Parody of a Tradition.” *Pacific Coast Philology* 5 (1970): 46–53. Print.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

Shapiro, Gavriel. *Delicate Markers: Subtexts in Vladimir Nabokov’s Invitation to a Beheading*. New York: Peter Lang, 1998.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

———. “Nabokov and Pellico: *Invitation to a Beheading* and *My Prisons*.” *Comparative Literature* 62.1 (2010): 55–67. Print.

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

Wood, Michael. *The Magician’s Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995. [End Page 93]

[Google ScholarOpenURL](#)

Footnotes

1. Henceforth, *SO*.

2. Here and in the epigraph, the French thinker’s name is spelled “Delaland,” but in *The Gift* it has an additional e: Delalande. I will use the *Beheading* spelling except when quoting from the other novel.

3. The phrase “Invitation to a Beheading” was used again in Nabokov’s short story “Cloud, Castle, Lake” (1938), which functions as a compressed version of the novel. It is about a staff excursion and in particular one employee, Vasiliy Ivanovich, who is constantly bullied by his co-workers. At a lake, he doesn’t quite find “beings akin to him” but a view of nature that “so *understood* the beholder that Vasiliy Ivanovich even pressed his hand to his heart, as if to see whether his heart was there in order to give it away” (_____ **435**; emphasis Nabokov’s). In a reversal of his novel, however, Vasiliy is not given this liberation, and when he is not allowed to remain forever by the lake, he cries, “Oh, but this is nothing less than an invitation to a beheading” (*ibid* 436). The narrator, presumably the manager of the company, refers to V.I. as “my representative,” an ambiguous term that could be synonymous with “my character,” especially since the name is used in another story, “Recruiting” (1935), about a writer who invents a story about a man sitting next to him on a park bench and asks himself, “Why did I decide that the man next to whom I had sat down was named Vasiliy Ivanovich?” (*ibid* 404).

4. While writing his first novel, *Mary*, Nabokov wrote to his mother, “I understand how God as he created the world found this pure, thrilling joy” (**Boyd 245**).

5. The names of two of the jailers—Rodion and Roman—derive from the protagonist in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov. In some ways, Cincinnatus’ journey parallels Raskolnikov’s, for both are men who have felt different since childhood and whose angst causes them to revolt against society: in Raskolnikov, there had “always been something heavy and mystically terrible for him in the awareness of death and the feeling of the presence of death” (441) and later in life in a proto-fascist manifesto he calls for a different morality for the superior, for those “who have the gift or talent of speaking a *new word* in their environment” (260; emphasis Dostoevsky’s). Though he assigned the book to his students at Harvard (_____ **123**, 126), Nabokov detested *Crime and Punishment*, finding it “long-winded, terribly sentimental, and badly written” (**Boyd 150**) and believing that Dostoevsky failed in his depiction of Raskolnikov’s “fast transition from an aspiring benefactor of the world toward an aspiring tyrant for the sake of his own power” (_____ **114**). Thus, we can read the names of Rodion and Roman as an indication that they belong to an inferior fictive world, the kind of characters who remain on the page instead of actualizing through the author’s and reader’s imagination—they are, in other words, more a Dostoevskian invention than a Nabokovian one.

6. For Nabokov’s sympathetic take on “mechanical” art, cf. _____ **163–6**.

7. This was a lesson Nabokov learned early on: *Mary* is marked by “a structure so orderly and well signposted it can all be assimilated at once ... Nabokov dared extend the classical unity of time from a day to a week, but no further ... all this bespeaks a desire for clarity and proportion that Nabokov never abandoned but that he would learn was not enough for him to express all he wished” (**Boyd 249**). *Mary*, then, was his *Quercus*.

8. In *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov argues that Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* and Gogol’s “The Carrick” are superior to Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* because “[t]he beauty of Kafka’s and Gogol’s private nightmares is that their central human characters belong to the same private fantastic world as the inhuman characters around them, but the central one ... pathetically and tragically, attempts to struggle out of it into the world of humans” (254, 255). He has fashioned Cincinnatus in the same mold—he is a stranger in a familiar land—but in this case, the central character is not reaching towards a world of humans, exactly, but of one with “beings akin to him,” with absolute authorial control and the freedom to *play*.

9. In *The Gift*, the narrator writes that the “blind ... deaf... blockhead[ed]” author Shirin (whose name is only one letter different from Nabokov’s pseudonym, Sirin) has “a complete inability to put a name to anything” (288).

10. This is an image he may have borrowed from real life: when his father, V. D. Nabokov, was put in solitary confinement for three months, “he could just stretch up far enough on tiptoe to see from his cell window the cupola of the Tauride Palace, home of the Duma” (**Boyd 76**).

11. For Nabokov, one of the “most severe limitations on human consciousness ... [was] the prison of the self—our inability to escape our own minds or enter those of others” (**Boyd 283**).

12. Likewise, *Bend Sinister*’s Professor Krug “realizes suddenly the presence of the Author of things, the Author of him and of his life and of all the lives around him,—the Author who is *myself*, the man who writes the book of his life” (_____ **49–50**).

13. Nabokov employed a similar device in *The Luzhin Defense*. Throughout that book, the protagonist hears a kind of supernatural voice. It rings in his ears when he is playing chess and he is not sure if it is “deceiving him” (117). Later called a “ghost” (141), the voice directs him in the middle of the most important game of his career to flee into the woods, and it is after waking up there that he permanently abandons chess.