

Artistic Subjectivity in Nabokov's *The Defense and Invitation to a Beheading*

LORNA FITZSIMMONS

Deliberately inverting what he terms the “artificial logical world” of commonsense, which squares off the sublime rotundity of life, Vladimir Nabokov contends in his *Lectures on Literature* that to develop the capacity to marvel at seemingly trivial details—“the footnotes in the volume of life”—is to achieve the “highest” form of consciousness (372, 374). By promoting skepticism toward prevailing conceptions of truth, this “childishly speculative” state functions to activate a creatively ironic stance toward existence, a view akin to Schiller’s notion of the “play impulse” in *The Aesthetic Education of Man*. “No doubt the artist is the child of his time,” writes Schiller, but “let him return to his century as an alien figure,” freed from the “corruptions” of the present age by “disdaining its opinion” (51-52). For Nabokov, irony is the *sine qua non* of great artistic achievement. It is with the exegesis of the role of irony in the artist’s life that much of his fiction is involved. Just as Thomas Mann upholds the ironic over and above the overtly political in art while contending that artistic critique serves as humanity’s “suffering leader” (499), Nabokov believes in the collective value of the ironic artistic consciousness as a means by which to catalyze the evolution of the human mind. Written during his Berlin period, *The Defence and Invitation to a Beheading* are characteristically Nabokovian in their reflexive concern with creative subjectivity.

Although Nabokov repeatedly voiced his antipathy toward literary didacticism, especially that of his Russian forebears, his view that art is “*Beauty plus pity*” leads him to entreat others to “bless the freak” (*Lectures* 251, 372):

Stranger always rhymes with *danger*. The meek prophet, the enchanter in his cave, the indignant artist, the nonconforming little schoolboy, all share in the same sacred danger. And this being so, let us bless them, let us bless the freak; for in the natural evolution of things, the ape would perhaps never have become man had not a freak appeared in the family” (372).

In both *The Defense* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, Nabokov's pity is extended towards the misfit artist, stigmatized by an intolerant society. The protagonist of each novel is mistreated by the insensitivity of philistines around him, the object of Nabokov's rapier wit. As Robert Alter has argued, the playfully "ostentatious artifice" in Nabokov's writing serves a serious social function (44). The author's satiric indictment of social pressures to conform is complemented by the foregrounded reflexive devices through which his texts espouse a relativistic position that debunks absolutism as inherently absurd. While *The Defense* demonstrates the deleterious consequences of the absolutist fallacy, *Invitation to a Beheading* becomes a celebration of the regenerative effects associated with recognizing its falsity.

The Defense details the rise and fall of the tragic chessplayer, Aleksandr Ivanovich Luzhin. As a child, introverted Luzhin discovers that the realm of artificial patterns—mathematics, detective novels, magic, jigsaws, and eventually chess—offers a harmonious refuge from his unpredictable world. Luzhin senior writes mediocre children's books and dreams of his son emulating the musician heroes of his novels; but chess is Luzhin's destiny. Increasingly seeking "illusory relief" in chess problems, the child prodigy emerges as a champion of international renown. Luzhin's obsessive preoccupation with order grows until his conception of reality and illusion becomes inverted—"everything apart from chess was only an enchanting dream" (133)—and he suffers a mental collapse. His eventual return to the familiar world is only temporary, however, for his obsession leads him to detect a "fatal combination" governing the seeming pattern of his own life. Imagining himself a pawn in a game directed by a malevolent opponent, he decides upon his ultimate defense: suicide.

Luzhin's is the case of the artist—a motif of music metaphors underscores the artistic nature of his chess endeavors—who retreats from society's dominant conventions with increasing alienation and paranoia, compelling him towards the pattern of "dark and pale squares" he sees as eternity (256). His weakness lies in the hypertrophy of the form impulse within his mind, undermining his capacity to retain an ironic posture toward his own creative powers. To Schiller, the play impulse is a liberating drive that aims at "the extinction of time *in time*" by combining the temporal thrust of the sense impulse with the atemporality of the form impulse (74). "The sense impulse wants to *be* determined, to receive its object; the form impulse wants to determine for itself, to produce its object" (Schiller 74). Luzhin's fatal pursuit of the final defense against himself is tantamount to a reflexive knight's move, a chess move which, as Victor Shklovsky quips in his formalist

treatise on the "conventions of art," *The Knight's Move*, is a paradoxically conventional "oddity" (qtd. in Erlich 190-191), a trope used in several of Nabokov's novels which is symptomatic here of the character's increasingly destructive narcissism as he lives his life as if it were a chess game. His end is that of the uroboros, the infinite regress of serpentine self-pursuit, a Russian roulette anticipated by his delight in the orderliness of "chess life," about which he "noted with pride how easy it was for him to reign . . . and the way everything obeyed his will and bowed to his schemes" (134).

Despite the apparent fatalism of its bends sinister, however, the deconstructive turns of *The Defense* nevertheless figure an ironic artistry foiling that of the protagonist. Most clearly, the reader is constantly reminded of the protagonist's fictionality by the sound correspondence between his name, Luzhin, and "illusion," which Nabokov underscores in the Foreword (7). The same point is made more subtly early in the narrative when young Luzhin attempts to "bring to life" five glass-encased dolls in a coin-operated machine: his coin fails to do the job (20). As a trope of the text, he is as much a trick as the optical illusion or the "coming-to-life" of a mechanical doll. Demonstrating Luzhin's penchant for illusory diversion, this image functions as a proleptic *mise en abyme* foreshadowing his social, professional, and mortal failure. The corresponding glass motif magnifies the trope. Not only does Luzhin revel in detecting optical illusions, he is frequently portrayed as either viewing the world, or being viewed by another character, through glass structures: hiding in the attic as a child, he peers down at his pursuers through the small rooftop window (23); at school he hides in the vestibule and watches his father through the glass of the door (29); his future wife first views him through a window (84); at the height of his mental breakdown he gets shoved through a revolving "glass radiance" (revolving doors) (141); seemingly recuperating, he gazes at the "shining blue" window in his hospital room (159); and finally, he commits suicide by plunging through a skyscraper window (253). As if glass-encased, Luzhin is estranged from the world by the invisible distinctiveness of his imagination. Unlike most, however, who are mechanical in their conformity, Luzhin possesses great imaginative ability, but lacking the critical self-consciousness which springs from synchrony between the sense and form impulses, he cannot imagine himself freely alive. The coming-of-age of Cincinnatus, in *Invitation to a Beheading*, involves the realization of this freedom.

Like *The Defense*, *Invitation to a Beheading* depicts an artistic individual vilified by philistines. The two artists differ, however, in the source and extent of their maltreatment. Luzhin's antagonists are of his immediate milieu: his schoolmates, chess clique, and his family circle by marriage, who are intolerant of his creativity and either reject or verbally harass him: "'What is he? Certainly not a real person,'" declares his mother-in-law, "'He's God knows what. And I'll guarantee he has a Soviet passport. A Bolshevik, just a Bolshevik'" (108). In *Invitation to a Beheading*, Cincinnatus' difference incites the antipathy

of not only his immediate familiars, but of the whole society, represented by grotesque caricatures who penalize originality by execution.

The narrative opens with the announcement of the death sentence against Cincinnatus C., a kindergarten teacher. Small and submissive, Cincinnatus is led away to an "enormous fortress," in which he is the sole prisoner. For three torturous weeks he is kept in ignorance about his execution date. In anguish over the uncertainty, he turns to reading and writing for relief. "Opaque" in a world where "translucence" is the rule, he only feigns obedience, however. "I have no desires," he writes, "save the desire to express myself—in defiance of all the world's muteness" (91). He ruminates upon his life, his dreams of an "ennobled, spiritualized world," and his imminent death, while dwelling upon the beauty perceivable in even the most mundane, including his treacherous wife. Led to expect an interview from her, he is suddenly introduced to his cell neighbor, M'sieur Pierre. This egocentric photography enthusiast is a master trickster who employs all his skills in an attempt to win Cincinnatus' favor. Between his disappointing visit from his wife—she brings her extended family, her furniture, and her lover—and a temporary uplifting interview with his mother, Cincinnatus suffers through M'sieur Pierre's efforts to "amuse" him. At night, he is bothered by the muffled sounds of someone digging. The sounds grow nearer and his rescue seems imminent, but out of the tunnel appear M'sieur Pierre and the prison director. His seeming co-prisoner is a maestro entertainer, a national hero, "the pet of women, the darling of everyone"—the state executioner. Shortly after this revelation, M'sieur Pierre finally leads Cincinnatus off "to do chop-chop." The equipment is staged, the crowds shouting, but as M'sieur Pierre brings down the axe, Cincinnatus walks off from the scaffold, his antagonists disintegrating behind him.

Written in 1934, five years after *The Defence, Invitation to a Beheading* demonstrates Nabokov's continuing concern with the struggles of the artistic individual. Estranged from the hostile world like a glass-encased doll, Luzhin becomes the beleaguered puppet of his own belligerent imaginings. While Cincinnatus also attempts to "encase" himself, the defensive mask that he dons proves to be a source of psychological malaise from which he eventually breaks free. His struggle is symbolized by the magnificent moth, considered a "monster" fit only to be fed to the obese cell spider, which is captured by the jailor shortly before the execution (203). Like Cincinnatus, the moth has deceptive features—eyespots and a "white-dappled abdomen"—to confuse its predators. The two also have a paradoxical sense of time: for the moth, "daytime is dark," an inversion paralleling Cincinnatus' view that "the rare kind of time in which I live [is] the pause, the hiatus, when the heart is like a feather" (53), an intimation of the liberating "extinction of time *in time*" which is a function of his emergent play impulse. When Cincinnatus later predicts that "the

moth will fly away at night through the broken window," his own liberation is foreshadowed (211).

A perverse double. M'sieur Pierre embodies conformist corruption spawned by the disjunction between the sense and form impulses, thereby hindering the realization of the play impulse. The two characters are the same age and are equally honored and identically clad during the pre-execution banquet, which smacks of a wedding feast. First seeming to be Cincinnatus' rescuer, the executioner is finally debunked as a false savior. Among the "transparent" conformists, "[s]pecters, werewolves, parodies" masquerading as people, however, M'sieur Pierre is considered the consummate artist. Significantly, he is a photography enthusiast, whose bulging wallet, filled with shots of himself, is symptomatic of a narcissistic culture incarcerated by photographic illusionism: newspapers always "teem" with color photographs (23); "photohoroscopes" use retouched photographs to predict the "natural progression of a given person's life" (170); M'sieur Pierre and Cincinnatus are photographed together at the pre-execution banquet (190) and numerous photographers are amongst the crowds gathered in Thriller Square before the execution (217).

Like the "cute calender" depiction of the fortress that M'sieur Pierre considers a "work of art," literature in this society is as unimaginative as the photography. The "famous" novel *Quercus*, "considered to be the acme of modern thought," is a one-thousand-page biography of an oak (123). A parody of documentary realism, it attempts to record all the events possibly witnessed by the oak, the result being that it seems "as though the author were sitting with his camera somewhere among the topmost branches of the Quercus" (123; Alter 54). Never having bothered with this novel before his incarceration, Cincinnatus plods through it with "dull distress," finding it irrelevant to his predicament. To M'sieur Pierre and his cronies, documentary realism constitutes art, as underscored by a number of mirror images in the text. An important exception to this is the case of the special mirror that turns "nonnons," or absurd, shapeless objects, into beautiful forms (135), symbolizing Cincinnatus' creative opacity, the antithesis of the photographic and literary realism of his oppressors, for, like Schiller, Nabokov scorns mimetic simulation as an impediment to freedom (Schiller 128).

Ironically, Cincinnatus' "beheading" is self-induced, functioning as a reflexive trope for the liberating effects of the play impulse. Unlike Luzhin's desperate suicide, Cincinnatus' self-destruction is a joyful, regenerative act suggesting the imaginary decapitation of his conformist other, anathema of the form impulse. Living in a "world of souls transparent to one another," all his life Cincinnatus has had to "feign translucence" (24). "[C]lutching his own self to his breast, [he] would remove that self to a safe place" (24). Faced with death, he gradually dismantles the panoply of this pretense and allows his artistry free rein. This liberating process of self-realization correlates with his increasing

detachedness toward the world of his adversaries. As long as his other sustains belief in the immutable actuality of their world, he allows and supports its existence. To believe in his adversaries is "infect them with truth" (138, 156). But with the exercise of his critical consciousness, Cincinnatus envisages the possibility of alternative worlds and gains an ironic awareness of his ability to passively sustain or actively reconstruct reality. The growth of his play drive advances him to a higher state of physical and moral existence, for he is freed from the determinism of the sense impulse while simultaneously compelled beyond passivity, thereby exhibiting the creativity facilitated by the synthesis of the sense and moral impulses (Schiller 74). Finally conscious of his power to choose, he walks off the platform as it disintegrates and proceeds to "make his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him" (Nabokov 223), an epiphany recalling Schiller's account of the "two fold experience" of beautification, whereby the subject is "at once conscious of his freedom and sensible of his existence," thus realizing a "complete intuition of his humanity" (Schiller 73-74).

For Nabokov, higher art is not mimetic but, rather, endows "the lifeless with life," the "meaningless with meaning" (155). In his *Lectures on Literature*, he argues that the materials of the world are chaotic until the artist allows them "to flicker and to fuse" (2). To believe in any such fusions is to "infect them with truth," but to realize the myriad diversity of patterns into which the chaotic materials of existence may be structured is to attain the higher and more humane state of consciousness irony yields.

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California State University,
Dominguez Hills