Ishaan Jhaveri
COML 3815: Reading Nabokov
Instructor: Gavriel Shapiro
December 1, 2016

Politics as a Device used to underscore the Importance of the Individual Artist in Nabokov's Work

Nabokov seems critical of politics in literature. "Nothing bores me more than political novels and the literature of social intent," he said to one interviewer, "political allegories [are an example of *poshlost*]" he stated to another (SO 9, 134). He declares that "the social or economic structure of the ideal state is of little concern" to him (SO 49). Yet several of his books and short stories appear overtly political. *Bend Sinister* is set in a small country where a hybrid of German and Russian is spoken, where a revolution has just toppled the mysterious Republic, and the new leader imprisons liberal thinkers in a bid to coerce the protagonist, a renowned Philosophy professor to support his regime. *Invitation to a Beheading* takes place primarily in a prison, where the protagonist awaits his death at the hands of the State for the cryptic crime of "gnostical turpitude". It was published in 1935, the same year that Nazis instituted the "Nuremberg Laws that withdrew German citizenship from Jews" (Bendersky 180) and that Stalin had begun arresting top party officials that he would proceed to sentence to death to prevent them from becoming sources of opposition to his rule (Kuromiya 712). "Tyrants Destroyed" has the word "tyrant" in its title, opens with an account of the protagonist's hatred for the dictator of his country and in the forward to the story Nabokov himself writes, "Hitler Lenin and Stalin dispute my tyrant's throne in this story" (*Stories* 655). Clearly these stories feature totalitarian regimes reminiscent to some extent of the Bolshevik and Nazi regimes in Russia and Germany respectively.

Thus there appears to be a discrepancy between Nabokov's opinion and his work. He dislikes political allegories in literature while simultaneously writing about totalitarian regimes. Yet on closer reading one can see that Nabokov's particular treatment of the totalitarian regimes that he presents in his stories doesn't contradict his opinion. Far from satirizing specific policies that Lenin, Stalin, Hitler or other totalitarian dictators followed, he focuses instead on the totalitarian State's affect on individual liberties. It is the individual person and the individual artist that are Nabokov's subjects, and not the politics he presents. That the politics in these stories bring to mind actual political events of his day is incidental to the theme he is really trying to explore: the tragedy of suppression of individuality and original artistic expression. Nabokov laments this suppression, and criticizes any movement or group that causes it. In the case of these apparently political stories, it is just the political regime that causes this suppression. This is the reason these stories appear political. Therefore in writing these stories Nabokov is not contradicting his opinion, he is merely using politics as a device to underscore how unfortunate the deprivation of individual expression is.

Nabokov has always been a great champion of the individual artist. He has a penchant for writing about great artists with great individual talent as in the case of the piano maestro Bachmann in the story "Bachmann" or the chess master Luzhin in *The Luzhin Defense*. He believes that the unique expression of the individual is the individual's art. "[Art] is a divine game … because this is the element in which man comes nearest to God through becoming a true creator in his own right" he says (*LRL* 106). To him an individual's art and an individual's consciousness are the ultimate

qualities that totalitarian regimes infringe upon. This, and not the regime itself is the true tragedy of the human condition that he writes about in his apparently political works.

In *Invitation to a Beheading*, the protagonist, Cincinnatus C has been sentenced to death for the crime of "gnostical turpitude". While the book contains no definition of this made-up term, one reading of it is that Nabokov has modified it from "moral turpitude", which in American law means "conduct that is considered contrary to community standards of justice, honesty or good morals" (Friedman 43). The word "gnostic" means, "relating to knowledge, especially esoteric mystical knowledge" ("gnostic" def. 1). Then with the invention of this term, Nabokov could be saying that Cincinnatus has been put to death by the State merely for possessing some sort of esoteric knowledge, knowledge that marks him out from the rest of the citizens. This crime, the crime of having individual knowledge, is punishable by death. In particular the knowledge that Cincinnatus is targeted for is his desire to write, to become a writer. Even while in prison he is mocked for his desire to write, and to mark himself separate from "everybody else": ""You'd do better to learn to knit like everybody else," grumbled Rodion, "so you can knit me a cache-knee. Writer, indeed!"" (*IB* 112). Hence Nabokov introduces the overarching theme he will discuss in *Invitation to a Beheading*, the suppression of individual knowledge, and by extension original art. He uses the "totalitarian state… merely as a dramatically convenient background for [his] recurrent theme, which is, to borrow Simon Karlinksy's apt formulation 'the nature of the creative imagination and the solitary, freak-like role into which a man gifted with such imagination is inevitably cast in any society' " (Alter 42).

The totalitarian State is presented as an aesthetic foil to Cincinnatus; a monolithic entity trying to quell any artistic individuality he may possess. Cincinnatus is the only opaque character in "this world of souls transparent to one another" (*IB* 11). He has learned to constantly "feign translucence" so as to hide his individuality (*IB* 11). That Nabokov presents the norm of the State and its citizens as transparency in contrast to Cincinnatus' opacity is proof that the State is empty and see-through, while the individual artist still has independence. The visual backdrop that the State attempts to subject Cincinnatus to is monotonous, repetitive and completely devoid of artistic ingenuity. When Cincinnatus is first lead to his cell he is lead along a wall by his jailers. "They walk and walk… one bend [follows] another… Several times they passed the very same design of dampness on the wall" (IB 25). The prison's "dense darkness" is rarely mitigated by anything other than "bitter yellow" or "highly-concentrated electric" light (IB 26, 3). When, one sunset, Cincinnatus perceives "extraordinary pigments" reflected in the light and wonders if it is the illumination of "some reckless colorists painting" to the right of the door it turns out to just be "a parchment sheet hanging on the wall with two columns of detailed "rules for prisoners"; the bent corner, the red letters of the heading, the vignettes, the ancient seal of the city – namely a furnace with wings – [that] provided the necessary materials for the evening illumination" (*IB 2*-3). The jailer Rodion and the warden of the prison Rodrig Ivanovich blend into one another. Sometimes one of them walks in and the other walks out of the cell, increasing the banal aesthetic repetition. Not even his fellow human beings have individual qualities. In contrast Cincinnatus' imagination is vivid and full of color. When he looks down from the prison turret he describes the sight he sees:

> Further away the sun-flooded town described an ample hemicycle: some of the varicolored houses proceeded in even rows, accompanied by round trees, while others, awry, crept down slopes, stepping on their own shadows; one could distinguish the traffic moving on First Boulevard, and an amethystine shimmer at the end, where the famous fountain played; and still further, toward the hazy folds of the hills that formed the horizon, there was the dark stipple of oak groves, with, here and there, a pond gleaming like a hand mirror, while other bright ovals of water gathered, glowing through the tender mist, over there to the west, where the serpentine Strop had its source. Cincinnatus, his palm pressed to his cheek, in motionless, ineffably vague and perhaps even blissful despair, gazed at the glimmer and haze of the Tamara Gardens and at the dove-blue melting hills beyond them—oh, it was a long time before he could take his eyes away... (*IB* 27)

Cincinnatus immediately sees and describes aesthetic beauty that the State could never understand. "As we look down on the scene with Cincinnatus, we are taken into the magic of its presence by being made to see it as a painting" (Alter 49). The "sun-flooded town" with its "amethystine shimmer", giving way to the "dark stipple of oak groves" on the horizon, the description of the "pond gleaming like a hand mirror" and the "serpentine Strop" are starkly beautiful contrasts to the banal images of the imprisoned life the State subjects Cincinnatus to. Where the State can only present dull grays and ugly yellows to Cincinnatus, when he lets his individual imagination loose he is able to discern and describe brilliant hues and picturesque landscapes that completely escape the

State and its actors. In fact Cincinnatus' lawyer, Roman Vissarionovich, another actor of the state at the very same scene simply "peers pensively into space", missing this natural beauty that leaves Cincinnatus agog (*IB* 28). The diction in this passage is clearly more descriptive and complex than in passages that describe the prison and its walls. Here we see Nabokov treat the totalitarian State as an aesthetic device. It is a tepid portrait at best whereas the individual is a boundless natural landscape. He is not concerned with the particular policies of the State as political writers like Orwell may be; he merely employs it as a device to expose how art is "inevitably connected with a larger vision of man", and how one's essence is one's individuality (Alter 50). It is the individual, and the individual's art that are Nabokov's subject; the State is his device.

That Nabokov doesn't offer any explanation of the crime that Cincinnatus has been imprisoned for or the legal process that tried him are further indicators that he is not concerned with criticizing particular policies of the totalitarian regimes, but primarily concerned with their effect on the individual. Notably in his presentation of M'sieur Pierre, the executioner and the most overt representation of the State, where Nabokov could insert critiques of policy if he had them, he doesn't. He focuses instead on the *poshlost* that M'sieur Pierre, as the representation of the State embodies. When it is revealed that M'sieur Pierre has been the executioner the whole time he was masquerading as a fellow prisoner, he encourages Rodrig Ivanovich to "announce his title officially", showing that in this State, the executioner enjoys a noble position (*IB* 139). The *poshlost* seen here is an oft seen Nabokov theme, similar to *Despair* where the philistine criminal Hermann considers his crime art. That M'sieur Pierre derives importance from his position as a State sponsored murderer is deplorable to Nabokov.

M'sieur Pierre puts great stock on the "photo-horoscope" he invented that shows made-up photos of Emmie's life, from a young age to adulthood. "By means of retouching and other photographic tricks, what appeared to be progressive changes in Emmie's face had been achieved; but one had only to look closer and it became repulsively obvious how trite was this parody of the work of time" (*IB* 136). Nabokov cannot hide his disdain for M'sieur Pierre's "art". It is unoriginal as the photos are composed from other photos. It is "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" (Alter 54). Nabokov suggests here that the totalitarian state is completely incapable of producing art because it is, at its root, empty, transparent, devoid of individuality. Thus in *Invitation to a Beheading* Nabokov paints a bleak portrayal of the effect on art and individual expression in totalitarian regimes.

These instances in *Invitation to a Beheading* show the effect totalitarian regimes have on individual expressions of art. In *Bend Sinister* Nabokov presents, in a similar vein, the effect totalitarian regimes have on the human mind. Once again his subject is the importance of individual consciousness and free thought, and the totalitarian State of Paduk that he presents us is the device he employs to expose this tragedy. In the story there are unmistakable parallels to both Germany and Russia. The citizens of Padukgrad speak a hybrid language of German and Russian. In a letter to an army officer who was thinking of translating the book to German in 1948, Nabokov writes "the dictatorship actually represented in this book is imaginary but it deliberately displays features peculiar a) to Nazism b) to communism…" (Boyd 95). Thus in 1947 when *Bend Sinister* was first

published Nabokov directly compared the Nazis to the Communist Party in Russia. At the time "immediate considerations required America to ally itself with the Soviet Union and overlook its polity. Instead, Nabokov links Stalin's tyranny with Hitler's. In a work of art that looks beyond the present moment, he will not compromise permanent political values for even the most pressing of immediate needs" (Boyd 97). This is an important theme that Nabokov wants to present with *Bend Sinister*, that nothing should result in the compromising of the individual's mind, and the individual's free thought.

Nabokov makes this point by exposing that because Krug maintains his individuality while Paduk and his Party of the Average Man favor the group over the individual, Krug will always remain superior to them. He has his own consciousness while they try and maintain "uniform consciousness" (*BS* 55). At the very beginning of the book Krug is accosted by two Ekwillian soldiers, "both with pockmarked faces" (*BS* 4). When joined by a third Krug asks him about his cousin only to be told it is one of the other soldier's' cousins not his. From the very beginning the agents of the state are identical and monolithic in contrast to the distinguished Krug. Nabokov exposes the mindlessness that the subjects in the new regime must live by when Krug is stuck on a bridge that he can only get off by gaining a signature from illiterate people. He is "doomed to walk back and forth on a bridge that has ceased to be one since neither bank is attainable" (*BS* 11). The Ekwillians seek Krug for him to endorse their regime. Here Nabokov shows that the totalitarian regime needs the approval of the distinguished Philosophy professor to lend it validity. The group thus panders to the individual despite propagating that "no tree can exist without a forest" (*BS* 56). This is another example of the fundamental emptiness of totalitarian regimes, that they conduct themselves on ideals

they themselves do not hold. This, he warns his reader is characteristic of group thinking and of sacrificing the individual mind: it is for empty promise. The regimes internal contradictions are further exposed when the "home life of Mr. and Mrs. Etermon (Everyman)" is considered the normal way to be, yet the story contains underlying suggestions that Paduk, the leader himself is homosexual, and thus does not conform to this life (*BS* 57). The inherent emptiness of the party is ultimately embodied in the "padograph". The "portable affair looking like a typewriter" could reproduce another person's handwriting thereby giving one agency to "[practice deceit]" (*BS* 50). Like the photo-horoscope in *Invitation to a Beheading*, this mechanical half-hearted attempt at art bears many of the qualities Nabokov associates with *poshlost*. It is an attempt to make art by copying the individual style (here, handwriting) of others.

While the regime is so empty, Nabokov presents Krug very positively. He is a distinguished Philosophy professor, well respected by his peers. His and his colleague Ember's response to the padograph is the translation of *Hamlet*, which Nabokov considers to be one of the greatest plays ever written. This task of translating language appears vaguely similar to copying handwriting, yet immediately more original and artistic. Krug experiences real love for his wife Olga and his son David and Nabokov states in the foreword, "the main them of *Bend Sinister* then, is the beating of Krug's loving heart, the torture an intense tenderness is subject to" at the hands of "dim-brained brutality which thwarts its own purpose by destroying the right child and keeping the wrong one" (*BS iv*). Such intense feeling is a unique privilege of one with consciousness, and the State's collective consciousness can never hope to aspire to something so beautiful. That is why the State performs the blunder of killing the wrong child. The

State's sheer inability to feel emotion is the great tragedy of the loss of consciousness that subjects in totalitarian regimes must face.

Finally Nabokov delineates the power of the individual consciousness over the group mentality by invoking his own consciousness. At the end of the book with a "well that was all" Nabokov reveals the story to be imaginary (*BS* 177). He reveals himself writing the story, and makes the point that it is his individual consciousness as a free thinker that could conjure up such an artful tale in which he warns against oppression of the mind. Without his own mind, he, Nabokov would not be able to pull off this feat. "His manner implies that … social forces are [not] what matter most… [consciousness does.] Consciousness calls up and controls these worlds, as some form of consciousness seems to have called life itself into being" (Boyd 103). That he as a writer is practicing the art of expressing himself through his own control of his own consciousness is the ultimate point Nabokov makes in *Bend Sinister*. He knows this to be the primal necessity of the artist, and thus laments those artists like Osip Mandelshtam who were forced to censor their art under the Soviet Regime. He admits that he experiences "helpless shame" on "being so free to write and think in the free part of the world" and call it the "only time when liberty is bitter" (*SO* 81).

Thus in *Bend Sinister* the mind of the State, the State's collective consciousness is a foil to the considerably more intelligent, artistic and sentient mind of the individual, much like the State is an aesthetic foil to the individual's artistry in *Invitation to a Beheading*. Hence Nabokov underscores how individual consciousness and artistic expression are at the very root of what it means to be an individual. He celebrates these

aspects of individuality and finds that the ultimate sin of totalitarianism is the depriving humans of these facets of their individuality.

With this in mind, one can see that loss of individuality and not specific political criticism is Nabokov's subject in a number of his other apparently political works. "Tyrants Destroyed" features a narrator obsessed with killing the dictator of his country. He begins with the resolve "he must be killed" (*Stories* 438). Eventually, "finding the physical pursuit of the tyrant a continuous impossibility, however, the narrator is left to hunt his quarry not through the corridors of the tyrant's prison fortress but through the endless windings of his own imagination, which becomes a prison in itself. 'What can I do?' he asks. 'How can I get rid of him?' (Stories 447, 457). Indeed by the end of "Tyrants Destroyed" the narrator is so consumed by the tyrant that he says 'By killing myself,' he reasons, 'I would kill him, as he was totally inside me, fattened on the intensity of my hatred'" (Caulton 26). He has become so obsessed with the regime that he has begun to lose his individuality. In "Cloud, Castle, Lake" too, Vasily Ivanovich's individuality is slowly extracted from him. He is first asked to put a book on Tyutchev "aside and join the group" (*Stories* 432). As he is the only member of the group with a cucumber, it is thrown out. He is then "made to play cards" with the group (*Stories* 432). Finally when he declares his desire to leave the group, he is not only made to stay, but also eventually beaten to death for all the individual requests he makes. The inevitable *poshlost* is not absent either. The tyrant in "Tyrants Destroyed" transforms the narrator's "wildflowery country into a vast kitchen garden" (*Stories* 441). The song that the compliant citizens sing in "Cloud, Castle, Lake" is jarring, repetitive and carries a clear political agenda. They play a bizarre game where men are encouraged to lift women's

skirts, and when Vasily Ivanovich loses, he is forced to eat a cigarette butt. All of these are representations of bad art, or poor taste, just the kinds of thing Nabokov considers *poshlost*.

Both of these stories focus intensely on the individual's experience, how the individual has to sacrifice their mind and any potential for artistic independence they may possess, in order for the group to assert itself. While both stories contain demonstrations of *poshlost* by the State neither of these stories contain specific economic or social policies. Vasily Ivanovich is different because he is foreign, that is as far as Nabokov goes in painting the policies of the regime in "Cloud, Castle, Lake," but no further.

Hence Nabokov is primarily occupied with exposing the totalitarian regime's disregard for the originality of the human experience. He does not concern himself with their policies as he himself writes in the foreword to *Invitation to a Beheading*, "I composed this book… after escaping the Bolshevist regime, and just before the Nazi regime reached its full volume of welcome. The question whether [this] had any effect on this book, should concern the good reader as little as it does me" (*IB i*). He thus castigates political writers: "primitive and banal mentality of enforced politics, any politics – can only produce banal art" (*SO* 80). It is clear that he doesn't see himself as a political writer and refuses to give the totalitarian regimes he portrays the privilege of criticizing their policies, choosing instead to expose the *poshlost* within them. To him propaganda is bad art, is *poshlost*. To engage with the regime that promulgates such *poshlost* could also be considered bad art to him, and thus he markedly refrains from doing so. Hence we can see on closer reading that Nabokov's apparently political novels contain a very specific reading of politics, and cannot be said to be the kind of *poshlost* political allegories he

disparages. He "admits politics into [some of his works] only to argue that politics should be kept out of people's lives" (Boyd 97). His strong refusal to engage with the policies of these regimes and the wide prevalence of manifestations of *poshlost* in the art and actors of these regimes underlies Nabokov's conviction that these regimes are inherently meaningless. They feed off depriving individuals, yet have no actual policies. They are as transparent as the characters in *Invitation to a Beheading,* as emotionless as the Party of the Average Man in *Bend Sinister*. One can now understand that Nabokov, the same author who penned *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister* can also claim that he has "never belonged to any club or group, no creed has influenced [him] ", that "the social or economic structure of the ideal state is of little concern to him" (*SO* 9, 49). One can see how he equates totalitarians on the left and on the right, lambasting them as oppressors of the individual artist without a thought to their specific policies. One can see the truth in his claim that:

> I pride myself with having discerned even then the symptoms of what is so clear today, when a kind of family circle has gradually been formed, linking representatives of all nations--jolly Empire-builders in their jungle clearings, the unmentionable German product, the good old church-going Russian or Polish pogromshchik, the lean American lyncher, the man with the bad teeth who squirts anti-minority stories in the bar or the lavatory, and, at another point of the same sub-human circle, those ruthless, paste-faced automatons in singularly wide trousers and high-shouldered coats, those Sitzriesen whom--or shall I say which?-

> -the Soviet State has brought out on such a scale after thirty years of selective breeding (*SM* 264).

This is why the only politics one can see in Nabokov's work is totalitarian politics. He doesn't write about other types of politics because he doesn't like having general political opinions. As he sees it, as long as a regime doesn't infringe upon the individuality of the individual, he will leave it alone. If it does, he will write about the falling out on the human condition, while still keeping the regime relatively at arm's length. To be able to recast the narrative of the atrocities of Nazism and Communism into aesthetic and artistic devices in the way Nabokov does paints a poignant picture of the human loss suffered at the hands of these regimes. Thus Nabokov manages to stay true to his human-centric concerns, and use politics as an ingenious device without having to compromise his beliefs and become a "political writer".

Works Cited

Nabokov

Bend Sinister. New York: Holt, 1947. Print.

Invitation to a Beheading. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1959. Print.

Lectures on Russian Literature. Ed. Fredson Bowers. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Bruccoli Clark, 1981. Print.

Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1966. Print.

The Stories. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995. Print.

Strong Opinions. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972. Print.

Other

Alexandrov, Vladimir E. *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Garland Pub., 1995. Print.

Alter, Robert. ""Invitation to a Beheading": Nabokov and the Art of Politics."*TriQuarterly*, vol. 17, 1970., pp. 41 http://search.proquest.com/docview/1311942887?accountid=10267.

Bendersky, Joseph W. *A History of Nazi Germany*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1985. Print.

Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991. Print.

Caulton, Andrew. *The Absolute Solution: Nabokov's Response to Tyranny*, 1938. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013. Print.

Dembo, L. S. *Nabokov: The Man and His Work*. Madison: U of Wisconsin, 1967. Print.

Friedman, Lawrence M. *American Law*. New York: Norton, 1984. Print.

Kuromiya, Hiroaki. "Stalin and His Era." The Historical Journal, vol. 50, no. 3, 2007, pp.

711–724. www.jstor.org/stable/20175118.

"Gnostic." Oxford English Dictionary. 2005. Oxford English Dictionary. Web. 25 Nov.

2016.