"Who was becoming seasick? Cincinnatus": Some Aspects of Nabokov's treatment of the Communist Regime

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In her letters to her brother from post-war Czechoslovakia, Elena Sikorski (née Nabokov) referred to the plight of the White emigrants as that of Cincinnatus.[1] This was also a hint at the nausea, the independently-minded people's disgust with the communist rule. In his answers Nabokov took care not to provide the regime with anything that could be used against his sister. He displayed a similar caution concerning the people who were in the USSR.[2] In the United States Nabokov boycotted Soviet representatives and spoke out against insufficient understanding of Soviet tyranny.[3] Yet even apart from these biographical facts, despite his lack of interest in the daily details of politics, Nabokov understood the nature of the Soviet regime more keenly than many of his contemporaries.

Though on leaving Russia in 1919 he shared his family's belief that the Bolshevik rule would be short-lived[4] and though in 1927 he still believed that "sometime in the next decade" they would all return to "the hospitable, remorseful, racemosa-blooming Russia" (*KQK* vii), the same year, as the USSR was celebrating the tenth anniversary of the October revolution, Nabokov called on his fellow émigrés to celebrate their own jubilee — ten years of faithfulness, freedom, and contempt — not for the ordinary man, "some working Sidorov, an honest member of some Com-pom-pom, but for the ugly and obtuse little idea" that turns people into ants.[5] His view of the Soviet regime as that of mass slavery had already been formed. Nabokov's hope of seeing the speedy end of the Communist rule in Russia faded over the next three years, probably with his realization of the role of the Soviet secret police. As John Shade remarks in *Pale Fire*, a totalitarian regime cannot do without its secret police, and the creation of the secret police is the "end of the world" (*PF* 156). It seems that Nabokov assessed the power of the network of informers before it became obvious to the masses of population in the USSR.

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[1] See Vladimir Nabokov, *Perepiska s sestroi* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), pp. 8, 9, 13, 37.

[2] In 1949, for instance, Nabokov "deprived himself of the pleasure" of writing a blurb for Mirsky's *History of Russian Literature*, since Mirsky was in Russia and compliments of a known anti-Soviet writer might have caused him "considerable unpleasantness" (*SL*, 91). Actually, despite the conversion to communism that made Mirsky return to the USSR in the thirties, he was arrested during the regime's action against the literary elite. He is "said to have died mad in a Siberian camp." Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purges of the Thirties* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 329.

[3] See Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1991), pp. 41, 61, and 84. Nabokov's remarks on the "thunderclap of administrative purges" that woke Wilson up the way "the moans in Solovki or at the Lubianka had not been able to do," as well as on the horrors of Uritsky's and Dzerzhinsky's rule before those of Ezhov and Yagoda (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters 1940-1971*, ed. Simon Karlinsky, New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1979, pp. 195-6) anticipate Solzhenitsyn's criticism, in the first volume of *The Gulag Archipelago*, of the view that the repressions gained momentum only during the Great Terror. A part of the letter in question appeared, in a revised form and in reference to another person, in *Speak, Memory* (pp. 271-2).

[4] Nabokov's father had already once had to while some time away from Russia, after signing the Vyborg resolution in 1908; see Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 66-67.

[5] V. Sirin, "The Anniversary", *Rul'* # 2120 (1927). The reference to the ants may stem from a Bergsonian distinction between two lines of evolution, towards a democratic human society and towards the communities of hymenoptera, such as bees or ants.

Yet the most clearly prophetic element in Nabokov's view of the totalitarian regime is the picture of its collapse in end of *Invitation to a Beheading.* Nabokov dystopian novels suggest that the bend-sinister line of social evolution is bound to wind itself, ultimately, perhaps after several generations, into a dead end.[6] *Invitation* paints a picture of such a process at its terminus: the streamlined movements and technical achievements of the past are a vague memory; matter is "weary"; time "gently doze[s]" (*IB* 43); and the fall of the warped structures almost naturally follows an assertion of individual freedom. "Tyrants Destroyed" and *Bend Sinister* depict the beginning of the wrong development.[7] They present free-thinking individuals who, unlike Cincinnatus, are not born into a despotic society but get trapped in one. The narrator of "Tyrants Destroyed" is a Schopenhauerian intellectual who, in his preoccupation with the history of painting and its cave origins,[8] has missed, overlooked, the moments when a dangerous turn began. Adam Krug, however, is a person who may also have been partly responsible for the sinister bend. "I used to trip him up and sit on his face," says Krug about the tyrant Paduk. "I sat upon his face ... every blessed day for about five school years" (*BS* 50-51). Krug thus promoted the desire for a backlash that came to dominate the young misfit's psyche. On another occasion Nabokov likewise mentions that Krug, usually the center of our sympathies, reveals "a queer streak of vulgarity and even cruelty" (*BS* 59). Krug is not directly responsible for the ambitions of the future tyrant but is part of the soil that has fostered these ambitions.

Nabokov's dystopian fictions refer to various totalitarian regimes, yet certain specifically Soviet realities are most clearly refracted in them.[9] His books were published in Russia at about the same time as the Gulag testimonies by ordinary people as well as by major writers like A. Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov moved from the Samizdat and Western publications to their native presses. For all of his alleged aestheticism and his real flights of fantasy, Nabokov's works do not strike a discordant note in that context — on the contrary, the new context brings out new dimensions of their meaning, especially if meaning is to be understood, in Wittgensteinian terms, as what "hangs together" with what.[10]

A number of details in Nabokov's dystopias "hang together" with the history of Stalin's reign. In *Bend Sinister,* the regime periodically eliminates its own henchmen, starts an assault on a prominent personality by systematic arrests in his entourage, exacts a demonstrative support of prominent intellectuals, uses a child as a hostage to make the parent collaborate, throws a political prisoner (symbolically represented by David Krug) into the den of depraved criminal convicts who abuse, torture, and murder him, and proclaims the interchangeability and

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[6] Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre: "What the totalitarian project will always produce will be a kind of rigidity and inefficiency which may contribute in the long run to its defeat. We need to remember, however, the voices from Auschwitz and Gulag Archipelago which tell us just how long that run is." *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 101.

[7] The allusions to Greek and Roman literature and philosophy in *Bend Sinister* (discussed in David H. J. Larmour, "The Classical Allusions in *Bend Sinister"* and Robert Grossmith, "Shaking the Keleidoscop": Physics and Metaphysics in Nabokov's *Bend Sinister*," *Russian Literature Triquarterly* 24, 1991, 163-72 and 151-61) likewise bring in the memory of the ultimate fall of empires.

[8] Cf. Nabokov's facetious remark that among his ancestor there must have been "the first caveman who painted a mammoth" (see Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 15).

[9] In *The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York, 1984) Laurie Clancy also mentions that the material of Nabokov's dystopian novels is closer to the Soviet than to the Nazi realities (p. 93). A similar point is also made by David Rampton in *Vladimir Nabokov: a Critical Study of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), pp.40-63. However, I find a number of Rampton's statements ethically objectionable.

[10] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* I, 437. For a valuable discussion see Eddy Zemach, "Wittgenstein on Meaning," *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 33/34 (1989), 415-35.

uselessness of the individual selves. In "Tyrants Destroyed" the people who had known the tyrant in his youth tend to die early; the life of the tyrant is safeguarded with triple-bottom ingenuity; and a non-conformist can only live in total obscurity, foregoing all social avenues of self-actualization.

In *Invitation to a Beheading*, Cincinnatus does not understand what is wanted of him, what it is that he is pressured to do — many communists arrested during the Great Terror could not understand how they were supposed to "disarm before the party" or collaborate with their tormentors in confessing to nonexistent crimes. The aversion that Cincinnatus feels for M'sieur Pierre is treated by the prison director as the backwardness of a difficult child; nevertheless it reminds one of a prisoner's instinctive rejection of a stool-pigeon's advances — a frequent motif in Gulag literature. Pierre's recourse to mental sadism in order to "get accustomed" to his future victim "hangs together" with the so-called "useless violence" practiced on the doomed to death in order to condition the henchmen.[11] In Russia soldiers who had to shoot prisoners were often conditioned by just vodka: judging by Shalamov's story "Captain Tolly's Love,"[12] it was rather the provocateurs among the prisoners who conditioned themselves by wanton cruelty.

Nabokov's most important insight into the realities of a totalitarian regime is expressed through the theme of callousness in the two dystopias — this theme would run throughout the Gulag literature of the later periods. Cincinnatus is callously denounced; his tormentors callously pursue their interests or caprices and spout medical, legal, or small-talk formulae without troubling their imagination about the horrible thing that is about to be done to him; his wife callously criticises his anguished letter to her as putting her into political jeopardy. In *Bend Sinister* Linda Bachofen does not mind her boy-friend's being killed in her apartment provided the floor is not messed up (her morning gets ruined anyway because she is late for a dental appointment; *BS* 207): in the USSR it was, at the time, all too easy to have an unwelcome neighbor or rival removed by a clean, sometimes anonymous denunciation — not at all as if one were involved in a fussy "wet" affair. Unlike the literature of the Holocaust, which is dominated by the sense of diabolical cruelty, the literature of the Gulag emphatically targets callousness, a universal human feature that need not cause atrocities but that allows them to take place.

The solitary imprisonment of Cincinnatus is, of course, luxurious in comparison with the real one of millions of Gulag prisoners — Ember's complaints about the latrines in *Bend Sinister* (*BS* 239) are more to the point. Yet owing to the overtly surrealistic procedures as well as to the fact that all the above details also belong to other levels of meaning, the differences between Nabokov's images of imprisonment and those in the Gulag literature do not jar — as they do in, for instance, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon.*[13] Both *Invitation* and *Darkness at Noon* raise the issue of individual inner freedom — likewise a pervasive theme of Gulag literature. Koestler, however, examines the mechanism of foregoing freedom, or perhaps a paradoxical assertion of this freedom through unlimited self-denial.

Darkness at Noon presents the span of a person's life between his arrest and execution. Though it seems to probe the reasons why the victims of the Moscow Trials of the late thirties

[11] This explanation for the systematic humiliation and torture of the doomed prisoners, practiced not even to extract information or for any other "practical purpose," was offered by Franz Strangle, the former commandant of Treblinka, to Gitta Sereny; see Sereny, *Into That Darkness* (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 101.

[12] See Shalamov, *Kolymskie Rasskazy*, p. 349 or *Graphite*, transl. John Glad (New York: Norton, 1981), p. 176.

[13] Koestler's Rubashov is, for instance, allowed to keep his watch in his cell, which would not happen in Soviet prisons.

confessed to base betrayal of their party (the crude realities of torture and blackmail did not interest Koestler in this case), it actually deals with the supererogatory extension of the ant-like priciple according to which one's identity is completely at the service of an idea, or rather at the service of the interests of the group (the collective, the party, the state) that professes the idea. Like some characters of *Bend Sinister* and unlike Cincinnatus, Koestler's Bucharin-like Rubashov has been deeply implicated in the crimes of the regime before becoming its victim. He is aware of the immorality of his past deeds, but he is also capable of a heroic denial of ungrounded accusations--until he is persuaded that the party needs the sacrifice not only of his life but also of his honor. Recognizing in this demand a logical extension of his own beliefs in the priority of the collective, Rubashov submits. The title of the novel is a reference to the *Book of Job* ("He taketh the wise in their own craftiness: and the counsel of the froward is carried headlong. / They meet with darkness in the daylight, and grope in the noonday as in the night," Job 5: 13-14): Rubashov passes the test of his faith, yet faith itself does not pass the test. The process traced in Nabokov's *Invitation* is diametrically opposite: Cincinnatus consciously learns to reject all emotional, imaginative, and practical submission to the collective and to assert the uniqueness of his "illegal" identity. This can now be read as symbolic of the desire for freedom that has kept resurging in Russia despite almost seventy years of repression.

The different thematic directions taken in the two novels are reflected in their imagery. One of the recurring metaphors in *Darkness at Noon* is that of a ship, unsteady because sailing without any moral ballast: "We have thrown overboard all conventions, our sole guiding principle is that of consequent logic; we are sailing without the ethical ballast."[14] The metaphor goes back to the ancient Greek idea of "the ship of state," used, for instance, by Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone* to argue that the interests of the state are above the moral principles of individuals.[15] In *Invitation*, however, the macrometaphor[16] of "the ship of state" is transformed into images of Cincinnatus in a little boat made for one.[17] His cot turns into a boat that almost sinks (*IB* 57) when he is promised a visit of his wife (the greatest threat to the discreteness and independence of his identity), yet he regains composure, and the tub in which

[14] Rubashov's thoughts work on as follows: "Perhaps the heart of evil lay there. Perhaps it did not suit mankind to sail without ballast. And perhaps reason alone was a defective compass, which led one on such a winding, twisted course that the goal finally disappeared in the mist." Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, transl. Daphne Hardy (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 260. Cf. Milan Kundera on the appeal of Communism in post-war Czechoslovakia: "Yes, say what you will--the Communists were more intelligent. They had a grandiose program, and plan for a brand-new world in which everyone would find his place. The Communists' opponents had no great dream; all they had was a few moral principles, stale and lifeless, to patch up the tattered trousers of the established order. So of course the grandiose enthusiasts won out over the cautious compromisers and lost no time turning their dream into reality: the creation of an idyll of justice for all." *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Transl. Michael Henry Heim (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1981), p. 8.

[15] In Creon's first speech "the gods, after tossing the state on heavy seas, have righted it again" and the ruler would not regard his country's enemy as his friend, knowing that it is the country that preserves the citizens "and only while she remains upright, as we sail upon her, that we make our friends" (*Antigone*, translated and edited by Andrew Brown (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1987), pp. 35, 37. The metaphor of "the ship of state" is also used by Aeschyllus.

[16] On the ethical force of macrometaphors in fiction see Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 325-32.

[17] Not all the images of sea, skipper, and Cincinnatus in a boat are metaphoric. According to Gaston Bachelard, a metaphor is a *"fabricated image*, without deep, true, genuine roots," whereas a non-metaphoric genuine image is a product of "a flicker of the soul." *The Poetics of Space*, transl. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon, 1969), pp. 75 and xviii. Nonmetaphoric navigation images in *Invitation* tend to suggest attitudes which are prior to thought.

he washes before the meeting is presented as a little canoe (*IB* 64); his peaceful floating continues when he is back in bed (*IB* 65).

The image of the puny discreteness of the boat that separates the individual from the environement is implicitly juxtaposed with the crash-prone "ship of state." The jailor peers into Cincinnatus's cell through the peephole "with a skipper's stern attention" (*IB* 13) — the Judas-window is also described as "a leak in a boat" (*IB* 12). Then it becomes a "blue porthole" through which the jailor can see "the horizon, now rising, now falling" as Cincinnatus becomes "seasick" (*IB* 13). The ship of state is heading towards Cincinnatus's little boat, to smash it, yet the seasickness of the man in the boat ("Who was becoming seasick? Cincinnatus." *IB* 13) suggests its passing him by.

The "seasickness" (dizziness and nausea) is a symptom not only of horror but also of disgust, the existential nausea which, as Nietzsche tells us, can be discharged through comedy — whereas to tame horror one takes recourse to the sublime[18] (both the elements are present in *Invitation*, yet the comic dominates). It is closely associated with Nabokov's contempt for philistine art, which, as he knew since, at least, the late twenties, well suited the Bolshevik regime.[19] "'Human interest'," Nabokov wrote in 1938, "means Uncle Tom's cabin to me ... and makes me sick, seasick" (*SL* 27). To hint at the ideological pressures at the Prague University library, Elena Sikorski wrote: "There the overseer kept putting on a red beard and dancing with Cincinnatus."[20] In *Invitation*, indeed, the image of the seasick Cincinnatus brought to his cell from the trial is followed by that of his accepting the sweat and garlick-smelling red-bearded jailer's invitation for a waltz--another cause of nausea. And a page earlier Cincinnatus is taken up a serpentine road to his prison — which prepares us for the sense of dizziness and nausea (it was probably at a later period that Nabokov learned about Serpantinnaya, the most terrible torture prison of Kolyma).

The image of a person in a little boat contrasts not only with that of the "ship of state" but also with the idea of being submerged, unprotected, unseparated from the waters. On the intertextual plane it thus contrasts with the so-called "oceanic feeling," a religious experience that serves as an opiate to Koestler's Rubashov on the way to his execution. Rubashov's beliefs in the need for submerging one's individuality in the larger whole lead not only to complete submission to the party but also to a quite "counter-revolutionary" state of the soul, in which one's personality seems to dissolve "as a grain of salt in the sea; but at the same time the infinite sea seem[s] to be contained in the grain of salt."[21] The term "oceanic feeling" for a subjective feeling of limitlessness and eternity first appeared, to my knowledge, in Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*: Freud denies ever having had such a source of religious energies and refers the formula to, as is now known, Romain Rolland.[22]

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[18] See Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, transl. and ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: The Modern Library, 1968), p. 60.

[19] Nabokov's 1927 *Rul'* article "The Anniversary" (see note 5 above) already speaks contemptuously about the philistine flavour of the Bolshevik culture. Robert Alter was, to my knowldege, the first to connect the issues of philistine art and totalitarian politics in *Invitation*, pointing to Nabokov's vision of the banality of evil; see *"Invitation to a Beheading:* Nabokov and the Art of Politics" in Alfred Appel and Charles Newman (eds.), *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes* London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), pp. 41-59. Here again Shalamov would, to a large extent, have been in agreement with Nabokov; see, for instance, his story "Boris Yuzhanin," about the fate of the theatre director who led an early revolutionary experiment in Russia, *Voskreshenie listvennitsy*, ed. Michael Heller (Paris: YMCA, 1985), pp. 262-70.

[20] Nabokov, *Perepiska s sestroi*, p. 8, my translation.

[21] *Darkness at Noon*, p. 256.

[22] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, transl. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1962), p. 8.

Cincinnatus's personality does not dissolve in a larger whole even when he removes all the parts of his body in order to revel in his "secret medium" (*IB* 32). His religious experience is rather a sense of the pause, the hiatus, the chink through which there can come "leakings and drafts" from another dimension (*SM* 35). In Nabokov's works the sense of the "otherworld"[23] tends to be associated with moments of grief or sadness, whereas it is usually a spot of joy that is accompanied by a "sense of oneness with sun and stone" (*SM* 139). This is not an "oceanic" submersion but rather an exultation of the monistic faith in the universe where matter and spirit, man and God, sun and stone, are interconnected and equally marvellous. "Oneness with sun and stone" is, to some extent, a recycling of a motif of the *Book of Job*: when the test of faith involves courageous acceptance of the chastening, "thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field" (Job 5: 23). In Job, however, this motif stands not for a compensation at the nadir of misery. The idea of "oneness with stone" is also reinterpreted in Shalamov's "Sententia"[24]: the state of deprivation in which "thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field: and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee" is presented not as ultimate suffering but as a stage in a Gulag prisoner's recovery from a still worse condition, a completely deadened one. In general, strange as it may seem, or perhaps not strange at all, the best of the Gulag prose, fictional or factual, shares a number of themes, attitudes, and technical devices with Nabokov's novels.

Indeed, *Invitation* and *Bend Sinister* support the position of those writers (including Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov[25]) who treat penal facilities not as "a world apart" but as a bolder expression of the general tendencies that prevail in a totalitarian state.[26] Cincinnatus's pained awareness of the mysterious beauty of the landscapes beyond the town and the prison is akin to moments of the sublime in Shalamov's tales. Yet in *Invitation* the hills and gardens break out in a "deadly rash" (*IB* 205), studded with colored light-bulbs for a vulgar festivity. In Shalamov's story "The Path" the protagonist has been able to compose poems while walking his self-made path in the Kolyma woods, his niche away from the world of concentration camps--but the path becomes useless for poetry as soon as he discovers on it the footprints of another man.[27] Nature does not provide for romantic escapes from human pain.

With Nabokov, the basic "correctness" of the way in which the realities of the Soviet regime are reflected is a matter of moral-aesthetic choices rather than of knowledge of the details.[28] In

[23] For a systematic discussion of the quasi-dualistic moment in Nabokov's vision see Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991). Nabokov's narrative techniques associated with the double-world model have been explored in Donald B. Johnson, *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), esp. pp. 155-219.

[24] Rendered in English as "Sententious," see Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales,* transl. John Glad (New York, Norton, 1980), pp. 70-76.

[25] In the seventies Nabokov read Solzhenitsyn's work and welcomed his arrival in the West (their appointment at Montreux was strangely aborted--see Michael Scammell, *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography* New York: Norton, 1984, pp. 906-907). It is unlikely, however, that Nabokov read Shalamov's stories.

[26] In the literature on the Nazi camps this view is most clearly represented by Bruno Bettelheim's *The Informed Heart.* The opposite view is most clearly represented by David Rousset in *The Other Kingdom* or Gustav Herling-Hrudzinski in *A World Apart;* it finds a less articulate expression in the memoirs of Evgeniya Ginzburg and Lev Kopelev.

[27] *Voskreshenie listvennitsy,* pp. 275-77.

[28]Nabokov, however, seems to have been aware of the material on the Soviet camps that was reaching the Western and, in particular, the Russian émigré press. For a bibliography of such materials see Libushe Zorin, *Soviet Prisons and Concentration Camps: An Annotated Bibliography 1917-1980* (Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1980), or Jacques Rossi, *The Gulag Handbook: An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Soviet Penitentiary Institutions and Terms Related to the Forced labor Camps.* Transl. William A. Burbans (New York: Paragon House, 1989).

Invitation and *Bend Sinister* he combines Russian and German motifs with those of a parody on the Romantic prison — but the merciless realist Shalamov does something similar in the play *Anna Ivanovna*, where, in a deliberately self-referential move, he fuses pre-war and post-war details in the history of the Gulag. The truth of the human heart amidst mass atrocities allows for some fictional transposition, but it must be made explicit that a transposition takes place — hence the element of self-referentiality. Indeed, one of the recurrent themes in Gulag prose, factual or fictional, is the very fact, the conditions, and the motivation of the writing.

It is not only in metaphysical terms that one can read Nabokov's famous credo, "I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more" (*SO* 45) — compare it, for instance, with a statement of a survivor of the Nazi camps: "It is better than you think, but worse than anything that you can imagine."[29] Unlike authors like Stryton, Nabokov refuses to deal directly with the things that he does not know profoundly at first hand. In *Look at the Harlequins!* the weirdly cogent episode of the protagonist's visit to Russia includes a critique of the tourist-type approach to reality; one can compare this with Shalamov's criticism of Hemingway who "remained a tourist in Spain, no matter how long he fought in Madrid."[30] Yet Nabokov cannot ignore the modern atrocities which he has been fortunate not to witness. He renders them indirectly, through the pain of Pnin or the lady in "Signs and Symbols," through Humbert's shuttling between psychiatric sanatoria in the early forties, or through the surrealistic techniques of his dystopian novels.

To portray an individual's predicament in a totalitarian society, Nabokov places well-realized, almost tangibly living characters into slap-dash, threadbare settings, "hastily assembled" (*IB* 51) out of suggestive odds and ends that barely suffice to produce the impression of a cataclysm when ultimately dismantled. The Gulag authors, who command a profound knowledge of the camp setting, do the opposite: they reconstruct a detailed environment with complex logistics which, as in Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, can by itself suffice for the reality effect. Yet their portraits of the prisoners tend to be painted sparely: after some exposure to camp conditions personalities get depleted and fates run in awsomely similar tracks.

The shared sense of literary imagination clashing against unwieldy yet coercive realities partly accounts for the harmony between the self-reflexive element in Nabokov's works[31] and the lack of hermetic closure in Gulag prose. The latter, indeed, almost inevitably leaks into extratextual reality, whether by way of a coexistence of contradictory versions of the fictional plot (Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle*), or a cancelation of the protagonist at the end (*Cancer Ward*), or an inclusion of documents as appendices (Herling's *A World Apart*, Marchenko's

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[29] See Ramon Guthrie, Preface to David Rousset's *The Other Kingdom* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), p. 10.

[30] Shalamov, *"O proze"* (On prose), *Lev[j bereg* (The left bank; Moscow: Sovremennik, 1989), p. 569. Cf. Nabokov on Hemingway: "I read him for the fist time in the early forties, something about bells, balls, and bulls, and loathed it. Later I read his admirable 'The Killers' and the wonderful fish story which I was asked to translate into Russian but could not for some reason or other" (*SO* 80). Like Shalamov, Nabokov here seems to hint that a writer should deal with the things of which he has the most profound understanding, which are the most "real" to him.

[31] A large portion of my book *Vladimir Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989), is devoted to the self-referential aspect of ten of Nabokov's novels. In "Stories from Kolyma: The Sense of History," *HSLA* , 17 (1989), 189-220 and "Some Features of the Narrative Method in Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," In Honour of Professor Victor Levin: Russian Philology and History,* ed. W. Moskovich, J. Frankel, I. Serman, and S. Shvarzband (Jerusalem: Praedicta, 1992), pp. 270-82, I discuss some self-reflexive elements in Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn.

My Testimony), or a Pnin-like placing of autobiographical "sources" for the foregoing materials at the end (Shalamov's *Kolymskie rasskazy*).

In both Nabokov and the Gulag authors, the flaunting of the imaginative element combines with a certain reluctance of the imagination in the face of the greatest horrors. Nabokov does not give us the details of the torture to which David Krug is subjected; "the less said the better" is his comment on the condition of Linda and her associates after the gang rape (*BS* 228); the violence in Humbert's relationship with Dolly during their last ride together is suggested indirectly. Whatever atrocities are reported by Gulag authors like Shalamov, Panin, Ginzburg, Buber Neumann, or Maloumian (one of the most interesting French contributors to Gulag literature[32]), somewhere close by there is always a worse camp, a worse punishment cell, of which one is aware but which one does not wish to look into or imagine, despite one's duty to bear witness.

The possibility of Nabokov's influence on the Gulag literature, or vice versa, being excluded, the basis for the above analogies lies in the force of the ethical drives of the two otherwise so different bodies of literature. Towards the end of *Lolita*, Humbert says that if it can be proved to him "that in the infinite run it does not matter a jot that ... Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac," then "life is a joke" (*L* 285). If the main ethical drive of documentary literature is to bear witness, one of the most prominent objectives of Nabokov's works is, while keeping mass atrocities in mind, to prevent them from dwarfing the value of an individual life. Since the eight-digit number of the victims of mass atrocities is made up of individual tragedies, there is no clash between these two ethical aims.

Nabokov's Works Quoted

BS - Bend Sinister. New York: McGraw-Hill, l974.

IB - Invitation to a Beheading, trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1979.

KQK - King, Queen Knave. trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968.

L - The Annotated Lolita, ed. Alfred Appel. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970.

LATH - Look at the Harlequins! New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981.

PF - Pale Fire. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962.

SL - Selected Letters 1940-77. Ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1989.

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

SO - Strong Opinions. New York: McGraw-Hill, l981.

[32] See Armand Maloumian, *Les fils du Goulag* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1976). Perhaps the most noteworthy among the other books by French survivors of the Gulag are Andrée Sentaurens, *Dix-sept ans dans les camps sovietiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963) and Jean Nicholas, *11 ans au paradis* (Paris: Fayard, 1958); see also Pierre Rigoulot (in collaboration with Geoffroi Crunelle), *Les Français au Goulag 1917-1984* (Paris: Fayard, 1984).