

MIKOLA GYÖNGYI
(Szeged, Magyarország)

**The Liquid Mirror
(Transcending Aesthetic Utopianism
in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* and *The Gift*)**

Abstract: Nabokov wrote his masterpiece *Invitation to a Beheading* interrupting his own work, writing another novel, *The Gift*. My hypothesis is that *Invitation to a Beheading* can be considered as a solution of a problem or elaboration of an idea, which was arisen during the creation of the other, the “main” book. In the present paper research I analyze the water motifs of the *Invitation..* and *The Gift* with close reading method to demonstrate the relationship of Nabokovian reader and/or writer heroes to the art of literature, and, besides, realization of self-mimetic, self-reflective potentialities of literature as specific liquid mirror in these novels. I collate the liquid mirror concept with the parodic representations of the utopianism of Russian aesthetic tradition, first of all with Nikolay Chernyshevsky's materialist utopia. I also study the relevance of Nietzschean concept of aesthetic redemption in connection with Nabokovian novels, and I suggest a special, synchronous, simultaneous idea of this philosophical term: in my opinion Nabokovian aesthetic redemption is confined only to the duration of writing or reading. But this real, empirical time of literary process works as a gap, transforms to a secret passage, a way through to the unknown, timeless outside.

Keywords: Vladimir Nabokov, aesthetic utopianism, Nikolay Chernyshevsky, aesthetic redemption, *The Gift*, *Invitation to a Beheading*

Nabokov started working on his novel *Invitation to a Beheading* in June 1934, interrupting the writing of his other novel *The Gift*, and completed the first draft within two weeks. The circumstances of the creation of the novel raise the possibility that the new novel solves a problem or elaborates on a topic, idea or variation that was impossible to fit in the framework of *The Gift*, but it is closely related to the poetic structure of the other novel (BOYD 1990: 408).

The Gift is set in a real time-space: in the Berlin of the 1920s, whereas the main location of *Invitation to a Beheading* is an unnamed fortification in an unnamed city in an unnamed century; it might as well take place either in the future as in the past. The main character's first name, Cincinnatus, is a Latin surname; the name of a Roman aristocrat Lucius Quincticus Cincinnatus, who was the model for a politician who promoted classical, bucolic virtues in the 5th

century B. C. However, the main character's surname is unknown; it is marked by C. The name Cincinnatus C. is not an expression of remembrance and self-identity like the name of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdintsev, but the far-away reminiscence of a past sunk into oblivion.¹ At the same time, however, similarly to the main character of *The Gift*, Cincinnatus C. is also a writer, who starts writing with the long pencil he finds in his cell, and by the time he is taken to the place of execution, there is only the stub of the pencil left.²

Perhaps the most exciting section of *The Gift* is Chapter 4, Chernyshevski's biography. The idea that the biography of a real historical person, writer and public figure Nicolay Chernyshevski's "literary biography" should be created by a fictional character in a novel, is all the more unconventional and unique because he is a real personality who, in the middle of the 19th century, laid the foundation for the utilitarian and materialistic literary approach which was further vulgarized by the aesthetes of the Bolshevik era in the artistic theory called socialist realism. The theses of Chernyshevski's doctoral dissertation written in 1853, entitled *Art's Aesthetic Relation to Reality*, are diametrically opposed to the artistic approach shared by his biographer Godunov-Cherdintsev (and, according to his essays, memoirs and interviews, Nabokov himself). It would be obvious to regard Chernyshevski's ironic portrait as a kind of literary revenge or vendetta. However, Fyodor repeatedly denies in the novel that his work is a slap in the face to Marxism. What is more, in the design phase of the book, in Chapter Three of *The Gift* he enumerates every argument in favour of Chernyshevski: "He sincerely admired the way Chernyshevski, an enemy of capital punishment, made deadly fun of the poet Zhukovski's infamously benign and meanly sublime proposal to surround executions with a mystic secrecy (...) for an execution should be moving."

¹ Opinions are deeply divided on the issue of the prototype of Cincinnatus' character among researchers. Those who read *Invitation to a Beheading* as a parodistic distopia tend to see a reflection of Chernyshevsky's figure in Cincinnatus (БУКС 1998, ДАНИЛЕВСКИЙ 1996). In his essay entitled *Пушкинские подтексты в романе Набокова «Приглашение на казнь»* (Pushkinian Subtexts in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*) Alexander Dolinin argues that Cincinnatus' character does not have any connection with Chernyshevsky, however, it has blood relation with Pushkin. (ДОЛИНИН 2004: 214-230). Zsuzsa Hetényi also shares Dolinin's opinion when she points out that the Latin word 'cincinnatus' means 'curly-haired', and 'curly-haired' is a traditional Pushkinian attribute in Russian literary history (HETÉNYI 2015). On the contrary, Dana Dragunoiu proposes a political approach, studying the novel in the connection with the Russian radical tradition (DRAGUNOIU 2001). In my own point of view, Cincinnatus' figure simultaneously carries both Pushkinian and Chernyshevskian motifs and characteristic patterns.

² While analyzing the pencil metaphor in detail, Gennady Barabtarlo comes to the conclusion, that "the pencil is both a local timepiece installed for reference and a means, if not a source, of the novel's existence, the unavoidable dwindling of which nears the inevitable end of that world" (BARABTARLO 1990: 390-392).

(NABOKOV 1980:187) This literary historical motif returns on the pages of *Invitation to a Beheading* in the way that the death sentence is communicated to the convict *in a whisper* in accordance with the law, out of sheer tact.

When Nabokov was asked in an interview by one of his former American students (NABOKOV 1990: 65) what his standpoint about Chernyshevski was and what his intention with this strange chapter in his novel had been, Nabokov referred the questioner to Koncheyev, another character in the novel, and also to Chapter 14 of his autobiography *Speak Memory*.

Koncheyev says, in his knowledgeable and laudatory critique of Chernyshevski's biography, that "...during an invasion or an earthquake, when escapers carry away with them everything that they can lay hands on, someone being sure to burden himself with a large, framed portrait of some long-forgotten relative." »Just such a portrait (wrote Koncheyev) is for the Russian intelligentsia the image of Chernyshevski which was spontaneously but accidentally carried away abroad by the émigrés, together with other, more useful things«; and this is how Koncheyev explained the stupefaction occasioned by the appearance of Fyodor Konstantinovich's book: »Somebody suddenly confiscated the portrait.«" (NABOKOV 1980: 281)

In Chapter 14 of *Speak Memory*, and indeed in the whole book, there is not a single mention of Chernyshevski. However, Nabokov goes into a lot of details about the hunger for ideology of some certain dominant emigrant groups, about their desire for a foothold provided by some kind of faith in the emigrant lifestyle, which was perceived in many respects as a vacuum: "In their attitude toward literature they were curiously conservative; with them soul-saving came first, log-rolling next, and art last. A retrospective glance nowadays notes the surprising fact of these *belles lettristes* abroad aping fettered thought at home by decreeing that to be a representative of a group or an epoch was more important than to be an individual writer." (NABOKOV 1966: 210)

Actually, this is the point that can provide a key to the central problem of *Invitation to a Beheading*: as the "fettered thought" is not only inherent dictatorships but it can also hold the mind in captivity even in a basically free society, living in good conditions.

The author assigns every typical attribute of dungeons to the place of Cincinnatus' imprisonment: "the road wound around its rocky base" (NABOKOV 1989), the condemned spends his last days among thick walls, long, maze-like corridors and small, porthole-like windows. At the same time, however, in a total contradiction to the concepts of solidity, hardness and immovability, the signs of instability and plasticity are also present right from the beginning; it feels as if the whole building standing on a rock and half embedded in the rock were actually be floating on water and could lose its contours and be dissolved in some wet medium at any time.

Godunov-Cherdintsev builds up Chernyshevski's biography using themes

recurring in spirals. Fyodor's biography analyses not only the work and political fate of the writer but, as if applying the writer's own theory, he describes the hero's physical appearance, discusses his short-sightedness in detail, his relations with women, etc., that is, he examines the relationship of his theory to reality. These leitmotifs: the fortification, the flirtatious wife, the death sentence passed on fabricated charges, writing and reading in prison – can all be found in connection with Cincinnatus on the pages of *Invitation to a Beheading*. These are the parallels which make it possible for us to see the character of Cincinnatus not only as the frail and vulnerable victim of a dictatorship, nor only as a creature thrown into existence and torn between the material and non-material worlds, but also as a thinking human being wandering in his own maze among the false constructions he has created about reality. That is, among other possible premonitions, Cincinnatus also contains Chernyshevski and of course Cherdintsev, too, who is being formed in *The Gift* parallel to him.

Chernyshevski, who suffered from short-sightedness, dealt with the problem of perpetual motion for five years. This is what Godunov-Cherdintsev considers to be the first instance of his hero's fate that so to speak opened the door to the whole series of calamities to come: "Right here is the chink with the nudius of revenge, since this sensible young man, who – let us not forget – is only concerned with the good of all mankind, has eyes like a mole, while his blind, white hands move on a different plane from his faulty but obstinate and muscular mind." (NABOKOV 1980: 200) Cincinnatus' dungeon is gradually exposed, and finally all the makeshift props collapse completely. However, Chernyshevski will never be able to see out from the fake backdrops of his own world-view.

At this point, it is illuminating to compare Chernyshevski's and Cincinnatus' relation to water in the two novels.³ When, in accordance with the law, his death sentence is whispered to Cincinnatus and he is helped out of the court room, he seems to have forgotten how to walk: "he planted his feet unsteadily, ... as if he were about to fall through like a man who has dreamt that he is walking on water." (NABOKOV 1989) The concepts of floating and fluidity mainly appear in similes and metaphors referring to the mental processes of the main character: in his memories, dreams, emotions and his imagination, as well as in the unintended and uncontrollable processes of reading, writing and thinking. Furthermore, walking on the water is also a Christ-motif, which carries the concepts of both spiritual suffering and resurrection.

In *The Gift*, Fyodor writes about young Chernyshevski, who had gone to St. Petersburg from Saratov, the town of his birth: "He liked the blueness and transparency of the Neva – what an abundance of water in the capital, how pure the water was (he quickly ruined his stomach on it); but he particularly

³ For more on the water theme in Nabokov's works see ALEXANDROV 1991, RUTLEDGE 2011: 90–96; water as an invariant motif HETÉNYI 2015: 921.

liked the orderly distribution of the water, the sensible canals”. (NABOKOV 1980: 198) Also related to water is the “topic of tears” in the book. According to Fyodor, “Chernyshevski cried willingly and often” and there are some words smeared by teardrops in his manuscripts: “»Three tears rolled down«, he notes with characteristic accuracy in his diary – and the reader is tormented momentarily with the involuntary thought, can one have an odd number of tears or is it only the dual nature of the source which makes us demand an even number?” (NABOKOV 1980: 202) In Chernyshevski’s biography, water, in opposition with the nature of this medium, is numerical, countable, mathematically calculable and, as opposed to reality, it appears perfectly clean. Teardrops, even those of real suffering, shall be counted.

The great paradox of the other novel, *Invitation to a Beheading*, is that while Cincinnatus’ mental processes are linked to the transparent medium of water in every respect, he is sentenced to death because of a “birth defect” that “he was impervious to the rays of others” and “produced... a bizarre impression, as of a lone dark obstacle in the world of souls transparent to one another”. (NABOKOV 1989) However, it is a question why this creature, who was “opaque” by fate, and was carrying his painful loneliness like a dark secret, searched so eagerly the transparent medium of water around as well as within himself.

Cincinnatus in the novel is the prisoner of a world built on the basis of Chernyshevski’s principles and his release does not depend on whether he can escape from the fortification, because he cannot. Release depends on whether the prisoner can see through the props, through his own fettered thoughts in circumstances when continuity is broken both with his personal past (he “was a son of an unknown transient” (NABOKOV 1989)) and also in relation to cultural memory (he manufactures rag dolls modelled on great Russian writers). The moment of Cincinnatus’ beheading coincides with the moment of his awakening. In other words, the false constructions of reality are sooner or later revealed, even if they are supported by a totalitarian and murderous state apparatus – at least in the world of the novel.

In actuality, Cincinnatus is not seeking the paradoxical medium of water but rather he simply reacts to it hyper-sensitively, in the same way as Godunov-Cherdintsev in *The Gift*. When in the middle of the night Fyodor takes a break from writing, he is suddenly faced with all the burdens of his miserable reality: “But once the window was closed again, feeling the void between his bunched fingers, he turned to the patiently waiting lamp, to the scattered first drafts, to the still-warm pen ... and returned at once to that world which was as natural to him as snow to the white hare or water to Ophelia.” (NABOKOV 1980:118-119) Fyodor, or rather the author who created him, also characterizes the state of writing by similes belonging to the semantic field of the ‘wet medium’, but these two similes seem to contradict each other. Snow is indeed the natural medium of the hare, but in what sense could water, in which she drowns

herself, be “natural” to a suicide? Literary creation (reading and writing alike) is a crossing over or a disappearance, a delirium which, while exploring the secrets of life, becomes similar to the greatest secret of all: death.

Cincinnatus, Cherdintsev and Chernyshevski are the constructions of different paradigms of a writer’s life. In analysing their figures, I have come to the conclusion that writing in Nabokov’s combinations does not mean an artistic escapism and does not promise the possibility of “aesthetic redemption”, at least not in the sense of some projection or program directed to the future. Literature carries its own genealogy and its own memory both on Pushkin’s and Chernyshevski’s branch that is, along the lines of so-called “clear poetry” as well as socially-ideologically committed art. The uniqueness of Nabokov’s model lies in the fact that he melts the two together by lifting them out of historical-numerical chronology and the captivity of political, ideological and critical theories and placing them into the present, into the timeless fluid of the personal, real, actual mental process of writing and reading, which is taking place in the present moment, and the creative knowledge, learning and understanding cleared of the teleological *constructions* of the future.

In Nabokov’s aesthetic model, literature is a medium (a “light conductor”, just like water) that at the same time creates and mediates the mysterious, parallel or synchronic reality, which can also be perceived in everyday life, and which can also be discovered and carried by the human gaze, because it is present in the visible invisibly or, to be more precise, overlapped, obscured and masked in the usually fallible, distorting mirror of interpretations, conclusions and attributions. The motto of *Invitation to a Beheading* is the greatest illusion of all formulated by “the great French writer”, (the fictional) Delalande in his (fictional) work entitled *Discours sur les ombres* (A Discourse on Shadows) as follows: „Comme un fou se croit Dieu, / nous nous croyons mortels.” (Like a fool believes he is God, we believe we are mortals.) (NABOKOV 1989)

Literature

- ALEXANDROV 1991 = ALEXANDROV V. Nabokov’s Otherworld. Princeton, 1991. DOI: [10.1515/9781400861712](https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400861712)
- BARABTARLO 1990 = BARABTARLO G. Within and Without Cincinnatus’ Cell. References Gauges in Nabokov’s Invitation to a Beheading // Slavic Review, Vol. 49. No. 3. 1990. 390–397. DOI: [10.2307/2499985](https://doi.org/10.2307/2499985)
- DRAGUNOIU 2001 = DRAGUNOIU D. Vladimir Nabokov’s “Invitation to a Beheading” and the Russian Radical Tradition // Journal of Modern Literature, Vol. 25. No.1. 2001. 53–69. DOI: [10.1353/jml.2001.0017](https://doi.org/10.1353/jml.2001.0017)
- HETÉNYI 2015 = HETÉNYI ZS. Nabokov regényösvényei. Budapest, 2015.
- BOYD 1990 = BOYD B. Vladimir Nabokov. The Russian Years. Princeton, 1990. DOI: [10.1515/9781400884025](https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400884025)
- NABOKOV 1966 = NABOKOV V. Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited. New York, 1966.

- NABOKOV 1980 = NABOKOV V. *The Gift*. Translated from the Russian by Michael Scammel with the collaboration of the author. New York, 1980.
- NABOKOV 1989 = NABOKOV V. *Invitation to a Beheading*. Translated by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author. E-book. New York, 1989.
- NABOKOV 1990 = NABOKOV V. *Strong Opinions*. Interviewer: Alfred Appel Jr. New York, 1990.
- RUTLEDGE 2011 = RUTLEDGE DAVID S. *Nabokov's Permanent Mystery. The Expression of Metaphysics in His Works*. Jefferson, North-Carolina, 2011.
- БУКС 1998 = БУКС Н. Эшафот в хрустальном дворце. О русских романах Владимира Набокова. Москва, 1998.
- ДАНИЛЕВСКИЙ 1996 = ДАНИЛЕВСКИЙ А. Н.Г. Чернышевский в «Приглашение на казнь» В. В. Набокова. Об одном из подтекстов романа // Труды по русской и славянской филологии. Литературоведение. Тарту, 1996. Т. 2. 209–225.
- ДОЛИНИН 2004 = ДОЛИНИН А. Пушкинские подтексты в романе Набокова «Приглашение на казнь» // Истинная жизнь писателя Сирина. Работы о Набокове. Санкт-Петербург, 2004. 214–230.