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**SACRIFICING THE
MAIDEN('S)HEAD:
DECODING NABOKOV'S
BURLESQUE OF SEX AND
VIOLENCE IN *INVITATION
TO A BEHEADING***

What have I put in my works to suggest so many subtleties?

I have put in them a little door opening onto a mystery.¹

BEHEADING

Two tales of decollations particularly resonate in the Western artistic imagination—that of Orpheus, the sublime musician, and of John the Baptist, the seer-prophet to whom the divine voice spoke in the wilderness. Ancient Greek myth identified Orpheus as the son of Apollo and Calliope (the Muse of epic poetry). He was renowned as a skilled player of the lyre (a gift from

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¹ Odilon Redon, *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists*, trans. Jeanne L. Wasserman (New York: George Braziller, 1996).

his father) and his music bewitched the Sirens and Hades. "Not only his fellow-mortals but wild beasts were softened by his strains."² According to Aeschylus, the Maenads tore Orpheus to pieces, and his severed head, perched on his lyre, floated to Lesbos, where an oracle was established. The head prophesied with such renown that Apollo, in a fit of jealousy, eventually closed the Orphic oracle, because its popularity outrivaled that of his Delphic shrine. "Orphism" was revived, or rather, reinvented by nineteenth-century poets in the context of "the broader Romantic revival of poetic or imaginative man...Orpheus represented the reflexive or self-conscious activity of the imagination, the power by which man distinguishes himself as the single artificer of the world in which he sings."³ European artists of the century painted Orpheus's head with iconographic reverence and repetitiveness. For example, Gustave Moreau's earliest innovative renditions ("Thracian Girl Carrying the Head of Orpheus," 1864 and 1865) depict the head, crowned with the poet's laurel wreath, carried on his lyre by a young woman.⁴ Andre Breton wrote of this exemplary image, "[A] priestess exchang[es] with Orpheus the unutterable gaze of Hegelian 'death' and a human being to which it transmits its secret."⁵ Marcel Proust, on the same painting by Moreau: "Thus it is that the poets do not wholly die and something of their true soul is kept for us, something of that inner life in which alone they felt their true self expand and live."⁶ The Orphic head figures emblematically as the immortal repository of divine imagination, poetry, and mystical knowledge.

The severed cranium as a symbolic locus of knowledge is likewise developed in the various accounts and depictions of John the Baptist. One should recall the theological role of John as "precursor" or "forerunner" in the Gospels. He is among the first to be inspired by the *logos* to *know* that Jesus is the Christ ("The word of God came to John...in the wilderness");⁷ he possessed theological knowledge, *gnosis* in its pure sense. John's imprisonment was politically and morally motivated; the result of his open challenge to Herod, and his condemnation of Herod and Herod's wife, Herodias, for moral

² Thomas Bulfinch, *Myths of Greece and Rome* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 218.

³ R.A. Yoder, *Emerson and the Orphic Poet in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), xii-xiii; see also Elizabeth Sewall, *The Orphic Voice: Poetry and Natural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).

⁴ Pierre-Louis Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau: With a Catalogue of the Finished Paintings, Watercolors and Drawings* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1976), 15, 97.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 98-9.

⁷ Luke 3:2.

turpitude.⁸ The Baptist's beheading was the caprice of the enraged and offended Herodias, carried out at the request of her daughter Salome, after the daughter's salacious dance so enthralled the phlegmatic Herod that he offered to give her anything she wished, up to half of his kingdom.⁹ Traditional iconographic renditions of the event were literal in their visual presentation of the terse Gospel account.¹⁰ For example, in the sixteenth-century fresco in Varlaam Monastery (Meteora, Greece), a soldier wielding a large unsheathed sword prepares to execute the haloed and kneeling John, while Salome bends close to John to catch his head on a gold plate. It was, again, the nineteenth-century poets and painters who perceived in the biblical event a mystical quality worthy of deeper analysis and interpretation. Modernist painters and writers and, a few decades later, film directors,¹¹ concentrated on the dance of Salome, often in the presence of or holding the detached head. Emblematic of the latter-day interpretation of the event is Moreau's "The Apparition"

⁸ Matthew 14:3-4; Mark 6:17-18.

⁹ Matthew 14:6-10; Mark 6:21-28. The dance, erotic by nature, thus takes the form of *danse macabre*, a dance of death. See Hellmut Rosenfeld, *Der mittelalterliche Totentanz: Entstehung-Entwicklung-Bedeutung* (Cologne: Bohlau Verlag, 1968); and Daniel Rancour-Laferrière, "All the World's a *Vertep*: The Personification/Depersonification Complex in Gogol's *Sorochinskaja jarmarka*," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* VI.3 (September 1982): 344-7. In the Salome myth, eroticism prefigures death. Thomas Mann noted the correlation in his novel *Joseph the Provider* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), 272-3: "There does exist a certain relation between death and marriage, a bridal chamber and a tomb, a murder and the abduction of a virgin. It is no great strain to think of a bridegroom as a god of death." Does Cincinnatus's dance early in Nabokov's text serve as a Salome-inspired prefigurement of his death by decapitation? Is the (homo)erotic overtone suggestive of the coitus=death equation? "Rodion the jailer came in and offered to dance a waltz with him. Cincinnatus agreed. They began to whirl. The keys on Rodion's leather belt jangled... The dance carried them into the corridor. Cincinnatus was much smaller than his partner. Cincinnatus was light as a leaf... his big limpid eyes looked askance, as is always the case with timorous dancers... They described a circle... and glided back into the cell, and now Cincinnatus regretted that the swoon's friendly embrace had been so brief" (Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* [New York: Paragon Books, 1959], 13-4).

¹⁰ Two significant monographs on John the Baptist iconography are: Raoul Plus, *Saint Jean-Baptiste dans l'art* (Paris: Editions Alsatia, 1937), and Oskar Thulin, *Johannes der Tauffer im geistlichen Schauspiel des Mittelalters und der Reformationszeit* (Leipzig: Dietrich, 1930).

¹¹ So striking was the visual potential of the dance of death that between 1902 and 1922, ten silent film versions of Salome were made (four American, two German, two Italian, one French, one British). See Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 194-5. For a substantial analysis of the manipulation of the motifs from the legend of John the Baptist and Salome in the novel, see Gavriel Shapiro, "The Salome Motif in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*," in *Delicate Markers: Subtexts in Vladimir Nabokov's Invitation to a Beheading* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

(1876),¹² in which the revived head of the Baptist, eyes wide open, blood dripping from his neck and surrounded by a halo-sunburst, hovers before the astonished dancer. Here the traditional norms of death have been abandoned. The resurrection of the head is presented as a mystical accomplishment, while the unvanquishable power of *gnosis* is proclaimed. The abstraction is carried further in a startling icon ("The Glorification of St. John") of the early twentieth century by J. H. Rosen, painted for the Armenian Cathedral in L'viv.¹³ John's headless torso (a sunburst in place of his head) stands serenely in a row of saints. The head, with the mouth opened wide in agony, is held by an attendant saint. The rays of light forming the sunburst are an iconographic *topos* traditionally reserved for the mystical dove, the Holy Spirit, which is the divine manifestation that can confer charismatic gifts of prophecy and knowledge. In the poetic realm, then, the severed head is to be recognized as metonymic of poetic imagination and mystical knowledge.¹⁴

BOATING AND BLUENESS

In the literature of the Romantics and their followers, imagination and fantasy were likened to boats, more precisely to ship cabins, which were envisioned as isolated, expansive crania-wombs surrounded by the nurturing sea. The cabins, with their single portholes, symbolized the place of mental gestation and imaginistic peregrinations. Des Esseintes, the effete decadent of Huysmans' novel *Against the Grain* (1884), for example, constructs precisely such a womb-cabin as the dining room (the place of nurturing) in his hideaway: "The dining room...resembled a ship's cabin with its wooden ceiling of arched beams, its bulkheads and flooring of pitch-pine, its tiny

¹² Pierre-Louis Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau, The Watercolors* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1985), 28-29, plate 11. See also Mathieu, *Catalogue*, 131, 157-164, 176, 328-9 (Moreau's variations on the theme of Salome); and 247, plate on Jean Delville's "Dead Orpheus," 1893, in which the severed head appears to grow out of the lyre, a pure evocation of the notion of the head as the repository of the Muses (whose attribute was the lyre).

¹³ Plus, *Saint*, 120.

¹⁴ It is curious to note in passing that in the psychoanalytic realm, decapitation is interpreted as castration. Freud developed the thesis in his analysis of the mythological theme of "the horrifying decapitated head of Medusa." "To decapitate=to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something" (Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 18 [London: Hogarth Press, 1953], 273). Is that "something" secret knowledge?

window-opening cut through the woodwork as a porthole in a vessel's side."¹⁵ This is the sea-worthy room in which, often under the influence of exotic liqueurs, des Esseintes hallucinates and carries on long, thoughtful discourses with himself.

The mythology of boat-womb-cranium as a vehicle for imaginative travel is further developed in Arthur Rimbaud's "*Le Bateau ivre* [*The Drunken Boat*]." The title conjoins the boat with intoxication, itself a mental transformation and an inducement to imaginative journey.

Ostensibly, "*Le Bateau ivre*" describes the journey of the voyant in a tipsy boat that has been freed from all constraints and launched headlong into a world of sea and sky that is heaving with the erotic rhythms of a universal dynamic force. The voyant himself is on an ecstatic search for some unnamed ideal that he seems to glimpse through the aquatic tumult.¹⁶

Vladimir Nabokov hinted at the link between Rimbaud's poem and his own work. In *Lolita*, the verse is conjured up with a deliberately but tellingly travestied title, "*Le Bateau bleu* [*The Blue Boat*]."¹⁷ Nabokov employed the image of the boat in *Invitation to a Beheading* in a way quite sympathetic to the significance it had attained in earlier literature. Quite contrary to his adamant claim that he "detest[ed] symbols and allegories (which is due partly to my old feud with Freudian voodooism and partly to my loathing of generalizations devised by literary mythists and sociologists"),¹⁸ a statement that only brings attention to those things he claimed to avoid, Nabokov made full use of a large cache of traditional symbols and metaphors. The prison cell of Cincinnatus (the hero of *Invitation*) is likened to a ship's cabin. As such, it is representative of the imaginative writing he composes there (his "criminal mind" being nurtured by it the way Raskol'nikov's mind drew peculiar strength from his tiny garret [каюта]).¹⁹ The cell is thus Cincinnatus's hyperbolically expanded brain, the womb of imagination, the dwelling-place of the last true

¹⁵ J. K. Huysmans, *Against the Grain* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), 18.

¹⁶ Magaret Davies-Mitchell, "Rimbaud, Arthur," *Encyclopædia Britannica* (2006). Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 10 May 2006, <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-6202>.

¹⁷ "In horrible taste but basically suggestive of a cultured man—not a policeman, not a common goon, not a lewd salesman—were such assumed names as 'Arthur Rainbow'—plainly the travestied author of *Le Bateau Bleu*—let me laugh a little too, gentlemen..." (Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* [New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1955], 252).

¹⁸ Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" (in *Lolita*, 316).

¹⁹ A workman who comes to give Raskol'nikov money called the garret "a ship's cabin; *ekaia morskaiia kaiuta*"—this the room in which Raskol'nikov ruminates and hallucinates (F. M. Dostoevskii, *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* [Moscow: Nauka, 1970], 94).

gnostic (“I knew what it is impossible to know”).²⁰ The cell, “with its peephole like a leak in a boat,” is where Cincinnatus becomes seasick, or alternately, nearly drowns.²¹ From this “port” he sets off on an imagined journey by tub-canoe in the spirit of des Esseintes. The mental journey is induced by Cincinnatus’s *writing* a journal entry on Day five.²² Thus accomplished though art, the journey is reminiscent of the symbolist painter Odilon Redon’s variation of the Orphic head. In his “*Tete d’Orphee flottant sur les eaux*” (c. 1881), the upright head floats, its neck rooted in and drawing sustenance from the water. Here is a vision of the cranium of imagination as a boat. In a later variant (“*Tete d’Orphee sur la lyre*”), the lyre serves as vessel.²³ How eloquent and clear is the visual portrayal of the unity of symbols — head, boat, water — the sources and nourishers of creativity and imagination!

Nabokov reveals in *Lolita* that blue is the color of the boat inspired by Rimbaud’s poem. Blue thus becomes the synonym for intoxication-fantasy. Those critical colorists who have exhaustively analyzed the symbolic values of various colors in various poetries and literatures report with great consistency that

the blue sky...is a symbol employed throughout post-romantic literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to reveal man’s isolation, the indifference of everything beyond the human sphere to the sufferings within him, to the hardships and catastrophes of his existence.²⁴

Further, as the critical psychoanalyst Jung states

We would conjecture that blue standing for the vertical means height and depth (the blue sky above, the blue sky below)...The vertical would correspond to the unconscious. But the unconscious in a man has feminine characteristics, and blue is the traditional colour of the Virgin’s cloak.²⁵

²⁰ Ibid., 95.

²¹ Nabokov, *Invitation*, 12-13, 57.

²² Ibid., 64-5.

²³ Robert Coustet, *L’Univers d’Odilon Redon* (Paris: Henri Screpel, 1984), 84; Roseline Bacou, *La donation Ari et Suzanne Redon* (Paris: Editions de la Reunion des musees nationaux, 1984), 13.

²⁴ W. J. Lillymans, “The Blue Sky: A Recurrent Symbol,” *Comparative Literature* 21 (1969): 118. See also the discussions of the significance of the color blue in Allan H. Pasco, *The Color-keys to “A la recherche du temps perdu”* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1976), 85-100, 211; William Gass, *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1975).

²⁵ Carl G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), 203-4.

Thus blue possesses two symbolic referents, the intellect and femininity. The bilingual punster has yet another trick he can play: *Goluboi* (*goluben'kii*), the “blue” of blue skies, of Nabokov’s blue porthole (“*goluboi glazok*”), blue temples (“*golubizna viskov*”), and “bluest blue” pulsating veins (“*golubye, kak samoe goluboe, pul'sirovali zhilki*”), are all slang for gay/homosexual, the Russian equivalent of *l'amour bleu*, linking Cincinnatus’s imagination to his ambiguous gender role.²⁶

Nabokov accepts and employs both the normative significance of blue as intellect, and its secondary significance as femininity in his novel *Invitation to a Beheading*. The reader is *invited* to the *beheading* of a “blue” character, one who stands out from the others in the text because of his intellectual capacities and his uncertain sexuality. But the text is also an invitation to intellectual search and creative thinking on the part of the reader; the text is riddled with allusions to boating and to the color blue. These hints underlie the entirety of the novel, forming its hidden structure of signification in a multi-layered, bilingual, shifting, and expansive verbal game. Let us attempt to trace these underlying meanings; to enter Nabokov’s game to unravel its significance. To do so requires the reader to become a player and match the moves of the well-known chess master.

NABOKOV’S CEREBRAL WEDDING GAME IN *INVITATION TO A BEHEADING*

*The Queen turned crimson with fury,
and...began screaming. “Off with her
head! Off with—” Koroleva pobagrovela
ot iarosti...i riavknula: “Otrubit’ ei
golovu! Otrub...”*²⁷

The traditional Russian village wedding as recorded by nineteenth-century ethnographers was a protracted ceremony which, in folk parlance, was termed *igra*, a ritualized “game,” a community-wide performance with formalized acts and scenes. The celebration was an elaborately orchestrated

²⁶ Nabokov, *Invitation*, 26, 36, 121, 124.

²⁷ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland: and, Through the Looking-glass and what Alice found there* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 281; Vladimir Nabokov, trans., *Ania v strane chudes*, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v 5 tt. vol. 1* (St. Petersburg: Symposium, 1999), 405.

affair, highly theatrical, that is, artificial, in nature. Mid- and late- twentieth century American weddings, those “once-in-a-lifetime” staged extravaganzas, share much of the spirit of their Russian counterparts.²⁸ The bride and groom become king and queen for a day, the central characters in an often overly staged drama of union which climaxes, at least ideally, in the annihilation of the bride’s virginity on the wedding night. One expansive subtext of Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading* [*Priglasenie na kazn’*]²⁹ is a broad burlesque of this wedding “game,” which is intensified by delightful inversions and perversions. Nabokov’s will be in essence a gay wedding—the mock union of two men, an executioner and the executionee, Pierre and Cincinnatus, whose nuptial bed is an execution block on Thriller Square.

The crux of Nabokov’s wedding game is the linking of balls and berries, the folkloric images of ripe female fecundity, with Cincinnatus’s head. The berry is frequently encountered in East Slavic wedding songs, particularly in *velichaniia*, songs of praise, often deliberately profane,³⁰ sung to the bridal couple during the wedding feast. In a song addressed to the bride, for example, we hear: “*Zemlianka-iagodka / Otchego-zhe ty krasna? / Oi, liuli, oi liuli, / Otchego-zhe ty krasna?*”; O little berry, little strawberry/ Why are you so red? / O la-dee-da, / Why are you so red?”; and in a typical expanded couplet addressed to the bride and groom: “*Vinograd v sadu tsvetet, / A iagoda, a iagoda sozrevaet. / Vinograd-to—Ivan-sudar’, / A iagoda, a iagoda—svet Praskov’ia ego, / A iagoda, a iagoda—svet Ivanovna ego*; A vine blossoms in the garden, / A berry, a berry is ripening. / Now the vine is Master Ivan, / And the berry, the berry is his beloved Praskov’ia, / And the

²⁸ For an evocative collection of photos of American weddings, quite in keeping with the spirit of Nabokov’s commentary on the “glossy fictionalization” of life (*Invitation*, 50-1), see Barbara Norfleet, *Wedding* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979). This was the catalogue for an exhibition of photographs at the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts, Harvard University (1976). Note in particular a 1944 photo of a chubby fellow in a bridesmaid’s veil holding a bouquet of pansies and the photos of guests admiring gifts.

²⁹ Russian text written in 1934 and first serialized in the Paris émigré journal *Sovremennye zapiski* June 1934-March 1936. *Invitation to a Beheading*, English translation (New York: Paragon Books, 1959).

³⁰ A universal tendency corroborated in Mann’s recounting of Joseph’s wedding feast: “More and more as the evening wore on, the laughter and rejoicing rather coarsely betrayed the real idea at the bottom of a wedding feast, the thought of what was naturally to follow. One might put it that the idea of abduction and murder and the idea of fertility came together and flowed into license; so that the air was full of offensive innuendo, of winking, obscene allusions, and roars of laughter” (*Joseph*, 276). Compare with Nabokov’s description of the “informal supper,” at which “the guests roared” at Pierre’s telling of a bawdy anecdote (*Invitation*, 183-4).

berry, the berry is his beloved Ivanovna.”³¹ In *Eugenii Onegin*, Pushkin plays with this folkloric connotation: “When we’ve lured a fellow, / when afar we see him, / we shall scatter, dear ones, / pelter him with berries, / with cherries, with raspberries, / with red currants.”³² “The snowball tree, the raspberry, the red currant,” the folklorist Sokolov modestly observed in his discussion of the imagery of wedding songs, “are the symbols of a girl just entering into marriage. The latter symbols, like many others, are based upon frankly sexual, erotic factors.”³³ Clinically speaking, the berry makes reference to the *virgo intacta*, the symbol of the state of maidenhead. Balls (and melons) are hyperbolic inflations of that symbol of intact virginity, a grotesque gigantism of the *petite flora* “cherry” that, in English slang too, connotes virginity and the intact hymen.

Nabokov’s *Invitation* is cluttered with berries, red fruits and balls—a cornucopia of feminine sexuality: “ruddy and glossy” cherries, apples, “rosy kisses tasting of wild strawberries,” “a dozen yellow plums,” “a piece of brilliant barberry-red hard candy” on Emmie’s tongue, “a spurting peach,” “apricot moon.”³⁴ Even Pierre identifies himself as “an Elderburian; *Vyshnegradets*” (“Call on me, I shall treat you to some of our elderburies” [rendered as *vyshni* in the Russian text]) jubilates Pierre à la Rudy Panko.³⁵ The ball appears as

³¹ N. P. Kolpakova, *Lirika russkoj svad’by* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1973), 144, 157–8.

³² This is Nabokov’s translation from the Russian, from Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, trans. with a commentary Vladimir Nabokov (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 172.

³³ Y. M. Sokolov, *Russian Folklore* (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1966), 522. See also the folkloric examples culled from Propp and Dal’ in Daniel Rancour-Laferrrière, “Pushkin’s Still Unravished Bride: A Psychoanalysis of Tat’jana’s Dream,” in *Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Daniel Rancour-Laferrrière (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: J. Benjamins Publishing Co., 1989). In Russian literature, particularly among the “village-prose” writers and those influenced by them, the motif is prolific. See for example Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *Iagodnye mesta* (Moskva: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1982) [Wild Berries (NY: W. Morrow, 1984)], and Vasilii Shukshin, *Snowball Berry Red* [*Kalina krasnaia*] (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1979). Updike, undoubtedly unaware of the rich folkloric associations, laments the repetition of the symbol in Yevtushenko’s novel (“as if repeating things rendered them profound”). “*Wild Berries* begins . . . with a hail of berries, as symbols of succulence, Siberian freedom, and female charms. A seduced and spurned woman ponders, ‘He’s picked all my berries, and now he’s looking for new berry patches;’ another, also seduced and spurned woman sports ‘red bilberry nipples’ and ‘dark, berrylike birthmarks’ ‘sprinkled’ on her ‘soft but blinding white’ skin; and still another, while being seduced preliminary to being abandoned, has a full basket of berries spilled over her (of course) ‘naked breasts’” (John Updike, “Books. Back in the U. S. S. R,” *New Yorker*, April 15, 1985, 115).

³⁴ Nabokov, *Invitation*, 12, 83, 185, 28, 33, 76, 141, 181.

³⁵ Ibid., 110; Vladimir Nabokov, *Priglasenie na kazn’* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979) 114.

the extended symbol of that ripe, but as yet innocent, female sexuality. The ball is Emmie's — that Ur-Lolita's — plaything, her object of temptation.

Emmie, the director's daughter...a mere child, but with the marble calves of a little ballerina was bouncing a ball, rhythmically against the wall...Emmie was gazing after them, while she lightly plopped the glossy red and blue ball in her hands.³⁶

Now the colors red and blue take over and forge the link to Cincinnatus. Red is the color of blood, streaming from the decapitated head/deflowered maidenhead, as well as the color of the place of execution, "the vermillion platform of the scaffold"³⁷ — a perfect anthropomorphic touch, Cincinnatus's world mirroring his condition. The pain of execution itself will be "red and loud," "*bol' rasstavaniia budet krasnaia, gromkaia*," Cincinnatus wrote in his diary.³⁸ Cincinnatus's head is blue, the Romantics' color for divine inspiration, as well as an indication of homosexual proclivity. Nabokov speaks first of "the azure of [Cincinnatus's] temples," and later of "the *other* Cincinnatus...all curled up in a ball."³⁹ In his poetic reverie on Day eight, Cincinnatus spies his "dream world": "Dreamy, round, and blue, it turns slowly toward me; *Sonnyi, vypukhlyi, sinii, on medlenno obrashchaetsia ko mne*."⁴⁰

Presaging the decapitation, Cincinnatus's head, the repository of artistry, becomes Emmie's red and blue ball. Nabokov approaches his most grotesque in the playfulness of Emmie's vague offer of escape in the form of her rolling ball.

Just then, silently and not very fast, a red-and-blue ball rolled in through the door [of the cell], followed one leg of a right triangle straight under the cot, disappeared for an instant, thumped against the chamber pot, and rolled out along the other cathetus — that is, toward Rodion, who without noticing it, happened to kick it as he took a step; then, following the hypotenuse, the ball departed into the same chink through which it had entered.⁴¹

The kicking of Cincinnatus's head repulses the attentive reader.

³⁶ Ibid., 41.

³⁷ Ibid., 218. It is of curious note that an arcane secondary meaning of "maiden" is "a former Scottish beheading device resembling the guillotine," Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary Tenth Edition (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1993), 699.

³⁸ Ibid., 194, 190.

³⁹ Ibid., 69.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 93, 99.

⁴¹ Ibid., 66.

Nabokov expands and reinforces the motif during the pre-execution feast: the table is loaded “with heaps of apples each as big as a child’s head, [shining] among dusty-blue bunches of grapes.” The boys who run after the carriage carrying Cincinnatus to the execution block are sympathetically identified as “red and blue.”⁴² The berry is hyperbolically expanded into succulent melons and watermelons, the objects of sexual teasing and play.

Emmie sat down at the table...[and] began spreading sugar...on her shaggy slice of melon; thereupon she bit into it busily, holding it by the ends, which reached her ears, and brushing her neighbor [Pierre] with her elbow. Her neighbor continued to sip his tea, holding the spoon protruding from it between second and third fingers, but inconspicuously, reached under the table with his left hand. “Eek!” cried Emmie as she gave a ticklish start, without, however, taking her mouth from the melon.⁴³

Here again is the delightfully vulgar Nabokov at work.

The imagery suggests, in the end, that Cincinnatus’s head is at once toy, plaything, and maidenhead, a female sex organ. Nabokov is toying with the classical and Romantic notion that art, inspiration, the Muse are to be allegorized as feminine. Cincinnatus’s head is for many reasons the object of Pierre’s desire. This sense of longing is reinforced by the incessant attention Pierre pays to Cincinnatus’s neck.⁴⁴ In the cache of Nabokov’s recurrent motifs, the “female neck seems to focus [on]...desire... Throughout Nabokov’s world, the attraction of female necks ranges from a delicate, melancholy beauty to intense desire,... attended by a specific seeking of relief.”⁴⁵

The verbal and visual attention Pierre lavishes on Cincinnatus’s neck again serves to highlight the artificially and symbolically sexual nature of the relationship, including the casting of Cincinnatus in the role of undefiled maiden, “preparing for those involuntary bodily movements that directly follow severance of the head.”⁴⁶ In his pretentious boasting of his attraction to women Pierre declares that he is particularly attracted to necks as the focus of sexual longing.

⁴² Ibid., 185, 215.

⁴³ Ibid., 166-167.

⁴⁴ Ibid., e.g., 89, 109.

⁴⁵ W. W. Rowe, “A Note on Nabokov’s Erotic Necks,” *Russian Literature Triquarterly* 16 (1979): 50, 52. Rowe makes no attempt to comment on the significance of Pierre’s attraction to Cincinnatus’s neck. Material from *Invitation* is cited in such a way that Pierre fits the category of Nabokov’s precocious experts on women!

⁴⁶ Nabokov, *Invitation*, 17.

“I caught just a glimpse of your spouse—a juicy little piece, no two ways about it—what a neck, that’s what I like”; “*sheia bol’no khorosha*”. “I don’t know about you, but when it comes to caresses I love what we French wrestlers call ‘*macarons*’: You give her a nice slap on the neck, and, the firmer the meat...”⁴⁷

Pierre’s eyes consistently focus on Cincinnatus’s neck with unambiguous sexual desire.

“The vein on our neck is throbbing...” [...]

“Excuse me, what is that you have on your neck—right here, here—yes, here.”

“Where?” Cincinnatus asked mechanically, feeling his neck vertebrae.

M’sieur Pierre went over to him and sat down on the edge of the cot. “Right here,” he said, “but I see now that it was only a shadow. I thought I saw...a little swelling of some kind. You seem uncomfortable when you move your head. Does it hurt? Did you catch a chill?”

“Oh, stop pestering me, please,” Cincinnatus said, sorrowfully.

“No, just a minute. My hands are clean—allow me to feel here. It seems, after all...Does it hurt here? How about here?”

With his small but muscular hand he was rapidly touching Cincinnatus’s neck and examining it carefully, breathing through the nose with a slight wheeze.

“No, nothing. Everything is in order,” he said at last, moving away and slapping the patient on the nape—“Only you do have an awfully thin one—otherwise everything is normal, it’s just that sometimes, you know...”⁴⁸

We can understand the reference to the “shadow” as the “shadow of an ax,” introduced in the preceding chapter; while the “slap” is precisely the *macaron* of the “French wrestler,” the indication of virile sexual arousal, the symbol of which is the ax.⁴⁹ Finally, Pierre recounts how he maneuvered to get to know Cincinnatus.

The results are before you. We grew to love each other, and the structure of Cincinnatus’s soul is as well known to me as the structure of his neck. Thus it will

⁴⁷ Ibid., 144-145. Here Nabokov is certainly paying tribute to Tolstoy, and Pierre’s namesake in *War and Peace*. In Book Eleven of Tolstoy’s novel, Pierre Bezukhov drinks with Ramballe, who, impressed by Pierre’s presence on the field of battle at Borodino, extols him, “So you are one of us soldiers!...So much the better, so much the better, Monsieur Pierre! Terrible in battle...gallant...with the fair’ (he winked and smiled), ‘that’s what the French are, Monsieur Pierre, aren’t they?’” Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, Norton Critical Edition, Second Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 805.

⁴⁸ Nabokov, *Invitation*, 85, 109.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 92.

be not an unfamiliar, terrible somebody but a tender friend that will help him mount the crimson steps, and he will surrender himself to me without fear . . .⁵⁰

It is now abundantly clear that the “crimson steps” lead to the platform-bed where the “surrender” will occur, in the position Pierre calls “chop-chop.”⁵¹

If there are other significant male organs in the text, they are frail indeed. Aside from “the Priapus who had nourished [Marthe]” and Quercus, the giant oak of the “famous” novel,⁵² the most persistent phallus in the chronicle is Cincinnatus’s pencil, a penile motif that Nabokov no doubt extrapolated from Andrei Bely’s *Petersburg* and employs in *Invitation* as an homage to the Symbolist writer. Bely’s pencil is the attribute of the father-statesman, Apollon Apollonovich, and is introduced very early in the novel. While the Freudian significance of such scenes as “Apollon Apollonovich was wont to express his agony by breaking packets of pencils which were kept for just such an occasion,”⁵³ is tangential to our argument here, its psycho-symbolic function in betraying the perverse sexual tension between father and child is not. The following passage was a ripe field for Nabokov, from which he seems to have harvested fruit, pencils, throbbing necks, convulsing heads and red faces—the stuff of his little game in *Invitation to a Beheading*. Would it in fact be too absurd to suggest that this very passage inspired much of the essence of *Invitation*?

Apollon Apollonovich stood chewing his lips ironically. His skin gathered in tiny wrinkles. It stretched taut on his skull. A serious talk was in the air: the fruit had ripened; it would fall; it fell and — suddenly:

Apollon Apollonovich dropped a pencil [*karandashik*] (by the staircase). From ingrained habit, Nikolai Apollonovich rushed to pick it up. Apollon Apollonovich rushed to forestall him, but he stumbled and fell, his hands touching the bottom steps. His head fell forward and down and unexpectedly landed under the fingers of his son’s hand. Nikolai Apollonovich caught sight of his father’s neck (an artery was throbbing on one side). The neck’s warm pulsation frightened him. He snatched his hand away, but he snatched it too late: at the touch of the cold hand the senator’s head convulsed in a spasm. His ears twitched slightly. Like a jumpy Japanese ju-jitsu teacher, he threw himself to the side and straightened up on cracking knees.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 175.

⁵¹ Ibid., 178.

⁵² Ibid., 141, 122-3.

⁵³ Andrei Bely, *Petersburg*, trans. Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmstad (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 160.

All this lasted but a moment. Nikolai Apollonovich handed his father the tiny little pencil.

“Here!”

A trifle had knocked them one against the other, and had produced in both an explosion of thoughts and feelings. Apollon Apollonovich got completely flustered by the fear he felt in response to politeness (this male in red [domino] was the flesh of his flesh, and to be frightened by one’s own flesh was disgraceful). He had been sitting *under* his son, on his haunches. Apollon Apollonovich felt annoyance as well. He assumed a dignified manner, bowed from the waist, and compressed his lips primly:

“Thank you. I wish you pleasant dreams.”

Nikolai Apollonovich felt a rush of blood to his cheeks, and when he thought he was beginning to blush, he had actually turned crimson. Apollon Apollonovich, seeing that his son was turning crimson, himself began to blush. In order to hide the blush, he flew up the staircase, with coquettish grace.⁵⁴

In Bely’s text the pencil is a key motif in exposing a disturbing sexual tension between father and son, which frightens them both. Moreover, because it is the instigator of this strange encounter between father and son, who are also victim and would-be murderer, the pencil, clearly linked here to Apollon Apollonovich’s neck, draws from Nikolai Apollonovich the realization that his father is human and vulnerable. Nikolai Apollonovich’s power over his father as the old man tumbles down the stairs to his feet is a mixture of sexual domination (focused, as in *Invitation*, around the neck and its pulsating veins) and control over life and death. The Nabokov pencil is similarly symbolic of these themes of mortality and sexuality; it measures the time to Cincinnatus’s execution/wedding day, growing shorter and shorter as his diary lengthens.

The pencil is first introduced on Day one: “On the table glistened a clean sheet of paper and, distinctly outlined against this whiteness, lay a beautifully sharpened pencil, as long as the life of any man except Cincinnatus...” By the eighth day it “has lost more than a third of its length”—a hint of the execution day to the careful reader, who now is privy to that piece of information so sought by Cincinnatus, “the exact execution date.”⁵⁵ The narrator opens Chapter eight, which, by the way, is almost entirely excerpted from Cincinnatus’s diary, with a parenthetical notice, perhaps a comment on some technique of intercourse or masturbation:

⁵⁴ Ibid., 152 (1922 text).

⁵⁵ Nabokov, *Invitation*, 12, 89, 36.

There are some who sharpen a pencil toward themselves, as if they were peeling a potato, and there are others who slice away from themselves, as though whittling a stick... Rodion was of the latter number. He had an old penknife with several blades and a corkscrew. The corkscrew slept on the outside.⁵⁶

Such intimate details about the life of the pencil independent from Cincinnatus add to its phallic shape to decisively establish the pencil as a male character intruding into the text. It provides a means of eternalizing Cincinnatus's imagination in the form of his diary; the union of the female intellect with the male pencil produces a text, an independent entity. The (hetero)sexual intercourse of mind and pencil is an act of reproduction creating art.

The interaction, however, is not equal. While the execution that follows the completion of the journal fulfills Cincinnatus's imagination and propels it into eternity, into a new world "where, to judge by the voices, [stand] beings akin to him,"⁵⁷ the conclusion of Cincinnatus's work represents absolute death for the pencil, which returns to the oblivion and meaninglessness of the other props around Cincinnatus once its task is accomplished. Indeed, the shortening of the pencil corresponding to Cincinnatus's diminishing life span is underscored by its gradual disappearance from the text; on the day before the execution, Cincinnatus's writing implement is no more than a "stunted pencil,"⁵⁸ and once Cincinnatus has completed his text with the word "death" (which is "immediately crossed out"), the pencil vanishes from the text. He is now, in effect, castrated.

By dropping and losing any further contact with his pencil, Cincinnatus is left with only his intellect, his blue and red feminized head, his berry, ripe for the picking. Cincinnatus is ready to become Pierre's bride, his maiden fair, as Pierre had pronounced to him, "To me you are as transparent as—excuse the sophisticated simile—a blushing bride is transparent to the gaze of an experienced bridegroom."⁵⁹ It is established early in the text that both Cincinnatus and Pierre shun sexual relations with women. Cincinnatus rejects his wife and Emmie, the former with the imperious exclamation, "Oh, don't—what nonsense," in response to her offer, "If you need it badly, Cin-Cin, go ahead, only do it quickly."⁶⁰ As for Pierre, he is impotent with women. In spite of his declarations of sexual prowess, he is unable to "perform" with Marthe:

⁵⁶ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 223.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 206.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 162.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 197.

[Marthe] returned only in three quarters of an hour, snorting contemptuously. She put one foot on the chair, snapped her garter, and, angrily readjusting the pleats below her waist, sat down at the table, . . . "All for nothing," she said with a sneer . . . "Shouldn't try if you can't manage it . . ." ⁶¹

We learn that Pierre was the object of her scorn from the impotent himself: "Outrageous! Intolerable! M'sieur Pierre was shouting . . . 'I am not well . . . They serve me with spoiled fish they offer me a disgusting whore . . .'" ⁶² In Cincinnatus's presence, on the contrary, Pierre is sexually aroused. Having just referred to Cincinnatus as a blushing bride, Pierre exposes to him the "broad shining ax," the instrument of execution, and then quickly is unnerved, saying, "We are both young—you must not remain here any longer . . . I too am excited, I too am not in complete control of myself, you must understand this." ⁶³ The reader fully grasps that the execution will indeed mime the sexual act, while at the same time it functions in imitation of the beheadings of Orpheus and John the Baptist—decapitations that mystically liberate artistry and spirituality. Pierre will brandish his ax (the object of "anxiety" in Nabokov's word play in the English text); ⁶⁴ Cincinnatus will sacrifice his innocent maiden-like head, his berry.

But what of the wedding ritual preceding intercourse, required by tradition and law? Pierre is too decorous to permit sex without marriage, hence the nuptial rituals, starting with the formal introduction of Cincinnatus and Pierre, the bride and groom. This is, in the Russian folk tradition, an arranged match. The carefully monitored meetings of the betrothed couple are to permit their getting acquainted before the ceremony. They are first introduced on Day seven. This is the *svatanie*, complete with the Director's (he plays the role of the *svat*) admonition to Pierre not to "find fault" with Cincinnatus.

"Allow me to present to you M'sieur Pierre," said the director to Cincinnatus in jubilant tones. "Come in, come in, M'sieur Pierre. You can't imagine how you have been awaited here—Get acquainted gentlemen—The long-awaited meeting—An instructive spectacle . . . Do bear with us, M'sieur Pierre, do not find fault . . ." ⁶⁵

⁶¹ Ibid., 199.

⁶² Ibid., 208.

⁶³ Ibid., 163.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 103.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 81.

The groom accepts Cincinnatus as his fiancée and pronounces formulaically, “I make bold to hope that we may get to know each other more closely.” Pierre proceeds to court and charm Cincinnatus, in part with comic demonstrations of physical feats and with jokes, while Rodrig’s eyes “[grow] moist from all these joyous titters and ejaculations.”⁶⁶ Pierre judges his efforts to be successful. On Day sixteen he gives clear voice to the notion of ceremonial sacrament, the union of the two:

[Pierre] went on, batting his eyelashes: “I need not explain how precious to the success of our common undertaking is that atmosphere of warm camaraderie which, with the help of patience and kindness, is gradually created between the sentenced and the executor of the sentence. It is difficult or even impossible to recall without a shudder the barbarity of long-bygone days, when these two, not knowing each other at all, strangers to each other, but bound together by implacable law, met face to face only at the last instant before the sacrament itself. This has all been changed just as the ancient, barbaric wedding ceremony, more closely resembling a human sacrifice — when the submissive virgin was hurled by her parents into the tent of a stranger — has changed with the passing of time.”⁶⁷

The proclamation asserts that the union, a mystical bond, has been achieved. The feast to celebrate the marriage takes the form of an “informal supper,” which is a cinematically inspired perversion of a traditional wedding feast. The inverted sexual undertone is emphasized by the identification of all guests as men, save for a lone physiologically stereotyped lesbian:

There were no ladies present, unless one counted the district superintendent of schools, a very stout, elderly woman in a gray frock coat cut like a man’s, with large flat cheeks and a smooth hairdo as shiny as steel...[and a] husky voice...⁶⁸

The waiters were “adroit dandies—the best representatives of its purple youth”; “*luchshie predstaviteli ego malinovoi molodezhi*.” Thus, an all-male cast celebrates the union of Pierre and Cincinnatus, who sat “side by side at the head of a dazzling table...identically clad in Elsinore jackets” and “everyone began to glance, with restraint at first, then with benevolent curiosity—which in some began to turn into surreptitious tenderness—at the pair...” The nuptial nature of the event is further emphasized by the traditional chanting of “Bitter, bitter, sweeten it with a kiss,” “*Gor’ko!*”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ibid., 82, 84.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 173.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 182, 188.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 180, 182, 185.

The final ritual is the consummation, the deflowering-decapitation to which, in the Russian folk tradition, the gathered guests were eager witnesses of a sort. This is attested to in the less prudish ethnographic accounts of the peasant wedding-game—the public examination of the marriage night bed sheet. Only the red stain of blood on the sheet (sympathetically anticipated in the text by the “red platform”)⁷⁰ would prove the virginity of the bride, the mark of the “red” wedding. In his memoirs, Damon Orlow recounts just such a moment in the wedding drama:

We are approaching the most important, the most delicate, yet essential act of the wedding. Its very nature compels your narrator to seek refuge, if possible at all, in euphemistic phraseology...

Behind a door locked from the outside, the couple was closeted, to spend the night... The supervisory committee, holding the keys to the chamber, stood on guard the whole night... [In the morning] the committee, having duly examined the marks and signs of the memorable night, came out and officially reported the glorious findings, positively and unquestionably certifying to the unimpeachable purity of [the bride's] virtue, of her integrity, of her virginity.⁷¹

Nabokov is less discreet. Assembled guests (with the reader as an implied observer) watch Pierre and Cincinnatus engage in disrobing and preparation for intercourse, the beheading to which all had been invited in the title of the novel—ax to neck, the sacrifice of head-cherry, with which the game, Nabokov's text, climaxes:

“No excitement, no fuss, please,” said M'sieur Pierre. “We shall first of all remove our little shirt.” “By myself,” said Cincinnatus. “That's the boy. Take the little shirt away, men. Now I shall show you how to lie down.” M'sieur Pierre dropped onto the block. The audience buzzed. “Is this clear?” asked M'sieur Pierre, springing up and straightening his apron (it had come apart at the back, Rodrig helped tie it). “Good. Let's begin. The light is a bit harsh... Perhaps you could... There, that's fine. Thank you. Perhaps just a wee bit more... Excellent! Now I shall ask you to lie down.” “By myself, by myself,” said Cincinnatus and lay face down as he had been shown, but at once he covered the back of his neck with his hands. “What a silly boy,” said M'sieur Pierre from above. “If you do that how can I... (yes, give it here; then, immediately after, the bucket). And anyway why all this contraction of muscles? There must be no tension at all. Perfectly at ease. Remove your hands, please... (give it to me now). Be quite at ease...”⁷²

⁷⁰ Ibid., 202.

⁷¹ Damon Orlow, *Red Wedding* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1952), 33-4.

⁷² Nabokov, *Invitation*, 221-2.

These final words of M'sieur Pierre ring out beyond the stage-set world of the town and the prison, beyond Cincinnatus's world of imagination, directly to the reader, who is seeing and caressing the last page of the *Invitation*. We also must soon "remove [our] hands" from the book. Nabokov's voice, through Pierre, is commanding us to be "quite at ease," to let go of Cincinnatus's life and of our anxiety for him. Now indeed

... we are nearing the end. The right-hand, still untasted part of the novel, which, during our delectable reading, we would lightly feel, mechanically testing whether there were still plenty left...has suddenly, for no reason at all, become quite meager: a few minutes of quick reading already downhill...⁷³

We readers had been watching Cincinnatus's twenty-day progress to the execution block along with the other invitees, the vomiting librarian, the transparent spectators, the dog-masked guards, M'sieur Pierre the executioner; but now we are about to part with them and with their quickly disintegrating world. The references to Russian and American marriage traditions, which had been hovering around the sexually charged execution, emerge in our understanding as an allegorical parody. The verbal games and symbols Nabokov had been using begin to form coherent structures, and his hints finally surge with meaning as our comprehension of the novel clarifies.

In fact, when we begin to understand Nabokov's games with colors, boats, and berries, we are surprised to find that he applies at least some of the imagery to *our* world, to the readers' world outside the novel. He continues his description of the "still untasted part of the novel" by comparing it to a bowl of cherries, reminding us that

The heap of cherries whose mass had seemed to us of such a ruddy and glossy black, had suddenly become discrete drupes: the one over there with the scar is a little rotten, and this one has shriveled and dried up around its stone (and the very last one is inevitably hard and unripe) O horrible!⁷⁴

What has Nabokov achieved in this giant verbal, imaginative game? It is a grotesque farce, a game invented around the humdrum vulgarity of "average reality" and its traditions. The mock wedding ceremony is one act in the vast circus-panorama of the text—a display of artifice remarkably versatile and evasive. Taken as a burlesque, a mini-comedy, it fits neatly into

⁷³ Ibid., 12.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

Nabokov's own proclaimed concept of the lack of value of ideas in art. But Nabokov is cajoling us to do more than double-think about berries, crania, allegories and marriage; his verbal games are training exercises. Since reading is an individual experience, the beheading must ultimately be ours, the readers'—we have read, we have been trained to read allegories and, with open minds, we can learn from them. Cincinnatus's beheading was allegorically an escape from the constraints of the world where "everything was falling" to a shimmering, shiny world. Nabokov is inviting us to transcend the limits of "average reality" with our imagination, to join voices with which we can communicate in created intellectual worlds. The very process of decoding Nabokov's verbal game is a signpost on the route to this liberating world of the intellect. Just as Orpheus's and John the Baptist's severed heads served as conduits to the worlds of poetry and gnosis, so should Cincinnatus's blood-letting lead to true existence. The decapitated head is a boat released from its moorings free to travel the sea of "true reality." The overall effect is that the reader, laying aside the novel, leaves the stage *with* Cincinnatus, and is now free to make "his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him."⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Ibid., 223.