

**Alexander Dolinin**

ART OF THE EXECUTIONER:  
NOTES ON THE THEME  
OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT IN NABOKOV

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*Cutting off a person's head requires great artistry.*  
P. D. Kalmykov, *Guide to Criminal Law* (1866)

*Who can know how much anguish there is  
In the art of the executioner!*  
Fyodor Sologub, "The Nuremberg Executioner"

**N**o Russian writer since Dostoevsky or Tolstoy has devoted as much attention to the topic of capital punishment as Nabokov. After first appearing in the author's historical scenes from the French Revolution (the early drama in verse "Grandfather" and the poem "In what paradise first murmured through..." both 1923), the theme then resurfaces in two poems about Russian executions by firing squad ("There are nights: I merely lie..." and "Unshaven, laughing, pale..." both 1927), and makes another appearance in *King, Queen, Knave* (Dreyer contemplates the death penalty in the Museum of Criminology). It travels along with Martin, the main character of *Glory*, whose likely execution outside the narrative itself is foretold in an episode on a road in the Crimean mountains, where a drunken stranger with a revolver threatens to shoot him, and by his reading of Carlyle's *The French Revolution: A History*, where he imagines "the simplicity of the black guillotine, and the clumsy tussle on the scaffold, where the executioners roughly

handle a bare-shouldered fat man while, in the crowd, a good-natured *citoyen* raises by the elbows a *citoyenne* whose curiosity exceeds her stature.”<sup>1</sup> The theme later flashes in and out of view in *Despair* (the background of Hermann’s portrait resembles a gallows; on New Year’s Eve Ardalion jokingly predicts that Hermann will be beheaded, and the protagonist himself exclaims: “That is the reason why I am ready to accept all, come what may; the burly executioner in his top hat, and then the hollow hum of blank eternity...”).<sup>2</sup> It is then foregrounded in *Invitation to a Beheading*, contemplated in *The Gift*, referenced in the “Paris Poem,”<sup>3</sup> and finally reaches its culmination in Chapter 13 of *Other Shores*, where Nabokov relates the story of a young German named Dietrich, a great lover of executions and photographic depictions thereof, who is imagined to be a “veteran of Hitler’s campaigns and experiments.”

Nabokov’s interest in capital punishment was to some extent a matter of inheritance. As we know, his father, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, fought long and hard to abolish the death penalty in Russia, angrily excoriating this “repulsive, ludicrous vestige from the time of barbarians”<sup>4</sup> and making speeches and reports at the State Duma. He would demonstrate, he said at a Duma session on 19 June 1906, that

the death penalty is by nature unacceptable in all cases without exception, serves no useful purpose, is deeply immoral as the taking of life, and is profoundly shameful for those who carry it out. We may point out that any man whose moral sensibility has not been dulled and who is present when a death sentence is carried out will experience this feeling of shame and dishonor. The greatest of Russian writers — Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy — have all noted this feature.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Glory* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1971), 62.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Despair* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 103.

<sup>3</sup> In the lines about public executions in Paris next to the prison on the Boulevard Arago: “The pain of a broken spine wanders / In the black wilderness of Boulevard Arago,” Vladimir Nabokov, *Stikhotvoreniia*, compiled and prepared and with introduction and notes by M. E. Malikova (St. Petersburg, 2002), 213. As Ronen has observed, Nabokov is referring to the execution of the Russian émigré Pavel Gorgulov, who in 1932 assassinated the president of France. See Ronen, “Podrazhatel'nost', antiparodiia, intertekstual'nost' i kommentarii,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 42 (2000), 260.

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, *Tiuremnye dosugi. Ottisk iz gazety “Pravo”* (St. Petersburg, 1908), 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Gosudarstvennaia дума. Stenograficheskie otchety. 1906 god. Sessii pervaiia* (St. Petersburg, 1906), 3:1486.

The elder Nabokov believed that, sooner or later, there would come a time “when the cold-blooded, intentional, well-regulated craft of slaying a defenseless victim, who knowingly goes under the knife or into the noose, will no longer seem to be an act of justice.”<sup>6</sup> In an English-language note printed posthumously in the Manchester *Daily Dispatch*, the author’s father again writes about the incompatibility of capital punishment and moral sensibility, and again appeals to the authority of great writers: Hugo, Dickens, Turgenev, and Dostoevsky.<sup>7</sup>

The younger Nabokov certainly shared the humanistic views of his father, and he was well acquainted with the literary tradition of condemning the death penalty to which the elder Nabokov had made reference. As was first noted some time ago, *Invitation to a Beheading* contains clear echoes of Hugo’s *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*,<sup>8</sup> Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*,<sup>9</sup> Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*,<sup>10</sup> and Leonid Andreev’s *The Seven Who Were Hanged*,<sup>11</sup> while the Russian version of *Lolita* includes an unexpected allusion to Turgenev’s “The Execution of Tropmann.” Because Nabokov feels solidarity with the victims but not the executioners, we rarely see common criminals subjected to executions in the world of his fiction, but rather innocent victims of state-sponsored or revolutionary terror and opponents of cruel tyranny, behind which we can discern historical models such as Andre Chenier, Louis XVI, or Nikolai Gumilev. But even in *King, Queen, Knave*, when Dreyer imagines the execution of some brutish murderer, he finds himself thinking that “it might be interesting to wake up at the crack of dawn and, after a thorough shave and a hearty meal, go out in striped prison pajamas into the yard, touch the plump executioner’s muscles with some appropriate joke, give the whole assembly a friendly wave of the hand, take a good last stare at the white official faces....”<sup>12</sup> Here we can already discern the idea of victory over death by overcoming fear, of despising executioners and refusing to accept what in *Speak Memory* is referred to as the “perfect cooperation between headsman and victim” — the idea at the heart of *Invitation*

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<sup>6</sup> Nabokov, *Tiuremnye dosugi*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> This remark was reprinted in the journal *The Nabokovian* 20 (1990), 50–62.

<sup>8</sup> A. Dolinin and R. Timenchik, “Primechaniia,” in V. Nabokov, *Rasskazy. Priglasenie na kazn': roman. Esse, interv'iu, retsenzii* (Moscow, 1989), 508.

<sup>9</sup> S. Senderovich, “Dickens in Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*: A Figure of Concealment,” *Nabokov Studies* 3 (1996), 13–32.

<sup>10</sup> Pekka Tammi, “Invitation to a Decoding. Dostoevsky as Subtext in Nabokov’s *Priglasenie na kazn'*,” in *Russian Subtexts in Nabokov’s Fiction. Four Essays* (Tampere: 1999), 1–33, 115–26.

<sup>11</sup> A. Dolinin, “Nabokov and ‘Third-Rate Literature’ (On a Source of *Lolita*),” *Elementa* 1. no. 2 (1993), 172; G. Shapiro, *Delicate Markers. Subtexts in Vladimir Nabokov’s Invitation to a Beheading* (N.Y., Washington, D.C., Baltimore et al.: 1998), 178–80.

<sup>12</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *King, Queen, Knave* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), 208.

*to a Beheading*. Nabokov had no doubt that Gumilev had accepted death in just this way, calmly and defiantly, though the reports of this fact originated from Georgii Ivanov, of whom Nabokov was skeptical in other instances. Nabokov writes in the article “The Art of Literature and Commonsense” that

there is nothing dictators hate so much as that unassailable, eternally elusive, eternally provoking gleam. One of the main reasons why the very gallant Russian poet Gumilev was put to death by Lenin’s ruffians thirty odd years ago was that during the whole ordeal, in the prosecutor’s dim office, in the torture house, in the winding corridors that led to the truck, in the truck that took him to the place of execution, and at that place itself, full of shuffling feet of the clumsy and gloomy shooting squad, the poet kept smiling.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, in addition to the victims of capital punishment, Nabokov was also captivated by many other elements of this repulsive event: the instruments of execution, the representatives of the authorities who oversaw such legalized killing, the public with its appetite for bloody spectacles, and, last but not least, the executioners themselves. As early as the poem “To Grandfather,” we see hints of the notion of execution as a quasi-theatrical presentation, a performance, and the executioner as a quasi-artist or actor:

...The executioner, by the way, was skillful,  
Diligent: an artist, not a butcher.  
In every way he was a copy  
Of his French cousin, the great Samson:  
He wheeled around the same little cart,  
And raised the severed heads  
Just the same, lifted by the hair...<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 376.

<sup>14</sup> Vladimir Nabokov (V. Sirin"), *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh* (St. Petersburg, 1999), 1:700.

The young Nabokov understood the basic sense of what Iampolskii later wrote on the semiotics of executions: after the introduction of the guillotine, the executioner was replaced by the machine as the main *dramatis persona* in the beheading and, consequently, death lost its existential depth: the culminating point in the execution was no longer the cutting off of the head, but rather the demonstration of the head to the public.<sup>15</sup> To this theatrical gesturing, Nabokov adds the solemn journey of the executioner with the victim to the block, a death procession of a sort, later repeated in *Invitation to a Beheading*, where the guillotine is replaced by the traditional axe.<sup>16</sup>

Previous scholarship has put forth interesting suggestions as to the sources of Nabokov's thinking on the theatricality of executions. Senderovich and Shvarts cited the lecture by N. N. Evreinov entitled "The Theater and the Execution Block," with which Nabokov could in theory have been familiar.<sup>17</sup> Evreinov's article draws an analogy between the theater and the execution block, arguing that the theater as a "public institution" has what we might call a "gallows genealogy":

No matter where we turn in search of the origin of theater — history, folklore, child psychology, or ethnography — we always encounter overt or hidden signs of the execution block, where the executioner and the sacrificial victim (human or animal) at the dawn of the art of drama are the first to establish through their spectacle the

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<sup>15</sup> See M. Iampol'skii, "Zhest palacha, oratora, aktera," *Ad marginem '93* (Moscow, 1994), 21–22.

<sup>16</sup> Execution by beheading with an axe was used in Prussia until the autumn of 1936, both under the Weimar governments and after Hitler came to power. See R. J. Evans. *Rituals of Retribution: Capital Punishment in Germany 1600–1987* (Oxford, 1996), 536, 651–59. As David Bethea has suggested, the conception of the novel may have been affected by a report in the newspaper *Poslednie novosti* no. 4677 (11 January 1934) about the execution of van der Lubbe, the arsonist who started the Reichstag fire, which stated that he had been beheaded with an axe though in fact he was guillotined. See D. Bethea, "A Note on Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*: The Reichstag Fire and the Execution of Mariaus van der Lubbe," *(Ne)muzykal'noe prinoshenie, ili Allegro:affetuoso: Sbornik statei k 65-letiiu Borisa Aronovicha Katsa* (St. Petersburg, 2013), 596. The same wrong information was contained in the so-called *Second Brown Book of the Hitler Terror* (1934): a compilation of materials regarding the trial of Dimitrov van der Lubbe that was published in various languages in Paris and London by the Comintern agent Willi Münzenberg with the help of Lion Feuchtwanger, Romain Rolland, and other well-known members of the antifascist movement. See *Reichstag Fire Trial: The Second Brown Book of the Hitler Terror...* (New York, 1969), 272. The book both begins and concludes with descriptions of executions, by axe, of Hitler's political enemies in 1933 (*Ibid.*, 9–10, 336–37).

<sup>17</sup> S. Senderovich and E. Shvarts, "Nabokovskii paradoks o evree, *Paradoksy russkoi literatury. Peterburgskii sbornik 3* (St. Petersburg, 2001), 303.

captivating power of this institution, so new to the crowd, which would only later happen to become theater.<sup>18</sup>

It is worth noting, however, that Evreinov says nothing about the theatricality of contemporary executions, but merely addresses the “executionality” of theater productions.

In a note to his article on *Invitation to a Beheading*, Gennady Barabtarlo points out another important parallel for the theatrical nature of the execution block in the novel genre: a grotesquely fantastic scene involving the execution of an Irish hero in Joyce’s *Ulysses* (Episode 12, which takes place in Barney Kiernan’s pub).<sup>19</sup> Barabtarlo unfortunately did not describe the scene carefully and notice its clear correspondences to *Invitation*. In Joyce, as in Nabokov, the execution is presented as a public holiday, a curious open spectacle with a huge gathering of viewers and a brass band, and the chief executioner has two visages: in the real Dublin of 1904, he is a vulgar barber offering his services as a hangman, while in the fantasy version he is a celebrity, a superstar, the lead actor at the execution theater:

Quietly, unassumingly Rumbold stepped on to the scaffold in faultless morning dress and wearing his favourite flower, the GLADIOLUS CRUENTUS. [...] The arrival of the worldrenowned headsman was greeted by a roar of acclamation from the huge concourse, the viceregal ladies waving their handkerchiefs in their excitement while the even more excitable foreign delegates cheered vociferously in a medley of cries...<sup>20</sup>

No one yet seems to have noted that in *Invitation* the barber connection with regard to the leading man/executioner’s French name of M’sieur Pierre. In St. Petersburg one of the most popular barber shops was called “Pierre”; in *The Twelve Chairs* Ilf and Petrov mention “The Master Barber Pierre and Constantine,” also more than willing to answer to the name Andrei Ivanovich; “Pierre the barber” is the addressee of a poem by the nearly forgotten Kiev poet Igor Iurkov (1902–1929) entitled “Well-being” (“Pierre the barber, / Pierre the barber, / You

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<sup>18</sup> N. Evreinov, “Teatr i eshafot,” *Mnemozina* (Moscow, 1996), 37.

<sup>19</sup> Gennady Barabtarlo, *Aerial View. Essays on Nabokov’s Art and Metaphysics* (New York, San Francisco et.al., 1993), 33n5.

<sup>20</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 295.

have a life of ease...”);<sup>21</sup> and, finally, in Nabokov’s short story “The Admiralty Spire” (written a year before *Invitation to a Beheading*), the Petersburg barber bears the same name as the executioner in the novel:

I [...] recall the generous spurts of *Vezhetal* lotion cooling my scalp, and Monsieur Pierre taking aim with his comb and flipping my hair over with a linotype swing, and then, as he yanked off the sheet, yelling to a middle-aged, mustachioed fellow, “Boy! Bross off the ’air!”<sup>22</sup>

But let us return to the quotation from “To Grandfather.” The mention of the famous Parisian executioner Charles-Henri Sanson (1739–1806; his son, Henri [1767–1840] was also an executioner from 1793) and the old-fashioned spelling of his name (it was spelled “Samson” in the nineteenth century) require us to presume that there is also a source for Nabokov’s ideas of the death penalty that predates Evreinov’s lecture and the scene from Joyce’s *Ulysses*. This source was almost certainly Pushkin’s remark about the memoirs, just released in Paris, of this very Samson/Sanson, which Pushkin had not yet read and which later turned out to be a forgery. Pushkin wrote the following in *Literaturnaia gazeta* in 1830:

...with baited breath, but also with repulsion, we are awaiting the *Notes of a Paris Executioner*. Will we see what there is in common between him and living people? In what beastly roar will he explain his thoughts? What will he tell us, this creature who commanded such poetic, terrible pages from Comte de Maistre. What will this man tell us, who in forty bloody years of life was present for the death throes of so many victims, famous and unknown, celebrated and hated? Every last one of them—his momentary acquaintances—will in turns pass before us on the guillotine where he, the raging mountebank, plays his monotonous role.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> I. Iurkov, *Stikhotvoreniia* (St. Petersburg, 2003), 163–64. See also R. D. Timenchik’s work on the theme of the barber in Russian poetry in the first half of the twentieth century: R. D. Timenchik, *Chto vdrug. Stat'i o russkoi literature proshlogo veka* (Moscow, 2008), 517–18.

<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *The Collected Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 350.

<sup>23</sup> A. S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 16 tomakh* (Moscow, Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR, 1949), 11:94–95.

Pushkin's musings on the executioner are influenced by a passage in the *Soirées de St. Pétersbourg* by Joseph de Maistre, to which he makes reference. According to de Maistre, the executioner is a special type of creature who stands outside human society and outside the system of moral values: "Outwardly he is made like us; he is born into this world as we are. But he is an extraordinary creature, and to find a place for him in the human family a special decree is needed, a Fiat of creative power. He is created as some world is created."<sup>24</sup> Like de Maistre, Pushkin presumes the executioner to be a unique "creature," separate from "living people," and speaking his own inhuman language. Yet unlike the bloodthirsty count he sees in the figure of the executioner not "the terror and connection of human societies," nor the instrument of God's wrath (without which chaos would reign and society would collapse), but rather a "raging mountebank" (*figliar*: in Pushkin's lexicon the equivalent of a joker, a magician, or a circus acrobat), thus emphasizing his lack of authenticity, his affectation, and his vulgar theatricality.

In this sense Nabokov is a direct continuation of Pushkin. In chapter 3 of *The Gift*, the protagonist recalls the words of his father, who, like Nabokov's father, condemned the death penalty, and states the opinion that there is

the feeling of something insuperably abnormal about the death penalty, something like the uncanny reversal of action in a looking glass that makes everyone left-handed: not for nothing is everything reversed for the executioner: the horse-collar is put on upside down when the robber Razin is taken to the scaffold; wine is poured for the headsman not with a natural turn of the wrist but backhandedly; and if, according to the Swabian code, an insulted actor was permitted to seek satisfaction by striking the *shadow* of the offender, in China it was precisely an actor — a shadow — who fulfilled the duties of the executioner, all responsibility being as it were lifted from the world of men and transformed into the inside-out one of mirrors.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "Il est fait comme nous extérieurement ; il naît comme nous ; mais c'est un être extraordinaire , et pour qu'il existe dans la famille humaine il faut un décret particulier, un Fiat de la puissance créatrice. Il est créé comme un monde." Joseph de Maistre, *Textes choisis et présenté par E.M.Cioran* (Monaco-ville, 1957), 55.

<sup>25</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*, trans. Michael Scammell (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 203.

To Nabokov's way of thinking, capital punishment is so alien to human nature that it becomes (in Russian and Chinese cultures, at least) a phenomenon from a parallel reality, a world behind the looking glass, and the executioner is thus excluded from the species of "living people" and given the features of a werewolf — a creature not of this world, merely pretending to be human. To substantiate his thinking, Nabokov cleverly assembles and shifts the emphasis in information derived from several sources of various types. In gathering materials for the biography of Chernyshevski, among the things he read was the journal *Historical Herald (Istoricheskii vestnik)*,<sup>26</sup> where he happened upon a note regarding a rare English book entitled *A Relation concerning the Particulars of the Rebellion Lately Raised in Muscovy by Stenka Razin (1672)*, which had been acquired by the Imperial Public Library. This book contained a printed engraving showing the cart carrying Stenka Razin to his execution (see figure 1), which the author of the Russian note described as follows: "The cart is drawn by three horses in a strange rig: their yokes are put on upside down. This may have been done on purpose in order to indicate that this team belonged to the executioner, who is apparently also driving the horses. As we know, everything is done backwards for an executioner, so that even his wine is poured awkwardly."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> All information on the Russian censors in the nineteenth century in chapter 4 of *The Gift* was taken from a series of articles by N. A. Engelgardt entitled "Ocherki nikolaevskoi tsenzury" ["Essays on the Censor under Nikolai"], *Istoricheskii vestnik* 85, no. 9 (1901), 850–73; vol. 86., no. 10, 156–79; no. 11, 600–632; no. 12, 970–1000. In addition, Nabokov used the articles by N. F. Skornikov entitled "N. G. Chernyshevskii v Astrakhani" ["N. G. Chernyshevskii in Astrakhan"], *Istoricheskii vestnik* no. 5 (1905), 476–95 and "Po povodu vospominanii o N. G. Chernyshevskom" ["Regarding Reminiscences of N. G. Chernyshevskii"], *Istoricheskii vestnik* no. 7 (1905), 125–32.

<sup>27</sup> A. B. V. "Zapiski anglichanina o bunte Stepana Razina," *Istoricheskii vestnik* 86, no. 11 (1901), 736–37.

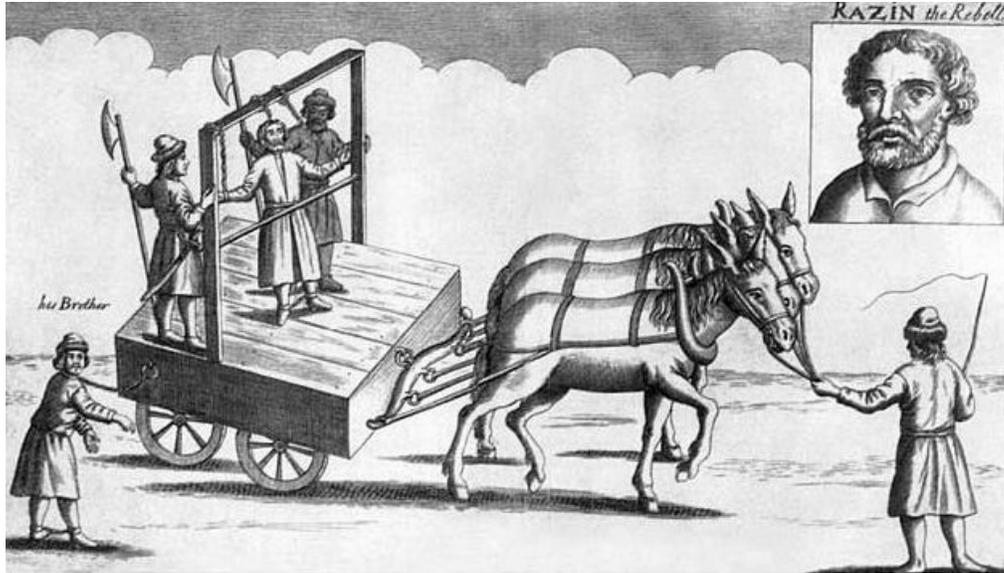


Figure 1: English Engraving of “The Execution of Stepan Razin”

In the same journal for the year 1898, Nabokov’s attention must have been drawn to a story by an eyewitness of an execution in China, which specifically states that Chinese executioners are of low birth and “on holidays take on the roles of actors in theaters.”<sup>28</sup> It is this work that seems to have given him the basis for identifying Chinese actors and executioners, made all the more striking by the fact that we see in Grum-Grzhimaylo’s *Description of a Journey to Western China* — the main source for chapter 2 of *The Gift* — in which he might have read that in the Kingdom of Heaven “actors were declared to be outside the law, and their profession was equated with that of the executioner, i.e. the most shameful in China.”<sup>29</sup>

Nabokov found yet another parallel for the “shadow” figure of the executioner as a play-actor in a work by Aleksandr Veselovskii entitled *Researches in the Field of Russian Sacred Verse*, which addressed the marginal position of the medieval German “Spielmann,” an itinerant actor or minstrel. According to Veselovskii, the occupation of the Spielmann was considered sinful: they were not permitted to take communion, and common laws did not apply to them. Thus when a Spielmann was wronged, wrote Veselovskii, “the Landrecht allowed him to achieve satisfaction in the following way: the offender would stand by a wall

<sup>28</sup> N. A. fon Fokht. “Kитайская казнь,” *Istoricheskii vestnik*, 72, no. 6 (1898), 846.

<sup>29</sup> G. E. Grum-Grzhimailo, *Opisanie puteshestviia v Zapadnyi Kitai* (St. Petersburg, 1899), t. 2: *Poperek Beishania i Nan'-Shania v dolinu Zheltoi reki*, 203.

in the sun such that his shadow would fall on the wall, and the offended Spielmann could approach the shadow and strike it in the throat.”<sup>30</sup> Nabokov implicitly equates this minstrel who is only allowed to strike the throat of a person’s shadow to an executioner who, as we can see from the conclusion of *Invitation to a Beheading*, is only capable of cutting of the head of a “doll” body, but not the “inner person” concealed within it.

If the executioner is the incarnation of non-being, a kind of invisible man, he must mask his substance, dress up, hide behind a disguise, and pretend to be someone else. As historians and sociologists of capital punishment have noted, the executioner’s costume has always played a crucial role in this masquerade of death, for example in the traditional red shirt worn by the Russian *kat*, or executioner.<sup>31</sup> In 1872 a new Paris executioner named Nicolas Roch, trying to gain some respectability for his profession, began appearing at executions in a black redingote or frock coat and, without fail, a black top hat.<sup>32</sup> Following his felicitous style, this headwear became for decades a consistent feature of executioners in France and Germany, and was remarked on a number of times in Russian literature. For example, in Aleksandr Grin’s short story “The Riddle of a Death Foreseen” (1914), the executioner who is to behead the protagonist emerges onto the block “in a frock coat, black gloves, a top hat, and a black necktie.”<sup>33</sup> In describing the execution of the French serial killer

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<sup>30</sup> A. N. Veselovskii, “Razyskaniia v oblasti dukhovnogo stikha. VI-X. Prilozhenie k XLV-omu tomu zapisok Imperatorskoi Akademii nauk” (St. Petersburg, 1883), 153; A. N. Veselovskii, *Istoricheskaia poetika* (Leningrad, 1940), 484.

<sup>31</sup> On the theatricality of Russian executions in the eighteenth century, see the article by E. A. Anisimov entitled “Narod u eshafota” [“The People at the Execution Block”] in his book *Russkaia pytk. Politicheskii sysk v Rossii XVIII veka* (St. Petersburg, 2004), 318–38. The image of the executioner in a red shirt is seen several times in Russian poetry. The best-known examples are Lermontov’s “Song of Tsar Ivan Vasilievich...” (“At the high place of the skull, / In a red shirt with bright cufflinks, / With a big sharpened axe, / Rubbing his bare hands, / The executioner joyously strolls along.”) and Gumilev’s “The Lost Tramway” (“In a red shirt, with a face like an udder, / The executioner cut off my head too). As others have noted several times before, Nabokov cited Gumilev’s comparison of the executioner’s face with an udder in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (“Mr. Goodman’s large soft pinkish face was, and is, remarkably like a cow’s udder”) (New York, 1992), 58; and in the Russian version of *Lolita* (about Rita’s brother: “a politician with a face like an udder, who wore suspenders and a hand-colored necktie”), V. Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii amerikanskogo perioda: Lolita; Smekh v temnote* (St. Petersburg, 1997), 316. Meanwhile, in *Look at the Harlequins* Nabokov translated the same two lines from “The Lost Tramway” into French and attributed them to Rimbaud: (“En blouse rouge, à face en pis de vache, le bourreau me trancha la tête aussi...”, V. Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins* (New York, 2011), 246.

<sup>32</sup> See: J. Delarue, *Le Métier de bourreau* (Paris, 1979), 304.

<sup>33</sup> A. Grin, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh* (Moscow, 1965), 2:448. Some motifs in this short story anticipate *Invitation to a Beheading*, and its conclusion, with the protagonist on the block using the power of his imagination to cut off his own head, not knowing that the execution has been commuted, seems to be an inversion of the final scene in Nabokov’s novel.

Henri Landru in the novella *Black Gold* (1931, later known as *The Emigrants*), Aleksei Tolstoi points out the gala attire of the executioner:

The executioner, growing out of the sunset next to the two columns of the block — a top hat, a black coat, gold glasses — gave the sign. ...The executioner presses a button, the dull knock of the triangular knife, and the head of Blue Beard leapt off into the basket. In that same basket, after taking them off carefully, finger by finger, the executioner threw his white gloves. He raised his top hat slightly. Reserved applause (due to suppressed agitation).<sup>34</sup>

Konstantin Vaginov uses a similar image in the poem “Every year he got smaller and smaller...” (1930): “Orpheus has been buried, / And a cry resounded, / In a top hat and gloves / Came the serious executioner.”<sup>35</sup> In his novel *General BO* (1929, later reworked as *Azef*), the terrorist Savinkov has the following thought: “They say that in Berlin lives an executioner with a wife and kids. His profession is to go and cut off heads. He dresses in a top hat, a frock coat, and after cutting off heads he goes home to his wife and makes children.”<sup>36</sup> The aforementioned “burly executioner in his top hat” imagined by Hermann in *Despair*, and the “cute little model of guillotine (with stiff top-hatted doll in attendance)...”<sup>37</sup> in *Bend Sinister* are part of the same series of literary reflections of reality.

The markedly respectable attire of the executioner, a form of social mimicry, often evoked associations with the clothing worn by officials as a symbol of power. As the famous Russian lawyer Nikolai Karabchevskii wrote, “Until very recently in France the executioner was a real ‘monsieur de Paris,’ adorning his head with the traditional top hat, at least as good as Loubet or Fallières.”<sup>38</sup> In his work *Death of an Executioner* — a unique sociological obituary of the Paris executioner Anatole Deibler — the French sociologist Roger Caillois argued that in terms of his social function and symbolic attributes the executioner in a

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<sup>34</sup> A. N. Tolstoi, *Chernoie zoloto* (Moscow, 1933), 10.

<sup>35</sup> K. Vaginov, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy* (Tomsk, 1998), 96.

<sup>36</sup> R. Gul', *Azef* (Moscow, 1991), 120.

<sup>37</sup> V. Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York, 1990), 214.

<sup>38</sup> N. P. Karabchevskii. *Okolo pravosudiiia: stat'i, soobshcheniia i sudebnye ocherki* (St. Petersburg, 1908), 184. Émile Loubet (1838–1929) was the president of France from 1899 to 1906, and was replaced Armand Fallières, (1841–1931), who was in office until 1913.

democratic society is similar to the head of state, though they are at opposite ends of the social spectrum. Their mirror-image resemblance, he wrote,

is manifested everywhere, even in their clothing. Thus the redingote is in fact considered the essence of formal wear, all but mandatory for official ceremonies, and is an attribute not so much of the man but the position, and is conveyed along with that. One of Deibler's biographical sketches tells of how one fine day he brought home the black redingote of the executioner's assistant to show symbolically that he was finally resigned to his fate. This suit, along with the top hat in which one wants to see the "refinedness of the gentleman" transforms the executioner into a kind of ominous double of the head of state, who by tradition dresses in exactly the same manner.<sup>39</sup>

The outward resemblance and symbolic kinship between the executioner and those in power could hardly have avoided reflection in the works of Nabokov, as we see in the depiction of the execution in *King, Queen, Knave*:

...at dawn, breakfastless, pale, top-hatted city fathers driving to the execution. The weather is clod and foggy. What an ass one must feel in a top hat at five in the morning! The condemned man is led into the prison yard. The executioner's assistants plead with him to behave decently, and not to struggle. Ah, here's the axe. Presto — the audience is shown the severed head. What should a frock-coated burgher do when looking at it...<sup>40</sup>

The execution here is viewed through the eyes of "top-hatted city fathers," who sense that their attire is out of place, and though nothing is said of the outfits worn by the executioner and his assistants, the reader, acquainted through newspapers and magazines with the German ritual of the execution block, understands that the representatives of authority and those carrying out the decapitation must be dressed in the same way.

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<sup>39</sup> R. Caillois, "Sociologie du bourreau," *Le Collège de Sociologie / Textes ... présenté par Denis Hollier* (Paris, 1979), 405–406.

<sup>40</sup> V. Nabokov, *King, Queen, Knave* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), 207–208.

In *Invitation to a Beheading*, however, Nabokov attempts to emphasize not the resemblance of the executioner to the authorities, but rather to the buffoons, minstrels, jesters, and actors of the theater and the cinema, and with circus performers, and thus he does not have him dressed in the traditional frock coat and top hat. The remote and distorted echo of the “executioner in a top hat” motif is heard only in the euphemistic sentence: “you will be made to don the red top hat,” instead of “you are to be beheaded,” which the judge pronounces for Cincinnatus.<sup>41</sup> This “stand-in phrase” with its eerie expressiveness (headwear used as a comparison for blood flowing from a hewn neck) calls to mind associations not only with the red caps of the French Jacobins<sup>42</sup> and with communist symbols, but also with the paraphernalia of contemporary executions, albeit in a totalitarian discourse that lost all sense of truth, the top hat is placed not on the executioner, but on the victim, and is colored not with the black of mourning, but a joyful red.

The red top hat as such is reminiscent not so much of official ceremonies as of the travelling show, the circus, and the cabaret.<sup>43</sup> It is accompanied by the “red pantaloons” that M'sieur Pierre refuses to wear for the execution (“The performer of the execution, in red pantaloons... now this is nonsense — they’ve overdone it, as usual”),<sup>44</sup> perhaps because they differ little from the red tights worn by the fool Pantalone in the *Commedia dell’Arte*. Of course, all of the outfits in which Nabokov’s executioner appears when he ceases pretending to be a prisoner are of a markedly theatrical character.

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<sup>41</sup> Vadim Vadimovich, the main character in *Look at the Harlequins*, whose artistic biography largely mirrors Nabokov’s, calls his fifth novel *The Red Top Hat*. The subject of this novel is capital punishment “in a country of total injustice.” V. Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins* (New York, 2011), 79, 227–28.

<sup>42</sup> It is worth noting that King Louis XVI’s path to the block began when on 20 June 1792 a crowd of sans-culottes broke in to the royal palace and forced him to put on a red hood. See Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History in three volumes* (London, 1896), 2:262. For other allusions to the French Revolution in *Invitation to a Beheading*, see A. Dolinin, “Thriller Square and the Place de la Révolution: Allusions to the French Revolution in *Invitation to a Beheading*,” *The Nabokovian* 38 (Spring 1997), 43–49.

<sup>43</sup> A good example can be found in Ostrovskii’s novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*, which describes a stage concert during the NEP period: “After the audience had been treated to a highly emotional rendering of ‘Oh, Nights of Burning Passion’ by a buxom soprano, a couple sprang onto the stage. The man, half-naked but for a red top hat, some shiny spangles on his hips, a dazzling white shirt front and bow tie, in feeble imitation of a savage, and his doll-faced partner in voluminous skirts. To the accompaniment of a delighted buzz from the crowd of beefy-necked shopowners standing behind the armchairs and cots occupied by the sanatorium patients, the couple gyrated about the stage in the intricate figures of a foxtrot. A more revolting spectacle could scarcely be imagined. The fleshy man in his idiotic top hat, with his partner pressed tightly to him, writhed on the stage in suggestive poses. Pavel heard the stertorous breathing of some fat carcass at his back.” N. Ostrovsky, *How the Steel Was Tempered* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979), 381.

<sup>44</sup> Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 176.

He first appears before Cincinnatus “in a velvet jacket, an arty bow tie and new, high-heeled, insinuatingly squeaking boots with glossy legs (making him somehow resemble an operatic woodman).”<sup>45</sup> The reference to opera gives the Russian-German background an Italian tone, hinting at the melodramatic, operatic style of Mussolini and his followers, which evoked such distaste in many contemporaries.<sup>46</sup>

Later, at the banquet on the eve of the execution, M'sieur Pierre shows up in a “*gamletovka*” (translated as “Elsinore jacket” in the English version): the stage costume of Hamlet, in which Cincinnatus is then also dressed. It has generally been thought that the word “*gamletovka*” itself is Nabokov’s own neologism, created on the model of “*tolstovka*” (allegedly referring to a type of long shirt worn by Tolstoy). However, it is just as likely that the word is a modification of “*gamletka*,” a jargon word documented by N. A. Leikin in *Apraksintsy* meaning a suit of “black velvet with glass beads,” which the rich children of merchants rented from costume shops when preparing to go in costume, as was traditional during the Christmas season.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, the executioner dresses for the beheading in a “pea-green (*gorokhovyi*) hunting habit” and a “pea-green hat with a pheasant feather”<sup>48</sup> (cf. the “pea-green jester” (*shut gorokhovyi*) and the “pea-green coat” worn by Russian trackers). This Bavarian or Tyrolean dress simultaneously points to two terrorist regimes: the Nazis (not so much due to ethnic origin as to the green hunting outfit in which Goering, the “chief hunter” of the Third Reich, was fond of appearing in public), and the communists (based on the choice of adjective: the prisons of the ChK, forerunner of the NKVD and KGB, were located on *Gorokhovaia* Street in Petrograd after the revolution). It is also probably worth noting that in German folklore the “green hunter” (grüner Jäger), “hunter in a green coat” (Jäger im grünen Rock), and simply “green coat” (Grünrock) are frequent euphemistic names for the devil, who hunts for human souls.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>46</sup> See S. Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000), 178.

<sup>47</sup> N. A. Leikin, *Apraksintsy. Stseny i ocherki dopozharnoi epokhi* (St. Petersburg, 1864), 39. Regarding the theme of velvet in *Invitation to a Beheading*, see G. Utgof, “‘Barkhat’ kak ‘rogozha’,” *Studia Slavica. Sbornik nauchnykh trudov molodykh filologov V.* (Tallinn, 2005), 100-110.

<sup>48</sup> Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 214.

<sup>49</sup> J. Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie. Vierte Ausgabe. III. Band* (Berlin, 1878), 296. This tradition was familiar to the Russian reader based on Zhukovskii’s translation of the narrative poem by Johann Peter Hebel, *The Red Carbuncle*.

All the outfits of the dressed-up executioner are the markings of the bare, garish banality or, as Bunin aptly put it, the “repulsive theatricality” of the Bolshevik terror.<sup>50</sup> Like all the actions and words of the executioner, they reflect the true essence of revolutionary and totalitarian regimes. As Alter has noted with regard to *Invitation to a Beheading*, “*poshlust*” is not merely one of the unpleasant, external manifestations of totalitarianism, but its “indispensable principle of such regimes, a necessary expression of their inner nature.”<sup>51</sup> Since the true purpose of a totalitarian regime is to render dead all that is human, the most important of its arts is not the cinema after all, but the art of the executioner, and the executioner himself, in his various guises, becomes the central character in its culture (or anti-culture, as the case may be). Thus, in a town full of joyful degenerates as depicted by Nabokov, the people treat M'sieur Pierre as a visiting celebrity, a public idol — a movie star or an operatic tenor. It is only at the end of the novel, when the true measure of things is revealed and the adornments of the false world break down, that the executioner is reduced in stature and occupies the place fit for him in the real world, transforming into the likeness of a blackfly larva, a maggot feeding on dead flesh.

*Translated by Keith Blasing*



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<sup>50</sup> I. Bunin, “Zametki (Po povodu vtoroi godovshchiny oktiabr’skogo perevorota),” in I. A. Bunin, *Publitsistika 1918–1953 godov* (Moscow, 1998), 56.

<sup>51</sup> R. Alter, “*Invitation to a Beheading: Nabokov and the Art of Politics*,” in *Nabokov’s Invitation to a Beheading: A Critical Companion*, ed. Julian W. Connolly (Evanston, IL, 1997), 60-61.