

Freedom in Exile: The Development of Intellectual Independence in Vladimir Nabokov's Novels

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Dr. Comment

04/17/2015

## Freedom in Exile: The Development of Intellectual Independence in Vladimir Nabokov's Novels

"You know," Lolita once says in a rare moment of sincerity, "what's so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own" (324). Although still just an adolescent, Lolita is excruciatingly familiar with isolation; her stepfather Humbert Humbert kidnaps her and coerces her into keeping their sexual relationship secret, trapping her in a world of "total evil" (324). Her plaintive thought reveals a close association between isolation and death. Thus, it is unsurprising that people are willing to go to great lengths and confine themselves to social norms to avoid becoming outcasts. Nabokov focuses on the theme of exile, but, according to Jerzy Durczak, the author distances himself from other immigrant writers (par. 2), which often causes critics to sideline this theme. Exile, however, is critical to discuss because it pervades many of Nabokov's stories and drives characters into accepting conformity in their search for social acceptance, thus fueling the tension between freedom and constraint. Nabokov uses progressions of settings in *Lolita*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Pnin*, and *Pale Fire* to reflect the mental transformations the protagonists undergo throughout his novels. The settings at the beginning of the novels confine them in unattractive exiles. These locations, however, give way to settings that connote of freedom, although the protagonists still remain in exile. This transition in atmospheres embodies characters' shift from their wish to conform to their desire to achieve moral and intellectual autonomy. Nabokov's romantic portrayal of the final settings associated with this desire stresses that those who seek such independence, even in exile, are heroes.

Settings connote imprisonment and constraint when characters accept conformity and intellectually bind themselves to convention. Physical constraints such as prisons and limiting windows parallel the protagonists' exile from society and self-imposed intellectual boundaries. In *Invitation to a Beheading*, Cincinnatus C. bemoans his captivity: he frets over time's "arithmetic progression" and calls his sole window "little" and "ugly" (14). The "arithmetic" movement of time suggests the tightly structured nature of Cincinnatus' prison, and his unflattering description of the window reveals his dismissal of any opportunities of freedom; he thus becomes not only a physical prisoner but a mental one as well. On the other hand, Charles

Kinbote in *Pale Fire* says, “Windows...have been the solace of first-person literature throughout the ages” (87). Windows offer “solace” especially to people who feel trapped, suggesting Kinbote’s own constraint, resulting from his need to earn social and academic welcome. In addition, first-person literature narrates with a single perspective and thus inherently possesses an isolating component with which Kinbote keenly identifies. Sometimes when an “elm’s gross growth” obstructs his windows, Kinbote goes downstairs to stare at “several precious bright windows” that belong to John Shade, a respected professor, poet, and Kinbote’s neighbor, and Kinbote regards such moments gratefully as “scraps of happy hunting” (*Pale* 87). The metaphor of the stray animal highlights Kinbote’s starvation for social acceptance, and the elm’s “gross” obstacle represents how repulsive his exclusion is to him. Kinbote constantly looks out his own windows to try to glimpse into the Shades’ (*Pale* 89, 96); this action is a motif that symbolizes Kinbote’s desire to exchange his solitary existence for one of acceptance, even if it is confining in its conformity. Open windows, however, rarely remain open to Kinbote for long: in one instance, Sybil Shade, John Shade's wife, closes the window with a “great bang” and “pull[s] down its strident blind” (*Pale* 90). To Kinbote, the window slamming closed on him parallels his exile from respected American academia. Although Kinbote is seemingly liberated outdoors, his limited mentality makes him feel trapped outside of the world he wants to join.

Cages and islands also occur as methods of physical isolation. Despite his distaste for his window, Cincinnatus stares out of it, and “there was a tiny golden cage in each of his mirror like pupils” (*Invitation* 29). The “golden cage” symbolizes the prison that conformity uses to seduce individuals into its gilded trap. The reflection of the cage in Cincinnatus’ eye suggests that the prison is not only external, but due to his self-imposed intellectual leash, internal as well. Later, “[l]ike a fledgling crow on a stump, [Cincinnatus] stood for a long while on the chair, motionlessly gazing up at the beggarly ration of sky” (*Invitation* 49). The comparison of him to a “fledgling” suggests that he cannot fly on his own, still relying heavily on conformity. Instead of a tree, Cincinnatus stands on a stunted “stump,” emphasizing his static nature. The “beggarly ration” of sky represents how society restricts his freedom. Cincinnatus, however, astonishingly assists society in its

oppression of him, complaining that he does not want to escape the confining world because his “soul has burrowed under the pillow” (*Invitation* 26). Cincinnatus likens his life to sleeping, suggesting he has become used to passively drowsing through conformity. Although he acknowledges his pliancy he still chooses to embrace it for the sake of comfort. In contrast, Timofey Pnin in *Pnin* does not recognize his passivity. Joan, one of Pnin’s landladies, once shows him a picture: “We have here,” she says, “a desert island with a lone palm, and...a bit of broken raft,” but Pnin calls the island “impossible,” arguing, “So small island, moreover with palm, cannot exist in such a big sea” (60). Pnin dismisses such isolation, but ironically, the island reflects his own situation: he lives in a foreign country, a hostile “sea,” with a “broken raft” to represent his disconnect from the world due to his tenuous grasp of English and the disdain others have for his eccentricities. The island’s “palm” suggests Pnin’s intellectual fertility and potential, but his dismissal of such a setting suggests that he fails to even recognize the possibilities of intellectual independence.

Traps do not only exist in the physical sense; mirages too can ensnare people in illusions caused by society and cause their perspectives to distort. In *Lolita*, Humbert tries to combat his sexual attraction to “nymphets,” fey-like girls between the ages of 9 and 14. He decides to marry, hoping that “regular hours, home-cooked meals, all the conventions of marriage, the prophylactic routine of its bedroom activities and, who knows, the eventual flowering of certain moral values” might help him control his “dangerous desires” (24). Words like “regular hours,” “conventions,” “routine” reveal his distaste for marriage, especially given his abhorrence of convention. Seduced by society’s promises that matrimony fosters moral “flowering,” Humbert falls into the trap of relying on marriage to preserve his morality. Certainly, he should control his desires, but the way he tries to do so strangles him with protocol and is thus doomed to failure. Humbert says he breaks Annabel’s “spell” over him by “incarnat[ing]” her in Lolita (14). Lolita’s association with illusions and magic establishes a correlation between Humbert’s lust for her and his disconnect from reality. Even Lolita’s surname, “Haze,” suggests that Humbert’s love for Lolita is a mirage borne of his craving to escape his exile, but which ensnares him instead. According to Harriet Hustis, Humbert does not truly want to reincarnate Annabel, but

“seeks to break the ‘spell’ cast by his abrupt awareness of the fact of her mortality.” Humbert's keen "awareness" of mortality, along with his sexuality, isolates him from a society that fears and ignores death. Like Hustis says, Humbert seeks to break the "spell" and return to the ignorance that society embraces; what he does not realize is that the true illusion, the "spell," is that of convention which refuses to acknowledge death. After meeting Lolita he tries to "trap" her into spending time with him by leaving the door to his room ajar (52). Conversely, Humbert is in the same room, which means that he is as equally trapped as Lolita, symbolizing how he is caught in a "covert set of values of his own creation" (Hustis par. 50). One afternoon Humbert sexually molests Lolita; convincing himself that she had been unaware of his actions, he says that what he had “madly possessed” was not “a minor,” but “[his] own creation, another, fanciful Lolita” (68). Drunk on the thrill of possessing Lolita, Humbert cannot see how his actions affect her, and excuses his actions by claiming his sexual abuse is aimed towards an illusory, “fanciful Lolita.” His use of the word “minor” for Lolita deliberately confirms his knowledge of her status in society; his hyper-awareness of society's judgment makes him ignore his own moral corruption altogether, thus trapping him in a delusion that he is innocent.

In *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Pale Fire*, the Cincinnatus and Kinbote feel constrained by their exiles and become victims of ensnaring illusions. Cincinnatus once escapes from prison and visits his old home in the beautiful Tamara Gardens, but only by "the interciliary bar between two windows" can Cincinnatus identify his house (*Invitation* 20). His body is free, but the image of the “interciliary bar" between windows evokes the illusion of a prison. This hints that Cincinnatus, even when physically liberated, suffers in an intellectual jail because he accepts society's power over him. While in his physical prison, Cincinnatus constantly longs for his home: “[In] blissful despair, he gazed at the glimmer and haze of the Tamara Gardens and at the dove-blue melting hills beyond them” (*Invitation* 43). Words that characterize the gardens are “glimmer,” “haze,” and “melting,” all of which also characterize a mirage. In addition, Cincinnatus’ “despair” suggests that the Tamara Gardens are unattainable; its illusions of perfection trap Cincinnatus’ intellectually and call, siren-like, to his mind, which keeps him passively longing for the Gardens instead of actively using his gifts to escape. Don

Barton Johnson argues that "Cincinnatus used to roam freely" in the Tamara Gardens (qtd. in Dragunoiu, par. 9), but while Tamara Gardens is idyllic, it is not a place where Cincinnatus experiences true freedom. Elusive language appears in its descriptions, from small waterfalls with their own fragile "rainbows" to deer transforming into "trembling mottles of sunlight" (*Invitation* 28). The ephemeral nature of the gardens hints that any freedom Cincinnatus finds there is only the illusion of autonomy. Kinbote fashions his own illusions to assuage his loneliness in exile. When spooked by the noises of the night in his new home in New Wye, Kinbote prays that Shade would have a heart attack so Kinbote may be "called over to their house...in a great warm burst of sympathy, coffee, telephone calls, Zemblan herbal receipts" (*Pale* 96). For all his claims that Shade is a "friend," Kinbote demonstrates little regard for the poet, focusing on only the "shade," the respite from his weary exile, that he offers. The "coffee, telephone calls" and "Zemblan herbal receipts" are all self-serving tools to parasitically stake a claim in the Shade household. The happiness Kinbote derives from convention has no foundation other than his deluded fantasies, hinting that his attempts to belong are neither feasible nor beneficial. In his Commentary of Shade's poem "Pale Fire," Kinbote notes that the "image in the opening lines evidently refers to a bird knocking itself out...against the outer surface of a glass pane in which a mirrored sky...presents the illusion of continued space" (*Pale* 73). The mirage of "continued space" kills the bird instead of facilitating its flight, highlighting the inherent inferiority and limitations of illusions. This parallels Kinbote's rebuffed attempts to gain social acceptance, and suggests how he limits himself with his desire to conform.

Convention and artificial tradition also stifle people's minds in the norms of society and academia. Kinbote imagines that he is Charles Xavier, former king of a nation called Zembla, and thus feigns extensive knowledge on him. Since he fears it would be "unseemly" for a king to be a professor, Xavier teaches wearing a heavy disguise (*Pale* 80). Convention's expectations of Kinbote force him into deception and into an intellectual exile in which he cannot connect with those around him because his very identity is false. James F. English believes that Kinbote knows that people ridicule him for his "social deviance," and that this awareness even allows Kinbote to "turn the tables" on those who mock him because he is "determined...to "recast even

the most humiliating episodes of exclusion as moments of fellowship and mutual recognition” (par. 13). But “recast[ing]” the truth of his outcast status does not reveal that Kinbote is “determined”; it shows that he is deluded. Furthermore, people reject Kinbote not only for his “social deviance,” but for his parasitism of Shade’s work (*Pale* 175). Kinbote dismisses the idea of creating anything himself and relies on Shade, the voice of conventional academia, to write him a masterpiece. In another instance of stifling academia, Pnin teaches at Waindell College, a “provincial institution characterized by an artificial lake in the middle of a landscaped campus (9). The “artificial” and “landscaped campus” suggests that the college obsesses over its appearance, imposing its control over its natural surroundings, and similarly forcing its faculty to conform to its ideals. Waindell has “murals displaying recognizable members of the faculty in the act of passing on the torch of knowledge” to “monstrously built farm boys and farm girls” (*Pnin* 9). Painted on a mural, the torch possesses an inherently static nature, suggesting that Waindell never actually passes on such knowledge. The contrast between the glorified “torch of knowledge” and its “monstrously built” receivers also highlights how much grandeur the college generates to maintain its academic image. Waindell also imposes its idea of education on Pnin. His lessons must consist of “exercises in grammar brought out by the Head of a Slavic Department in a far greater college than Waindell—a venerable fraud whose Russian was a joke” (10). The description of a “greater” college than provincial Waindell outlines the hierarchy of academia; in the pecking order, Pnin becomes just another subordinate who society demands “stick to language exercises” (67) provided by such colleges. The irony of a “venerable fraud” assigning such dictations highlights the absurdity of Pnin’s obedience to society’s educational convention. R.H.W. Dillard asserts, “The central figure of Nabokov's novels is the artist, the man of sensitivity and imagination. Hero and dragon alike dream the creative dream” (par. 4). Humbert, Cincinnatus, Pnin, and Kinbote are not artists at the beginning of their stories, bound and mentally limited by convention as they are; as the novels progress, however, they begin to “dream the creative dream.”

In the middle of the characters’ journeys, the settings have elements of both imprisonment and freedom, reflecting the tension between protagonists’ attachment to conformity and their awakening desires for

intellectual independence. Their physical surroundings connote both freedom and constraint; windows in particular embody this conflict. On his road trip, Humbert recalls some of his lodgings as "prison cell[s] of paradise, with yellow window shades pulled down to create a morning illusion of Venice and sunshine when actually it was Pennsylvania and rain" (*Lolita* 163). Humbert traps Lolita and himself in an illusion of clear skies when in reality the clouds confine them. This generates tension between the appearance of freedom and the reality of their ensnarement. Humbert and Lolita are on a road trip, seemingly free, but their brief stops in these "prison cells" masquerading as "paradise" suggest otherwise. Although Humbert realizes his depravity, his fear of society's judgment prevents him from admitting his own crimes to himself. He feels as though they live in a "lighted house of glass, and that any moment" someone will "peer through a carelessly unshaded window to obtain a free glimpse" of their depraved lives (*Lolita* 204). Humbert feels both trapped and exposed, a dichotomy between confinement and freedom. Although his growing guilt signals his realization of his crimes, he dreads the judgment of society through the "unshaded window," which is why he clings to his deliberate moral ignorance. As Pnin works on his personal research project in a library, he notices "the violet-blue air of dusk, silver-tooled by the reflection of the fluorescent lights of the ceiling, and, among spidery black twigs, a mirrored row of bright book spines" (78). The reflection in the window inscribes the lights and book spines on the dusky sky and twigs; the imprint of the rigid order of humanity on the uncontrolled autonomy of nature reveals a tension between confinement and liberty, one that Pnin experiences himself as he both seeks permanent tenure at Waindell and yet longs to pursue his own intellectual research. When Pnin invites his friends to a party at his new home, guests notice in his bedroom "the view from the row of small windows: a dark rock wall rising abruptly...with a stretch of pale starry sky above the black growth of its crest" (164). The sharp contrast between the oppressive dark rock and the expansive night sky reflects Pnin's internal conflict about whether to conform to society's expectations or pursue his own interests. The "small windows" allow sight, but their size limits the very freedom they create, thus emphasizing Pnin's mindset, torn between freedom and constraint.

In *Invitation to a Beheading*, Cincinnatus' mentality begins to change. He describes his cell again: the walls are "unalterably four" and painted a yellow that is "dark" compared to the "shifting spot where the bright ochre reflection" of the window and the "precious parallelogram of sunlight" which also moves with the sun (118-119). The "unalterable" number of walls characterizes them as static, contrasting with the window's reflection and the sunlight, both of which move freely throughout the day. The mobile nature of this light also signifies that Cincinnatus is free to change, even within the confines of his cell. Unlike his first appraisal of his cell, Cincinnatus' description now focuses on the "precious" light, not on the window that constrains it. This important shift in mentality demonstrates that, although he is confined by the walls of his own limitations, he is beginning to reconsider his role as a static, stereotypical prisoner. According to Dana Dragunoiu, "Nabokov inverts the traditional conceptions of spirit and matter. Matter, usually viewed as solid, stable, and continuous, is made transparent, unpredictable, and discontinuous. By contrast, spirit is shown to be more substantial" such as Cincinnatus's opaque soul, which gives him an "exceptionally strong, ardent, independent life" despite his physical transparency (par. 19). By reversing these traditions, Nabokov himself defies convention, and Cincinnatus's insubstantial physique hints that he has the potential to shed his physical body, and likewise shed conformity. Matter's fluidity appears several other times: in one instance, Cincinnatus removes his "dressing gown, the skullcap, the slippers," but then also takes off "his collarbones like shoulder straps," "his rib cage like a hauberk," and "his arms like gauntlets," but then "[t]he iron thunderclap of the bolt resounded, and Cincinnatus instantly grew all that he had cast off, the skullcap included" (32-33). Cincinnatus's body parts are compared to "shoulder straps, "hauberk," and "gauntlets," suggesting how his physical body that both armors and restricts him. When he discards his armor, he demonstrates that for a brief moment he dismisses society's opinions of him, and has no need to protect nor restrict himself. At the boom of the bolt, however, Cincinnatus returns to the trap of his physical body. The emphasis on the "skullcap," a hat that envelops the head, and how it "grew" back not only symbolizes the confinement of Cincinnatus's mind, but also suggests that its limitations are caused by forces that are internal and self-imposed.

Images of freedom constrained in books and photos parallel the dichotomy in characters as they struggle between the desire to free their minds and their attachment to conformity. Cincinnatus peruses “a bound magazine” from the prison library. It shows pictures of a different world, where “the flowing glass of enormous windows curved around corners of buildings; a girl in a bathing suit flew like a swallow” and “a high-jumper lay supine in the air” (*Invitation* 50). The windows in the picture flow and curve, unbound by the rigid lines of buildings, which associates these windows with the liberty Cincinnatus’ prison window lacks. The girl and the high-jumper fly birdlike through the air, also demonstrating the freedom Cincinnatus desires. These images, however, only exist within the confines of the “bound” magazine, a fact that shadows these images of freedom with constraint. Cincinnatus later finds in the library catalogue a series of images, forming a “coherent narrative” of a prisoner “fleeing,” drawn by a “child’s hand” (*Invitation* 61). Although the drawings seem to indicate freedom, their confinement in the catalogue suggests otherwise. In addition, the inmate’s freedom is drawn by the power of a “child’s hand,” suggesting that the “fleeing prisoner,” Cincinnatus, has no power over his own fate. His desire for freedom, however, awakens despite his self-limitation. As Pnin goes to return a book to the library, Nabokov details the settings around him: A tree “ascend[s], naked, into the sky,” and “pigeon” flies by. Pnin drops a book and it falls open to “a snapshot of a Russian pasture...and some long mared horses” (73). The tree’s nakedness, its ascent into the sky, and the flying pigeon evoke images of freedom. The naturalness of this scenery contrasts with the previous view of Waindell’s “artificial” and “landscaped” campus, reflecting Pnin’s mental shift towards independence. The book also portrays an image of freedom with the idyllic “Russian pasture” with “innocent” horses; these images, however, are contained within a photograph, reflecting Pnin’s limitations of his intellectual curiosity due to society’s expectations of him. In one of his dreams, Pnin “[sees] himself fantastically cloaked, fleeing through great pools of ink under a cloud-barred moon” and waits on a “desolate strand” despite the open ocean before him (109-110). Pnin is free of the Bolsheviks’ reach but the prison-like description of his dreams suggest that his mind still complies with societal barriers.

This tension between freedom and social constraint surfaces in settings that are free and open spaces, yet experience distortion due to ensnaring mirages. Humbert decides to marry Charlotte to spend more time with Lolita without arousing suspicion, and “[B]efore such a vastness and variety of vistas,” he says, “I was as helpless as Adam...miraged in his apple orchard” (*Lolita* 79). The innumerable “vistas” hint at Humbert’s freedom, but “miraged” reveals that his belief that his hope for a relationship with Lolita is an empty fantasy, and mires Humbert in the apple orchard’s false utopia of deliberate ignorance. After kidnapping Lolita, Humbert drags her on road trip, “putting the geography of the United States into motion” to give her “the impression of ‘going places’” (171). Humbert and Lolita are running on a treadmill that gives them only the illusion of progress. On the trip, Humbert recalls that the sky “would melt overhead” in the “hot haze,” and “the road shimmered ahead, with a remote car changing its shape mirage-like in the surface glare” (*Lolita* 172). Although Humbert and Lolita appear free on their journey through the expanse of America, the melting sky, shimmering road, and “mirage-like” images of cars emphasize that the normality of their road trip is an illusion. The “hot haze” also evokes Lolita’s surname, suggesting that Humbert, by projecting his delusions onto Lolita, turns her from a person into his fantasy to feed his parasitic craving for acceptance. Humbert admits that their journey has “defiled” the country with a “trail of slime” (*Lolita* 198). His fixation on these illusions reveals that he registers his corruption during the trip, but ignores it anyway. The mirages of the Tamara Gardens consistently lull Cincinnatus into a passive mentality. Cincinnatus escapes for the first time, and in the landscape he sees that the Gardens “shimmered dimly, merged, and dissolved,” and above them floats “a chain of translucent and fiery cloudlets” (*Invitation* 165). Cincinnatus has just gained freedom, but illusions persist: words like “shimmered,” “merged,” “dissolved” foreshadow the ephemeral nature of his newfound liberation. The “chain” of clouds also hints that despite his immediate freedom, Cincinnatus has not yet thrown off all his shackles. He subconsciously chafes against these chains, however. He reflects, “in my dreams the world would [become] so...free and ethereal, that afterwards it would be oppressive to breathe the dust of this painted life” (*Invitation* 92). Although Cincinnatus imagines these “free and ethereal” settings, they only exist in his dreams,

and he always returns to the dull conformity of “painted life.” Although Cincinnatus longs for the autonomy in his dream world, he still clings to the limited waking one. Pnin also feels confined: he moves houses “every semester” that he teaches at Waindell and “[t]he accumulation of consecutive rooms in his memory now resembled the displays” in the “soft light of the furniture store beyond which it snows” (62). The cozy diction of “beds, and lamps, and inglenooks” illuminated by a “soft light” would normally signify warmth and comfort, but since they are only an illusion within a “furniture store” with artificial “displays,” these descriptions seem contrived. The reference to Waindell and how he moves every semester suggest that the college’s artifice contributes to Pnin’s intellectual restlessness.

The final settings express an idealized autonomy, affirming the characters’ desire for intellectual independence, and Nabokov’s romantic portrayal of these settings stresses that seeking such autonomy is a heroic endeavor. Although characters remain exile, Nabokov describes romantic physical settings at the end of novels to suggest that they become heroes by seeking intellectual and moral independence. Nabokov adopted such an attitude toward exile himself: “though lonely and alienated,” Durczak says, “[Nabokov] refused to be considered an unhappy victim of exile” and saw both pros and cons to his rootlessness (par. 43). Nabokov’s sentiment about exile underlies most of the endings in his novels. The protagonists remain in exile, but their mentalities shift by weaning themselves off of convention. At the end of his memoir, Humbert focuses not on his imprisonment but on one of his final moments of freedom: “What I heard was but the melody of children at play...majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic...and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord” (351). By understanding that Lolita’s lost childhood is the most “poignant thing,” Humbert reveals that he has finally surrendered his need for social acceptance and has fully realized his sins. The “melody” of playing children, described as “majestic,” magical, and “divinely enigmatic,” establishes Humbert’s reform and the formation of his moral autonomy. Through Humbert’s lens of spiritual awakening, Nabokov also romanticizes his physical settings, describing a quaint town with “green puffs of trees,” a “serpentine stream,”

and “the rich, ore-like glitter of the city dump” (350). Humbert’s attention to the picturesque details of the setting reveals his appreciation for the beauty he remembers, despite his current imprisonment. The comparison of the dump to a rich “ore” highlights the romanticism in the passage; ores are valuable for metals and minerals that can be extracted from them, so Nabokov seems to believe in the value of even things that appear worthless. This suggests that Humbert is, despite his unforgivable sins, a hero for his intellectual independence, and, as Brian D. Walter asserts, for being “an artist who wins the reader over to sympathy despite the dictates of common sense and morality” (par. 11). The sympathy Humbert gains despite and through his confession demonstrates the extent of his achievement. In addition, although his exile persists in prison, and then turns permanent in death, Humbert becomes what Nabokov considers a true artist, an artist-hero, by embracing the moral and intellectual autonomy which allow him to create the masterpiece that is the memoir *Lolita*.

In the final moments of *Invitation*, Cincinnatus repeatedly insists on doing things by himself on the way to his execution (218, 219, 221). Throughout the novel, he constantly depends on others, whether he leans on them for support (11, 29); asks questions of them (16, 47); or relies on them to rescue him (53, 157). The first time he says, “By myself,” he manages to escape from the prison for the first time (165). This time he insists on independence, demonstrating the development of an inner strength borne of his matured mental autonomy. As he lies on the execution block, he wonders, “[W]hy am I here? Why am I lying like this? And, having asked himself these simple questions, he answered them by getting up and looking around” (222). Nabokov romanticizes the situation: not all situations can be resolved by making a simple if profound realization. It does, however, emphasize Cincinnatus’ leap into independence. He asks himself, and even answers his own questions with actions: his “getting up” symbolizes how he transcends the confines of his world and from the mental limitations he has placed on himself, and “looking around” represents how his eyes finally see the paths that have always been open to him. After he rises, Cincinnatus’ world crumbles, its foundation built on the passivity Cincinnatus discards through his defiant self-reliance (223). The collapse of the platform, the place where Cincinnatus would have become trapped in death, romantically symbolizes how society’s constraints fall

apart in the face of an individual's mental independence. Cincinnatus transforms from a helpless prisoner to a powerful, almost god-like figure, which parallels his transition from a passive mental state to an actively independent one; accepting society's dictations, to a mentality seeking his own answers. This metamorphosis glorifies Cincinnatus and establishes him as a hero for seeking intellectual independence in the final moments of the novel.

After being fired from Waindell, an indignant Pnin leaves town. The day of his departure, "[t]he air was keen, the sky clear and burnished. Southward the empty road could be seen ascending the gray-blue hill among patches of snow" (190). The "keen" air along with the "clear and burnished" sky of the beautiful day are at odds with Pnin's anger; the day's beauty therefore reflects the action Pnin takes towards obtaining freedom. Without Waindell to chain him, Pnin can head down an "empty" road clear of obstacles and ascend the "hill" of his own academic and spiritual pursuits. Nabokov also adds flair to Pnin's exit from the novel: Pnin's small sedan, at first trapped between two trucks, boldly swung past the front truck and, free at last, spurted up the shining road, which one could make out narrowing to a thread of gold in the soft mist where hill after hill made beauty of distance, and where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen" (191). By swinging "boldly" past the confining trucks, Pnin rejects society's claim on him and escapes to the freedom of distance. The "shining road" that narrows to a "thread of gold," the "soft mist" and "hill after hill" romanticize the setting of Pnin's departure, affirming that his escape from society's confines and embrace of his own intellectual individuality mark him as a hero, better off for his exile.

Even if the described settings are physically unattractive, the mental liberation the protagonists experience makes the final settings romantic anyway, revealing the heroism of transcending the confines of societal norms through moral and mental autonomy. After murdering Clare Quilty, the man who eloped with Lolita, Humbert drives calmly away and decides to go on the other side of the road simply for the "novel experience"; he feels "a pleasant diaphragmal melting," and then "surrender[s]" himself "lazily" to the "absolutely reliable support" of the arriving police (349, 350). Humbert does not romanticize his surroundings

but focuses on the internal bliss he experiences as he finally slips free of the noose society pulls around him. His focus on the sheer “novel experience” demonstrates that he does not care about rebelling against society, but acts only for his own reasons. Moving to the other side of the road symbolizes his release from pressures of society’s morals and acceptance of his own. Humbert seems to be surrendering himself to society, but in reality he simply does not care what it can do to him any longer, because he has already judged himself and understands the “bits of marrow...and blood, and beautiful bright-green flies” on his story and soul (351). He is often an unreliable narrator, but the horrifying way he portrays himself in his memoir is compelling in its honest self-recrimination. Thus, Humbert truly gains a moral compass not by adhering to society’s expectations of him, but by realizing, independently, that he destroyed Lolita’s priceless childhood. Throughout the novel he addresses the “ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” whom at first appear to be the court jury, but Humbert reveals at the end that they are the heavenly jury, since he has no intention of “parad[ing] living Lolita” at his hearing (351). He addresses Lolita in his final sentences: “[W]hile the blood still throbs through my writing hand, you are still as much part of blessed matter as I am, and I can still talk to you...I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (352). Imprisoned, diseased, and dying, Humbert writes from a very dark place, and admits that when the memoir is to be released, both he and Lolita will be dead (352). His final sentences, however, light up this darkness with images bursting with vitality that transcends time’s corrosion. By following the demands of his personal morals rather than those of society, Humbert manages to find peace even in the most hopeless hour and writes his memoir accordingly.

Kinbote’s ending is not physically romantic, but his mindset creates a sense of spiritual serenity despite his exacerbated exile. Kinbote confides, “On such sunny, sad mornings I always feel in my bones that there is a chance yet of my not being excluded from Heaven...despite the frozen mud and horror in my heart” (*Pale* 258). Despite the “frozen mud and horror” he experiences from his exile, Kinbote still holds out hope that he might belong somewhere, even if that place exists only after death. He relinquishes his obsession with belonging to

the “clubby world of fifties American academe” (English, par. 13) and with having Shade create the perfect poem for him; instead, he channels his energies towards creating his own narrative, which compliments and turns out just as well-written as Shade’s work and establishes Kinbote as an artist-hero. Like Marilyn Edelstein says, Kinbote transforms his “parasitic” relationship into a “symbiotic” one (par. 9) by embracing his exile and intellectual autonomy. He says, “I have suffered very much, and more than any of you can imagine. I pray for the Lord’s benediction to rest on my wretched countrymen. My work is finished. My poet is dead...I shall continue to exist” (*Pale* 300). Kinbote draws several parallels between himself and Christ: “My work is finished” were the last words of Christ as he died on the cross; “I pray for the Lord’s benediction to rest on my wretched countrymen” resembles how Christ asked God to forgive and bless those who crucified him; Kinbote’s claim that he has “suffered” unimaginably reflects how Christ suffered and died for the sins of humanity; Christ was resurrected after three days and returned to heaven, and Kinbote, too, affirms his decision to live, or “continue to exist.” Thus, Kinbote not only accepts his continued exile but, through religious language and the hope contained within them, layers his exile with hope fueled by the strength he gains by shedding society’s judgment.

The transformation of constrained settings to free ones highlights how characters shift from conformist mentalities to intellectual independence. Romantic portrayals of the final settings suggests that Nabokov considers those who pursue mental autonomy to be heroes. Early settings constrain characters in exile, while latter ones free them in the same exile, suggesting that mental autonomy and social exile to a degree are mutually inclusive. If, then, we associate isolation with death and separation from society a separation from life like *Lolita* does, it is important that we learn to change this mentality and stop condemning social exile; perhaps we should even embrace it at times, in order to gain the intellectual freedom that is so crucial to the health of our minds and spirits.

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