



**FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
UNIVERZITY KARLOVY
V PRAZE**

ANGLISTIKA – AMERIKANISTIKA

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Fiktivní politické zrcadlení ve dvou románech Vladimira Nabokova

Fictional Political Mirroring in Two Novels by Vladimir Nabokov

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Praha, Srpen 2010

Acknowledgement

I am genuinely thankful to my supervisor, Justin Quinn, for providing me with invaluable information and inspiring suggestions for my further research. I would like to thank him for his guidance, but foremost for his continual patience despite my occasional stumbles. Also, writing this thesis would not have been possible without the constant support of my family, as well as my friends, and their unconditional encouragement throughout the years of my studies. Therefore, my sincere gratitude goes to all of these precious people.

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně a výhradně s použitím citovaných pramenů, literatury a dalších odborných zdrojů.

Souhlasím se zapůjčením práce pro studijní účely.

V Praze dne 23. 8. 2010

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Anotace

Záměrem bakalářské práce je vytvořit ucelenější pohled na problematiku političnosti děl Vladimira Nabokova. Pro ilustraci této tematiky slouží detailní rozbor románů *Pozvání na popravu* a *Ve znamení levobočka*, považovaných literárními kritiky za nejpolitičtější z autorových děl. Cílem práce je na základě literárně kritických studií a za pomoci analýzy samotných textů románů objasnit možné spojitosti mezi obsahem děl a soukromým životem jejich autora, a dále pak ilustrovat, jak Nabokov promítl své politické názory do těchto románů a za jakým účelem tak činil. Přestože práce zohledňuje autora politická, či spíše apolitická přesvědčení jako taková, zaměřuje se převážně na otázku totalitních režimů. V úvodní kapitole je proto nastíněn historický kontext vzniku románů a jsou zde shrnuty klíčové okamžiky ze života Vladimira Nabokova mající spojitost s totalitními systémy. Následující kapitoly se pak detailně zaměřují na podobnosti skutečných režimů vládnoucích v Evropě v první polovině dvacátého století a režimů fiktivních. Závěrečná kapitola pokračuje srovnáním světů a postav hlavních hrdinů. Nezbytným doplněním jsou pak zdokumentované názory autora na politické dění jeho doby. V závěru dochází k zhodnocení možných spojitostí mezi fiktivními světy a reálným životem autora, a jejich významu pro pochopení románů. Z prozkoumaných pramenů vyplývá, že ačkoli je politika nedílnou součástí Nabokovových románů, slouží pouze jako nástroj pro objasnění autorových názorů na postavení umění v lidské společnosti a jeho vlivu na individualitu člověka.

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1. Introduction

The focus of this thesis is to closely analyze two novels by Vladimir Nabokov, namely *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*, and on the basis of close reading as well as detailed examination of critical literature enlighten the circumstances of their creation in the course of author's life and the influences and experiences that might have imprinted in the novels. Although validity of biographical approach may be subjected to question, it proves to be a rather insightful approach concerning the central topic of the thesis and it also provides wider perspective for more accurate understanding of the novels, as it directs the reader from politics towards more philosophical and aesthetical concerns. The thesis should also summarise the main points of Nabokov's artistic theory and clarify what was the main concern of Nabokov's literary works.

Invitation to a Beheading, one of the last works Nabokov wrote in his mother tongue, a "dystopian fable" which appeared for the first time in a Russian émigré magazine *Sovremenniya Zapiski* in 1938, follows the last days of Cincinnatus C., a prisoner sentenced to death for his deviation from the common transparency of his fellow citizens in a world which is a grotesque parody of an absurd political regime, but at the same time this exaggerating portrayal depicts the most absurd features of totalitarian regimes in general with striking accurateness.¹ *Bend Sinister* originally published in 1947,² on the other hand, is one of the earliest works of Nabokov's American period and it is one of the first attempts to write a novel entirely in English. Its protagonist, the philosopher Adam Krug, represents the last instance of resistance to the all-consuming political tyranny of the 'Ekwilist' party and its leader Paduk. From this point of view, each of the novels finds itself on the opposite shore of the same ocean just as the years in which the novels were created are markers of what is generally considered to be one of the world's most distressing periods.

The introductions to the two novels are no exception in Nabokov's habit of explaining the meaning of his works, or rather the habit of making clear what the meaning of his novel certainly is not. His ironic remarks invite polemics and often initiate argument about their real

¹ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 410.

² Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York: Vintage International, 1990) ix.

significance, as the author tends to mislead his ‘un-ideal’ readers in order to direct them, of course without their noticing they have been manoeuvred, into a preferable interpretation. However, it seems to be clear that despite the obvious connection with politics, the desired point of the books is not to express how the author overcomes his negative experience of undemocratic regimes but it is rather the clash of individual consciousness with totalitarian political systems that plays central role in these two novels.

Although the author in his prefaces claims the opposite, numerous critics and experts recognized these two novels as Nabokov’s most political works. The plots are clearly constructed around political themes. Readers are free to decide for themselves whether they take the political aspect of the novels as a crucial feature of the works, or a mere complement which helps to lead the “small Nabokovs” towards the aimed conclusion diligently prepared by the author.³

Although some ideas of the thesis are inspired by the reading of critical texts and numerous quotations had been added to support the points made throughout the paper, most of the text is based solely on personal close reading. The secondary sources are both concerned with the historical facts and reality of the early twentieth century Europe as well as works of Nabokov scholars and specialists. Nabokov’s autobiographical work *Speak Memory* and *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, written by Brian Boyd, were the two main sources for the chapter concerned with the pertinent facts from Nabokov’s biography. This chapter discusses the influence of Nabokov’s environment as well as the impact of his social status and political opinions of his family. In this sense the most dominating figure was probably Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, the author’s father, an active politician and also journalist. Therefore, a rather extensive passage of the first chapter is dedicated to a detailed analysis of V. D. Nabokov’s political career and his opinions on politics as a whole.

As a young man, Nabokov witnessed some of the greatest political as well as social changes in human history, both a national and international scale. His entire family fled Russia in 1919 under the pressure of the Bolshevik revolution.⁴ When on the verge of Second

³ *The Russian Years*, 308.

⁴ *The Russian Years*, 136.

World War life in Europe became dangerous, the writer together with his wife, who was of Jewish origin, and their young son Dmitri, had to flee once again. This time they had to leave behind the whole European continent to save their lives. In 1940 the family of three boarded a ship heading for the United States. This was the second time a totalitarian political regime deprived Nabokov of his home and contact with his close ones. The first chapter sets out what Nabokov thought of these drastic political changes and how he dealt with the difficult situations he found himself in, first, thanks to the Communists and later due to the Nazis. This biographical account should point out the relevant moments of Nabokov's experience of totalitarian regimes and enlighten how these incidents might have, in a changed form, entered his novels.

The following chapter demonstrates how Nabokov depicts totalitarian systems both in *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*. It also deals with the problematic of 'apoliticality' of Nabokov's novels, which is an issue that extends even further to the subsequent chapter. The second chapter gives an extensive account of the resemblance between the fictional worlds of Nabokov's novels and the reality of Russian and German politics of the first half of the twentieth century. It will show how the author implants hints and images reminding the reader of the two greatest totalitarian systems of our times as Nabokov presents an interesting mixture of the policies of these two dictatorships.

In the last chapter, I would like to try to illustrate in what aspects the main principles of the political systems in the fictional worlds of the novels differ from Nazism and Communism. I will compare and contrast 'Ekwilism' and individualism, as it is presented in the novels (especially then in *Bend Sinister*) and also question the aim of the mentioned applied theories to restrict the minds of the individuals and establish non-opposing averageness in anyone who would prefer to maintain their freedom of consciousness. Another question to be considered in this chapter is what connects the two main heroes, Cincinnatus C. and Adam Krug, and in what aspects they differ in relationship to political systems. This chapter will also briefly touch upon the possible similarities of the main character's opinions and experience with those of the author. The last chapter of the thesis should also bring into discussion the question of art, the means of expressing beauty and the outcome of individual

human creativity. Art will be contrasted with the applied arts and mass culture of the totalitarian regimes. Furthermore, the final chapter also makes clear how Nabokov keeps his readers aware of the fact the two novels are a manifestation of his own individuality and creativity and the notion that the novels are still only works of art lingers throughout the novels and reminds the readers of the consciousness of their own perceiving individuality.

2. Life

Vladimir Nabokov's political views were indubitably influenced by the environment he grew up in, as well as by the social status and political opinions of his family. He was born into an unstable Tsarist system which was on the verge of collapse, although at that point no one could be sure of the outcome. Several political and social movements were undermining the apparatus of the despotic "all-powerful officialdom," as the Tsarist regime was called by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.⁵ They wished to bring about a revolution that would ultimately lead to the overthrow of Tsar Alexander, as well as of his government, taking advantage of the unfortunate situation caused by World War One when hunger and despair made workers strike.⁶ In due course, when already lacking political opposition capable of resistance, the Bolsheviks intended to establish a social state.⁷

Vladimir Nabokov unfortunately lived to see the realization of what was in the year of his birth still only a bold plan, and surely he would not think that butterfly hunting near the family estate in Vyra would have to become just a dear recollection because of the course of events put into motion by the Socialists under the pretext of setting the Russian men free.⁸ In his memoirs *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov himself comments on the events of 1917 with clear contempt for both the new establishment as well as its leader:

When, at the end of the year, Lenin took over, the Bolsheviks immediately subordinated everything to the retention of power, and a regime bloodshed, concentration camps, and hostages entered upon its stupendous career. At the time many believed one could fight Lenin's gang and save the achievements of the March Revolution.⁹

⁵ James D. Young, *Socialism Since 1889: A Biographical History* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1988) 114.

⁶ *The Russian Years*, 122-124.

⁷ Among other minor groups there were two parties that were of great importance concerning the Russian Revolution of 1917, and these were the Socialist-Revolutionist Party and the Bolsheviks, the Left Wing faction of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party. It was after the open demonstrations of half-starving and jobless working class severely mutilated by the war broke out when these two groups, both opposing the Provisional Committee established in order to calm down the situation in the country after the imperial regime fell, came up with their own program.

⁸ Young, 114.

⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (London: Penguin Books, 2000) 186.

2.1 Troubled times

As a political figure, Vladimir's father joined the Provisional Government, majority of which consisted of the Constitutional Democrats, and was appointed a minister without portfolio in March 1917.¹⁰ But when the revolution eventually came to Russia, Vladimir's father also had to quickly analyze the situation. Seeing that reforms instituted by the Provisional Government did not bring the expected results, as the Russian population was already expecting rather more radical changes,¹¹ he swiftly decided for the whole family to leave St Petersburg for Crimea.

He sent his two elder sons first, probably to avoid their being conscripted by the 'Red' army,¹² and so eighteen-year old Vladimir and his brother Sergey, ten months his junior, left the capital alone and the rest of the family were to meet them later in Crimea, near Yalta, which was an area still unoccupied by the new Soviet army. Unsure whether they would meet their father again, as he decided to remain in St Petersburg as long as possible, or rather as long as it was safe for him, Vladimir and his brother undertook an adventurous journey to the south.¹³ The region had been already flooded by Russian aristocrats and intellectuals, who just as Nabokovs sought for escape from the upheavals. Upon their arrival, the boys were already expected by their relatives who managed to leave St Petersburg earlier. Their mother Elena and sisters joined them only several days later.¹⁴ Nevertheless, when they encountered their father again, the family could not hope for much wanted relief.

Living on greatly reduced financial means, they were soon forced by the circumstance to continue with their journey. Their stay in Crimea was becoming more and more insecure after the original local government was, as Nabokov put it, "swept away by a brand-new Soviet, and [they] were subjected to the preposterous and humiliating sense of utter insecurity"¹⁵ additionally escalating thanks to the threat represented by the Bolshevik assassins advancing on the area. Nevertheless, in spring 1918, the Bolsheviks were replaced

¹⁰ *The Russian Years*, 125.

¹¹ *The Russian Years*, 127.

¹² *Speak, Memory*, 187.

¹³ *Speak, Memory*, 187.

¹⁴ *The Russian Years*, 138.

¹⁵ *Speak, Memory*, 189.

by German troops who cleared out of Crimea when the Red army began to attack the region from the north¹⁶ and eventually broke through in 1919.¹⁷

This rupture did not only mean that Vladimir Nabokov had to depart Russia never to return, but also, what was more painful, as he claims in *Speak, Memory*, it ended communication between him and his first great love, Lyussyva-Valentina Evgenievna Shulgin.¹⁸ “Tamara”, as he calls her in his memoirs, however, lived on in his memory as well as in his literary works, to be immortalized as some of Nabokov’s characters, above all in *Mashenka*, or *Mary* as the English title goes.¹⁹

First the Nabokovs fled for Greece and after couple of months relocated to England.²⁰ However, living in London was not acceptable for a longer period than absolutely necessary, as the expenses were largely overextending the financial possibilities of the family. Therefore, the parents together with the younger children left Vladimir and Sergey behind, at that time both studying at Cambridge, and moved to Berlin, a city that provided a new and preferably temporary home for thousands of Russian émigrés. Berlin was also a place where Nabokov’s father helped to establish an exile government and sealed thus his fate. These unstable times taught young Nabokov about the cruelties humans are capable of, and living through all this must have formed his opinions concerning the Bolsheviks, and most importantly provided him with the firsthand experience of a totalitarian regime.

Nevertheless, the fact that he was fully informed about the bloodshed and oppression taking place in his homeland at occasions proved to be even disadvantageous for young Nabokov, as he was left but mesmerised by opinions of some of his acquaintances at Cambridge. As the memories of his forced and rather dramatic departure from Russia were still fresh, he could not understand how some of the English intellectuals might have approved of the revolutionary upheavals. These college peers learnt about the Russian Revolution only from the press, or other biased sources, and misinformed as they were they could defend the newly established regime and its leader Vladimir I. Lenin. Apprehending the

¹⁶ *Speak, Memory*, 191.

¹⁷ *Speak, Memory*, 194.

¹⁸ *The Russian Years*, 112.

¹⁹ *The Russian Years*, 245.

²⁰ *Speak, Memory*, 194-195.

upheavals simply as a protest against the Tsarist despotism and repressions, they were unable to see that the repressions of the new system were even greater.²¹

Although Nabokov generally claimed he was apolitical throughout his life, he admitted that at the time of his studies his criticism of the Soviet regime was great and he recollected how he argued about politics in those days, his stance and arguments largely revealing his father's influence.²² Nonetheless, Nabokov soon learnt that the political debates with his fellow students at Cambridge mostly led to a dead end, and hence, according to his own words, Nabokov decided to “[turn] away from politics and [concentrate] on literature.”²³

2.2 Vladimir Dmitrievich – Nabokov's father

To understand fully the early influences on the author's political opinions, one must also learn about Nabokov's father, who tried to pass some of his ideals to his children. Thus his love for democratic principles was handed down to yet another generation of Nabokovs. In this sense, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov was undoubtedly the dominant figure, a beloved father whom young Vladimir admired greatly, and whose political opinions Nabokov if not fully accepted then at least to a large extent shared.

Probably due to his roots, having been a son of Minister of Justice and of an aristocratic mother, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov was interested in politics as well as juristic issues and only naturally followed his father's career and studied law at St Petersburg University.²⁴ Soon after finishing his studies, Vladimir Dmitrievich was made Junior Gentleman of the Chamber and apart from lecturing on criminal law he was also active in publishing articles on the same subject, some of them the subject of great controversy.²⁵

As Nabokov later noted in his memoirs, his father's position and political career were assessed several times due to his steady “[conformity] to his principles in private and public matters.”²⁶ As if his provocative articles were not enough for Vladimir Dmitrievich to

²¹ *Speak, Memory*, 200.

²² *The Russian Years*, 168.

²³ *Speak, Memory*, 204.

²⁴ *Speak, Memory*, 135.

²⁵ *Speak, Memory*, 136.

²⁶ *Speak, Memory*, 136.

complicate his life in such troubled times, in addition to his journalistic activities he and several of his fellows founded the Constitutionalist Democratic Party, a group which disagreed with the politics of the Tsarist absolutism but could not see a violent revolution as the one and only answer to the situation Russia found itself in.²⁷ Unfortunately, it was not the Cadets, as the members of this party were called, who eventually brought about reform.

As opposition to the new established Soviet regime, the Cadets were between the first to be dispatched. The new system could not afford to keep their enemies in the country and so they eliminated anyone who had not fled and escape thus the bloodsheds. After making his getaway from the talons of the new Soviets, he even became a Minister of Justice in the Regional Government in Simferopol, and also edited a Russian émigré newspaper. However, his participation in exile politics and governmental organisations led, although not directly, to his death, as he was killed by an assassin. This event took place on the evening of 28 March 1922 in Berlin at a public meeting,²⁸ when the gunman's bullet missed its aim and wounded Nabokov instead of his colleague. The injury was fatal. Thus Vladimir Nabokov lost his father unexpectedly in his early adulthood. Absurd as it may sound, the murderer, a “sinister ruffian,” as Nabokov calls him in his recollections, was appointed “administrator of émigré Russian affairs” by Hitler during World War Two, a detail which, as we shall see, is not irrelevant.²⁹

2.3 Nabokov's individualism

It can be easily understood from the pages of *Speak, Memory* devoted to Nabokov's father how dearly his son regarded him. It is possible that even owing to the fact that his father died because of the political views and position he held, Nabokov tried as much as he could to avoid any sort of active participation in political or social movements, let alone a political party. But we could go further in history to search for the reasons of his dislike of political as well as other groupings – back to his school years when he was proud of his intellectual background and his high, even aristocratic, origins.

²⁷ Lawrence L. Lee, *Vladimir Nabokov* (London: George Prior Publishers, 1976) 21.

²⁸ *Speak, Memory*, 137.

²⁹ *Speak, Memory*, 138.

Vladimir Dmitrievich was a man of moral as well as democratic principles and according to these he decided on the schools his eldest son was to attend, and so young Vladimir was forced to conform to other children of his age. As is clear from *Speak, Memory*, it was not easy for young Vladimir Vladimirovich to fit in: many times he was reproached for showing off. He was an individual to the core of his very being and therefore unable to see himself as equal to his schoolmates. Hence he tried to distinguish himself from the rest of the children even by means that seemed unacceptable or childishly arrogant. It was especially when the Soviet Revolution broke out when young Nabokov was severely criticized by his teachers because he, unlike all of his peers, refused to join in political declarations and demonstrations.³⁰ His school years were the time when young Nabokov realized that he was most satisfied when left alone. Even while playing football, he always wanted to be a goalkeeper to reduce the contact with the rest of the players to a minimum so he could rely on his skills only.³¹ This attitude, however, was not just a phase that many children go through; he was not to conform easily if at all. We can follow the ‘goalkeeping parallel’ as far as to his university years. Even at Cambridge, he fought with the conformism of the environment.³²

2.4 Life of an émigré

After he finished his studies, Nabokov joined the rest of his family in Berlin and started to concentrate on his literary career more than ever before. He earned his living as a private tutor and had regular pupils whom he taught English, French, tennis or even boxing.³³ Nabokov claims that the Russian émigrés created their own world in Berlin, although they were living among the natives.³⁴ Berlin was not just the city where young Nabokov lost his father, but also where he found his life-long partner, Véra Slonim, a Russian émigré herself. When Germany was severely hit by inflation in August 1923, many Russian émigrés left for Paris or Prague (Nabokov’s mother was one of those who found their new home in the capital

³⁰ *The Russian Years*, 128.

³¹ *Speak, Memory*, 145.

³² *Speak, Memory*, 145.

³³ *The Russian Years*, 241.

³⁴ *Speak, Memory*, 211.

of the Czech Republic³⁵). Nabokov settled down in Berlin, satisfied with working prospects and happy in his relationship with Véra,³⁶ whom he married on April 15, 1925.³⁷

Although the time he spent in Berlin was productive concerning his literary activity, Nabokov considered leaving Berlin and moving to France as early as 1930, largely because there was a large community of Russian émigrés there and also because it was becoming inevitable with the growing restrictions set by the Hitler's party among the population of Semitic origin, including his wife, who was also Jewish, and also their son Dmitri. However, the situation became complicated as Nabokov was not able to obtain work permit and so he worked hard on making contacts in Western Europe.³⁸

When it became clear that it was no longer possible and safe to remain in Nazi Germany, the Nabokovs left for France. A friend of theirs managed to find them an apartment in the otherwise immensely crowded capital.³⁹ In this period, Nabokov frequently visited Britain, where he mainly travelled for business. As the situation in the whole of Europe was no longer safe under the threat of Germany's further expansion, Nabokov searched for an overseas job. A post at a British university would have been welcome; however, there would be opportunities in neither England nor the United States for some time.⁴⁰

It was during his stay in France when Nabokov's mother Elena died. She passed away in May 1939 when Prague was already under German occupation, and therefore it was unthinkable for Nabokov to attend her funeral. Throughout the last two decades his life had been seriously restricted by totalitarian regimes and now not only did the Nazis prevent him from being by his mother's side during her final illness, but he was even deprived of giving her his last goodbye.⁴¹ Unfortunately, she was not the only member of Nabokov's close family he was to lose due to Nazis, as the Nazi regime directly caused death of his older brother, for Sergey was arrested and imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, where he soon died unable to endure the appalling and harsh living conditions any longer.

³⁵ *The Russian Years*, 220.

³⁶ *The Russian Years*, 235.

³⁷ *The Russian Years*, 239.

³⁸ *The Russian Years*, 434.

³⁹ *The Russian Years*, 492.

⁴⁰ *The Russian Years*, 508.

⁴¹ *The Russian Years*, 507.

2.5 Sergey

Long before Vladimir Nabokov and his wife were forced to leave the shores of the old continent by the German army spreading to a number of European countries, France being one of them. Nabokov's solitary nature did not allow him to get to know his brother Sergey too well, although the age difference was less than a year.⁴² Their personalities differed immensely and it was not until they both entered Cambridge when they grew closer and they even had some common friends.

Although both Sergey and Vladimir with his family resided in Paris on the brink of the World War Two, they did not see much of each other. The writer's brother, being out of the city at that time, was only informed of the family's departure several days after they managed to leave Paris in order to escape from the Nazis and settle in the United States.⁴³ Neither of the two brothers was left with much hope they could ever meet again, and in reality Vladimir Nabokov learnt only little about his brother after they parted. Sergey's steps could have been followed back to the point when he returned to Berlin where he worked as a translator in an office.⁴⁴ The few details his brother later found out were not enough to understand why Sergey's life took such an unexpected turn. He was not a typical hero and judging from Nabokov's recollections of Sergey, one would rather expect him to conform to the regime than verbally confront its ideology in public.

Although he was probably not a typical hero, Sergey could not help but disagree with the regime established in Germany by Adolf Hitler and his party, and while talking to his colleagues at work he dared to simply state the obvious and criticize the leadership. But to speak of taboo issues, the truth about the Nazi regime that by no means could be agreeable and pleasing, within earshot of his colleagues resulted in him being sentenced to death in a concentration camp, where he, according to his brother's words, died of lack of spiritual

⁴² *The Russian Years*, 43.

⁴³ *The Russian Years*, 522.

⁴⁴ *Speak, Memory*, 199.

vigour.⁴⁵ Each of the two cruellest totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century directly took away a member of his close family and thus aggrieved Nabokov greatly.

2.6 *The American Years begin*

When eventually safe in America, Vladimir Nabokov and his family could finally live without fear, yet uprooted and having lost most or all of their families, their life remained marked by their experience of the troubled times. No matter whether we are willing to believe in Nabokov's claims that his work is wholly apolitical, it would be rather surprising if the writer whose "curiosity was alert to everything: quirk of psychology, a play of light, a tree, a tram"⁴⁶ to whom no generalization could count for the stray fact, would reduce his experience with totalitarian regimes to an entirely insignificant supplement of his prose – for how can any part of his prose be insignificant.

⁴⁵ *Speak, Memory*, 199.

⁴⁶ *The Russian Years*, 250.

3. Fiction that Mirrors the Life

The message the novels *Bend Sinister* and *Invitation to a Beheading* convey seems to be clear when we consider Nabokov's lifelong attitude towards any kind of restraint or limitation. The lines describing Nabokov's political beliefs which Lawrence L. Lee recalls in his essay are simple yet straightforward – every man is fully entitled to the basic freedoms of speech, thought and art.⁴⁷ Nabokov's own words that “the social or economic structure of the ideal state is of little concern to [him]”⁴⁸ prove to be truthful of both of the novels in question as it is the freedom of consciousness that concerns the author the most and form the core of the two mentioned works.

3.1 Totalitarian systems and their ideologies

Nabokov believed democracy was “the natural condition of every man ever since the human mind became conscious not only of the world but of itself.”⁴⁹ In a democratic state every man has the right to differ in spirit and consciousness. In Nabokov's understanding, democracy is a fine balance between unlimited privileges of every person and strict equality for everyone.⁵⁰ Every man is an individual therefore men can never be equal in all aspects of their existence. In contrast to democracy, which, according to Nabokov, may protect the individual from “the pressure of politics,”⁵¹ totalitarian regimes introduced by the novels in their extremity aspire to deindividualise and equalize people so that the general rules and order may be applied to any and everyone without exception and the individual may become fully exposed to political machinations.

Finding a way of manoeuvring people and subsequently controlling their behaviour proves to be the only way any dictatorial system may last. It has been proved by modern history of humankind that breaking human's individuality and gradual implanting of new ideological concepts into broken minds needs to be swift and yet consistent, for otherwise the

⁴⁷ Lee, 21.

⁴⁸ Lee, 21.

⁴⁹ *The American Years*, 97.

⁵⁰ Michal Sýkora, *Vladimir Nabokov – „Americká“ témata* (Brno: Host, 2004) 34.

⁵¹ *The American Years*, 97.

threat of opponents and rivals may undermine the position of the regime. It is not before new ideas are fully adopted without doubting their validity or legitimacy by majority, when the people become part of the newly established political system. Hence, with this acceptance and obedience the power of the regime grows. The ideologies of this kind first address the masses, common people who are living in poor conditions whose wishes and desires tend to be similar, and who also prefer to leave the solution of social and economical problems to the authorities rather than rely on their own individual endeavour.⁵² Thus, the totalitarian revolutions broke out in economically backward and semi-feudal countries rather than in Western Europe as Karl Marx, one of the leading socialist thinkers, envisioned.⁵³

It seems to be clear to a perceptive individual, and Nabokov surely was one, that if there should be a social or political system built on false basis there is no chance this system could ultimately work without breaking out of its own bonds. It is the unachievable equalization of human beings that constitutes the main problem for any ideology or theoretical concept of an ideal state. Interestingly, those systems which aim and at first seem to be the most satisfactory to all people and which claim to be of a flawless structure, turn into something inhuman. Humans are beings who undeniably make mistakes, as the commonly known saying goes “to err is human”, and although people are able to live within a society, this society naturally tends to be inhomogeneous.

Each and every man is an original and individual and their diverse tendencies sooner or later prove to be destructive to any attempt at homogeneity, unless the humanity in all of the inhabitants living under totalitarian oppression is reduced to simple animalistic needs by merciless measures taken by the ruthless government. Fortunately, unlike in *Invitation to a Beheading*, none of the regimes of the world’s recent history managed to spread its influence to such an extent that humanity would be deprived of its nature completely. Thus the people

⁵² *Politické ideologie*, trans. Z. Masopust (Praha: Eurolux Bohemia, 2005) 113.

⁵³ *Politické ideologie*, 133.

of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of the two greatest totalitarian systems, as well as the process in which the promised utopia⁵⁴ turned into dystopia.

3.2 Politics in Nabokov's novels

Nabokov's claims that his works are apolitical do not prevent the critics from analyzing and comparing his two novels, *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*, which, as Lee puts it, deal with "living political themes."⁵⁵ In his introduction to *Bend Sinister* as well as to the later editions of *Invitation to a Beheading*, even Nabokov himself likens these two works and admits there are "obvious affinities" between them. Yet, although politics may not be central to the novels, the theme surely serves the author's intentions well as helping to define his approach towards human consciousness and the question of its freedom, as well as towards the role art plays in the lives of human beings.

It is under the oppression of totalitarian regimes when these issues become prominent, as people are generally predisposed to realize the essence and importance of what they take for granted when they are about to lose it, and totalitarian systems indisputably represent immediate threat of losing one's freedom of being an individual – freedom that allows people to be creative and imaginative, freedom of consciousness. In the fictional worlds of Nabokov's novels dictatorships and tyrannies try to deprive the heroes of self-government.

Another aspect of Nabokov's style, which proves that the author remains true to his words when he denies that his novels are primarily political,⁵⁶ as political writings tend to generalize. Nabokov argued it is essential and even prerequisite for any writer to be perceptive and have an eye for detail.⁵⁷ Peter Quennell in his essay "The Novelist's World" appreciates Nabokov's "marvellously receptive mind." It almost seems that the writer avoids generalizing in his writing, and if an instance of generalization occurs, it is always intentional

⁵⁴ First used by Thomas More in the title of his satirical work written in the 16th century, in which the author depicted a fictional ideal society, functioning perfectly because the human nature of its inhabitants was suppressed. The term "utopia" comes from Greek and means "no place" suggesting impossibility of its existence.

⁵⁵ Lee, 104.

⁵⁶ *Bend Sinister*, xii.

⁵⁷ Alfred Appel Jr., "Remembering Nabokov," *Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute: His Life, His Work, His World*, ed. Peter Quennell (New York: W Morrow, 1980) 12-13.

and purposeful, usually mocking unpremeditated use of this phenomenon. Nabokov is the master of detail and precision – and this is evident in *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*.⁵⁸ Peter Quennell, compares Nabokov to Bergotte, a fictional novelist – one of Proust’s characters, and observes that “Bergotte, too, distrusted generalizations and did his best to avoid the majestic truism, the ‘grands lieux communs’, that are apt to weigh down ideological literature.”⁵⁹ It is this aspect of the author’s personality in which Quennell also sees the reason why Nabokov was never able to accept politics as a concept of life.⁶⁰

The main and crucial problem of totalitarian systems is that they blindly overlook the flaws and differences for the sake of seemingly perfect constructions, and that they work with concepts which tend to generalize, or even over-generalize. Thus the central points of their ideology incline to be rather schematic and the imprecise structure based on these key points is unavoidably predisposed to imperfect functioning if put to practice. Yet it is logical that these simplifications are by their nature more easily approached and understood by a larger audience than ideas and theories more advanced and complex. Thus the chance of the simplified concept becoming widespread and broadly accepted or even generally popular is much more probable. Therefore, such ideas quickly convince masses rather than individuals.

It is the vagueness of ideas that Nabokov scorns, the vagueness that enables abusive treatment of ideology leading to demagoguery.⁶¹ Europe lived through such a development when Communism abused some of the ideas gathered by the authors of *Capital*⁶² and other similar publications concerned with the socialist theories throughout the nineteenth century, and turned the political systems of several countries on the European continent into demagogical establishments.⁶³ Just as the greatest thinkers the Communists drew inspiration from did not live to see the outcome of their ideas, the philosopher Skotoma, whose “vague and benevolent Ekwilism [was later] transformed into a violent and virulent political doctrine”⁶⁴ in *Bend*

⁵⁸ Peter Quennell, “The Novelist’s World,” *Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute: His Life, His Work, His World*, ed. Peter Quennell (New York: W Morrow, 1980) 8.

⁵⁹ Quennell, 5.

⁶⁰ Quennell, 5.

⁶¹ *Bend Sinister*, 75-76.

⁶² *Politické ideologie*, 129.

⁶³ *Politické ideologie*, 133.

⁶⁴ *Bend Sinister*, 76.

Sinister, died too soon to learn what his theory, originally an “idea of balance [of human consciousness] as a basis for universal bliss” resulted in.⁶⁵

Skotoma, the great thinker of Ekwilism, whose name translate from modern Greek as “murder” and “killing”,⁶⁶ did not cause any deaths directly. It was in the hands of the party founded by a group of young boys led by Paduk, a future dictator, when the ideas and thoughts of the old and at that time already senile thinker, became dangerous, and when the young enthusiasts and fanatics decided to put the nonsensical and illogical ideology of Ekwilism into practice.⁶⁷ The obvious connection with the English word ‘scotoma’ probably rather than to the physical condition refers to its figurative meaning – “a mental blind spot” and “inability to understand or perceive certain matters.” His own bright philosophy made Skotoma partially blind. Therefore, he could only see the brighter future of society and “the blind spot of his visual field” prevent him from seeing what would unavoidably be the real aftermath of his seemingly genius vision.⁶⁸

3.3 The curse of ideologies

Throughout the texts of the novels specific imagery stands out closely resembling the symbols and indispensable features of the two main totalitarian systems of the first half of the twentieth century. Every totalitarian regime needs to incorporate fresh, new characteristics and at the same time fulfil most of the expectations of the common people, who later represent the basis of the newly born regime. Ideology forms the core of the system, in its simplicity can be understood by everyone and at the same time abused by those who are ambitious and covetous. These ideologies clearly point out the rules and through observance of these rules society should in its brighter future reach clearly defined aims set by the ideology.

⁶⁵ *Bend Sinister*, 75-76.

⁶⁶ Lee, 113.

⁶⁷ *Bend Sinister*, 76-78.

⁶⁸ “Scotoma,” *Dictionary.com*, 21 Aug. 2010 <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/paddock>>.

3.4 Cult of personality

Such systems usually require a persona which embodies all the central features that are the most commonly appreciated and admired. This man of “charismatic authority,” as the sociologist Max Weber defines the character of such individual, personifies the ideal of the society.⁶⁹ He becomes the leader whose authority differs according to his status. Either he is just a figure governed by the apparatus which is the real organ that runs the party, or the system may be centred around him, as for example in the case of Adolf Hitler, and then it is the leader who makes the most important decisions. Depending on the power he holds and is willing to use, as well as the strength of his followers, he becomes a dictator or a tyrant. The leader, as Ingo Winkler, effectively links “followers’ self-concept to [a] mission, emphasising collective values and ideologies, and thus influences the values, goals, needs and aspirations of [their] followers.”⁷⁰

Paduk, the only clearly defined tyrant of the two novels, in certain aspects strongly resembles Stalin, not only with his gray uniform and his ill-famed abominable purges on the Russian population. He also presented the nation with a bold plan, a promise of equal rights and equal possibilities. Just as under Paduk’s leadership, no one could feel secure under Stalin’s rule, although his propaganda team managed to convince the common people that Stalin was “an ideal type of personality.”⁷¹ They initiated a cult of personality, presenting the political leader as a God-like figure. This admired icon was, however, created, or manufactured, by the propagandists, and so the presentation of dictator lost the touch of reality and the ostensible power of the leader must have been artificially imposed on the people.

According to Jaroslav Fiala, a Czech historian, Stalin “became a symbolic ‘public leader’, who keeps an eye on every individual. His name could be found everywhere, he was a subject of panegyric poems, prose, paintings, statues or dramatic plays.”⁷² Paduk’s propagandist politics more or less correspond with the politics of Stalin. Like Paduk, Stalin

⁶⁹ Ingo Winkler, *Contemporary Leadership Theories* (Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2010) 32.

⁷⁰ Winkler, 34.

⁷¹ Jaroslav Fiala, “Svůdný kult osobnosti,” *Nový Prostor* 18 Aug. 2008: 12. Translation mine.

⁷² Fiala, 12.

was supported by a single political party which governed the whole country. Fiala sees the party also as “an impersonal institution, which subordinates every man not only to its laws but also to inscrutable decisions of the leader,” thus the Ekwalist of the fictional world may be likened with the very real Russian Bolsheviks.

3.5 Propagandism and demagogical methods

Expressions used by some of the characters supporting the Ekwilist regime in *Bend Sinister* strongly remind one of the propagandist slogans that used to fill Russian newspapers and could have been heard at public assemblies. Everything that is publically uttered needs to be necessarily conformed to the regulations of the system. The regimes try to direct the thinking of the people by regulating their public verbal expressions. Institutions such as universities are prone to educate people who are intelligent and less adaptable to the politics oriented at masses. That is why the intelligentsia of Paduk’s state is wiped out first when they are unable to conform to the rules of the regime.

Although Krug is not a president of the academy, he is much more highly valued. Of course, his position of internationally known philosopher plays its role, and the regime would like to use and expertly mangle some of Krug’s ideas to support their political system, yet his value as a former classmate of Paduk seems to be clearly decisive when it comes to Krug’s real importance for the party leader. He is pressured into a position in which he is answerable for the whole institution and the fate of the university seems to be completely in his hands. It is this remarkable ability of totalitarian regimes to make the public and individuals believe they are directly responsible for the deeds of the state, although they have no valid right or say in what actions are taken. This manipulation was the prevailing practice of both Nazism and Communism and is the order of the day in *Invitation to a Beheading* as well as in *Bend Sinister*.

Adam Krug and Cincinnatus C. are forced into accepting their responsibility for the actions of the state, although they cannot alter and affect anything except their own selves. It is their control over their thinking and individuality that alarms the system and it is why the regimes decide to undertake severe measures against Cincinnatus and Krug. The philosopher

is not, unlike the rest of the society, governed by fear of persecution. His intellect prevents him from blind obedience and succumbing to the tyranny of the state, and so the regime tries to instil the sense of responsibility for the fate of others and weaken thus his dignity. However, it is not until the very end when they find out which strings need to be pulled to make Krug conform to the illogical machinery of the system. Although the regime eventually manages to divest Krug of his bold spirit and strength of character, the most brutal means need to be applied to do so. And yet, the very moment the regime manages to manipulate Krug into submission to the illogical rules of the dictates, the system itself tears the precious strings and thus loses hold of Krug forever.

On the other hand, Cincinnatus is already unable to conform. There is no handle to Cincinnatus's consciousness, his ties with his family and the world outside the prison had been severed either by a natural process of detachment, when Cincinnatus began to accept his uniqueness as unavoidable, or by the subsequent imprisonment. The two heroes share a feeling of responsibility for their thinking and their individuality, but at the same time they have no control whatsoever over the lives of their close ones or the fate of the society as a whole. Although, it is the regime that imprisons and murders, the two heroes are blamed for the tragedies of the others. Ironically, as is typical for Nabokov the string to pull Cincinnatus and the handle to Krug are put to wrong use and the systems lose their holds over the two protagonists.

Yet it is not only the ideology that in a strange and depraved way resembles the reality of the early twentieth century, it is also the application of the demagogical methods. And so Paduk's regime, just as Stalin's or Hitler's, is not hesitant to use the most brutal ways of manipulation and torture to accomplish the set aims. If the will of the dictator is to enter the heart of the society, it needs to be handed down to the youngest members of the society to root the central ideology into the developing minds of the children and so Paduk founded an organization called 'Schoolboy Brigade' remarkably resembling Hitler-Jugend. The state's army, utterly controlled by Paduk's government and demonstrating the power and inviolability of the system, prevents outcries or any other type of protest. Such an ostentatious

display of power was meant to instil fear in common people both in the fictional world of *Bend Sinister* and Russian or German reality.

The regime also built countless concentration camps “in a remote province” in which they once and for all silenced their political opposition. All members of the society were deprived of their freedom to make decisions for themselves - as long as all the people were equal according to the state’s ideology the decisions made by the government were good enough for each and every member of the society and therefore individuals did not need to trouble themselves with such mental activity and they were to blindly accept what was already arranged for them. Thus the speech Krug was to give on the occasion of the reopening of the university under the new administration was already written for him under the pretence of saving him the time and trouble. Although the public as a whole became a mere unit of the state’s machinery necessary for the proper functioning of the system, the individuals became dispensable and easily replaceable items.

The regime dismissed anyone who would be or seem inconvenient, and thus we may see how the librarian, who supplies Cincinnatus with old magazines in *Invitation to a Beheading*, is killed for lack of interest and inability to display required enthusiasm, just as we may witness the sudden disappearances of the intellectuals from Krug’s vicinity.

Whether the system functions flawlessly and the public does not try to disrupt the conditions essential for uninterrupted continuation of the regime, was not observed exclusively by the army and governed by the political institutions, but also secretly monitored by numberless agents and spies. These people, either morally corrupted or extorted, informed the regime about their neighbours and co-workers, or even their lovers and families. Readers of *Bend Sinister* are not surprised that Paduk knows about every step Adam Krug takes, as they can see, unlike the philosopher, he is surrounded by spies. As Ellis Pifer notices in her essay, Krug “consistently fails to detect the most clumsy and crude stratagem of the regime.”⁷³ When Krug eventually employs one agent as a nanny for his son he becomes even more vulnerable to the manipulations of the regime. Strangely enough, the philosopher reveals his awareness of the spies in his close surroundings and he realizes his neighbourhood

⁷³ Pifer, 80.

is infested by people feasting on his fear and also his resistance, but at the same time denies the possibility of such situation.

However, the question remains open, why Krug did not undertake any measure that would prevent him from surrendering to the regime completely and that would give him at least some precious time allowing him to escape. The only explanation possible, following the logic of the novel, would be that Adam Krug simply disbelieved that such an idiotic system may be actually able to outwit a wise professor like him. The spies and agents making one mistake after another probably seemed too ridiculously unreal to Krug, so that he simply dismissed them as unworthy of his attention, unconscious of their routine approach towards the people they spied on and their complete mercilessness. The regime agents believed they simply did their duty and remained completely unaware of the consequences of their actions. Even the languages used by these ‘helpers’ of the regime in *Bend Sinister* stimulate the association with the two states that gave rise to the most despicable totalitarian systems, as their notable use of mixture of German and Russian expressions and idioms speaks for itself. Also Cincinnatus is tricked by the visitors in the prison, although they are not agents in the actual meaning of that word. As might be expected, they are invited to change Cincinnatus’s opinion, but, in contrast to the spies of *Bend Sinister* and of course with the exception of M’sieur Pierre, they are harmless outside the walls of the prison living their poor lives in deplorable conditions.

3.6 Reflections of totalitarian imagery

Also the specific symbols and imagery so firmly connected with totalitarian regimes happened to influence the novels. For example the uniform-like clothing – Paduk’s grey uniform resembles Stalin’s famed outfit while the leather coats of Cincinnatus’s jailers remind one of the long overcoats of the Nazi officers. The appearance of the state symbol decorating the official buildings of Paduk’s country is also familiar. The combination of red, white and black colours evokes the notoriously known flag designed by Adolf Hitler himself. The red field holds a white circle in its centre, which is decorated by swastika. In Paduk’s hands, the symbolic ornament changes into an emblem “bearing a remarkable resemblance to a crushed

dislocated but still writhing spider.”⁷⁴ The crouched legs of the deformed creature echo the crooked oriental symbol and at the same time arouse the impression of beastliness and fearfulness of the regime this predator arthropod represents. The image of the spider also recurs in *Invitation to a Beheading*. The beast is omnipresent, shares the cell with Cincinnatus and overlooks all the actions that take place there. It is in a way parallel to the peep hole on the door which overlooks every inch of the cell and does not allow for any privacy whatsoever. The jailer Rodion cherishes the beast, he feeds it and so it happens to grow to enormous size.

The already mentioned red colour was not only one of the colours appearing on the German Nazi flag, but also dominating colour of the flag of the Russian Communists. Red may also represent blood, or even bloodsheds and ideology redeemed by murders and deaths. It naturally drives adrenaline into our veins. It is also the colour of setting sun, representing the end of the day, or maybe even the end of life. Cincinnatus is literally encompassed by the colour red. The jailers’ beards and hair are red, the evening sun shining through a small window in his cell protrudes its reddish rays through the bars. Even the fellow prisoner-executioner, just like the other inhabitants of the prison, very often incorporates the word ‘red’ into his remarks.

3.7 Two worlds – interconnections and dissimilarities

However, similarity of origins and genesis, as well as the distinct imagery of the ideologies were not the only features resembling the reality of twentieth-century Europe. Even in the nameless countries with uncertain locations, only vaguely indicated in the case of *Bend Sinister*, the proclaimed principal idealistic factors characterizing the political systems (at least officially) were community, cooperation and equality⁷⁵- the last mentioned feature being of the utmost importance for both of the fictional worlds created by Nabokov.

Both novels present a hero who is crushed by the political system of the world he occupies. Although the resemblance is indisputable, as they both bear traces of totalitarian

⁷⁴ *Bend Sinister*, 35.

⁷⁵ *Politické ideologie*, 113.

tyranny, it becomes instantly evident we approach two distinguishably different universes, the grotesque realm of Cincinnatus' prison and deadly illogical political state of Adam Krug. It is repeatedly made clear throughout the text that the reader should perceive the worlds of these two novels as fictional. They do not claim to be realistic. On the contrary, numerous passages point out the dream-like or theatrical nature of the setting as well as of the actions which take place. Especially then in *Bend Sinister* the narrator introduces numerous expressions connected with theatre and dramatic productions, which help create the illusion of the plot being staged, and thus it is even further distanced from the reader's reality. But the question lingers, what makes these two intentionally imprecise obscure worlds so similar and at the same time discernibly different?

Invitation to a Beheading is, as has been mentioned, not very explicit in its depiction of the political system running Cincinnatus's native land, and yet it manages to show rather efficiently the essential illogicality of the regime. By exaggeration, Nabokov makes obvious how pathetic the tyranny ruling the country is. The grotesqueness and the dream-like blurriness concentrate rather on the consequences of the oppression than on the oppressors, who are themselves not easily definable as they change identity.

It seems that the novel shows the last phase of demagogical politics, when all the inhabitants successfully and fully adopted the ideology and became alike, except in appearance. Their shallowness of spirit developed into complete emptiness and transparency, for there was no more need for hiding anything from the rest of the population. Cincinnatus is an exceptional personality among the crowd of doubles and triples, among the crowd of intermingling and interchanging characters who seem to lack their own margins and as such they cannot understand Cincinnatus' behaviour.

The concept of personality and individuality seemed to almost disappear from their apprehension of humankind. Their inability to deal with such phenomenon, which Cincinnatus represents with his opacity, confuses the residents of this absurd land and in some cases even brings them to desperation. For example Cincinnatus' lawyer is virtually on the verge of tears when the prisoner tears up an envelope containing a letter of unknown content. Cincinnatus knows well this piece of paper was as meaningless as the apparatus which

composed it, but his lawyer, one of the grotesque figures, pleaded the letter could have been a means of salvation – undoubtedly salvation as seen through the optics of the absurd characters. Cincinnatus was, however, aware that by starting to conform to the irrational rules of the system he would lose some of his will and individuality.⁷⁶

The society represented in *Invitation to a Beheading* reached the point in which, on the basis of absurd ideology which replaced their individuality, they were unable to understand deviation from normality. Throughout Cincinnatus' imprisonment, the jailers strove to make the only prisoner get rid of his opacity and reduce him to a pitiable creature indistinguishable from themselves. Failure to do so led the system to the inevitable decision to undertake the final solution and deprive Cincinnatus of his life, thus eliminating the only instance of deviation from normality. It was due to the instinctive capability of his fellow citizens to discern Cincinnatus' otherness and at the same time powerlessness in understanding the prisoner that sealed his fate.

Adam Krug, the hero of *Bend Sinister*, is also destined to be eliminated. However, although his position within the system is unique, he is not the only person left with opinions opposing the politics of the state. In contrast to *Invitation to a Beheading*, Krug's political stance is not exceptional and several of his acquaintances and friends share his attitudes towards Paduk's authoritarian government. Krug's uniqueness resides in his importance for the political leader of the country, be it for emotionally motivated reasons or practical ones, as Krug happened to be one of the most influential personalities of the country - an internationally acclaimed philosopher, and at the same time the dictator's former classmate. Although he bullied the revolutionary leader, Krug somehow managed to gain Paduk's respect and even inscrutable admiration closely bordering with obsessive love. Cincinnatus' innate otherness could have been suppressed for some time, or as long as he could feel he at least partially belonged to the world he occupied. On the other hand, Krug's otherness resided in his willing and intentional opposition, due to his disposition as well as education.

Unlike in *Invitation to a Beheading*, Paduk's regime did not have time to evolve fully and it could be said it is captured at the dawn of its existence, when the regime is still fresh

⁷⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* (London: Penguin Books, 2001) 33.

and full of strength, as Nabokov himself notes in the introduction.⁷⁷ Paduk and his army have managed to suppress most of the inhabitants of the country. In Krug's world the intolerance of uniqueness and individuality is deliberate and not yet fully rooted within the society and therefore the representatives of the regime, Paduk among them, understand Krug's attitudes and at the same time acknowledge the danger connected with his behaviour and reasoning so hence they try to avoid any disturbance that may spring from Krug's disobedience.

The two novels in actuality represent opposite situations. Cincinnatus tries to conform himself to the rest of the society and breaks out of bonds only after he realizes his life is not fulfilled and that by conformity he did not acquire the expected, and above all, desired satisfaction. Krug, on the other hand, retains his freedom of consciousness till the very end of the novel when he is ready to officially succumb to save his son, but he seems to preserve his wits till the point he discovers that David was accidentally slaughtered, and only then losing touch with reality.

3.8 Biographical connections

Whether Nabokov drew upon his own life experience is questionable. The parallels drawn between the relationship of Adam Krug and his son David with the relationship of Nabokov and his father are certainly not supported by enough evidence, although Nabokov draws readers' attention to the very pages about David and his father and claims that these passages were the reason why the novel had been written in the first place.⁷⁸ Also the circumstances of the deaths of both V. D. Nabokov and Krug's son seem to show certain similarities, be it the connection with politics or the fact that both deaths were actually accidents and someone else was to die instead of them.⁷⁹ One of the contributors to *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*,⁸⁰ John Burt Foster Jr. went even further and disclosed an idea that the novel *Bend Sinister* could be a kind of private anti-utopia – a possible scenario of what could have happened had not Nabokov escaped the totalitarian regimes, first Russian

⁷⁷ *Bend Sinister*, xiii.

⁷⁸ *Bend Sinister*, xiv.

⁷⁹ *Speak, Memory*, 137-138.

⁸⁰ John Burt Foster Jr., "Nabokov and Modernism," *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, ed. Julian W. Connolly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 85.

Communism and subsequently German Nazism which took over the continent soon after he and his family fled from Europe.⁸¹ Emigration to a democratic country proved to be the only way of maintaining his convictions not only for Nabokov in his real life, but also in the fictional universes. Neither of the novels proposes there could exist another solution that would allow for an individual to retain their beliefs and opinions without restraint of the totalitarian authorities. Of course, one may ignore the threat and try and endure the oppression. However, in that case such a person must be ready to face the consequences. The usual outcomes, both represented in the novels, are either eventual subordination and adoption of the ideology or rebellion against the system, most commonly resulting in persecution or death.

However, even the author himself would not directly refuse the idea of certain biographical connections and he even admits existence of apparent reflections of the “idiotic and despotic regimes that we all know and that brushed against [him] in the course of [his] life: worlds of tyranny and torture, of Fascists and Bolsheviks.”⁸² The writer himself gives us clues of his inspiration by the politics of his homeland. In his introduction to *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov reveals that some of the language used by Paduk and his political state was inspired by Soviet propaganda and he admits that passages from Lenin’s speeches or even Soviet constitution were directly used to enrich the language of the Ekwalists.⁸³

Nabokov also harshly criticized post-war optimism concerning the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and could not understand the turn of opinion especially among the Russian émigrés.⁸⁴ The writer became enraged when he learnt that even one of his father’s former colleagues, Vasilij Maklakov, turned up at the Russian embassy in Paris to pronounce loyalty and drink to the deeds of the dictator.⁸⁵ But it is not for the difference of opinion among the Russian émigrés that this anecdote is mentioned but rather for Nabokov’s reaction following this event. In his letter to his acquaintance, also a Russian émigré who, unlike Maklakov, shared Nabokov’s opinions, the writer expressed his disbelief and added that the only

⁸¹ Vladimir Nabokov – „Americká“ témata, 38.

⁸² *Bend Sinister*, xiii.

⁸³ *Bend Sinister*, xiii.

⁸⁴ Vladimir Nabokov – „Americká“ témata, 34.

⁸⁵ Vladimir Nabokov – „Americká“ témata, 34-35.

condition that would make him personally renounce his convictions would be a threat of torturing or harming one of his close friends or a member of his family. Under, and only under, such circumstances would he agree with anything and, as he rather sarcastically continues, even take care of “Stalin’s buttocks.”⁸⁶

When Alfred Appel, Jr. asked Nabokov about autobiographical traces in his novels, the writer explained existence of such autobiographical hints thus,

I would say that imagination is a form of memory. Down, Plato, down, good dog. An image depends on the power of association, and association is supplied and prompted by memory. When we speak of a vivid individual recollection we are paying a compliment not to our capacity of retention but to Mnemosyne’s mysterious foresight in having stored up this or that element which creative imagination may use when combining it with later recollections and inventions.⁸⁷

Once again this quote brings us back to one of the central issues of Nabokov’s novels, time and timelessness. For Nabokov, as the quote continues, “both memory and imagination are a negation of time.”⁸⁸ And it is the reoccurring theme of timelessness in connection with art and artistic expression that seems to be main concern of Nabokov’s prose.

⁸⁶ *Vladimir Nabokov – „Americká“ témata*, 35.

⁸⁷ Appel, 32.

⁸⁸ Appel, 32.

4. Individual versus System – The Heroes of the Tragedies

Just as the worlds of Nabokov's novels share certain features and differ in others, their heroes' responses to the oppression of the systems are not analogous. The world of Krug is governed by greyness and mediocrity; Cincinnatus's world is dominated by soulless emptiness and nonsensicality. Although both protagonists are searching for answers to similar questions, their approach to the system and the ways of dealing with their lives vary. Adam Krug seems to be the more rational of the two and even his physical appearance corresponds with the mental strength he possesses. At first sight it seems that Cincinnatus's feeble state of mind is reflected in his feeble frame, yet at some points we find out that, although fully aware of his position, Cincinnatus is strongly determined to save himself from inveiglements of the prison staff and continues to assure himself of his entity.

4.1 “Gnostical turpitude” of Cincinnatus C.

Nevertheless, Cincinnatus feels he does not belong to the world he, as if by a mistake, occupies, and when defining his own self he cannot avoid contrasting himself with others and the world outside his opaque self. Cincinnatus belongs to the forgotten glamorous age that he likes to read about so much in the magazines he orders from the prison library. It was the age in which Cincinnatus's nature was a concept that could be named and understood, clashing with the proclaimed non-existence, or impossibility of existence, of it within the new system. Cincinnatus took after his father who was according to his mother's words “also like [him].” That is all that the prisoner knows of his origin. His history is blurred by lack of information, but that also allows Cincinnatus to concentrate on his self without the burden of a fixed position within society. Nevertheless, society demands that Cincinnatus engage in the system, and he is at first willing to conform. His nature, however, prevents him from remaining in this position and after recurring agonizing disappointments concerning his marriage he no longer resists and reveals what he has been hiding for year, the fact that he is unlike everybody else, that he is not transparent but opaque.

Cincinnatus is imprisoned and sentenced to death. His attitude and refusal to succumb again are dangerous and cannot be tolerated within the absurd illogical political system, which interprets Cincinnatus's individualism as a threat:

Accused of the most terrible of crimes, gnostical turpitude, so rare and so unutterable that it was necessary to use circumlocutions (...); sentenced for that crime to death by beheading.⁸⁹

Cincinnatus clearly defines himself as living outside the reality of the rest of the population. He refers to them as to jailers, gives them names of horrid creatures and even calls them spectres, and thus further deprives them of the status of real beings from his perspective, and in contrast to these unreal figures of the underworld defines his own reality.

For thirty years I have lived among spectres that appear solid to the touch, concealing from them the fact that I am alive and real – but now that I have been caught, there is no reason to be constrained with you. At least I shall test for myself all the unsubstantiality of this world of yours.⁹⁰

Thanks to realizing all this he is free to see the pathetic grotesqueness of the system and at the same time it seems to be his only freedom to compare the others with himself and realize the emptiness of his jailers in contrast with him.

Of course, the demagogical persistence of the jailers in refusing giving assurance and answers explains the attitude and responsibility towards Cincinnatus' fate. The jailers, who are actually 'everyone', rebuff Cincinnatus' questions concerning his execution. The response given to the prisoner is never clear and almost every time the equivocal answers to Cincinnatus's demands are accompanied by the word 'probably'. The inability or unwillingness to give a solid reply divests the jailers of their responsibility for the actions that are about to take place. Their pretentious behaviour is supposed to mislead the prisoner into believing he is the one who is actually responsible for what they must, of course 'unwillingly' and with grave sadness, undertake. The only person who was able to communicate and get across an instant of something real and unquestionable and "in this world" as the narrator intervenes "everything was subject to question" was Cincinnatus's mother, Cecilia C., who

⁸⁹ *Invitation to a Beheading*, 61.

⁹⁰ *Invitation to a Beheading*, 59.

came to visit him before his execution, apparently invited by the jailers as the last and only person able to break Cincinnatus' resistance. The intended manipulation however had the complete opposite effect. In his mother's eyes the son could see an expression of real emotions. The narrator does not feel the need to define it, merely approximating it to horror or pity, but he rather concentrates on the effect it had on the prisoner:

Cincinnatus suddenly saw that ultimate, secure, all-explaining and from-all-protecting spark that he knew how to discern in himself also. [...] The spark proclaimed such tumult of truth that Cincinnatus's soul could not help leaping for you.⁹¹

Thus the first accusations that his mother was “just as much a parody as everybody and everything else” and the pretence Cecilia put on vanished in a split of a second – and the farce becomes again a drama necessarily nearing the tragic and all-revealing end. In this scene Cincinnatus probably uses the comparison to the theatrical nature of his imprisonment the most strongly; almost every utterance of his mocks the trashy dramatisation of the last days of his life.

The promises made in the course of events are forgotten the minute they are uttered, and as long as they are not remembered they are not valid and it is as if they never existed. This is characteristic for the whole world of *Invitation to a Beheading*, as when something is considered forgotten it is deprived of any value and declared as non-existing. Also Cincinnatus's state of being is defined by the narrator as already inconceivable, the word describing him is long forgotten, therefore, he is someone living out of the order of this world and either needs to be conformed to the known form of existence or exterminated. Cincinnatus perceives himself as someone living outside the borders of the world surrounding him - living separated from the others in the moment between “movement of a man and the movement of [his] laggard shadow – that second, that syncope – there is the rare kind of time in which [he] live[s] – the pause, the hiatus, when the heart is like a feather.”⁹² Cincinnatus faces the nightmarish reality of his days with breaking but not yet broken dignity. He keeps on realizing his role within the universe, unfortunately irreconcilable with his actuality. According to Cincinnatus, as he refers to it during one of his contemplations, the world

⁹¹ *Invitation to a Beheading*, 116.

⁹² *Invitation to a Beheading*, 45.

around him “seems not bad example of amateur craftsmanship, but is in reality calamity, horror, madness, error.”

4.2 Krug’s philosophy and logical ignorance, or ignorant logic

The main difference between Cincinnatus and Adam Krug is their position within society. Unlike Cincinnatus whose situation is exclusive, Krug’s condition is shared by other characters in the novel.⁹³ From what we learn about Adam Krug, he is a person of steady character resolute in his opinions, highly intelligent and at the same time a loving and caring father. His stubbornness concerning the regime he refuses to accept as a valid system as it does not work on the basis of logic as he understands it. The outcome of this refusal is ignorance of any threat emerging from the violent political doctrine. Herbert Grabes remarks that it is Krug’s lack of interest in political matters that results in lack of ‘judicious’ behaviour.⁹⁴ Upon realizing how powerful this illogical system might be when it builds its own foundations outside the boundaries of Krug’s logic, the philosopher decides to escape but soon realizes it is too late for him to make his getaway and the author must ease the philosopher’s pain by depriving Krug of his wits.

As Ellen Pifer noted in her essay on *Bend Sinister*, Krug’s blindness to the frightful monstrosity of the totalitarian regime, which established itself firmly within the public of the state, “partly arises from the subhuman nature of the Ekwilist’s organization of average reality”⁹⁵ discussed earlier. This blindness inevitably leads to his own death, as well as deaths of his close ones. However, Krug cannot be blamed for the persecutions of his friends or deaths of his family members as the twisted logic of the regime once again tries to put the blame on those, who are the actual victims. Krug’s way of dealing with the political system was not at its core completely incorrect. It is undoubtedly crucial for saving one’s consciousness to disclaim the ideology that does not make sense if one wants to preserve human nature and human creativity within themselves. Yet Krug should have realized much earlier that something that does not work on the basis of logic will eventually become

⁹³ Pifer, 68.

⁹⁴ Herbert Grabes, *Fictitious Biographies: Vladimir Nabokov's English Novels* (The Hague: Mouton, 1977) 20.

⁹⁵ Pifer, 88.

capricious and the only way to face such inconstant situation is to leave.

It is also interesting how his university colleagues perceive Adam Krug. During their meeting Krug is seated somewhat apart from the rest, the philosopher is indirectly addressed by the President:

In our midst we have a man ... a great man let me add, who by a singular coincidence happened in bygone days to be the schoolmate of another great man, the man who leads out State, Whatever political opinions we hold – and during my long life I have shared most of them – it cannot be denied that the government is a government and as such cannot be expected to suffer tactless demonstration of unprovoked dissension or indifference.⁹⁶

It is clear from this extract that the propagandist discourse had entered the assembly room and that the university professors were being watched and none of the attendees except Krug would dare insult the regime or its leader. Krug is delighted by sharing his memories of the sweet school years when he enjoyed so much humiliating his least popular classmate Paduk. The philosopher seems almost proud of his ill-treatment of the young dictator. Nevertheless, this is not the only instance of such an attitude when Krug publicly displayed his disrespect towards the head of the state. His confidence did not leave him even when he was asked to visit the leader in his office. Not even the seriousness of this situation made Krug behave accordingly, and all he did was that he criticized the inability of Paduk's staff to write a reasonable and civilized paper, uttering his critique with absolute calmness. The President continues in a highly artificial tone full of eager agitation aimed at Krug, to whom he ascribes almost divine powers. Krug is depicted as a saviour of the institution that was doomed to fall "because of the lack of initiative and tact"⁹⁷ towards the political system. The philosopher is the one who might save the university from dismissal and the President of the academy even likens Krug's role to a dove, the ancient symbol of peace. Krug should become the messenger of the newborn pure world and by bringing the good news about the university's conforming to the regime he would bring peace to his colleagues as well as to the education as a whole. But Krug interprets this vision in the light of his own understanding. That way the peaceful mission turns into a special form of primal sin – an act of betrayal

⁹⁶ *Bend Sinister*, 49.

⁹⁷ *Bend Sinister*, 48.

towards his own self and his conscience.

When the narrator uncovers Krug's history, we learn not only about the link between him and Paduk, but also that young Adam shared with the author a deep aversion towards political groups. Like young Nabokov, Krug was criticised for his lack of initiative and unwillingness to join in the political organisations and debates initiated by one of the politically engrossed teachers. Krug's lack of political ambition proved to be disadvantageous under the circumstances as the rule of the Ekwilist party had nothing to do with the common moral or ethical directives.

One might feel the need to condemn Krug for not answering to the regime and for not accepting its rules. That would however mean we have accepted the ideology as valid and we consider it worthy, thus giving it authority and strength and that is exactly what Krug strove against the whole time. The way Nabokov depicts the world of Paduk's police state does not attempt to be realistic, yet we somehow cannot prevent ourselves from judging Krug and his deeds. This way Nabokov deliberately reveals to his readers the discrepancy between our moral and ethical expectations and our vulnerability, the reader may apprehend how illusory and misleading our minds might be, but also how frail our freedom is and how easily and willingly we are ready to give it up. Thus even though the regime and its basis are nonsensical it does not deprive it of its power and ability to terrorize people, especially someone who, probably not out of sheer ignorance, but rather inability to accept it internally, evades and refuses to face the facts, the laws and the rules the system prepared for him.

The twisted logic of Paduk's establishment had been screwed ever since the rise of the Ekwilist thinking. The founders of the party were by no means the strongest and brightest students. On contrary, they did not even represent the average but they were rather a group of defected and hurt young boys yearning for acceptance and recognition after all the humiliation they had to face for their lack of esteem from their classmates. The mere thought of accepting the dictate of such people was naturally repulsive to Krug and so he happened to underestimate of their capabilities. Mesmerizing as it may be Krug's decisions and attitudes were not so unique. As we may see when we look back in history and follow the fates of millions of Jews, who like Krug did not see how far some people could go in order to achieve

their goals and how inhuman their means might be. Even the concept of such cruelty seemed inconceivable to the millions of people who lost their lives in German concentration camps and they did not recognize in time that the restrictions and new laws could have such an impact.

Totalitarian systems, as has been demonstrated, do not work on the basis of logic, but rather on the basis of set rules as well as on acceptance of certain hierarchy. Therefore, Krug's ill-judged examination of his own position being above the rest of society, which resided in his confidence in his intellectual abilities, inevitably must have had crushing consequences. The critic Stanley Hyman calls the world of Paduk's state "morally inverted" and adds that in this political system "Krug's moral and intellectual strength turns out to be tactical weakness."⁹⁸ Adam Krug was obviously brighter than most of his opponents or colleagues and his self-assurance gave him courage to oppose the governmental coercion. He was, however, misled by his abilities and forgot that humanity does not reside merely in intellect and individuality of consciousness. Human beings are also driven by their instincts and innate compulsions. These drives become prominent when an intelligent being is deprived of applying his logical thinking to the situation he finds himself in. When reaching this point, even Krug began to be vulnerable to regime's entices and manipulations due to his desires, as illustrated in the scenes with Mariette, an attractive regime's agent pretending to be a nanny, or his emotions represented by one of the strongest bonds a human may build with a fellow being, Krug's parental love for David.

4.3 Dehumanization

The dehumanizing and deindividualizing of society, completed in *Invitation to a Beheading* but still in process in *Bend Sinister*, take on several forms and the political systems employ various means of manipulation and terrorization of the public to achieve complete and stable state of equalization. Paduk's aim is to establish a system which would be independent of individual choices, free from art and which would shatter any possibility of excelling as

⁹⁸ Pifer, 88.

Ekwilist dogma negates believe in human singularity. He himself has already lost his human features, his appearance reminds us of an animal and it is no accident that his school-time nickname was the 'Toad'. Ellen Pifer tracks the instances of such reduction of humanity into beastliness both in *Invitation* and *Bend Sinister* and illustrates how the inhumanity of Nabokov's characters is not only beastly or animalistic, but may be even further downgraded to the state of deathliness.⁹⁹ Nabokov describes Paduk by deliberately using expressions connected with death. It is "the motionless cast of his features" preventing Paduk from laughing and "his small dead-white nose" that form the image of a lifeless creature.¹⁰⁰ The political system run by Paduk reflects the spiritless sterility of its leader. The country occupied by Cincinnatus also reduced its cultural life to an empty reproduction of his former artistic activities. A good example of the shallowness of this state is the anecdote mentioning the life journey of Cincinnatus C., who used to work in a factory where they manufactured rag dolls. These symbols of emptiness bore the forms of former famous Russian poets and novelists and reminded those who were still able to distinguish their significance of the better times that were irretrievably lost. Adam Krug and Cincinnatus C. clearly represent with their vivid inner lives the opposition to the deathliness of the regimes.

4.4 The role of art within the fictional worlds

While art aspires to become immortal and overcome the boundaries of time, Paduk's regime and its equivalent concept of art have no such aspirations. The art and diversity of creativity is reduced to applied arts, functional decorative objects, which devalue the culture of the country as a whole. But Paduk does not feel the need to encourage any kind of artistic activities which would eventually bring objections against the ideological restrictions. He also claims that his political state has reached the utmost ideal of Plato's republic, and he wants Krug to reproduce the idea "that the dream of Plato has come true in the hands of the Head of [their] state" in his speech on the occasion of the reopening of the University. Of course, in the ideal community there would also be no need for "divine inspiration or enthusiasm to

⁹⁹ Pifer, 74.

¹⁰⁰ *Bend Sinister*, 67-68.

remind the rulers of the highest values and archetypes of reality” as they already live according to these values.¹⁰¹

On the other hand, in *Invitation to a Beheading* one of the sources of power is also physical beauty, which in this absurd state replaced the beauty of spirit. Thus M'sieur Pierre with his graceful features and cherubic face is a wolf in sheep's clothing. And yet some details still disclose his true nature. M'sieur Pierre's handsome face appeals to the inhabitants of the prison and his trickery is so refined that he at first manages to convince even Cincinnatus about his good natured disposition. The character of M'sieur Pierre happens to resemble the trashy mass culture as his admirers present him as a modern celebrity. They praise and applaud him no matter what he does or says, be it a card trick or a sleazy joke. Pierre puts on a show, he is boastful and claims there are no limitations to what he can do and at the same time he displays a clearly false pretentious modesty. Hence he becomes an unbelievable character, a mocking figure of comically imitative behaviour. Pierre introduces himself through a pack of photographs and the director of the prison really delights in every single snapshot even though what he sees are obvious fakes. Unfortunately, people in general seem to be prone to believe in what they see without questioning the validity or truthfulness of what is represented and therefore the mass culture may have such a great impact on the public.

The jailers are also careful to keep sufficient distance between Cincinnatus and Pierre, at first allowing the prisoner to have a look at his new neighbour only through a peephole. Thus the former might have built a false and rather refined impression of the latter and at the same time M'sieur Pierre is protected from being observed by the prisoner for longer periods of time and, therefore, it is less probable he would reveal his true identity too soon. It is as if M'sieur Pierre exhibits what is already suggested by his fancy name – that he is superior to the natural. He is represented to Cincinnatus as a flawless super-human, but the readers may appreciate the blasting grotesqueness of the character, which stripped of the imitation of flamboyant features turns by the end of the novel into a larva, a shapeless creature lacking any trace of humanity or spiritual vigour.

¹⁰¹ Martin Procházka, *Literary Theory: An Historical Introduction* (Praha: Karolinum, 2008) 17.

4.5 The power of words

Lawrence Lee also accentuates one central element of literature that stands out of both Nabokov's works of fiction – “the sheer joy of using and seeing words used intelligently and sensitively. Both Krug and Cincinnatus miss and search for this fulfilling element of cultured life. The political system divested people's experience of the delight in creative use of words and language is reduced to a utilitarian practical use. The regimes put emphasis on silence and obedience. Words may be much too revealing as and they may express spiritual freedom and individuality.

Paduk's ways of degrading language are surprisingly elaborate. He abuses both verbal and written forms. His padograph deprives the written expression of authenticity. Although these machines, a 'genius invention' of Paduk's father, copy the handwriting of individuals, once the individual letters are set the writing does not change. It not only minimizes the engagement of writer's originality, but, moreover, it is a “mechanical device, which can reproduce personality.”¹⁰² As such the machine is an ideal instrument for cheaters and their fraudulent activities. Individual writings tend to evolve and change over time, but the mechanisation ceases individual development. Thus mass distribution of this invention directly influences the evolution of human individualism.

Paduk's sources of verbal perversity are not limited solely to the pitiful piece of machinery. His love of anagrams combined with his obsessions detested already by his schoolmates, which however did not prevent Paduk from practicing this strange kind of wordplay even in the years when he holds the office of the state's leader. Some of the alternations of certain names, especially than the name of Adam Krug, entered the official representation of his politics in the form of new official titles of the subjected cities. What would at first sight appear to be a spark of inventiveness soon proves to be a yet another way of undermining the status of individuality. Paduk himself explains that “one should constantly bear in mind that all men consist of the same twenty-five letters variously mixed.”¹⁰³ The original purpose for the existence of names was to distinguish individuals. Some names even

¹⁰² *Bend Sinister*, 70.

¹⁰³ *Bend Sinister*, 68.

changed into symbol standing for a characteristic of the person who bore the name. However, this function loses its validity when Paduk minimizes the importance of names by downgrading them into meaningless mechanical combinations of letters.

Nevertheless, Paduk is not the only one who plays with words, the author engages clever puns wordplays and further enhances the already rich texture of the novels. As Lawrence L. Lee notes in his book on Vladimir Nabokov, it is not only the content of Nabokov's fictions but also the form that actualizes "the ironic strain between art and politics"¹⁰⁴ and it cannot be more true than in case of *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*. The dumbness of Cincinnatus's is in strong contrast with the occasional eloquent and poetic utterances of the prisoner. Krug is always ready to use his wit to outsmart his opponents. Nabokov also deliberately chooses names with multiple meaning and shades that in contrast to Paduk's efforts either emphasise the individuality and creativity of people or degrades the bearers of the names by evoking subhuman connotations.

Adam Krug's surname, meaning 'circle' encloses the whole story, the text is interwoven with images of a circle and after closer analysis brings the reader to the philosophical level of the novel. Paduk's name, as well as his nickname the 'Toad', are more straightforward and do not offer such a wide range of interpretations. The surname remarkably reminding of the word 'paddock' an archaic expression for a toad, an ancient symbol for evil is arousing less comfortable images. Although it has probably nothing to do with the intentions of the author even the original meaning of its homonym coming from Old English quite nicely accentuates the nature of the ruler. Paddock, in its original form spelled 'parreoc'¹⁰⁵ meant enclosure and it is undoubtedly Paduk's dream to enclose the human imaginative individuality and restrict it from any further improvement and evolvement out of the borders clearly marked by the state as he under the influence of the 'ekwilist' ideology aims to adjust the imaginary fluid of everyone's individual consciousness to a prototypical vessel and restrict thus any unwanted inconsistency while establishing the perfect state of equal averageness.

¹⁰⁴ Lee, 107.

¹⁰⁵ "Paddock," *Dictionary.com*, 30 Jul. 2010 <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/paddock>>.

5. Conclusion

Reflections always resemble the truth in certain way, but although they resemble reality they cannot acquire the status of being real. Nabokov's worlds of *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister* are fictional and when they reflect reality they never claim to ascend to the same position. Some aspects of the novels may remind us of the author's life, they might reflect it in the mirror of the writer's imagination called fiction. In the creative process imagination disrupts the memories into art as the outcome of the need of the artist's self to realize it in the work of art. I cannot but agree with Lawrence Lee when he says that "language and art are the essence of life" and therefore they must survive even under harsh regimes to protect humanity from perishing.¹⁰⁶

As it should be clear from the preceding lines, it is the individuality of the characters that is stressed throughout the novels as well as in the introductions to these works, and the concept of individuality is indissolubly connected with language and art. Nabokov makes sure his characters are not understood as "types." As Nabokov adds, "[his] characters are not carriers of this or that 'idea'"¹⁰⁷ and although they live in "a grotesque police state[s]"¹⁰⁸ it is their individuality that contrasts with the ideological equality of the regimes. The states' politics are governed by a singular idea and their ideology works with simplified models, or "types". This is a characterisation that is inapplicable when we speak of Nabokov's writing, therefore, Nabokov's novels cannot be perceived as politically engaged literature. Although the novels depict the politics of totalitarian regimes they seem to do so only to show the limits of individuality of consciousness.

Let me conclude with a quote from *Bend Sinister*. Although to a certain extent used out of its context, it fittingly summarises the conditions and requirements that would need to be met in order to realize the bold plans of the totalitarian regimes

If the state is to be saved, if the nation desires to be worthy of a new robust government, then everything must be changed; popular commonsense must spit out the

¹⁰⁶ Lee, 114.

¹⁰⁷ *Bend Sinister*, xiii.

¹⁰⁸ *Bend Sinister*, xiii.

caviar of moonshine and poetry, and the simple words, *verbum sine oratum*, intelligible to man and beast alike, and accompanied by fit action, must be restored to power.¹⁰⁹

I hope that it is clear from the pages of the thesis how desirable it is to keep our consciousness alert so we can avoid experiencing the terrible dream of Cincinnatus and the dreadful nightmare of Krug outside the boundaries of fiction.

¹⁰⁹ *Bend Sinister*, 108-109.

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