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ENGL 428

May 5, 2017

A Psychological Perspective on the Significance of “Mental Journeys”
Taken by Protagonists in *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Lolita*

Authors have pushed the protagonist from here to there since the dawn of Western literature to more recent times. Think of Odysseus’ decade-long adventure from Troy home to Ithaca as described in *The Odyssey*, an epic poem that took the hero and his men across many landscapes around the Aegean Sea. Alternatively, follow Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, the wayward vagabonds fictionalized in *On The Road*, who drive the reader spiritually and figuratively across cities and towns in mid-20th century America.

In these very different works of literature, the fantastic sea voyage and cross-country road trek, the journey itself becomes a pivotal and definitive factor to each story.

Characters in works of fiction (as well as in the real world) also can take other kinds of journeys, but these excursions do not involve a ship, automobiles or any other conveyance. The journey in question here centers on psychological travels, dreams or other short-term detachments from the real world that do more than advance the story line. These mental journeys can reveal much about the character, as well as open new doors of interpretation regarding messages that the author hopes readers will identify and comprehend.

This paper will delve into and extrapolate greater meaning behind what's taking place in the minds of the principal anti-hero characters who dominate two very different works from Vladimir Nabokov – *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Lolita*. The objective here will be to analyze a critical passage from each novel and demonstrate through supportive scholarly research and interpretation that Nabokov employs “mental journeys” to let his protagonist initially take control of themselves, those around them and their destiny, then get to someplace else, some place they perceive as being better; but the ultimate attempt to complete that actual segment of the journey ends up disastrously and damaging.

What Nabokov delivers through the passages that will be explored ahead is this: We can escape the present and the physical space and time through the recesses of our minds and even through well-conceived plans; but often times the conclusion of an actual journey is not what was intended at the time the first step forward was taken. Impediments encountered so often lead to a virtual dead-end, as was the case with Cincinnatus S., or as Humbert Humbert learns, a triumvirate of calculated, calloused schemes could not keep his precious pre-teenage prize from eventually finding freedom.

First Leg of the Trip: Some Insight on Journeys in Life and Literature

One can assert that every day that human beings live and breathe, we embark on a journey of sorts at work, at play, at school. In literature, the journey as a dominant psychological motif holds much credence across poetry, novels and even drama. As noted in

this short passage: “A journey embarked upon is often intertwined with numerous issues of self-discovery such as the personal, inner and mental journeys of the mind.”¹

From a psychological perspective, journeys offer the opportunity to be enlightened. In the introduction to an article, psychiatrist Abigail Brenner offers a straightforward perspective: “Journeys are one of the most powerful and literal tools for making passages or transitions because they manifest our internal drives and desires in the outside world. The journey is a deliberate effort to move beyond ourselves.”² It’s the aspect of how a mental journey offers the potential transition to someplace better or desired – a transition that may not always come to fruition -- that will be addressed shortly.

In addition, of course, Odysseus, perhaps the literary world’s most recognized traveler (after all, the derivation of the character’s name is defined as “a long wandering or voyage usually marked by many changes of fortune”³) endured hardship after hardship during his long, arduous return home. On his so-called “hero journey,” Odysseus traveled both physically and within his mind, and subsequently demonstrated the correlation between what he had to endure completely. Through this process, “Odysseus matures—achieving a more complete understanding of himself and his place in the world. At the conclusion of his journey, Odysseus is a better person, having conquered his own psychological restraints, and he returns home to use his new-found self-understanding to be a better king, husband, father, and son.”⁴

The two works addressed here contain actual excursions that center on the main characters and do much to advance the plot, further develop the characters, expand

interpretation and help shape the outcome of the story. As potentially fascinating and intriguing these events may be – a march, no, more of a “parade” to the town square in order to hold an execution and road trips made in a sedan to virtually all corners of America in the post-World War II years – a great deal of insight and understanding of Nabokov’s literary artistry also can be gained by directing the critical and interpretive focus on an analysis of the “mental journeys” we’re about to analyze.

The Passage That Leads to a Dead End for Cincinnatus

Imagine you are in this situation: Sentenced to be executed for committing a purported “terrible” crime, you are encouraged by the prospect of something good that was about to take place. In the case of the convicted Cincinnatus S., that diversion from the still uncertain pending day of death was to be a visit from your wife, a woman who had betrayed your trust and love, but your wife nonetheless.

Then, in a moment, your spirit is shattered when your jailer arrives at your cell and delivers a formal written notification stating that the meeting cannot take place that day due to stipulations in the existing law; the visit must be postponed a day. That was the message delivered in a sinister-yet-cheerful manner by jailer/director Rodion to the lowly Cincinnatus at the start of Chapter Six in *Invitation to a Beheading*. A verbal quarrel ensues between jailer and inmate, as Rodion insists that Cincinnatus depart in order for the cell to be cleaned properly for Marthe’s pending visit.

As he physically leaves his cell, the narrator describes how Cincinnatus “sleep walks” on what becomes a macabre journey where he comes to the realization that on one still-to-be-determined day he will be beheaded for his crime, makes a desperate attempt to recall life in the village before he was charged and imprisoned, and gets slapped back into reality through an encounter with a child.

Nabokov uses the following passage to drive home the emotional trauma that the soon-to-be executed Cincinnatus felt as his mind wandered: “It was then that Cincinnatus stopped and, looking around him as if he had just entered this stony solitude, summoned up all his will, evoked the full extent of his life, and endeavored to comprehend his situation with the utmost exactitude. Accused of the most terrible of crimes, gnostical turpitude, so rare and so unutterable that it was necessary to use circumlocutions like ‘impenetrability,’ ‘opacity,’ ‘occlusion’; sentenced for that crime to death by beheading; emprisoned in the fortress in expectation of the unknown by near and inexorable date...”⁵ Note how Nabokov sets the scene by stating that Cincinnatus comes to somewhat of an epiphany as he prepares to embark on a journey in search of some kind of temporary redemption.

With these thoughts, Nabokov sets the tone for the balance of Cincinnatus’ psychological sojourn, one that is both bleak and real, but reflects on the heroic character of the protagonist as he demonstrates courage to persevere while reflecting on the life ahead of him and the life he had before being convicted, tossed into jail and sentenced to death.

Further on, Cincinnatus shuffles off these depressing thoughts and charges forward with a psychological pronouncement that he wanted to return to a simpler, happier time. Nabokov

portrays this through a statement that illustrates how we can mentally transport ourselves from a downtrodden place to a better place, a place we know well and want to revisit:

“... Cincinnatus C. felt a fierce longing for freedom, the most ordinary, physical, physically feasible kind of freedom, and instantly he imagined, with such sensuous clarity as though it all was a fluctuating corona emanating from him, the town beyond the shallowed river, the town, from every point of which one could see—now in this vista, now in that, now in crayon and now in ink – the tall fortress within which he was.”⁶

The “physically feasible kind of freedom” longed for by Cincinnatus – metaphorically described as an out-of-reach crown, a symbol power or freedom -- clearly can only be achieved in his mind, yet seeking that outlet does allow him to take a few more mental steps down the imaginary corridor in the prison; and, as he comes to grip with time moving forward, Cincinnatus takes another step toward his desired destination, the city of his birth emerging from dawn to a new day. He explores a city “where everything seemed better that it really was.”⁷ He sees a pensive Marthe, carriages in the shape of swans, school children and laborers, and various examples of other people and regular commerce, seemingly examples of normalcy and the life he imagined he once led.

All the while, however, time marched ahead, punctuated by an incessant sound – a reminder of his actual fate and place in life -- leaving Cincinnatus still stuck in the virtual prison walls of his mind: “These are the things that Cincinnatus saw and heard through the walls as the clock struck, and, even though in reality everything in this city was always quite dead and awful by comparison with the secret life of Cincinnatus and his guilty flame, even though he

knew this perfectly well and knew also that there was no hope, yet at this moment he still longed to be on those bright familiar streets ... but then the clock finished ringing, the imaginary sky grew overcast, and the jail was back in force."⁸

Further, down the passageway, Cincinnatus continues his journey, only again battered by what eventually are illusions of the smidgen of positivity and hope he was seeking after learning the visit from Marthe would not take place that day. A new clock-like sound is heard that continues to assault his senses and add to his already frail condition; through an encounter with the blond child Emmie, he is scolded; a large window that allows in light proves to be a false opening in the prison wall that provided a mirage-like perspective of the town's Tamara Gardens, certainly a place of solace Cincinnatus had hoped to reach; and, the appearance of Rodion – smug, snarky and sinister as ever – brings the nightmarish daydream to an unsettling conclusion. The imaginary escape results in even greater despair, confusion, and uncertainty: "And, only then did Cincinnatus realize that the bends in the corridor had not been leading him away anywhere, but rather formed a great polyhedron – for now, as he turned a corner, he saw his door in the distance, and before he reached it, passed the cell where the new prisoner was kept."⁹

This type of unsettling episode, where worldly boundaries work to define what takes place in a fabricated reality, is a reoccurring literary motif for Nabokov, and is supported by the lush Nabokovian language one would expect. In the essay "The Informing of the Soul," scholar Gennady Barbtarło identified *Invitation to a Beheading* as the novel that demonstrates "probably the most convincing case in point. The novel's dimensions are defined almost

exclusively through a thematic network, and even much of its plot formation is driven by periodic devices.”¹⁰ As learned in other parts of the novel, Nabokov incorporates various scenarios where perceived, definitive delineations of place and time get jumbled. A great example centers on a critical plot line: The uncertainty of the exact day Cincinnatus will meet the executioner and ultimately pay for his crime. In a real world situation, this of course would more than likely never happen, but throughout *Invitation to a Beheading*, this motif regarding uncertainty of the future underscores Cincinnatus’ ultimate fate.

One can make the argument that the short imaginary journey Cincinnatus embarked on within the prison walls is Nabokov’s way of saying that in our mind we can hope to escape from something dreaded, but that reality will catch up and we’ll have to face the inevitable.

On the Road Again: The True Purpose Behind Humbert’s Travel Plans Get Steered Off Course

Plans for a less surreal kind of mental journey – but one correlating to an actual motor trip that included stops in seemingly every geographical locale of the United States – take shape at the very conclusion of Part One and solidify at the onset of Part Two of *Lolita*. At this halfway point in the novel, readers learn a great deal more about the cunning, duplicitous intentions of Humbert Humbert and the innocent façade erected by his prepubescent concubine Lolita.

From one perspective, both Humbert and Lolita must take to the road to escape an uncertain future following the accidental death of Charlotte Haze. Would the good people of Ramsdale allow a European carpetbagger (albeit an educated and presumably charming one) take up residence in the conservative New England community with the daughter of his recently wed (and recently dead) wife? One would think the new Humbert “family unit” would

not fit very accordingly into mid-century small town America. Make haste, Humbert conceived, rendezvous with Lolita and take to the highway!

The main character or characters in some “road” stories are on a quest for adventure, to “find themselves” or embark on a journey that eventually leads to solace. In the case of Humbert and Lolita, the pair were involuntarily driven away given the circumstances of their very different upbringings and their lives ahead: “... both exiles, and, alienated from the societies with which they are familiar, they find themselves in ambiguous and moral territory where the old rules seem not to apply. Humbert chooses exile and comes willingly from Europe to America, while Lolita is forced into exile when Charlotte dies.”¹¹ Humbert’s solution to their collective plight is the incessant auto travel that results in staid adventures and short-term stays in out-of-the-way motels that were “... clean, neat, safe, nooks, ideal places for sleep, argument, reconciliation, insatiable illicit love.”¹²

The prelude to the physical road journey ahead, however, begins in Humbert’s mind shortly after he informs Lolita that Charlotte is dead. After stopping in the town of Lepingville (perhaps a cleverly selected and decidedly ironic name since the two were about to “leap” forward on a circuitous journey), Humbert conceives an initial plan to ingratiate his traveling companion. He buys Lolita lots of stuff – from a box of candy and soda pop, to books and sanitary pads, to a radio and roller skates. He initiates this “down payment” of sorts to satisfy Lolita with material possessions any young girl from mid-century America would relish, a way to sooth the spirit with objects after Lolita learns her mother is dead and her future is now completely in the hands of a pedophile now legally her father. Like the cruel cad he is, Humbert

spends money freely on material goods knowing these purchases would help pacify Lolita and take her mind off the loss of her mother, thereby advancing his more encompassing and dastardly plans for the future.

Humbert, of course, did not need any material trappings; his focus was how to use his cunning and position to take control of a child's life and be able to continue the charade of love and caring in order satisfy his desire for Lolita. To rational, compassion human beings, Humbert's scheme is criminal and beyond deplorable. To Humbert, the prospective motor journey concocted was simply a means of maintaining control.

As noted in an essay by Ellen Pifer, the character's actions at this juncture of the story are somewhat definitive, a reflection of calculating singlemindedness without any redeeming factors. "Humbert's account concretely renders the metaphysical process by which, in Nabokov's expressed view, a world emptied of good becomes a fitting habitation for evil. Indifferent to everything but his desire, Humbert has seen *nothing* of the innocent and dreamy landscape, the beneficent order of reality through which he passed like a blind man. For him, this lovely country was only a grid, a blueprint, a series of marks on a map. Such an abstract universe, emptied of love and meaning, signifies the moral vacuum that evil rushes to fill – just as the child's miserable sobs filled the silence of every night."¹³

But the confections and toys purchased could only mediate the situation for only a relatively concise amount of time; Humbert knew that to keep the physical journey with Lolita

progressing without any change of plans, other measures had to be taken, measures that were more devious and calculated because the ultimate goal was to enslave Lolita through fear and false pretense.

Early in Part Two, he arrives at the conclusion that “the system of monetary bribes which was to work such havoc with my nerves and her morals somewhat later, I relied on three other methods to keep my pubescent concubine in submission and passable temper.”¹⁴ Thinking quite strategically, Humbert in a way combines “good-cop/bad-cop” rationale and strategies to keep Lolita hostage and participatory as they continue the cross-country tour.

He delivers these three mandates to Lolita:

1. He would relocate to a desolate American town, a maneuver that assuredly would deprive the young girl of access to the physical pop culture trappings desired by middle-class American kids of the time.
2. He convinces Lolita that the decision to motor from town-to-town was in her best interests only. He portrays himself as the “protector” of her future.
3. And, he unfolds a sobering – but certainly realistic – scenario: If he goes to jail for statutory rape, Lolita would be placed into foster care, presumably a fate worse than the uncharted and uncertain life on the road with Humbert.

Humbert succeeds, of course, rationalizing that he and Lolita, through their illicit motor journey, have a commonality: “By rubbing all this in, I succeeded in terrorizing Lo, who despite a certain brash alertness of manner and spurts of wit was not as intelligent a child as her I.Q.

might suggest. But if I managed to establish that background of shared secrecy and shared guilt, I was much less successful in keeping her in good humor. Every morning during our yearlong travels I had to devise some expectation, some special point in space and time for her to look forward to, for her to survive till bedtime. ”¹⁵

The quotation above encapsulates Humbert’s mindset and vision of his future with Lolita, one where he would encounter endless joy and satisfaction with his imprisoned stepdaughter -- as long as he can continue to invent diversions and keep the sedan pointed in new directions across small town America. Yet, this 12-month motor odyssey does come to a very sudden conclusion later in Part Two when hospitalized, Lolita makes her physical escape, leaving Humbert anguished and alone.

From Humbert’s perspective, the mind excursion he conducted month upon month, one that in his mind should have let him continue, perhaps indefinitely, his domination of the young girl. Yet the journey ends with him lost, literally and figuratively.

So, Where Do the Imaginative Journeys Really Lead?

In both works addressed here, confusion was the ultimate outcome after both protagonists concluded very different mind journeys initiated to reach a desired destination. For Cincinnatus, that destination was a temporary reprieve within his mind to get to the place he once knew as home; for Humbert, that destination was far less definitive, required regular changes in course, and driven by his selfish need for control.

By the end of each novel, the ultimate fate and circumstances for each character remain uncertain. Cincinnatus does, indeed, walk away – at least in his mind – from the executioner as the world around him erupts into chaos. He, from one perspective, triumphs over the oppressive forces that imprisoned him and stole his freedom and dignity; but he escapes to a world where “Everything was coming apart. Everything was falling.”¹⁶ This forbidding outlook was foreshadowed by the daydream described in Chapter Six, where he stumbles through a labyrinth of confusion and dead ends.

From the confines of prison, where he’s spent time in the psychopathic ward, Humbert considers various pseudonyms (perhaps demonstrating an inability to come to terms and face reality) to use as authorship for his “memoire,” a study in how he recounts and tries to rationalize his maniacal reasons for controlling Lolita and justify the criminal acts he committed. He leaves the reader without clarification as to who he – or the narrator – really is and what will happen to him – besides presumably a very, very long jail stint or even execution. He offers a tepid perspective on his future: “For reasons that may appear more obvious than they really are, I am opposed to capital punishment; this attitude will be, I trust shared by the sentencing judge.”¹⁷ Humbert’s wry commentary here (and throughout the novel) may be interpreted as his apparatus to justify his cold, calculating nature, his selfishness, his lack of morality.

From a more encompassing perspective, the two mind journey passages explored in this paper are unquestionably different. From a time perspective, one lasts perhaps a few minutes, the other months upon months. One takes place in a faux, surreal world, the other in the

defined confines of 1950s America. They do, however, serve as preambles of sort for the need at times to try to escape one's trappings in life in order to reach a desired place, one that's a little better just down the road.

Well, perhaps.

Journeys, taken in one's mind or otherwise, sometimes punctuated by tolls, detours and potholes.

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