Flesh Made Word:
Inscription and the Embodied Self
in Osip Mandel'shtam and Vladimir Nabokov

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"Flesh Made Word" examines two seemingly incongruous Russian modernist writers to illuminate one remarkable species of aesthetic response to the violent pressures of Marxist ideology, especially as those pressures are manifest as sociolinguistic phenomena and practice. The unexpected pairing of Osip Mandel’shtam and Vladimir Nabokov is motivated by their shared debt to Henri Bergson’s materialist theories of embodied selfhood and subjectivity, language, and the metaphysics of art. Poetry, both writers insist, as it operates according to a non-linear logic of ever-open and expanding associations of sound and image, offers the only authentic grammar for a multifarious self that knows not the constructions of time, causality, and finality. This mode of self-expression, at once intimate and cryptic, clashes with the Marxist state’s effort to make the subject uniform and transparent—to “sentence” him to his prescribed collective identity in the bondage of speech, prose, and narrative, whose didactic agenda and linear momentum are encrypted with Marxism’s world-historical teleology. Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s own texts, the study argues, operate primarily by poetic principles, and their literary practice in turn creatively anticipates theories of Bergson’s postmodernist heirs (Foucault, Barthes, Derrida), particularly as they draw bold political implications from Bergson’s theories to analyze the relationship of language, writing, and power. Barthes, for instance, claims that the “poetic” text—composed of a personal image-system, not a “structure of signifieds”—places the artist “outside the pact that binds the writer to society.”
In exploring this conflict between manners of expression, the study offers innovative, cohesive readings of the writers’ most enigmatic and elusive works of poetic prose—Mandel’shtam’s *The Egyptian Stamp* and Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*. More specifically, it examines the ways the conflict is manifest on the bodies of the narrator-protagonists. These figures are effectively twice composed: once by the mortifying narration of the State, again as they are the subjects of their own revitalizing self-writing. The texts that the protagonists produce of themselves are figured as their very flesh transubstantiated, and as nothing other than the poetic works that we are reading. These metaphysical dimensions of the fiction make forceful statements about the power of the artistic act, and especially its potential to reclaim and restore the self in a gesture of political defiance.

By establishing a distinct set of images, themes, and techniques shared by the authors, along with a conceptual framework in which to discuss them, this dissertation responds to a scholarly need, until now not substantively articulated, to place Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s creative projects into dialogue. As much as it invites a parallel gaze, however, the study equally contributes daring new chapters to each author’s existing body of scholarship and opens fields of inquiry that demand continued critical attention.
# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements** ........................................................................................................................................ i

**Introduction**

A Common Thread ........................................................................................................................................... 1

**Chapter I: Body-Language**

Henri Bergson and his Heirs on the Power of Self-Writing ............................................................................. 25

**Chapter II: Truancy and Truth in Mandel’shtam**

a. Mandel’shtam and Literary Savagery ........................................................................................................ 79
b. Coat, Text, Body: Parnok’s Obolochka in *The Egyptian Stamp* .............................................................. 115

**Chapter III: Nabokov’s Invitation to Art**

a. Nabokov and the Text(ure) of the Self ........................................................................................................ 155
b. Cincinnatus the Scapegoat and Writing the Remedy: *Invitation* and *Pharmakos* ............................. 195

**Conclusion**

The Death of the Author? ................................................................................................................................. 242

**Bibliography** .................................................................................................................................................. 253
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—INTRODUCTION—
A Common Thread

And now I have finished a work, which neither the anger of Jupiter nor fire nor the sword nor biting time will be able to destroy. When that day, which has dominion over nothing except this body, so desires, let it finish the uncertain extent of my time: still through the better part of me I will be carried everlasting above the high stars, and my name will be un-erasable, and wherever Roman power extends over conquered lands, I will be read in the mouths of the people, and through every age in fame, if there is any truth in the prophecies of poets, I will live.

—Ovid, Metamorphoses 15.871-879

Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book.

Michel de Montaigne, Address to the Reader in Essays

Why a comparative study of the works of Osip Mandel’shtam and Vladimir Nabokov? Why especially these two particular writers on whom, individually, scholarship seems already to have reached the saturation point? And how? After all, how many meaningful connections can be drawn between these two artists, the one an Acmeist poet, a Jew of humble social rank, murdered by the Stalinist state, and whose creative work was subsequently suppressed for decades afterward, the other an émigré of noble Russian birth, known for writing decadent prose, who lived to greet international fame and prosperity?

Despite the apparent discrepancies, however, there has long been a temptation to bring these artists into creative dialogue—but always only a temptation. In the galaxy of Russian literary scholarship, the names of Mandel’shtam and Nabokov often orbit near one another, and even come into brief, tenuous contact, only to quickly resume their solitary courses. In the introduction to Autobiographical Statements in Twentieth-Century Russian Literature, for example, Jane Gary Harris links the two figures by suggesting that when Nabokov admits, “The man in me rebels against the fictionist,” the same statement could describe Mandel’shtam’s own
“impulse” to personal self-writing; but the correspondences seem to end there.¹ Michael Meylac approaches a more tangible parallel when, analyzing intertextuality in a group of Nabokov’s poems from the mid-1950s, he likens a Nabokov poem to one of Mandel’shtam’s, only to show that no concrete connection can be made: “The fifth stanza recalls a stanza by Mandel’shtam, written in 1936 but published only in 1964, and certainly unknown to Nabokov.”² Both attempts at comparison are typical and instructive, for they demonstrate that the scholarship observes a gravitational pull between the two artists, both in terms of their larger creative projects and at the more molecular level of style.

Harris and Meylac in fact introduce precisely the dimensions of the writers’ creative expression—their presence in their work, along with their harmonies in style, device, and image—where I would like to establish firm links. Before I define those common elements of their art, however, it bears observing a number of salient reasons why Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s works might share important characteristics. Not least among these is Nabokov’s avowed appreciation of Mandel’shtam. Otherwise an inveterate sufferer of Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence,” Nabokov admitted Mandel’shtam to be one of the few fellow writers whom he deeply admired, and who might even have inspired his own art. In a 1967 interview for *Paris Review*, Nabokov affirmed that he “knew [Mandel’shtam] by heart.”³ Seven years earlier he had gushed over Mandel’shtam’s artistic talent, calling him “a wonderful poet, the greatest

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poet among those trying to survive in Russia under the Soviets,” one whose “limpid gifts are admirable specimens of a human mind at its deepest and highest.”

In my research, I have yet to encounter any record of Mandel’shtam having read Nabokov’s work. Certain historical circumstances suggest that any familiarity with Nabokov on Mandel’shtam’s part may have been unlikely. Published almost entirely in emigration, Nabokov’s works did not enjoy broad readership in the Soviet Union during the late 1920s and ‘30s. So even before his persecution by Stalin, Mandel’shtam would have had only very minimal access to Nabokov’s works, and the continual displacement of his final years would have made the chances of such an encounter even less likely. This absence of evidence, however, is neither surprising nor does it temper the effort to conduct a balanced comparative study of the two writers. In fact, this study is very little concerned with locating instances of potential creative “borrowing” and instead aims to trace the deep origins of Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s creative values to suggest that their modes of expression would, with good reason, develop organically along similar paths, even though their lives followed radically different trajectories.

The lives of Mandel’shtam and Nabokov have significant sites of contact from the very beginning. Born in 1891 and 1899 respectively, both men were raised in Russia’s “cultural capital,” St. Petersburg, in respectable families. Of noble Russian blood, the Nabokovs enjoyed decidedly more luxury than the Mandel’shtams, but the fact that the Mandel’shtams were among the few Jewish merchant families allowed to live outside of the Pale of Settlement, and within the city proper, confirms that Mandel’shtam’s father was rather prosperous in the leather business that was his trade. The Mandel’shtam’s relative affluence is further evidenced by the family’s

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ability to send young Osip to the renowned Tenishev School. Many biographers and scholars note that both writers studied at the celebrated St. Petersburg academy; fewer acknowledge the school’s distinguishing qualities: Russia’s top-tier secondary education institution at the time, the Tenishev School was also “emphatically liberal, democratic, and nondiscriminatory in terms of race, rank, and creed.”5 The progressive, inclusive atmosphere embodied and reinforced both families’ social and political values.6 Moreover, the school’s modern structure and curriculum were oriented toward the West and thus complemented the education both young men received at home from tutors and French governesses. Indeed, beginning in their youth, both men developed a strong interest in Western art and letters, an interest they nurtured in their post-secondary educations.

Already as teenagers at the Tenishev School, both Mandel’shtam and Nabokov began composing poetry in earnest, though with tellingly different degrees of success. Reporting on a public reading organized at the school in 1907, the school’s newspaper raved that “Mandel’shtam called forth a storm of applause with his poem ‘Kolesnitsa’ (Chariot), which greatly exceeds in artistic quality the majority of our school belles lettres and perhaps of modern belles lettres generally.”7 At the same age, albeit eight years later in 1916, Nabokov managed to publish a collection of verse, simply titled Stikhi (Poems), composed for his young love Tamara. It was not met so warmly. Nabokov’s instructor of Russian Literature, V. V. Gippius (who also taught Mandel’shtam, and whom both pupils greatly admired), openly mocked the volume in class.

6 Their experiences at the school also reflect important distinctions. Mandel’shtam, for instance, “rode the streetcar from the Jewish quarter,” while Nabokov was chauffeured to school in the family’s Rolls Royce limousine. Additionally, though it was actively discouraged, anti-Semitism was pervasive at the time, and could not be rooted out of the school. Clarence Brown, Mandelstam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 22-23.
7 Cited in: Brown, Mandelstam, 30.
Furthermore, Nabokov reports that Gippius’ cousin Zinaida beseeched the young poetaster’s father to tell his son that he would “never, never be a writer.” Despite such criticism, Nabokov continued to compose and publish three more volumes of poetry over the next seven years. Although the maturity and success of their youthful compositions may have differed, their shared instinct to write poetry evidences an important shared creative impulse.

Informing that instinct were the creative models the two young men likewise had in common. Well versed in the masters of the Golden Age, Mandel’shtam and Nabokov also ravenously consumed poetry of the more proximate Silver Age. Among contemporary Russian poets, Annensky, Briusov, and Viacheslav Ivanov were favorites. Both men lionized Blok as the greatest poet of his generation. They found equal inspiration in innovative French poets: Verlaine, Baudelaire, Mallarmé. If, as Mandel’shtam suggests in his memoir The Noise of Time (Shum vremeni, 1925), a man’s biography consists solely of the books he has read, the biographies of this pair of future artists would have read very much the same.

After completing studies at the Tenishev School, both Mandel’shtam and Nabokov continued to venture west, this time geographically. Mandel’shtam spent time in Paris (1907-1908) and Germany (1908-1911), where he studied Romance languages with a focus on Old French, and philosophy, while enrolled for two semesters at the University of Heidelberg.

Among other excursions while in Europe, Mandel’shtam made two brief trips to Italy, a land that

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9 Almanakh: dva puti (Almanac: Two Paths), containing twelve poems by Nabokov alongside eight by Andrei Balashov, was published in 1918; Grozd’ (The Cluster) was a collection of thirty-six poems published in 1922 under the surname V. Sirin; and a year later “V.I. Sirin” published a volume of one hundred and twenty-eight poems titled Gornii put’ (Empyrean Path).
10 Osip Mandel’shtam, Shum vremeni, in Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh, ed. E. Sergeeva (Moskva: Art-Biznes-Tsentr, 1993-1997), 2:384. Most translations from the Russian are my own, with the exception of Nabokov’s Invitation to a Beheading, where I generally use the author’s own translation. If I use an existing translation, it is duly cited in the notes. I am indebted to Clarence Brown’s fine translations in The Noise of Time: The Prose of Osip Mandelstam (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986).
his creative consciousness already actively inhabited. He cultivated his imaginative sympathies with the ancient world upon returning to Russia, where he studied in St. Petersburg University’s Faculty of History and Philology, focusing on Greek and Latin, for which he demonstrated an uncommon aptitude. He remained at the university until 1916, though he never formally graduated.

Nabokov’s experience of the West was much more extensive and expansive, residing there as he did for over two decades. The Nabokovs emigrated from Russia in 1919, about one year after the Provisional Government, of which Nabokov’s father had been secretary, was overthrown by the Bolsheviks. The family first went England, where Vladimir enrolled in Trinity College, Cambridge, to study Romance languages. The bulk of Nabokov’s European life, however, was spent in Berlin (1922-1937), where his family fled in the wake of the 1917 Revolution. During the years 1937-1940, Nabokov resided mainly in Paris, before relocating to New York and beginning the American period of his life. Thanks to the prosperity he enjoyed from the publication of *Lolita*, Nabokov was able to return to Europe in 1960, settling in Switzerland until his death in 1977.

There was nothing extraordinary in Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s exposure to, and even formal education in, western art and thought, though their enthusiasm for foreign traditions may have been less than typical. What is undeniable is that their earnest appropriation of those traditions became hallmarks of their respective styles. The same influences also invited the writers into a broader movement of European modernism by informing the ways in which they would come to distinguish themselves from other, more dominant Russian modernist trends. One shared point of distinction is particularly illuminating. Though they came of age under the
influence of Symbolism, both writers eventually rejected its poetics, and their subsequent aesthetics were in important ways defined by their principled anti-Symbolist polemics. Acmeism, the small and short lived but forceful poetic movement of which Mandel’shtam was one of the main figures, along with Nikolai Gumilev and Anna Akhmatova, “arose out of repulsion” for Symbolism.11 Upending the very essence of Symbolism, Acmeist aesthetics promoted a lucidity and precision of the poetic word and image, and construed those crystalline signifiers almost literally as the building blocks of poetic structure: architecture was one of the movement’s (and Mandel’shtam’s especially) favorite compositional metaphors, whereby the materiality of the “the Word as such” (slovo kak takovoe) was capable of erecting firm and durable verbal artifacts. Nabokov, for his part, similarly found the very “notion of the symbol” to be “abhorrent.”12 Paul D. Morris, among others, suggests that Acmeism was one of the likely “models for Nabokov’s poetic practice and metaphysics,” as these latter also relish the “beautiful clarity” of the verbal image.13 Thus the opening poem of Nabokov’s 1923 collection of verse The Empyrean Path (Gornii put’) strikes a chord that resonates with Acmeist polemics. The lyric voice of “To the Poet” (“Poetu”) calls for the versifier to abandon Symbolist ambiguities in favor of a new way:

Болота вязкие бессмыслицы певучей
покинь, поэт, покинь и в новый день проснись!
Напев начни иной—прозрачный и могучий;
[. . .]
Отчетливость нужна и чистота и сила.
Несносен звон пустой, неясность утомила:
я слышу новый звук, я вижу новый край. . .

The swamps of nonsense melodious
leave, poet, leave and to a new day awake!

12 Nabokov, Strong Opinions, 304-05.
Begin a different melody—lucid and powerful;  
[...]
Precision is needed, and clarity and strength.  
Unbearable is the hollow sound, vagueness grown wearisome,  
I hear a new sound, I see a new horizon. . .  

Equally important as these formative aesthetic and ideological influences, and eventually melding with them, was Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s shared sense of abiding alienation. Despite the renown their talent eventually earned them, both writers perceived themselves to be, and were often treated as, social outsiders. The Jewish Mandel’shtam was, to state it plainly, a pariah by blood in a country where anti-Semitic sentiment ran deep. It is frequently speculated that Mandel’shtam’s baptism into Finnish Methodism in 1911 was a conversion made to secure enrollment at the University of St. Petersburg, which did not share the Tenishev School’s egalitarian spirit. In the Soviet period Mandel’shtam’s ethnicity, combined with his proud standing as an educated non-noble (raznochinets) and his ambivalence toward the Socialist project, increased his outsider status. Beginning in 1923, Mandel’shtam’s “ideological unacceptability” led once reliable publishing outfits to turn down his poetry; he was sustained financially only by his meager income from translations.

Mandel’shtam’s refusal to compromise his artistic ideals under ever-increasing political pressure made his removal to the fringes more intense and more terrifyingly literal. In her memoirs of life with Mandel’shtam in the 1930s, the poet’s wife Nadezhda recalls with chilling candor the suffocating atmosphere of anxiety, dread, and distrust in which they lived under the Stalinist police state, where the neighbor who had not been abducted to the Lubianka in the

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15 See, for instance, Gregory Freidin, A Coat of Many Colors: Osip Mandelstam and his Mythologies of Self-Presentation (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 29-30; Brown, Mandelstam, 46.
16 Brown, Mandelstam, 101.
middle of the night might just as likely be an informant. After word spread of the poet reciting his caustic “Stalin Epigram” in 1933, Mandel’shtam came to know a new otherness—that of criminal, enemy of the state. The following years of Mandel’shtam’s life were characterized by almost relentless persecution, in which the poet was subjected to all the technologies of Stalinist policing: arrests, surveillance, seizures of property, perlustration, interrogations, imprisonment. From 1934 on, Mandel’shtam lived almost entirely in internal exile; banned from entering major cities, he and his wife Nadezhda settled first in Cherdyn and later Voronezh. In May 1938, he was arrested one last time and sentenced to five years hard labor. Seven months later Mandel’shtam was dead. He is said to have succumbed, in utter solitude, to malnutrition and exposure while at a transit camp near Vladivostok.

Nabokov’s life on the periphery, it must be recognized, was in important ways an act of choice: he celebrated his seclusion and boasted about his refusal to participate in any sort of communal environment or endeavor. In his years at Tenishev and Cambridge, he proudly left the activities of the various clubs and fraternities to the other “good little democrats,” his peers.17 The one exception he allowed was in athletics, though here, too, he favored one-on-one competitive sports, such as tennis and boxing. While Nabokov did enjoy soccer, even in this team sport he felt most at home not in the frenzy of the pitch, but cloistered between the goal posts. On playing for the Cambridge soccer club, Nabokov wrote of the unique responsibility and glory of the “aloof, solitary, impassive” position of goalkeeper, for that same “lone eagle, [and] man of mystery” was “surrounded by a halo of singular glamour” and was made the unique

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17 Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 186.
“object of thrilled adulation.”

For Nabokov, the same thematic imagery of solitary flight became synonymous with artistic creation.

While he seated himself atop an ivory tower, Nabokov also suffered externally imposed marginalization. As an émigré from Russia, forever separated from his beloved land and language, Nabokov always felt himself an awkward alien. He records this experience most poignantly in Pnin, wherein the title character, a sensitive, intelligent, and gentle soul, fumbles through life in his adopted country, the object of constant mocking and derision. At the same time, Nabokov was subjected to official censure in the Soviet Union, where all of his works, English and Russian, were effectively banned until the late 1980s. Nabokov also came to share in Mandel’shtam’s ethnic estrangement: his wife Véra’s Jewish ethnicity compelled the couple to depart from Berlin to Paris in 1937, as Hitler’s anti-Semitic policies became increasingly brutal. Nabokov thus encountered discrimination as a Jew by association. In fact, Nabokov saw himself as doubly ostracized, doubly exiled: first, pushed violently and forever out of Russia for his family’s liberal democratic ideals, then forced to flee the Nazi scourge. And though he was never himself victim to the grisly technologies of Soviet and Nazi terror, those violences touched him intimately: in 1922, Nabokov’s father, then a prominent member of the liberal Constitutional Democratic Party, was shot to death as he defended Pavel Miliukov, founder and leader of the CDP, from an assassination attempt by monarchist terrorists, and his brother, Sergei, died in a Nazi concentration camp. This is to say nothing of the numerous friends and less immediate

18 Ibid., 267.


family members who met similar fates. Pnin, the alien in America, is thus likewise haunted by the specters of loved ones murdered in Russia and Germany.

These feelings and proofs of perfect outsiderness figure among both Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s most salient themes, and the urgency of the condition is felt in almost all of their creative work. Nevertheless, their imposed social, cultural, and political otherness ultimately recapitulated and reinforced a still deeper, more inherent sense of alienation. The artists felt a fundamental dissonance between their internal lives and the outside world, between that world as it appeared and as they experienced it. This essential “ontological alienation,” an internal exile of the self, emerged as the thematic nucleus of their work.21 Art and language proved the sole means of reconciling the self to the world. Thus, in “The Morning of Acmeism” (“Utro Akmeizma,” 1912) Mandel’shtam declares that “to exist—this is the artist’s greatest pride,” though he cannot do so in the phenomenal world as is appears; rather, the artist’s “sole reality is the work of art itself.”22 Nabokov even more explicitly juxtaposes his private experience of self to all things external, while proposing the same method of giving shape to that experience: “Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life’s foolscap.”23 The artists consequently construe language as the surrogate medium into which they can articulate their inner lives and that can, as Nabokov’s imagery suggests, project that life outside themselves.

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21 Ontological alienation is the term Heidegger uses to describe the condition of the subject mired in the superficial reality of the world—reality as it is informed and constructed by normativized social conventions that facilitate collective understanding; this muted reality is the social realm of “idle talk,” and is opposed to “authentic” reality. In many ways his theories harmonize with those of Bergson, to be discussed in detail in Chapter I.


23 Nabokov, Speak, Memory, 25.
Not just any creative product, not just any language or literary form, promises to function in this way, however. Mandel’shtam begins to identify the appropriate mode of expression: “I liken the poem to an Egyptian bark of the dead,” says Mandel’shtam in the seminal aesthetic treatise of his mature art, “everything necessary for the extension of a man’s earthly journey [. . .] is stored in [it], nothing is forgotten.”24 That Mandel’shtam invests a poem with these personalizing and preservative capacities is not surprising, but it is crucial. Nabokov was of like mind. While the genre in which he excelled may technically have been the novel, he, no less than Mandel’shtam, considered poetry the highest form of artistic expression, and his work makes apparent the primacy he gave to it. Affirming that a given novel’s events themselves are of secondary concern to the author, and summing up what is almost a scholarly consensus, Marina Naumann has categorically stated that “the greatest aesthetic impact of Nabokov’s prose is precisely because of its poetic elements.”25 Like Mandel’shtam, Nabokov locates the same capacity to articulate his inner life in poetry. “Nabokov’s poetics is individual, inductive, and proceeding out of an artistic engagement with the world of experience,” concludes Paul D. Morris in his study of the author’s defining and omnipresent “lyric voice.”26 Another poem from Empyrean Path imagines the lyrical self fusing with the mortal body into an animate verse.

Вдохновенье—это сладострастье
человеческого "я"
жарко возрастающее счастье,—
миг небытия.

Сладострастье—это вдохновенье
tела, чуткого, как дух:
y ты прозрел, ты вспыхнул на мгновенье,—
v трепете потух.

Но когда уседа грозовая
пронеслась, и ты затих,—
в тайнике возникла жизнь живая:
сердце или стих. . .

Inspiration—it is the sensuality
of the human “I”:
a fervently growing happiness,—
a moment of non-being.

Sensuality—it is the inspiration
of the body, responsive like a soul:
You regained sight, you flared up for a moment,—
in trembling died out.

But when the stormy pleasure
swept over, you quieted,—
in the hiding place arose a living life:
the heart or a verse. . .

Indeed, Mandel’shtam and Nabokov also construed their existential conflict as an
inherently linguistic and literary matter.28 The very real, very violent political forces that bore
down on the men were, in fundamental ways, manifest in a distinctly prosaic verbal form.

Roland Barthes has proposed that Marxism’s profoundly teleological view of history “calls for a
sequence of events, that is, for an intelligible Narrative.”29 Mandel’shtam recognized too this
connection between ideology and literary form—a point he makes clear in a 1922 essay, aptly

28 Here and elsewhere I use the term “linguistic” in its most general sense, that is, as a matter of language—a mode
of expression with a variety of possible modes, such as speech and writing, poetic and prosaic language, each of
which have different strategies for creating meaning. If in my analysis I make reference to the specific science of
linguistics I make note of the change in sense.
30.
titled “Literary Moscow: The Birth of Plot” (“Literaturnaia Moskva: rozhdenie fabuly”), though there he meaningfully connects the tendencies of narrative with what he construes as narrative’s deeper grammatical, structuring component: prose. The poet understands prose to be any utterance whose purpose is primarily to inform, to instruct, and which abandons the words’ aesthetic functions as it rushes toward a predetermined “meaning.” He thus partners “prose” with narrative (as will Barthes), since it has a linear syntactic trajectory and momentum that mirror, and thus reinforce, narrative’s own characteristic teleology—its “development” from messy conflict to conclusive resolution. As prose’s very structure—linear, unidirectional, and unidimensional—is encrypted with Marxist political ideology, Mandel’shtam proceeds to graft its properties onto the movement of the body politic. A “craving” for prose “coincided for us with the Revolution,” he says, precisely because the Revolution demanded a linguistic form that could “unite itself to the tidy action of the verbal masses” (deistvie slovesnykh mass). Prose, then, is thus necessarily “anonymous,” abstracted, and communalized, “bypassing the personality of the author, bypassing everything incidental, personal.”

Expository prose and narrative cannot be personal for the simple fact that, as Mandel’shtam states it, “the totality of what is considered a human [life] is not itself a biography.” And indeed, the Marxist state, as a sociolinguistic entity, understands “prose” in a similar way, but embraces its qualities: it is precisely the state’s demand for narrative, its worship of causality, transparent signs, and socio-

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30 The pluralization of “verbal masses” (slovesnye massy) signals the fusion of literary form to the social body. When speaking in strictly linguistic terms, it is conventional to refer to the content of an utterance in the singular (verbal mass, slovesnoe slovo), as Mandel’shtam himself does elsewhere. Here he knowingly conjures the proletarian masses.


historical momentum, that justifies its brutalization of actual bodies to effect Marxism’s
materialist vision of world-historical construction. In this context, to author the subject into
“prose” is to alter his body.

The virtue of poetry—its ability to communicate subjective experience—lies in its
peculiar semiotic and semantic logic, and its unique spatial and temporal structure, or
chronotope, which mirrors that of the inner life. That is, poetry does not create meaning by the
progression of words that lead to a defined end, but by the words themselves in their aesthetic
functions: the sounds and images they conjure and the continual accrual of those images in
thematic patterns and expanding associative networks. This accrual takes place through and
across the poem, in defiance of the apparent space and time of the text, toward the production
(without product) of a broader, holistic poetic sentiment. The poem’s “meaning” continually
swells, is in a ceaseless state of becoming. Mandel’shtam and Nabokov in fact find the same
metaphor for the process in the swirling patterns of arabesques on oriental rugs. In Speak,
Memory, Nabokov says that the true purpose of autobiography ought to be the tracing of
“thematic designs through one’s life.” The memoirist then performs the very principle of poetic

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33 Mikhail Bakhtin coined the term chronotope to express “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial
relationships that are artistically expressed in literature”; in other words, the chronotope refers to how the peculiar
time and space of a given literary work are expressed in language. I make a liberal borrowing of the term to point to
the spatial and temporal structure unique to lived psychic experience and to poetry. In these two phenomena,
understood by Bergson, Mandel’shtam, and Nabokov, familiar conceptions of time and space do not operate.
Instead, in psychic life and in poetry, time and space collapse as if into a single unit: the past, for instance, is always
within the present; in like manner, loci apparently disparate in space are superimposed to occupy a single point. I
frequently counterpose this atemporal and omnispatial, perpetually here-and-now character of privileged subjectivity
and its literary form to its antithesis, typified in speech and in the biographical novel. These latter verbal and literary
forms are, for Bergson, Mandel’shtam, and Nabokov, marked by their linear momentum, as the syntax of the
utterance and the events of the narrative move inexorably forward toward a determined end, a fixed meaning. For
Bakhtin’s discussion of the chronotope see his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” in The
Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX:

34 I borrow this juxtaposition of production and product from Barthes. In S/Z, for example, he characterizes the
artistic (poetic) text as “production without product,” while its prosaic antithesis is a “product (and not production).”

logic, some one hundred pages later, when elaborates: “I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let others trip.”36 “Poetic expression is a carpet fabric,” says Mandel’shtam in “A Conversation about Dante,” (“Razgovor o Dante,” 1933), a fabric “containing a plethora of textile warps differing from one another only in the interpretive coloration, only in the musical score of the continually changing commands of the instrumental signaling system [woven] into braids, figures, and ornaments.”37

The visually effective fabric metaphor for poetry is further productive for the way it draws abstract text into a material textile, since the poetic text(ure) communicates and conserves more than just the inner life of the psyche. Rather, both Mandel’shtam and Nabokov imagine a sort of metamorphosis to take place in the compositional act, a transfiguration whereby the poet’s flesh is made unto word, where it might be preserved. Mandel’shtam and Nabokov were artists who relished the objects of the material world; they were also men constantly, painfully reminded of their own mortality. The promise of a medium that would allow them in their entirety to occupy a vessel that would endure in the external world provided much-sought security. Thus the poetic sentiments cited above do not only envision a textu(r)al relic of the self and the body, both are also marked by the specter of death. Indeed, every metamorphosis is a death, as the larva enters its sarcophagus and “dies into” a new form of life. What is more, both writers’ authorial posturings evoke the theme of self-sacrifice, of martyrdom to the transcendent act of artistic creation.

36 Ibid., 139.
37 “Поэтическая речь есть ковровая ткань, имеющая множество текстильных основ, отличающихся друг от друга только в исполнительской окраске, только в партитуре постоянно изменяющегося приказа орудийной сигнализации […] в жгутах, фигурах, орнаментах” Mandel’shtam, “Razgovor o Dante,” 3:216.
The antagonism between poetry and prose, and the ethics of the confrontation, marks the exact nexus where Mandel’shtam and Nabokov meet most fruitfully for creative dialogue. The texts on which I focus my analysis dramatize the conflict both in their formal elements and in the events depicted. Mandel’shtam’s *The Egyptian Stamp* (*Egipetskaia marka*, 1928) is the poet’s single, and singular, work of “prose” fiction. The text’s convenient categorization as a novella is, however, a perfect misnomer, as what minimal plot it feigns to attempt is jarringly disrupted by decidedly poetic reveries that fluidly travel through time and space. Set in the “Kerensky Summer” of 1917, it is the work of an active and animated narrator who attempts to tell the story of his pseudo-double, Parnok, a Petersburg “little man” (*malen’kii chelovek*), from whom the narrator wants too desperately to distinguish himself. Parnok’s misadventure resembles a marriage between Gogol’s “The Overcoat” and “The Nose,” as the social outcast tries, and fails, to retrieve his beloved morning coat, which has been appropriated by one Captain Krzhizhanovsky. He also tries, and fails, to save an innocent man from being murdered by a bloodthirsty mob. The narrator, too, fails in his ostensible effort at narrative, as he is increasingly departs from Parnok’s story to indulge in digressions of personal poetic reverie.

Nabokov’s 1935 novel *Invitation to a Beheading* (*Priglashenie na kazn’*), despite its more cohesive plot, has some remarkable similarities in form and theme with *The Egyptian Stamp*, making it the ideal complement to Mandel’shtam’s enigmatic work. It is the story of Cincinnatus C., the prisoner of an anonymous, and thus universal, authoritarian regime, which has sentenced him to death for being the “lone dark obstacle in a world of souls transparent to one another.”

What sets Cincinnatus apart is precisely his poetic sensibility, which makes him

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unintelligible to others, whose thoroughly conventional language allows them to be “understood [by] each other at the first word.”

Faced with his imminent destruction, Cincinnatus composes, in his unique language, a text of himself, a text that might “surround” his “soul” with a “structure of words.” My most radical claim is that Cincinnatus is not just writing a text within the text, but that he is also the narrative voice of the whole work—*Invitation* as we are reading it. This interpretation draws a vital connection to Mandel’shtam’s novella in conceiving of the landscape of the fictive world as the anatomy, the perpetual here-and-now chronotope, of the narrator’s subjective psychic experience, as is the case in *The Egyptian Stamp*.

Most importantly, the ultimate contest between poetry and prose in both works is realized on the protagonist’s body. In line with the writers’ respective *metaphysiologies* of poetic articulation, whereby the subject’s anatomy is necessarily implicated (inscribed) in the act of textual composition, the protagonist’s writing of his inner life produces a unique textu(r)al artifact that is of his very flesh yet issues out to endure in the world of things. At the same time, however, the protagonist also finds himself *subject to* forces operating outside him, authoring him with their preferred devices and tropes: those forces act not to poeticize the protagonist but to narrate him into prose, with dramatically different consequences. The outside agents dictating the individual subject’s prosaic narrative are the social, political, and discursive worlds in which he is inextricably embedded. Both poetic and prosaic composition of the subject entail a pointed element of violence, of destruction even, since both necessarily alter the embodied protagonist, but these violences are fundamentally different in kind. In prose, the subject is sacrificed to the

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39 “Окружающие понимали друг друга с полуслова.” Ibid., 26 / 745.

40 “[Д]уша бы обстроилась словами.” Ibid., 205. / 805.
obligations of the state, in poetry, that subject inscribes himself into the poetic artifact, where he is preserved.

To describe the processes at work in Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s texts, the potentialities and problematics of writing the subject that they imagine, the authors found firm theoretical affirmation in the philosophy of Henri Bergson. With his theories of embodied subjectivity, the anatomy of the self and its possibilities in language, as well as the physiological implications of artistic activity, Bergson gives real substance to the writers’ otherwise seemingly occult claims. Although he is no longer a household name, in the early twentieth century Bergson was wildly popular throughout Europe, and his theories were no less enthusiastically engaged in Russia’s creative epicenters. His most influential contributions to artistic thought include his model of “lived” time (“duration”) as fluid, “heterogeneous, [and] continuous,” along with his concepts of “pure” and “ordinary” memory and perception, concepts most famously explored in Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*.\(^{41}\) Energized and validated by Bergson’s championing of subjective experience and his assurance that art is the means to accessing Truth, all the major schools of Russian “modernist” aesthetic thought from those early decades—Acmeism, Symbolism, Futurism, Formalism—owed an intellectual debt to the Nobel Prize winning philosopher (whose 1927 Nobel was, it bears noting, awarded in the field of Literature).\(^{42}\)

Duration and the ambiguous processes of memory and perception are, as numerous valuable studies have demonstrated, integral to Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s aesthetics, as

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42 Bergson was honored for his theories that, in the prize committee’s words, “released a creative impulse of inestimable value”; though it was equally the literary merit of his philosophical works that earned him the Prize. The Nobel presentation speech characterizes Bergson’s “doctrine” as “a poem of striking grandeur” and concludes by declaring that, “as a a stylist and as a poet, he yields place to none of his contemporaries.” Horst Frenz, ed. *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1969), 245.
they were for many contemporary literary experimenters. The peculiarities of these phenomena also prove essential to the present study. But I will further show that Mandel’shtam and Nabokov were particularly sensitive to dimensions of Bergson’s formulae that have received significantly less critical attention, at least from literary scholars. Namely, I will pay close attention to Bergson’s model of selfhood, which he describes as a “multiple unity” of diverse but cohesive selves. I will also return emphasis to what, for Bergson, is an elemental fact: the fact of the human body. Bergson insists that all of our being is always and only embodied being. The interior life, the psyche, is necessarily conditioned by its being interior, by its nature as a physically and, more importantly, corporeally housed entity that exists among other objects and bodies that are not itself. To write oneself, then, is to write the story of one’s body, the story of the impressions made upon one’s embodied subjectivity by the material objects that one encounters.

Crucially, the aspects of Bergson’s thought reflected most vividly in Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s work—aspects that can be distilled to Bergson’s profound materialism—are not tangential themes of his philosophy. Rather, they are the foundational conceits that condition almost all of his propositions. They are, in important ways, also the aspects that make Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s engagement with Bergson unique from that of other Russian modernisms. While Symbolists and Formalists alike appealed to Bergson’s empowering vision of

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aesthetic activity, none took as seriously—as literally—as Mandel’shtam and Nabokov the truly physical and corporeal implications, treating them instead rather more abstractly. What Bergson provided Mandel’shtam and Nabokov was a *mechanics* for the creative act as they had intuited it.

Mandel’shtam and Nabokov unequivocally acknowledged the profound influence of Bergson’s philosophy on their thinking. Already in 1910, Mandel’shtam knew and admired Bergson’s work, to which he may have been exposed during his studies in Paris. In his *Petersburg Winters* (*Peterburgskie zimy*, 1928), Georgii Ivanov shares a telling anecdote about Mandel’shtam returning from his time abroad. The poet had lost his only suitcase en route, a suitcase in which, “besides a toothbrush and [a volume of] Bergson, there was a tattered notebook of poems. The only real loss, though, was the toothbrush—both his poems and Bergson he knew by heart.”

Ten years later, Mandel’shtam was still thinking with the French philosopher. One of the most valuable source materials for this study, Mandel’shtam’s seminal theoretical tract “On the Nature of the Word” (“O prirode slova,” 1922), in which he articulates most fully his concept of “philology,” opens with a explicit and extended reference to Bergson as a theoretical precedent for his argument about the possibility of poetic language to *physically* harmonize the poetic subject with the phenomena of the external world.

Nabokov placed the philosopher in rare company with Mandel’shtam, since Bergson was one of the few other figures for whose work the author admitted unreserved affection. In a 1964 interview, for instance, Nabokov states that Bergson, whom he read enthusiastically “between the ages of 20 and 40” remained among the “top favorites” who for him had not “lost the glamour

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44 Georgii Ivanov, *Peterburgskie zimy* (Parizh: La Source (Rodnik), 1928), 108. I am indebted for this biographical gem to Fink, *Bergson and Russian Modernism*, 64.
and thrill they held” decades earlier.\textsuperscript{45} By no coincidence, \textit{Invitation to a Beheading} was composed in the heat of that infatuation, when the author was thirty-five.\textsuperscript{46}

It is thus Bergson, along with his intellectual heirs, who explain the curious workings of Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s elusive pieces of poetic prose in particular, as well as the salient shared tendencies of their authors’ larger aesthetic projects. The artistic practice that emerges motivates my framing of this study as an analysis of self-writing. It is little concerned with the writers’ respective “autobiographies.” The following pages account for a mode of literary expression that necessarily encrypts the private anatomy of the self, organically inscribing it in the resulting textual product. Moreover, that mode only comes into full relief when compared to the method of narration against which it defines itself, a method that imposes on the subject not only the thoroughly objectifying, abstracting, and conventionalizing gaze of the other but also the abstracting and conventionalizing form of prose.

Since Bergson’s thought provides an essential vocabulary with which to discuss the two artists, Chapter I reviews his pertinent theories of embodied subjectivity, the nature of the self and the problems of its presence in language, as well as the metaphysical implications of art. The same chapter also follows the elaborations of Bergson’s essential premises by the poststructuralists Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida.\textsuperscript{47} These literary and social theorists not only draw Bergson’s proposals more directly into the study of verbal art, their

\textsuperscript{45} Nabokov, \textit{Strong Opinions}, 43.

\textsuperscript{46} The author claimed to have written the novel “in one fortnight of wonderful excitement and sustained inspiration,” in the summer of 1934. See Nabokov, \textit{Strong Opinions}, 68; Brian Boyd, \textit{Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 408.

emphasized concern for the relationships between language and power allow for a fuller accounting of what takes place in Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s works, particularly in terms of those works’ politics. Foucault shows how language serves as an integral technology of a power that seeks to control and discipline individual subjects and their bodies. Barthes, focusing on the other side of this confrontation, explores how the poet resists the pressures of prosaic power by composing a text of his “hidden, secret flesh.” Derrida confirms the texture of the poetic text: he argues against Plato’s promotion of the spoken word as the medium of truth to insist that real presence, and thus the authentic self, is perforce inscribed in writing. Thus in The Egyptian Stamp and Invitation to a Beheading the textual artifact produced is a written one, a performance of John Kenneth MacKay’s definition of inscription as “a literary norm and [a] ritual and quite physical practice,” a practice that is realized in actual material objects: “specifically, sepulchral, and other commemorative kinds of place-marking, such as burial markers along the road, votive sites, memorial carvings.”

Chapters II and III treat first Mandel’shtam, then Nabokov, and their creative texts. The structures of these two chapters are identical: I deeply examine each writer’s aesthetics and pertinent personal philosophies to demonstrate the distinct ways he internalized, interpreted, and expressed the theories described in Chapter I. I then turn to the creative texts to analyze closely how they realize the personal aesthetic vision.

As much as Chapters II and III bring together the aesthetic visions of the two writers, they likewise reveal important distinctions. I conclude by examining more closely some of these

48 Barthes, Writing Degree Zero, 11.
differences, raising the questions that they provoke. For instance, Mandel’shtam and Nabokov have contrasting conceptions of just what composes the self and consequently, contrasting views of the poet’s role: while Mandel’shtam no doubt adheres to Bergson’s model of the self’s anatomy, he understands the identity to be a reservoir of poetic culture. His model of the poet’s sacrifice, then, resembles Christ’s martyrdom for mankind, whereas Nabokov’s rhetoric of fierce individualism holds that it is his singular, extra-cultural identity that will endure. I hope that in identifying such points of divergence I might open new areas of inquiry that will complement or, equally, problematize the contentions of this modest study, but that, in either event, will invite us to continue discussing these two artists in the same space.
—CHAPTER I: BODY-LANGUAGE—
Bergson and his Heirs on the Power of Self-Writing

But I never looked like that! —How do you know? What is the “you” you might or might not look like? Where do you find it—by which morphological or expressive calibration? Where is your authentic body? You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image: you never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens (I am interested in seeing my eyes only when they look at you): even and especially for your own body, you are condemned to the repertoire of its images.

—Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*

In the terms of this chapter, which discusses the theoretical framework for the mode of self-writing imagined in *The Egyptian Stamp* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, I will use Plato’s *Phaedo* (c. 360 BCE) and *Phaedrus* (c. 370 BCE) as productive preliminary intertexts. The basic subtext of both works is the commandment to “know thyself,” a philosophical aim which Plato maintains is the highest moral good. These two particular dialogues introduce important statements on the nature of the self and how that self should be articulated in language. These points resonate in important ways with Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s creative works, and with the Bergsonian theories underpinning them. The *Phaedo*’s recounting Socrates’ state-enforced suicide meditates on the immortality of the immaterial soul, and the *Phaedrus*’ discussion of rhetoric examines the best means to express true self-presence. To make use of Plato’s texts (and to initiate what will become a vital spatial metaphor), we must steal into them, approaching them as if from the outside.

Derrida’s analysis of the *Phaedrus* most effectively illuminates the important themes that Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s texts actively engage. First, Derrida advocates writing over speaking. In “Plato’s Pharmacy,” he exposes the philosophical tradition’s phonocentrism, its privileging of speech over writing, which the the *Phaedrus* had made normative. The true,
Plato’s metaphysics declares, is an *internal* quality, and it is the spoken word that allows it to be expressed most immediately, issuing as it does straight from the mouth of the speaker, whereas writing externalizes meaning and thus makes it vulnerable to manipulation and error. Derrida, by contrast, maintains that writing more closely reflects truth precisely because it externalizes, materializes, and stabilizes the utterance.

Next, Derrida’s particular point of entry into Plato’s dialogue, by way of a curious ambiguity of the term *pharmakon*, invites Plato’s texts and his “pharmacy” to engage even more compellingly with *The Egyptian Stamp* and *Invitation to a Beheading*. In Plato’s Greek, when Theuth offers writing to Pharaoh, he presents it as a *pharmakon*, or “remedy,” for the ailing memory. Pharaoh summarily rejects writing as a “poison,” which in Greek happens to be the same word, *pharmakon*. Derrida’s deconstruction pivots on the paradoxical ambivalence of this key term, an ambivalence that allows him to declare that writing is *both* a disease (but only to the speech that it dethrones) and the remedy that stabilizes self-presence. Plato’s explicitly medicinal, physiological lexicon thus complements the gravity of Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s texts, where the *pharmakon*-writing’s effects are literalized on Parnok’s and Cincinnatus’ bodies.

Derrida’s subsequent discussion of the ritual of the “scapegoat,” or *pharmakos*, then suggests the specter of a deeper social and political context, one that offers an ideal template for the basic plots of both Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s creative texts. In the ancient Greek ritual of the “scapegoat,” a community confronting a period of crisis, such as plague or famine, would choose a citizen to be sacrificed so that the calamity might be brought to an end. Here the spatial metaphor of *inside* versus *outside* reemerges, since Plato’s initial figuration of writing as
pharmakon demonizes writing precisely because it perverts inner presence. “If writing [. . .] produces the opposite effect from what is expected,” argues Derrida, “if the pharmakon is pernicious, it is so because it doesn’t come from around here. It comes from afar, it is external or alien: to the living, which is the right-here of the inside, to logos as the zōon it claims to assist or relieve.”¹ Theuth himself, “a demigod speaking to the king of gods,” embodies this outsidedness: Theuth is an “orphan” and a “menace.” Significantly, the scapegoat was always a social pariah—a criminal, someone destitute, or someone physically deformed. The victim whose blood cures the broader community is thus himself an individual member of that community yet always almost outside it. Together, Plato’s and Derrida’s texts set up the fundamental themes and questions explored in The Egyptian Stamp and Invitation to a Beheading: inner presence versus external appearance, “speech” versus writing, the “criminal” perishing at the hands of the state versus the distrusted orphan who ends up redeeming the community. In both Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s texts, the protagonists are cast as scapegoats who seek to articulate their inner lives in a form that will endure beyond the immanent destruction of their flesh.

At first glance, both Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s texts seem to invite thoroughly Platonic readings. Invitation to a Beheading, in particular, knowingly alludes to Plato’s works and, indeed, a popular interpretation of the novel relies on its apparent sympathies with Platonic

idealism. In that reading, the protagonist, Cincinnatus C., appears to be executed, while his soul is delivered to a benign realm of eternal beauty. More generally, despite Nabokov’s repeated efforts to reject the idea of any sort of Platonic influence, scholars frequently cite Plato’s indelible imprint on Nabokov’s “otherworldly” metaphysics. Similarly, Mandel’shtam’s infatuation with ancient Greek culture, its worldview and its aesthetics, resonates as a constant thematic refrain throughout his works, including sentiments that echo Platonic metaphysics.

Like Derrida’s reading of Plato, though, The Egyptian Stamp and Invitation to a Beheading engage with Plato polemically. Those polemics begin with the basic conceit of Platonic thought: the dualism of mind and body. While essential elements of Plato’s and other classical philosophy remained relevant, the cultural and political realities in which Mandel’shtam and Nabokov lived called for novel ontological perspectives. Perhaps most pressing, philosophy had to respond to the insistent materialism that informed the contemporary experience of being in the world, particularly as that materialism variously interpreted and also authored the embodied human subject. The late Renaissance and Enlightenment exposed and catalogued the anatomy; industrialization pitted the body against man-made machines; the body count of the first Great War reified the flesh in a horrifyingly new way, as military materiel. But

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2 Nabokov’s novel is almost conspicuously punctuated with references to the Apology, the Crito, and the Phaedo, the trilogy which recounts Socrates’ trial, incarceration, and execution. The resemblances have been ably catalogued by Alexander Moudrov, who argues that Nabokov’s novel playfully lampoons Plato and his philosophy while betraying a significant anxiety of influence. And while Alfred Appel, Jr., in a 1966 interview suggested to Nabokov that his 1962 novel “Pale Fire appears to some readers to be in part a gloss of Plato’s myth of the cave,” Moudrov sees Invitation as playing the same role. “The atmosphere of the novel clearly evokes Plato’s famous Allegory of the Cave,” observes Moudrov, “a vision of everyday reality as a shadowy realm whose inhabitants are barely aware of the artificiality of their existence. Only a few of them dream of the other, perfectly original world, let alone actually reach it. Those who do escape, if only in their imagination, are persecuted by their fellow cavemen, who do not share their appreciation for what is real” (62). Nabokov’s reply to Appel’s inquiry was a characteristic denial: “I am not particularly fond of of Plato […] I do not think that this cave business has anything to do with my Shade and Shadows.” See Alexander Moudrov, “Nabokov’s Invitation to Plato’s Beheading,” in The Goalkeeper: The Nabokov Almanac, ed. Yuri Leving, 60-73 (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010); Nabokov, Strong Opinions, 69-70.

it was under the banner of Marxist ideology in Soviet Russia that the epistemological doctrine of
materialism was imposed as official ideology, with profound implications. The Soviet project in
basic ways mechanized the body itself by reducing it to an instrument in the larger apparatus of
material production. Likewise, it endeavored to reshape and then mass-produce, on the template
of the New Soviet Man, the embodied human subject, complete with a thoroughly
deindividuated, collective identity.

In the face of such pressures as these, which often suggested the expendability of the
human body to the service of abstract ideological aims, a Platonic dualism of psyche and soma
seemed, to many, more valid than ever. For others, however, the same conditions only reinforced
the essential fact of embodiment. Thus the great writer of the Soviet gulag, Varlam Shalamov,
learned from his fifteen years of hard labor in Siberia that the condition of the “spirit” is utterly
contingent on that of the flesh, since “the frost, the same frost that turned spittle into ice midair,
reached as well the human soul. If bones could freeze, then the brain could also freeze through
and be dulled; the soul as well could freeze through.” All the lofty capacities of the soul, he
writes elsewhere, “all human sentiments—love, friendship, jealousy, fellow-feeling, charity,

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4 My gloss here no doubt relies on radical simplifications of some complex philosophical concerns and terminology. I justify this gesture by affirming that mine is not a philosophical analysis per se; I find further validation in the knowledge that it is precisely the layman, not the philosopher, who shapes the world. P. T. Grier describes how Lenin relied on such philosophical simplification: “In general Lenin tended to conflate the epistemological doctrine of realism with the metaphysical doctrine of materialism. Materialism as a metaphysical doctrine would normally consist of a specific definition of ‘matter’ plus the claim that nothing but matter is ultimately real. However, by ‘materialism’ Lenin often meant only the denial of the mind-dependence of external objects, plus the claim that they really possess the properties they appear to have, i.e. the epistemological doctrine of realism.” P. T. Grier, Marxist Ethical Theory in the Soviet Union (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer Science and Business Media, 2012), 56.

desire for renown, honesty—fell away along with the meat [miaso] that we lost during the periods of prolonged starvation.”

Making no effort to cast Mandel’shtam and Nabokov as staunch materialists, for indeed they had their own metaphysics of the soul, I approach them as artists who, in contrast to Plato, worshipped first and foremost the sensuous realm of the flesh, their invariable (if not impending) departure from which could not be fully compensated for by the promise of immaterial bliss. Consequently, art itself became the only means to reconcile their fixation to their fate. Generative and enduring, a work of creation rivaling only that of the Almighty, art—and more specifically, physical writing—allows, in Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s views, the complex life of the soul to materialize into the world of things. This chapter aims to describe how Mandel’shtam and Nabokov understood this process. Since The Egyptian Stamp and Invitation to a Beheading also pit this mode of poetic self-writing against the destructive method of a political power that authors a subject into prose narrative, my discussion will provide a theoretical foundation for those sentiments and the conditions that inspired them.

While many thinkers influenced Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s personal ideologies, Henri Bergson in particular helps account for the specific ways that they made sense of their condition vis-à-vis Platonic dualism; Bergson is also where they found philosophical affirmation for what I term their similar metaphysiologies of art, that is, a metaphysics that centralizes, as Bergson does, the subject’s necessary condition of corporeal embeddedness. Bergson’s philosophical project was, in essential ways, dedicated to debunking what he saw as the fallacy

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7 I am borrowing here language of Nabokov, when he states that “the creative writer must study carefully the works of his rivals, including the Almighty.” Nabokov, Strong Opinions, 32.
of dualist idealism—a Platonic “fallacy” that nevertheless became philosophical orthodoxy with its restatement by Descartes in the seventeenth century.\(^8\) Where Plato had posited the fundamental discreteness of mind and body—and, crucially, ascribed ontological and valuative primacy to the former as the sole seat of the self—Bergson crafts a model of the self and subjectivity as inextricable from the fact of their embodiment. We are, in Bergson’s view, immanently psycho-somatic beings.

Within this same effort to phenomenalize the mind, however, Bergson introduces a different line of division, a line marking the distinction between *private* inner experience and *public* presentation or appearance, between the individual as *subject* and as *object*, between *intuition* and *intellect*. These two dimensions of experience, or two modalities of being in the world, have their own often radically dissimilar realities that we inhabit simultaneously. More accurately, Bergson claims, there is one true and authentic reality, that of the intuitive inner life, which is edited and simplified by the practical and logical outer life of the intellect so as to be more readily comprehended and navigated. The latter, “virtual” reality (what Nabokov will derisively term “average reality”) is necessitated by our condition as social beings. Bergson describes the circumstances most plainly in his *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900).

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\(^8\) In the Introduction to his seminal text *Matter and Memory* (1896; Introduction penned in 1910), Bergson makes clear that he is responding to Descartes. Indeed, as Gary Hatfield states in his detailed gloss on Descartes’ thought, the seventeenth-century philosopher “was no Platonist,” although his model of dualism, as laid out in his *Meditations* (1641), “agrees with the Platonic tradition in philosophy, which denigrated sensory knowledge and held that the things known by the intellect have a higher reality than the objects of the senses.” Sarah Broadie has distilled the distinctions between Plato and Descartes to one “main difference,” namely “Plato’s acceptance and Descartes’ rejection of the assumption that the soul (= intellect) is identical with what animates the body.” I do not think these nuances in any way undermine my basic thesis. See Gary Hatfield, “René Descartes,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (website), last modified January 16, 2014, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes/; Sarah Broadie, “Soul and Body in Plato and Descartes,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 101 (2001): 295-308.
Man must live in society, and consequently submit to rules. And what interest advises, reason commands: duty calls, and we have to obey the summons. Under this dual influence has perforce been formed an outward layer of feelings and ideas which make for permanence, aim at becoming common to all men, and cover, when they are not strong enough to extinguish it, the inner fire of individual passions. The slow progress of mankind in the direction of an increasingly peaceful social life has gradually consolidated this layer, just as the life of our planet itself has been one long effort to cover over with a cool and solid crust the fiery mass of seething metals.  

A solid, progressive, and intelligible outer layer, common to all men, forged out of obedience to convention, yet concealing a mobile and formless substance of ceaseless becoming: such are the basic features that describe the two realities that we occupy. Those features are communicated into the similarly bivalent forms of the self: the psyche and the soma. The same attributes further translate into the linguistic forms available to us to know and describe the world. My work below will thus be dedicated to unpacking in greater detail the various qualities of these modalities of embodied subjectivity—intuitive inner life and apparent, “observed” reality—in their diverse dimensions.

—My Body, My Self: Embodiment and Subjectivity in Bergson—

Bergson’s ontological vision both anticipates elements of the Big Bang theory and resonates with Plato’s theory of Forms. He imagines all phenomena as issuing from a common and essential source that interlinks all matter, and whose signature they retain. Hence in Creative Evolution (1907), he states that no phenomenon exists in perfect isolation, individuality, and finitude. He contends that, “if there is a finality in the world of life, it includes the whole of life in a single indivisible embrace,” and “in this sense each individual may be said to remain united with the

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totality [. . .] by invisible bonds.”⁠¹⁰ Further, in their true states all objects are, like the expanding and changing universe itself, in a continual state of becoming. “Matter,” elaborates Bergson in *Matter and Memory* (1896), is essentially a series of “vibrations,” “all linked together in uninterrupted continuity, all bound up with each other [. . .] like shivers through an immense body.”⁠¹¹ Complementing its spatial continuity, the metabody of all phenomena resides in a distinct atemporality, wherein “no moments [. . .] are identical or external to one another, being essentially heterogeneous, continuous, and with no analogy to number.”⁠¹² This unique chronotope—at once atemporal and omnispatial—is the condition Bergson calls “duration” (*la durée*). If we always perceive things as they really are, we would see them both in their individual peculiarities as mobile and changing objects and as part of a galaxy of organically related phenomena. Mandel’shtam parsed this element of Bergson’s philosophy; in the poet’s words, we would see each unique object also as an “intricate complex of phenomena, a connection, a ‘system.’”⁠¹³

Such is the *true* state of the phenomena amongst which we live: infinitely particular yet immanently united. In our *intuitive* capacities we are capable of apprehending the world in its constant continuity and flux, for intuition “is molded on the very form of life, [it] proceeds, so to speak, organically,” and recognizes the true state of reality. But, for the most part, “our consciousness only attains to certain parts and to certain aspects” of the intricate complex.⁠¹⁴ As social, and thus *intellectual*, beings, we have been compelled, for purposes of pure pragmatism, 

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to edit reality that we might make sense of and use it more readily. “The intellect is characterized by a natural inability to comprehend life,” Bergson states flatly, and so it categorizes and codes phenomena to be readily legible.\(^{15}\) Bergson captures our condition in his famous veil metaphor from *Laughter*:

> Between nature and ourselves, nay, between ourselves and our own consciousness a veil is interposed. Life implies the acceptance only of the *utilitarian* side of things, […] all other impressions must be dimmed or else reach us vague and blurred [while] the *individuality* of things or of beings escapes us […] In short, we do not see the actual things themselves; in most cases we confine ourselves to reading the labels affixed to them.\(^{16}\)

Corresponding to Bergson’s two modes of cognition—intellect and intuition—are the two levels, the two *media*, by which we perceive phenomena. The *image* is the most immediate (unmediated). An image is the material projection of an object that reflects that object’s true, durational nature. A *representation*, by contrast, is an image that has been “intellectualized,” that is, put through a process of cognitive analysis, evaluated for its utilitarian profit and thus ascribed meaning. Images and representations interact with and are perceived by two dimensions of body, one visible, tangible, and practical, the other primarily receptive to stimuli and linked with the intuition.

The most obvious dimension of the body is the anterior, visible body.\(^{17}\) Bergson consistently refers to it as a surface of action and interaction: the dimension of the body that

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\(^{17}\) A host of related terms, all interchangeable, emphasize different nuances of this dimension of the body: in addition to anterior and visible body, I find useful surface body, object-body, social and socialized body. What I hope to communicate is that this is the body as it exists as a public commodity in average reality, where it is conditioned by and participates in the practices of pragmatic, utilitarian perception.
embedded in average reality, where it acts upon and is acted upon by other objects and bodies. Capable only of perceiving the censored representations of other objects, the surface body is the sensory instrument of the intellect and the very seat of habit. Bergson thus refers to “habitual” perception and memory as “embodied” perception and memory, since their responses are as if trained into the flesh. Less intriguing, perhaps, than its other, intuitive dimension, this surface body carries implications that are equally significant.

As the locus of interaction, the visible, surface dimension of the body incorporates one into society; it is thus also a social body. To fully function, the social body has key properties: since it must be legible to others, that is, read and interpreted by others, the surface, social body is further a “lexical” body. It is furthermore conditioned and shaped by external forces, as Bergson most clearly explains in The Two Sources of Morality and Religion. The same societal laws that dictate the intellect’s pragmatic function are also expressed as a series of “often subconscious pressures demanding the compliance of individual members” through discipline of their bodies. Bergson states that such pressure comes in the form of habits, “the specific habits of obedience to the countless particular requirements of social life.” Insidiously powerful, these habits “would have a force comparable to that of instinct in respect of both intensity and regularity” in the ways they train the body through their “totality of obligation.”

Ultimately governed by the same practical public impulse to “resemblances” and homogeneity, society’s habits do not just train a normativized and compliant body, but subsume

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21 Ibid., 17.
the singular body into a collective corpus, a structure resembling a colony of ants. The social-
ized body then mimics the natural networks connecting all phenomena and is “comparable” “to
an organism whose cells, united by imperceptible links, fall into their respective places in a
highly developed hierarchy.”22 The similarity, however, is only an “imitation,” an “artificial”
“guise” that feigns the real thing: “An organism subjected to inexorable laws is one thing” but, in
the socialized colony, manufactured obligation “plays the same role as necessity in the works of
nature.”23

According to Bergson’s model, the surface body’s counterpart is not strictly the meat and
bones of the physical organism; rather, “my body,” the subject-body, is more aptly described as
the physical and psychic sensorium. The subject-body is primarily receptive—it is, in Jeffrey Jay
Gaines’ apt description, the aspect of the body that is “seeing but not seen, touching but not
touched.”24 In Bergson’s already loaded words, my body is “a privileged image, perceived in its
depths and no longer only on the surface.”25 My body is connected to the tissue of the universal
metabody through which all the matter of the universe vibrates; it is the intuitive dimension of
my material self that makes immediate contact with the world and, as such, is attuned to the
harmonious and durational nature of things. In Bergson’s words from Matter and Memory,

This special image which persists in the midst of the others, and which I call my body,
constitutes at every moment, as we have said, a section of the universal becoming. It is
then the place of passage of the movements received and thrown back, a hyphen, a

22 Ibid., 1.
23 Bergson, Two Sources, 1.
24 Gaines, “The Habitual Body-Subject,” 211.
25 Bergson, Matter and Memory, 64.
The contact with objects of which my body is capable Bergson terms “pure perception,” which he describes as a “virginal” physical encounter, one that bypasses and brackets the surface body and is uninfluenced by memory and the relativizing processes of the intellect.

My body is further significant as the material dimension of one’s real identity, the “particular image which I adopt as the center of my universe and the physical basis for my personality.” As one object among the galaxies of other phenomena, the embodied human subject can also be understood as an iteration, a fractal unit mirroring the natural condition of all other objects. To appreciate the “essential character of organization” of the “conscious being,” Bergson says we ought to compare it “to the totality of the material universe [. . .] Like the universe as a whole, [the] conscious being [. . .] is a thing which endures. Its past, in its entirety, is prolonged in its present, and abides there, actual and acting.”

In his description of the human psyche—its subjectivity and the very anatomy and chronotope of the self—Bergson most thoroughly accounts for the peculiar internal state of all phenomena; that is, the state of duration.

In Bergson’s blueprint of psycho-somatic being, the anatomy of the human psyche also reflects his fundamental model that envisions a molten inner core of all objects. Bergson consequently proposes a radical model of subjectivity and identity, one that upends received

26 Bergson, Matter and Memory, 196. These intuitive capacities of my body are exactly those made famous in the celebrated “madeleine moment” of Marcel Proust’s A la recherche du temps perdu (1913-1927). In that enchanting scene, the mature narrator, after tasting a bit of madeleine, dipped lemon tea—a treat familiar to him from childhood years but long since untasted—experiences a memory of his beloved childhood residence. The memory is so vivid that it as if materializes before his eyes. He derives from the sensory experience the understanding that the most authentic awareness of the world and of ourselves occurs precisely outside of habit and intellect, since “the past is hidden outside the realm of our intelligence and beyond its reach, in some material object (in the sensation that this material object would give us) which we do not suspect.” Marcel Proust, Swann’s Way, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Penguin, 2004), 44-45.

27 Bergson, Matter and Memory, 64.

28 Bergson, Creative Evolution, 15.
notions of what literary scholar Dennis Brown terms the “integral self”—a monolithic, continuous, and as if pre-formed self, confidence in which condition had been the “normative assumption of cultural discourse up until the Modernist movement.” By contrast, Bergson proposes the self as a “multiple unity.” This model imagines one’s personality to be a harmony of sometimes discrepant attitudes, impulses, and values. More plainly, it contends that the self is in fact a symphony of selves.

What Bergson means by this difficult formula is, first, that the self is also in an ongoing process of becoming, a condition of the simple fact that “consciousness cannot go through the same state twice. The circumstances may still be the same, but they will act no longer on the same person, since they find him at a new moment in his history. Our personality, which is being built up each instant with its accumulated experience, changes without ceasing.” In short, while one’s knowledge of oneself as consistent subject is sustained, one also has ongoing contact and interaction with one’s “former states,” former personalities, as one’s past constantly insinuates itself into the present—a process that is nothing other than the action of memory.

Duration is the cohering force for the disparate personalities and thus explains the self’s peculiar unity. For while the self’s former states are recognized as such, they are not relegated to a discrete past. Instead, those former states hover around the current consciousness, ever reminding it of their presence—reminding it, moreover, that they have in fact shaped it. Bergson explains in *Time and Free Will* (1889):

> There are [...] two possible conceptions of time, the one free from all alloy, the other surreptitiously bringing in the idea of space. Pure duration is the form which the

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30 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 212.
succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states [. . .] It need not [. . .] forget its former states: it is enough that, in recalling these states, it does not set them alongside another, but forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another.31

Put simply, the same self can be appreciably dissimilar through time (conventional, linear, and discrete time); but those distinct iterations of the self all still belong equally to and operate within the personality at every moment. Those multiple selves, even when apparently at variance with one another, in fact constitute the present and apparently uniform (as opposed to **unified**) personality.

Bergson’s qualification of the self’s uniformity as **apparent** is important. As an object in the social world, the subject manifests one explicit and fundamental layering of the self, as that subject must display to the world a self that projects a state of regularity and comprehensibility—it must “submit” to the “rules” that govern virtual, surface reality. Manifesting a psychic analogue of the social body, the self presents a “frozen surface” that conceals its true condition. This surface self we might more simply think of as a **performed** personality, since our social condition makes it so that “the greater part of the time we live outside ourselves, hardly perceiving anything of ourselves but our own ghost, a colorless shadow.” As we thus “live for the external world rather than for ourselves, we speak rather than think, we ‘are acted’ rather than act ourselves.”32 Not false or fabricated, the surface self is necessarily edited and modified for communication with others; it is shaped by the obligations of the social world. While not at odds with the more diversified, true self, the surface personality cannot be a fully authentic reflection of it.

31 Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, 100.
32 Ibid., 231.
Bergson was not alone in suggesting a multiple self, but his is distinct from other modernist models. Unlike Freud, for instance, Bergson insists not only on the self’s awareness of its own complex makeup and activity, but on the retention of a pervading and cohering sense of self that reconciles and organizes the apparent chaos. The unity that Bergson reasserts into his multiplicity thus makes his theories stand out from another important modernist “selfhood” (and the subject of Dennis Brown’s book), “which is pluralist, heterogeneous and discontinuous”—a self not fully knowable to itself.33 We can fully know ourselves, insists Bergson, though most of the time we are kept at arm’s length from that knowledge, just as we are generally kept from full knowledge of other objects. Art alone allows us to regain knowledge both of ourselves and of the objects amongst which we live.

—“Communion with Things and with Ourselves”: Bergson and the Possibilities of Art—

“Dense and opaque for the common herd,” writes Bergson in Laughter, the veil that usually conceals from us the very nature of things can be penetrated. “For the artist and poet,” the same veil is “thin, almost transparent,” allowing him to eschew representation, to see beyond “the prejudices of form and color that come between ourselves and reality.” The artist is able to perceive the durational, multiform nature of himself and the objects of the world. His work, when effective, succeeds in communicating that access, “insinuat[ing] into our own perception” what he has already apprehended. The artist, in other words, aspires to “brush aside the utilitarian symbols, the conventional and socially accepted generalities [. . .] in order to bring us face to face with reality,” a reality otherwise only perceived by intuition and the faculties of my body.34

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33 Brown, The Modernist Self, 2.
34 Bergson, Laughter, 151, 156, 157.
The implications of this revelation in art are multiple and profound. The impact most immediate to this study’s concern with the body were picked up on by Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s contemporaries, the Russian Formalists, whose theory of artistic “defamiliarization” (ostrenie) is built largely on Bergson’s proposals. The principal Formalist theorist Viktor Shklovsky describes the pointedly sensuous effects of art by insisting that art’s very purpose is to cut through the “automatized” perception that normally “eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives” and to “to return sensation to our limbs, […] to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony.”

Shklovsky, in other words, suggests that the artist restores the subject to his physical sensorium, activates the capacities of my body. He does this by disrupting our habitual, practical, and representational modes of cognition, thus enabling us to perceive phenomena at the immediate level of pure image. Truly effective art rejects familiar tropes and pretensions at mimesis, since these only act upon and thus recapitulate habitual representations of objects. Rather, Bergson posits, art must “baffle” the mind so that it may perceive anew. The process is a challenging one. To have a virginal encounter with the objects of the world, “the mind has to do violence to itself, has to reverse the direction of the operation by which it habitually thinks, has perpetually to revise, or rather to recast, all its categories.”

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36 Bergson, Introduction to Metaphysics, 48. In the realm of visual art, the paintings of Paul Cézanne graphically demonstrate Bergson’s ideas. Derided in their time—which was, it should be noted, before Bergson—for their lack of verisimilitude, Cézanne’s works reflect the painter’s efforts to effectively unsee his subject—to allow his vision to deconstruct his representation of the world as it was informed by memory and habit. Neuroscientist Jonah Lehrer, in demonstrating that our minds do in fact preemptively construct our cognitive picture of the world with the anticipatory influence of memory and habit, has described Cézanne’s method for reorienting his gaze. The painter “would stare at his subject until it melted under his gaze, until the forms of the world had decayed.” By allowing his vision to shake its reflexive representations, Cézanne was able “to return to the start of sight,” to allow his optical sensorium “to become nothing but ‘a sensitive recording plate.’” Jonah Lehrer, Proust Was a Neuroscientist (New York: Mariner, 2007), 102.
Significantly, Bergson, with his profound materialism, takes his metaphysiology of the artistic act farther than the Formalists. Shklovsky may adopt Bergson’s rhetoric of “mak[ing] the stone feel stony,” but not as literally, as physically, as Bergson understood the artistic encounter with a given phenomenon. Art, in Bergson’s view, facilitates a very material contact with the aestheticized object, since what art produces is the very same image that radiates from the object itself. This is true in verbal art as much as in visual or plastic, since “the poet is he with whom feelings develop into images, and the images themselves into words which translate them while [. . .] in seeing these images pass before our eyes we in our turn experience the feeling.” If what the artist transfers is his pure perception, since “[pure] perception is precisely the point at which mind and matter meet,” the subject’s interface with those images necessarily manifests at a thoroughly physical, somatic level.

But, as Bergson reminds us, in our everyday, surface interaction with the world, we are veiled not only from objects: the “zone” we inhabit compels us to live “midway between things and ourselves, externally to things, externally also to ourselves.” Consequently, the same activity of art which baffles our sensorium disrupts our pragmatic cognition so that habit and memory cannot intercede, and we must rely on intuitive insight. Art, then, brings us “back into our own presence,” “back to our inner core,” which is nothing other than the tumultuous flux of durational subjective experience.

Bergson observes, then, that through art, we “enter into immediate communion with things and with ourselves.” Such sensual and psychic revelations are possible through “painting

40 Bergson, *Laughter*, 150.
or sculpture, poetry or music.” But Bergson gives pride of place to literature, and especially poetry, even though the very medium of language presents some of the most profound obstacles to effective art. The vocabulary of his theoretical descriptions signals his preoccupation with the particular, albeit problematic, role of language in the creation of genuine art: in ordinary perception we merely “read the labels affixed” to objects, while my body, intuitively attuned to the natural order, becomes part of the grammar of a universal utterance—the “hyphen” that unifies the embodied subject to the external world.

Because of the complexities Bergson identifies in language, and because they are the very issues that Mandel’shtam and Nabokov confront in their creative texts, I will examine at greater length the unique problematics and possibilities of verbal art. A preliminary discussion of Bergson’s valuations of different modes of language—specifically speech, prose, and poetry—will proceed to a demonstration of how certain of Bergson’s philosophical heirs elaborate on his fundamental observations, in ways that bring Bergsonian models into a sociolinguistic context more specific to Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s milieux. As they examine the relationships between language, writing, and Power, the ideas of postmodern literary and cultural theorists such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida help to more fully explicate the personal, material, and political implications of Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s literary activity.

—The Logic of Poetry: A Syntax for Subjective Experience—

How can one reproduce in language the tricky chronotope of the multifarious self that knows not the constructs of linear time and discreteness in space? What is the logic that makes this apparent

41 Ibid., 157.
discord a harmony? How can one communicate the complex relationships to external phenomena that captures their simultaneous singularity, mutual interconnectedness, and union with the subject himself? Such are the principal questions that Bergson, Mandel’shtam, and Nabokov attempt to answer. Before describing their solutions, however, it is essential to understand the verbal and literary forms that are insufficient to the task of self-articulation.

As established above, the basic component of all communication in general and of art in particular is, according to Bergson, the image, which he defines as the essential, material projection of all objects in the world. An image itself cannot be defined since in its raw form it is not a single, isolated entity; rather, the image-objects of the world mirror the multiform and durational condition of the self. Words conjure images, so the image is necessarily the matter that language manages; but this management can be realized in varied ways. Just as ordinary perception and the surface personality traffic only in representations (censored images), ordinary language—what Mandel’shtam, and I, will categorize simply as prose—does much the same. Prose, as it aims to quickly transmit a determined meaning, delimits the component words’ inherent potential for more nuanced image-making and thus only participates in distancing one from reality.

The fourth-century theologian Augustine’s account of language development reads remarkably like a page of Bergson: “For the rational part of us, [. . .] since it was joined by a sort of natural social bond with those with whom it had reason itself in common, and since one human could not be properly bonded to another if they could not talk to each other [. . .] [reason] saw that it needed to assign words (that is, sounds with signification) to things.”

agrees that language fills a practical social need in enabling us to identify objects and discuss them with one another. While Bergson describes language in much the same way, he provocatively contrasts it to more organic methods of communication:

If ants exchange signs, which seems probable, those signs are provided by the very *instinct* that makes the ants communicate with one another. On the contrary, our languages are the product of *custom*. Nothing in the vocabulary, or even in the syntax, comes from *nature*. But speech is natural, and unvarying signs, natural in origin, which are presumably used in a community of insects, exhibit what our language would have been, if nature in bestowing on us the faculty of speech had not added that function which, since it makes and uses tools, is inventive and called *intelligence*.43

If the intellect is the mode of cognition that deals only with the surface reality things, ordinary language, prose, is the communicative medium of that veiled dimension of experience. Going further, Bergson contends that prose not only operates in average reality but is one of its principal architects and guarantors, since a prosaic word “only takes note of the most ordinary function and commonplace aspects of the thing, intervenes between it and ourselves, and would conceal its form from our eyes.”44 In its basic social, communicative function, prose facilitates the swift transmission of information and ideas. It does this by delimiting the associative possibilities of the designated image-object so as to assign to it clear and definite meaning. In other words, prose is the language that “affixes labels” to phenomena and thus operates, as a principle, by the necessary impoverishment of images. Hisashi Fujita has provocatively characterized this tendency as a species of violence that Bergson sees in language, “a violence that cuts up reality arbitrarily with a view to the convenience of action.”45

43 Bergson, *Two Sources*, 18.
The impact of this violence is amplified as prosaic words pile up. Often the sheer abundance of words, especially qualifiers, promote certain semantic interconnections in order to refine and fix the images. Standardized grammatical and rhetorical constructions, normative tropes, and plain clichés, for example, have further reductive effects, as they automatize meaning and forestall any further associative engagement. The rigid formulae of prose further produce prose’s teleological trajectory and signature *momentum*, movements that are patently at odds with duration. Conforming to the intellectual constructs of linear time and space, as well as causality, prose moves relentlessly toward its utilitarian content, its promoted “meaning.” In a prose sentence, “from the very beginning we are reconstructing [its] meaning hypothetically; our mind darts forward in a certain general direction [. . .] as the sentence, unrolling, pushes our attention towards one meaning or another,” so that “the present is perceived in the future on which it treads, rather than apprehending in itself.”46 Compelling the reader to the general idea, prose further coerces one to hurry past the images, instead encountering them merely as “so many sign-posts that show me the way from time to time.”47

The tendency to attenuate the words' expressive possibilities is what defines any utterance as prosaic, though, according to Bergson, the impact is decidedly “more pronounced under the influence of speech.”48 Proceeding in real time and directed at an immediate listener or interlocutor who must rapidly absorb its message, speech thus relies more heavily on generalizations and commonplaces, set patterns and phrases, for ease of reception. Contemporary science, Bergson affirms, shows that the subject’s engagement with speech is, in fact, more


superficial still. “Experiments on the hearing of speech [. . .] completely confirm the fact that what we hear is only a part of the words pronounced,” as habit and memory automatically fill in the rest to anticipate meaning.49

Crucially, the violent impacts of prose are not limited to the image-objects the medium attempts to confine and restrain. The subject is himself implicated in the reductive procedure, since “we cannot compress the impulse of our whole psychical life as completely as we compress that of our speech.”50 As the simplified social face of the self, the surface personality is naturally “much better adapted” to prose because “consciousness prefers” prose’s readymade conventions. The trite phrase suits well the self’s “outer crust of clean-cut psychic states.”51

The patently prosaic structure and style of the traditional autobiography manifest the complementarity of prose and conventional notions of self, as the genre attempts to define and explain, if not an inherently integral self, then the subject’s developed and finalized personality. The ideology informing the conventional autobiography is grounded in a Classical concept of the self, understood as something fixed and stable, like a sculpture that has been etched into an indelible form over time. This vision of selfhood as a causal and teleological development demands, in other words, a narrative. Thus, just like its sibling the biographical novel, the traditional autobiography imposes on the subject a specific chronotope, one prefigured in the momentum of a prose sentence, as Andrew J. Nussbaum’s definition of the traditional biography makes clear.

In the traditional autobiography “self” is a progressive term. Through a cohesive, frequently chronological presentation of selected events an author attempts to develop a

49 Bergson, “Memory of the Present,” 206.
50 Ibid., 180.
51 Bergson, Time and Free Will, 167.
self that might reasonably be extended from the past to the writer’s present image of himself. The resulting text may exhibit [...] moments of crisis, the autobiographer’s own doubts about the viability of his task, but these episodes are crises within a plot. The autobiographical structure itself is never allowed to collapse. These writers assume that beginning with birth and leading into the present there exists a continuous “I”; writing a traditional autobiography involves recording that “I”’s development.52

“Progressive,” “cohesive,” “chronological,” “plot[ted],” “continuous,” “structure[d].” These are the characteristics of prose; moreover, these qualities decidedly do not belong to the subjective experience of self. As a consequence of the surface personality’s comfort in prose, however, consciousness “gradually loses sight of the fundamental self” in its natural condition of durational complexity.53

Bergson argues that language need not always function this way, the image-object and subjectivity need not be imprisoned in prose. He clearly outlines a different potential for language when insisting that “everyone may have observed the strange character a familiar word sometimes takes when we fix our attention on it. The word appears new, and really is so, for till then our consciousness had not made it a stopping place.”54 In short, Bergson identifies an opportunity to disrupt conventional and conventionalizing language, thereby allowing its components to function in more complex ways. This is another violence—one that counteracts prose’s butchering of reality—that Fujita identifies in Bergson’s formulae of language, the “violence that language undergoes, a violence that writers and thinkers practice on it in order to rediscover the reality that is thus distorted, a violence that takes the form of metaphors,

53 Bergson, Time and Free Will, 128.
54 Bergson, Mind-Energy, 180.
analogies, images, figures, in short, a new style.”\textsuperscript{55} Even more provocatively, Bergson terms all such disruptive linguistic techniques \textit{poetic}.

Poetic language exploits many devices to achieve its creatively disruptive ends. In formal verse poetry, the demands of meter and rhythm upset prosaic syntax and compel words into unexpected combinations; rhyme and other phonetic patterning likewise link otherwise unrelated words; metaphor can make jarring combinations of words, images, and concepts that cast all equally into new light. Loosed from the arbitrary bondage of definition and denotation, words serve as conduits to the much richer and more expansive images that the words themselves cannot signify, but that they can signal. Might this not be an effective definition of that elusive phenomenon “poetry”: a linguistic form composed of a hyper-abundance of raw imagery, that is, imagery absent the qualifying words and rigid syntax that prose uses to stabilize images and harness them to a determined semiotic and semantic agenda, and toward the construction of a \textit{didactic product}? Bergson certainly thought so, since for him the ideal artistic text is made up of “many diverse images, borrowed from very different orders of things,” and placed in immediate proximity to one another.\textsuperscript{56}

For Bergson, such is the privilege of poetic language that other artistic media cannot necessarily realize: its capacity to reproduce the activity of duration. Unlike the image-objects of a painting, for instance, the image-objects of a poetic utterance are not static. An image in the first line gets subtly echoed, in slightly altered form, in the fourth, and again in the tenth. Each successive image is informed by those that precede it, while it also reaches back to retrospectively modify those antecedents. Every iteration of an image at once clarifies the larger

\textsuperscript{55} Fujita, “Anarchy and Analogy,” 129.

\textsuperscript{56} Bergson, \textit{An Introduction to Metaphysics}, 14.
image-system and expands the associative possibilities of its constituent elements, exposing more of the organic connections that unify the “intricate complex” of phenomena. The poetic utterance builds meaning in its fluid mobility and its constant swelling.

It is by this return to an abundance of open and unfixed images that the poet is able to perform the process outlined above, whereby, in art, the subject returns to full apprehension of his true psychic state in duration. “By the convergence of their action,” the disparate images of a poetic text demand “from the mind the same kind of attention, [. . .] the same degree of tension” that characterizes subjective experience, to the effect that the images’ interplay “direct[s] consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to be seized” and the mind “appear[s] to itself as it really is.”\

Precisely by eschewing the effort toward exhaustive and mimetic description typified in ordinary prose, poetic language performs its own alternative manner of mimesis, is fully authentic in a more profound way. “[B]y rhythmical arrangement of words, which thus become organized and animated with a life of their own, [poets] tell us—or rather suggest—things that speech was not calculated to express.”\

What poets express is precisely the “rhythms of life and breath that are closer to man than his inmost feelings,” “the living law” that is “our inner life’s unbroken melody.”

The activity of poetic language, Bergson promises, likewise restores the subject to his physical sensorium. Carsten Strathausen has described perfectly the effect of the poet’s peculiar language by relocating Bergson’s grammatical metaphor for my body onto the artist:

The poet’s very existence is a kind of language spoken by the things themselves in which he functions as a mere punctuation sign—the hyphen—that literally embodies meaning.

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57 Ibid, 14.
58 Bergson, Laughter, 156.
59 Ibid., 150.
The words of the poet express a message whose meaning cannot be understood rationally, but must be experienced as a part of one’s own body.60

The perception “insinuated” through poetic language bypasses both the intellect and the habit-conditioned surface of the anterior body to facilitate a virginal encounter with the poeticized object, now perceived in both its inherent peculiarity and organic interconnectedness.

In terms of self-authorship, then, the semantic networking of poetry provides a productive, private alternative to the public narrative of the self; the logic of poetry supplies a meaningful syntax for the subject-in-duration. Bergson proposes just this possibility in Creative Evolution, where he finds that the only effective metaphor for the “extraordinary nature of the particular unity presented by personality” is a poem: “Thus, a poetic sentiment, which bursts into distinct verses, lines and words, may be said to have already contained this multiplicity of individuated elements, and yet, in fact, it is the materiality of language that creates it. But through the words, lines and verses runs the simple inspiration which is the whole poem. So, among the dissociated individuals, one life goes on moving.”61

What does this all mean for the body of the subject? How do language and the modes of communication implicate the flesh? Fujita’s rhetoric identifying two manners of linguistic violence suggests a path to answering these questions. One kind of violence is that of prose and narrative as they brutalize the objects of the world. If we take Mikhail Bakhtin’s model of

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responsible authorship, typified in the nineteenth-century biographical novel, and centered on the
construction of the hero’s body as the site where the inner life is “consecrated,” what does it
mean if such an incarnation is enacted through a perforce violently reductive language? Alternatively, what are the material implications of a poetic language that brings my body into
contact with the world, while also violently rejecting the anterior, social, and socialized body?
These questions also invite new lines of inquiry: What are the ethics of these modes of writing?
What are their politics?

The thinkers I discuss below consider such questions at length, and their ideas bring into
clearer view the methods of self-writing explored and performed in Mandel’shtam’s and
Nabokov’s creative works. All intellectual heirs of Bergson and not quite a generation removed
from Mandel’shtam and Nabokov, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida work
from many of the basic assumptions discussed above, but they also happen to translate and
elaborate them into the circumstances peculiar to the Russian writers who are their close

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62 In his early essay “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” (ca. 1920), Mikhail Bakhtin proposes that aesthetic
activity consists in the author consummating the entire life and world of the hero. To consummate the hero means to
capture and communicate, not only his internal life, but also all of those elements and conditions external to the
hero’s individual experience, elements outside of his own seeing. In this principled effort to convey the whole world
of the narrative subject, that subject’s body must be privileged as the site of his material presence in the world and as
a means of expressive communication: “Man is embodied and is plastically and pictorially significant. The inner
body merely adjoins the outer body: it reflects the value of the outer body and is consecrated by the outer
body” (53). The author is then charged with making that body whole if his hero is to be meaningfully realized as a viable individual. Bakhtin’s vision of authorship thus emphasizes the power and the attendant responsibilities of the
creative act, as the author endeavors to breathe life into his hero, to animate his linguistically fashioned character
into the flesh of the human form.

In this way, Bakhtin promotes the centrality of the body in aesthetic expression because, for him, the fact of
man’s embodiment means that he is not ontologically self-sufficient: he can only be fully known and can only fully
mean in relation to the other. Since the individual inhabits his own body, there are parts of it inaccessible to his
seeing, and, moreover, his impressions of that body are colored by his own subjectivity, or “inner self-activity.”
According to Bakhtin’s model, it is consequently the charge of the author, armed with his privileged “excess of
seeing,” to “complete” that body and set it out, in toto, among other objects. In his words, “It is only in the other
human being, in fact, that a living, aesthetically (and ethically) convincing experience of human finitude is given to
me, the experience of a human being as a delimited empirical object” (36). Should the author’s hero be himself, the
same values and ethics apply, and the author “must become another in relation to himself, must look at himself
through the eyes of another” (15). To “know thyself,” in Bakhtin’s view, is to examine oneself from the outside in.
Mikhail Bakhtin, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin, ed. Michail Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin, TX: University of Texas
contemporaries. In the shadow of emerging, world-shaping authoritarian regimes—especially those based in Marxist ideology—that marked the early decades of the twentieth century, these poststructuralist theorists are frequently preoccupied with the question of how language and writing are integral to the confrontation between the subject and the sources of authority.

Foucault, for instance, builds on the Bergsonian premise that “the morality of a human society may indeed be compared to its language” to argue that language is one of the principal organs into which Power encrypts its values and thus imposes them as part of its larger project to train what Bergson has already identified as “obedient” bodies and subjectivities alike through its “totality of obligations.”63 Barthes goes on to define “writing” (écriture) as the “morality of form,” the “well-behaved” literary recapitulation of a “reality” authored by official ideology and typified in the utterly prosaic biographical novel.64 He also proposes a powerful alternative in style. Barthes further echoes Derrida in suggesting that there is a mode of writing—here explicitly distinct from speech—capable of resisting the coercions of authority and of realizing a material expression of the private, inner life of the subject.

—“Legible and Docile”: Foucault’s Body Politic & the Power of Discourse—

The pivotal modification Foucault makes to Bergson’s basic premises comes from a recognition that the latter’s notion of practical, social “utility” has a politically motivated source and that the visible object-body, the social body, is subject to the various coercions of state authority that would have all citizens function in particular ways. What Foucault himself terms “bio-power” consists of “the numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and

63 Bergson, Two Sources, 18.
64 Barthes, Writing Degree Zero, 15, 73.
the control of populations”\textsuperscript{65}; it was initiated in modern societies when “the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power.”\textsuperscript{66} In many ways, and certainly as it was perceived by Mandel’shtam and Nabokov, such was precisely the endeavor of the Soviet project—the grim shadow that looms over both The Egyptian Stamp and Invitation to a Beheading. That radical experiment makes for an almost ideal case study of Foucauldian models, particularly as Soviet socialism’s architects often consciously laid bare many of the practices of subjugation and control that are otherwise meant to operate entirely at the subliminal level. Indeed, so closely and thoroughly do Soviet practices, and especially those of the Terror years, model his theories that Foucault calls Stalinism, along with fascism, one of the “pathological forms” of power—a “disease of power.”\textsuperscript{67}

Foucault identifies many techniques that literally control physical bodies and are imposed by institutions such as prisons, medical clinics, workplaces, and schools. Those institutions of utilitarian power seek to impose two complementary conditions on subjects’ bodies: legibility and homogeneity. The demand for legibility means that the roles of all objects be clearly defined, thus satisfying the impulse toward categorization typical of Bergson’s practical cognition and perception, which simplifies the world and, most importantly, makes it easier to operate upon. Also like the habitual reading of the average world, where “the differences that are useless to man are obliterated, the resemblances that are useful to him are


emphasized,” 68 utilitarian taxonomy gravitates toward affinity or “the concept of the same.” 69

The ideal corpus of political utility, Foucault makes clear, is thus a “homogeneous social body,”
a monolithic body politic. 70

Effective as such methods of physical coercion may be, and illustrative though they are of
the desires of power, they only externally shape the surface, socialized body. In order to realize
the full extent of its power, the state needs to penetrate the flesh of the populace and fashion true
subjects in both meanings of the term, that is, simultaneously “subject to someone else by control
and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge.” To meet these
ends the state exercises a thoroughgoing “form of power that applies itself to immediate
everyday life [and that] categorizes the individual, […] attaches him to his own identity,
imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him.” 71

Foucault argues that realizing this internalized dimension of power is a project of a
different order, and its methods are far more insidious. He demonstrates that, in order to facilitate
the more overt apparatuses of bio-power, the state manufactures and imposes onto its subjects a
whole worldview, an entire psychic reality. Foucault accounts for this form of ideological soft
coercion in his theories of the episteme and discourse. He describes an episteme as the aggregate
of beliefs and assumptions about the world that “defines the conditions of possibility of all
knowledge” at a given historical time and place. 72 Determining what can be said to be true and
false, good and bad, the episteme in turn conditions discourse, that is, the concrete practices and

68 Bergson, Laughter, 74.
71 Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 331.
utterances issuing from the episteme. Put simply, discourse manufactures a virtual reality by establishing, and performing, the parameters of what is meaningful and true. Although it “may make use neither of weapons nor of terror,” discourse remains inherently a technology “of a physical order,”\(^73\) since it gets internalized as a constellation of recursive social practices that reinforce and reassert the values of power and the utility of its bodies.\(^74\)

Language, though not exclusively, is the most immediate and potent arena in which discourse is manifest. In a process of delimiting the spaces and the times where it is permitted to make certain utterances, language performs power relations through the generation of “authorized” vocabularies, “codified [. . .] rhetoric[s] of allusion and metaphor,” and even “a control over enunciations.”\(^75\) As it produces the actual terms in which the world can be described and discussed, language encrypts into those terms the values dictated by discourse. Every utterance, then, reinforces and reproduces those coded values, including, most importantly, how the subject understands his own identity. The utterance acts as an incantation that conjures into being the desired reality. Bergson had already exposed this insidious tendency of prosaic language, especially as it degenerates into platitudes and cliché, whereby prefabricated meaning is thoroughly automatized in the minds of both speaker and hearer.

The ultimate realization of these diverse attitudes and practices would be a society where all is agreed upon, consented to, and internalized. Such a population might be characterized by what Derrida terms “transparent proximity,” the condition that enables “a community immediately present to itself, without difference, a community of speech where all the members


\(^74\) See Kreps, *Bergson, Complexity, and Creative Emergence*, esp. 93-98.

are within earshot.”

Derrida tracks the political fantasy back to Rousseau, but he sees it
embraced most fully in “Utopian Socialisms” that are zealously motivated by the “rage for
unity.” In such a sociolinguistic environment, poetic language’s principled disruption of
determined meaning would prove threatening. It is little wonder that the Bolsheviks, for instance,
immediately went after poets as targets of the most virulent persecution.

The Soviet experiment often reads like a textbook implementation of Foucault’s theories. Terry
Eagleton, for instance, has interpreted the Bolsheviks’ Marxist materialist ideology as an
audacious question that assumes the absolute primacy of the body: “What if an idea of reason
could be generated up from the body itself, rather than the body incorporated into a reason which
is always already in place? What if it were possible, in a breathtaking wager, to retrace one’s
steps and reconstruct everything—ethics, history, politics, rationality—from a bodily
foundation?” In striking contrast to the idealism of prevailing ontologies (Kant’s,
Schopenhauer’s, Kierkegaard’s), Marxism operated from the conviction that all meaning and
value proceeds from basic “bodily interests”—a conviction that motivated the Bolsheviks’
political doctrine prioritizing the utility of the human subject as a source of material production.
Mayakovsky’s poetic vision of the Soviet project as the work of “reforging human
material” (perekovka chelovecheskogo materiala) captures with graphic clarity and simplicity the

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University Press, 1997), 136.

77 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 138. The term “rage for unity” is Spivak’s. She uses it in the context of the desire for
a semantically transparent language, the dream of the “transcendental signifier.” Introduction to *Of Grammatology*,
xvi.

spirit of the endeavor, especially its emphasis on the “normalizing” of the material self. Mayakovsky’s image refers to the ideal of the New Soviet Man—the template according to which all citizens would be molded. That template had a physical form: “strong and healthy, handsome and virile, broad shouldered and square chinned.” In salient ways, the ideal Soviet man only had meaning as a physical entity. In Marxist discourse, the human body is reduced to little more than an organic mechanism of production, and a man’s value is measured by the amount of work he can do. Shalamov states the matter with horrifying simplicity: “In the eyes of the state and its representatives,” says the narrator of the story “Dry Rations” (“Sukhim paikom,” 1959), “a physically strong person is better — precisely, better — more moral, more valuable than a weak person, the one who cannot shovel twenty cubic meters of dirt out of a trench in a day.”

The New Soviet Man’s subjectivity was likewise shaped by depersonalization. Indeed, the New Man was marked by the absence of personality and subjectivity: all things personal evaporated, or were sublimated into, the enthusiastic adoption of a collective identity. To quote Dmitri Halavach, “This new Soviet subjectivity erased boundaries between public and private. [. . .] It affirmed the public sphere and the collective as the only domain in which it was possible

79 This exact phrasing is from Mayakovsky’s 1929 poem “Stikh kak by shofera.” His epithet immortalized an idea that was already integral to Soviet discourse. The final line of the poem reads, “So that in this, in industrialization itself, / chauffeurism not lose faith, / comrades, it is necessary in this life to take up / the reforging of human material” (Чтоб в эту в самую в индустриализацию / веры шоферия не теряла, / товарищи, и в быту необходимо взяться / за перековку человеческого материала). Mayakovsky, “Stikh kak by shofera,” in Sobranie sochinenii v vos’mi tomakh, ed. L. V. Mayakovskaiia, V. V. Vorontsov, A. I. Koloskov (Moskva: Pravda, 1968), 8:141-43.


to achieve true happiness and true self-realization.” Stephen Kotkin demonstrates the meaning of this ethos in the factory, the site of labor production itself. For instance, workers were encouraged to participate in ongoing competitions over their individual production numbers, but distinct from “capitalist” competitions, “the aim was not supposed to be the triumph of a victor but the raising of everyone up to the level of the most advanced.” All labors were further deindividuated by being translated into an altruistic global effort, since the “exertions of every worker at the bench were inscribed in an international struggle” to propagate socialist ideology and practice.

The Bolsheviks’ sensitivity to language’s capacity to influence reality was evidenced by the enactment, almost immediately after the October 1917 Revolution, of an orthographic reform. The revolutionaries recognized language as one of the most effective means of indoctrination, and their orthographic changes simplified written Russian in order to increase literacy among, and thus “empower,” the “unenlightened” and economically oppressed peasantry. At the same time, the New Soviet Man, like the original Man (Adam), needed to rechristen the things of his brave new world. New political principles, activities, and institutions gave rise to a vast new phraseology that included truly original abbreviations and acronyms, expressions and idioms, slogans and jokes, but also inspired existing terms and phrases to change meaning.

On even larger scales, too, the Soviets instituted new modes of expression. The template Soviet subject now had a dictated personal narrative that described his awakening into the Soviet

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83 Ibid., 194-95.
worldview and collective identity. “Soviet subjectivity becomes a matter of mastering a new language of power,” Eric Naiman states plainly, and that fluency “transforms the speaker [. . .] into membership in the Soviet community.”84 Valuable and sometimes shocking studies like Naiman’s have demonstrated how the Soviet language, in all its dimensions, was adopted and internalized and how it influenced actual behavior. Igal Halfin’s Red Autobiographies: Initiating the Soviet Self demonstrates that Party initiates reconfigured their personal biographies to map onto the ideological trajectory. Stephen Kotkin’s seminal study of lived experience in a Stalinist mining community, Magnetic Mountain, evidences how citizens’ utterances realized a proficient literacy in Soviet phraseology and an apparent embrace of the social and political values encrypted therein. Maria Mogilner’s Mythology of the “Underground Man” (Mifologiia “podpol’nogo cheloveka”) reveals how, leading up to Revolution, the literary became the literal, as impressionable young citizens in their everyday lives performed the clichéd tropes that constituted the cultural myth of the radical revolutionary hero.

Seeking precisely the transparency Derrida has described, Soviet, and especially Stalinist, methods of discipline endeavored to monitor and enforce the adoption of prescribed attitudes, practices, and utterances with diverse surveillance technologies that could penetrate the body and actively police the subjective self, ensuring the parity of private life and public performance. Communal phones forced domestic dialogues out into the shared space; visual surveillance was paired with wiretapping and perlustration; a culture of informantism meant any person one encountered could be an earpiece of the state. More recent scholarly work on diary writing in the Soviet era has shown how this most intimate self-record was, on the one hand, “encouraged as a

means to speed up and document personal transformation. On the other hand, diaries were sought by the NKVD as an ideal way to incriminate victims of terror if they were suspected of harboring oppositional ideas.  

In *Fourth Prose* (*Chetvertaia proza*, 1930), Mandel’shtam’s scathing descriptions of the Party-approved professional “writer” (*pisatel’*) of sanctioned “literature” (*pisatel’stvo*) exposes that writer as the ideally transparent Soviet citizen. Having effectively “sold [himself] over to the pockmarked devil” to become a perfect “parrot” for the state, the writer forfeits precisely what should have been the source of his art: his singular voice, his personality, his very soul. His thorough docility makes the writer invaluable to the effort to discipline the body politic, since “literature always and everywhere carries out one assignment: to help superiors keep soldiers obedient, and to help judges exact punishments on condemned men.” Mandel’shtam goes on to say that he is incapable of serving as such a writer because his own body, even his blood, revolts at the notion. The poet’s graphic terms suggest the physical implications of the linguistic confrontation between the state and the individual who writes, as Mandel’shtam puts it, “without permission.”

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86 I put “writer” and “literature” in quotation marks because Mandel’shtam inflects these familiar terms with undisguised scorn.


89 “Все произведения мировой литературы я делаю на разрешенные и написанные без разрешения” (I separate all the works of world literature into [those written] with permission and those written without permission). Mandel’shtam, *Chetvertaia proza*, 3:171.
—My Body, My Text: Barthes & the Writing Self—

Barthes argues that literature, as it both absorbs and then reiterates the social consciousness, is the principal discursive medium that encrypts the ideology of state power in language, effectively creating the Bergsonian virtual reality of social-political life. Much like Mandel’shtam, Barthes problematizes the political “commitment” of écriture (writing) against the individuality of style.90 Écriture is perforce a political “function” because it issues from an internalization of the “language [which] is a corpus of prescriptions and habits” that define the “horizons” of literary forms, themes, and tropes. True écriture is only possible “when language, being established on a national scale, becomes a kind of negativity, a line which separates what is forbidden from what is allowed.”91

The hallmark of écriture is its semiotic and semantic encryption, encryption that dictates a politically determined interpretation. The mechanisms of encryption are, for Barthes, most apparent in “Marxist writing,” where the “closed character” of the interpretive system is radically constricted: vocabulary and even figurative language are highly specialized and “severely codified” to delimit unapproved or subversive potentialities of meaning. Marxist writing thus presents itself as the very “language of knowledge,” assuming a “univocal” lexical authority that enables it “to impose a stability on its explanations and a permanence on its method,” since “each word is no longer anything but a narrow reference to the set of principles which tacitly underlie it.”92 In the era of “triumphant Stalinism,” écriture “come[s] to pervade writing

90 I keep the French term (écriture) here to forestall confusion with what Barthes calls the “writerly text,” discussed below, whose function and operation is in fact the radical opposite of “writing.”


92 Ibid., 22-23.
completely.” Under the dictator, the closed semantic system of the language is also realized in its full power, since every definition further becomes a value judgment, a “separation between Good and Evil.”

The cultural product of semantically univocal écriture is the readerly text, readerly precisely because its ideology is designed to be easily digested by a wide audience. Thoroughly prosaic in its highly specialized semiotic and semantic encryption of ideological discourse, the readerly text is even more so in its signature momentum. It shares the effect of speech in a common “horizontal axis” whereby, in a “flow of empty signs [...] ceaselessly swept onwards, [...] everything is held forth, meant for immediate consumption,” since all lexical elements “are launched toward a meaning superseded.” The “grammatical logic” of prose’s movement critically prefigures and reinforces a larger structure. In freighted terms, Barthes says that “the sentence is a nature whose function [...] is to justify the culture of narrative.” This is precisely the relationship that gets exploited in the Marxist context, since the world-historical vision promoted by Marxism “calls for a sequence of events, that is, for an intelligible Narrative.” Consequently, Barthes identifies the novel as the genre of the Marxist readerly text and, more specifically, the classic realist, biographical novel.

Barthes meaningfully echoes Bergson’s and Foucault’s contentions regarding the reality-shaping effects of prosaic language. The “codes” by which truth and meaning are encrypted in readerly texts also, “by a swivel of [...] ideology, which turns culture into nature,” in their turn

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93 Ibid., 13.
94 Ibid., 24.
95 Ibid., 19, 11.
96 Barthes, S/Z, 127.
“establish reality, ‘Life.’”97 Therefore, the novel “is the ideal instrument of every construction of a world.” Crucially, Barthes amplifies Bergson’s rhetoric on this point by declaring that the veil of virtual “life” disguises its true, contradictory impact. Though it may affirm the structures of social life and the habitat of the surface personality, “the Novel is a Death,” Barthes proclaims flatly.98

Barthes further contends that the biographical novel, more particularly, “is always a murder in intention.”99 It is a murder because its formulaic sentiments reject the particularity of subjective experience. As the novel regurgitates prepackaged platitudes in the dead language of cliché, the work degenerates into “a nauseating mixture of common opinions, a smothering layer of received ideas.”100 Similarly, in the novel’s bondage to narrative time and causality (a bondage inscribed in grammar), it “sentences” to unnatural confinement the atemporality that defines real, inner life. Clearly referencing Bergson, Barthes says that narration necessarily “transforms life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an orientation and meaningful time.”101 Still more provocatively: “What must be destroyed is duration, that is, the ineffable binding force running through existence.”102

Barthes holds that narrative destroys the subject because the self is not a development, but the “multiple unity” proposed by Bergson. He affirms his rapport with Bergson’s model in his own enigmatic autobiographical statement, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, when he

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97 Ibid., 206.
99 Ibid., 39.
102 Ibid., 39.
asserts that the self is “a diffraction, [. . .] a dispersion of energy in which there remains neither a central core nor a structure of meaning: I am not contradictory, I am dispersed.” 

Dispersed and without a core. Nevertheless, Barthes cites Diderot to ultimately affirm the self’s prevailing unity and endurance: “Everything has happened in us because we are ourselves, always ourselves, and never one minute the same.”

There is, Barthes promises, a mode of writing that resists the murderous “plausibility” of narrative and reflects instead the multiplicity and duration of the subject. Whereas the readerly text is semantically deterministic in its fixation on communicative content, the writerly text invites interpretive openness and expansion, beginning with its relationship to words themselves. If the prosaic readerly text sacrifices its constituent words to general content, the writerly text fetishizes the individual word; and if prose launches toward that content by denoting meaning, that is, by delimiting the words’ potentialities of connotation and association, the writerly text makes every effort to invite semiotic and semantic openness. Figurative language, especially metaphor, emerges for Barthes as the basic device that facilitates this activity.

As potential meanings proliferate in this writerly word-fetishization, communication is profoundly problematized. Barthes thus distinguishes between communication (speech) and poetry. The writerly text necessary belongs to the latter, since “one might call ‘poetic’ [. . .] any discourse in which the word leads the idea,” rather than the other way around. “If you like the words to the point of succumbing to them,” Barthes affirms, “you exclude yourself from the law

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104 Ibid., 145.
of the signified.”\textsuperscript{105} The theorist’s uncustomary second-person pronoun (“you”) in this account of poetic language subtly signals the peculiar intimacy and personalism of the poetic utterance.

Precisely for its “openness” and semiotic self-sufficiency, Barthes promotes the poetic writerly text as the medium of the multiple and durational self. Barthes clarifies in \textit{S/Z}, where he is plainly thinking with Bergson: “The writerly text is \textit{ourselves writing}, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system [discourse].”\textsuperscript{106} Outside the coded language of discourse, what I will now call \textit{my text} is composed of a personal “image-system, one’s imaginary life,”\textsuperscript{107} the “networks” of which are

many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can authoritatively be called the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend \textit{as far as the eye can reach}, they are indeterminable [. . .] as nothing exists outside the text, there is never a \textit{whole} of the text.\textsuperscript{108}

In the same way as Bergson’s poetic text, \textit{my text}, with its words loosed from denotation and images not diluted by mimetic representation, transcribes the activity of the subjective and intuitive mind, reproducing its multiplicity, its condition of unfinished eternal becoming, and its protean changeability in duration.

It must be noted that, in general, Barthes conceives of “text” not only as a physical page but as the broader “social space” composed a diverse array of “enunciations” surrounding us in books, music, film, advertisements, and so on. The image-system projected in \textit{my text}, however,

\textsuperscript{105} Barthes, \textit{Roland Barthes}, 152.
\textsuperscript{106} Barthes, \textit{S/Z}, 5.
\textsuperscript{107} Barthes, \textit{Roland Barthes}, 82.
\textsuperscript{108} Barthes, \textit{S/Z}, 5-6.
is necessarily graphic, scriptive, since “in writing,” poetic sentiments “become, by simple structural displacement, unspeakable terms: contradicting what can be said, […] but which precisely—the very voice of the image-system—you would like to be able to say immediately (without mediation).”

He communicates this textu(r)al dimension of writerly work by using another metaphor that will resonate in important ways with Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s shared, and central, metaphor of fabric:

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, “run” (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning.

The materiality, the textu(r)al quality, initiated in such writing is appropriate, since my text is composed of style, which Barthes contrasts to écriture and describes as a “self-sufficient language,” an independent and private system of “imagery delivery [and] vocabulary [that] spring from the body and the past of the writer and gradually become the very reflexes of his art.” More specifically, this kind of imagery delivery communicates the impressions made on the sensorium of my body, born as it is of “a sub-language where flesh and external world come together.” A “private […] ritual” expressed as the “decorative voice of a hidden, secret flesh,” my text articulates precisely the inner and essential self. Barthes employs a wonderful anatomical metaphor to capture the simultaneous privatizing of a text that also goes out into the world. The self-writer is much like a strange sea creature: “The cuttlefish produces its ink: I tie up my

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109 Barthes, Roland Barthes, 83.
111 Barthes, Writing Degree Zero, 10.
112 Ibid., 11.
image-system (in order to protect myself and at the same time to offer myself).” The poetic writer uses his ink similarly: he externalizes his subjective inner life onto the page, but the highly personal image-system in which he encrypts his private experience is never thoroughly transparent to the public reader.

Because of its origins in the experience of my body, Barthes insists that my text always produces a “transformation,” an anatomical “metamorphosis.” Moreover, if we read Barthes’ proposals in conjunction with Bruce Clarke’s description of literary metamorphosis, we can see the important implication for the surface body. Clarke observes that metamorphoses imagined in literature are always “an allegory of writing, and the structural consequences of [. . .] transformative communication,” that is, an allegory for devices of figurative language, as those devices represent “exceptions to normal, natural, or mimetic production” characteristic of prose. “When signifiers construct the psyche, the foremost dispossessed property is the anterior body,” Clarke continues, since “in language the signified is encrypted by the signifier, so in a metamorphosis the proper body is disfigured by figuration, derealized, and appears to fall away.” The linguistic allegory thus “turn[s] on the notion of the given body (the proper name or literal term) as a suspended form” and thus results in an “exile” of the insufficient surface body: “the anterior body of the metamorph is bracketed, preserved as a moment in the metamorphic process, yet negated as a viable vehicle.” If the anterior body—that is, the surface, socialized body—is jettisoned, what is exiled is only that dimension of the self which is subject to the coercive practices of discourse and bio-power.

113 Barthes, Roland Barthes, 162.

In Barthes’ terms, these privatizing properties make my text a political act—a criminal one even. The novel, “by the obviousness of its intention” produced by the “narrative [of its] signs,” demonstrates the writer’s commitment to operating within the codified norms of political discourse.\footnote{Barthes, \textit{Writing Degree Zero}, 39.} By contrast, my text is everything that the novel is not, and “by reason of its biological origin,” necessarily “resides outside art, that is, outside the pact that binds the writer to society.”\footnote{Ibid., 12.} Moreover, the politics of the text are patently and truly revolutionary, as they succeed in subverting and disrupting the codes of discourse. Style, the biological impetus of my text, thus asserts its own rightful species of power in an act of individual freedom from discursive coercion and subjugation (an act that seems to offer a subtle jab at the Russian Revolution’s failure): “It is the Authority of style, that is, the entirely free relationship between language and its fleshly double which places the writer above History as the freshness of Innocence.”\footnote{Ibid., 13.} Echoing Bergson’s notion of a virginal sensory encounter in artistic perception, Barthes’ poetic text is an expression of the subject’s experience of the world as that experience intuits a reality beyond the veil erected by the forces of utilitarian power.

Barthes’ important turn to writing as the medium of the unspeakable, and hence as the only true medium of the authentic self, along with his clear statement of the political implications of such writing, at last returns this chapter’s discussion to its initial engagement with Plato and the

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
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\bibitem{1} Barthes, \textit{Writing Degree Zero}, 39.
\bibitem{2} Ibid., 12.
\bibitem{3} Ibid., 13.
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Classical world. Though here it is not Barthes, but once more Foucault who closes the circle and forcefully summarizes the ideas discussed above.

In his later work, Foucault turns from the theme of power to a one he calls “care of the self,” which he identifies as a practice vital in ancient Greek culture, and one which, in time, metamorphoses into a practice of resisting the coercions of both discourse and bio-power. Part of the classical commandment to know thyself, care of the self constituted a set of practices, “an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain a certain mode of being,” wherein one “take[s] up residence in oneself.” It is a “matter of attending to oneself, for oneself: one should be, for oneself and throughout one’s existence, one’s own object.”

In a salient way, care of the body takes priority, since this “cultivation of the self” has, “above all,” a “curative and therapeutic function” “closer to [a] medical model” than to an intellectual or spiritual one.

Essentially an “ascetic” practice, the same system of care has a crucial aesthetic dimension. Among the “indispensable” technologies of self-care are productive reading and “personal writing.” Reading is productive because the subject should select “disparate [and] heterogeneous” sources, the wisdom of which one must “appropriate” and “assimilate” in a process of “digest[ion]” and “subjectification.” The subject achieves this by reading texts with

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119 Foucault, “The Hermeneutic of the Subject,” 97.

120 Foucault speaks of ascetic practice in its most “general” sense. He uses the Greek term askēsis to account for a “set of practices” used for the “training of the self by oneself.” He holds it up against conventional notions of asceticism as the severe denial of material and sensual pleasures, and even the denial of the self. “Philosophical ascessis looks with suspicion on those figures who point to the marvels of their abstinences,” and instead works toward shaping the self so that it can meet a certain purpose, which is nothing other than the tumult of life itself: “We must learn only what will enable us to bear up against events that may occur; we must learn not to let ourselves be thrown by them, and not let ourselves be overwhelmed by the emotions they may give rise to in ourselves.” See Foucault, “The Hermeneutic of the Subject,” 99; “Self Writing,” 208.

and against one’s own experience. Suggested in the digestion metaphor, “the role of writing” is “to constitute, along with all that reading has constituted, a ‘body.’” And this body should be understood [. . .] as the very body of the one who, by transcribing his readings, has appropriated them and made their truth his own: writing transforms the thing seen or heard “into tissue and blood.”” Finally, the same act of writing inextricably incorporates the subject’s psychic self since, while composing his textural body, the “writer [also] constitutes his own identity [. . .] [his] own soul.”122 On account of its essential heterogeneity, this text—my text—is explicitly not a “narrative of oneself,” but acts as a “chorus,” where the “voices of the [disparate] individual singers are hidden” as they seamlessly “blend in harmoniously into one.”123 Appropriate to the “therapeutic” bent of self-cultivation, recourse to my text is meant to work like a “medicine (pharmakon)” that one “should be supplied with for protection against the vicissitudes of existence.”124

In the ancient world, care of the self was construed as a public good, “a useful service to the city-state,” but in time the same practices assumed exactly the opposite role.125 As the power of state came to exert more control over the subject, devout attention to the self, and especially personal self-writing, became a radical act. If Barthes assures us that to write the private self means to inscribe what discourse deems “unspeakable,” Foucault sees the same writing as a “critique.” Critique is, first, a gesture of Bergsonian “defamiliarization”: “[critique] is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such.

122 Ibid., 213-14.
123 Ibid., 210, 214.
124 Foucault, “The Hermeneutic of the Subject,” 100.
125 Ibid., 93.
Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult.”\(^{126}\) Furthermore, critique, as a procedure of self-making, also and of necessity performs an act of freedom, since Foucault also defines critique as, “the movement through which the subject gives itself the right to question truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth. Critique will be the art of voluntary insubordination, of reflective intractability.”\(^{127}\)

One writer seems to Foucault the modern embodiment of care for the self. A pioneering figure of French Symbolism, and a staunch anti-fascist, Andre Breton (1896-1966) initiated, in Foucault’s estimation, a radically new mode of writing that demonstrates a “deep incompatibility” with Marxism precisely because it discovers “a space that is not that of philosophy, nor of literature, nor of art, but of that of experience.”\(^{128}\) I cite at length Foucault’s treatment of Breton because his vocabulary and his imagery resonate so fully with the various and complex ideas introduced in my lengthy discussion above.

For Breton [. . .] writing in itself, the book in its white flesh, have the power to change the world. Up to the end of the nineteenth century, language and writing were transparent instruments in which the world was reflected, decomposed, and recomposed, in any case, writing and discourse formed part of the world. But perhaps there is a writing so radical and so sovereign that it manages to face up to the world, to counterbalance it, to offset it, even to utterly destroy it and scintillate outside it. [. . .] This experience of the book as an antiworld is reencountered in Breton and it has contributed substantially to changing the status of writing. And it has done so in two ways. First, Breton remoralized writing, as it were, by demoralizing it completely. The ethic of writing no longer comes from what it has to say, from the ideas that one expresses, but from the very act of writing. In that raw and naked act, the writer’s freedom is fully committed at the same time as the counteruniverse of words takes form.\(^{129}\)


\(^{127}\) Foucault, “What is Critique?,” *Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans., Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007), 47. (41-81)


\(^{129}\) Ibid., 173.
For the generative force of his poetic self-articulation, Foucault calls Breton “a swimmer between two worlds.” His example encapsulates the central thematic concern of Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s art. The writers recognize themselves to be embedded in a sociolinguistic environment that, through its thoroughgoing powers of discourse, wants to forcibly conform to the obligations of a manufactured reality. They seek a mode of expression that will allow them to bring forth the “worlds” that often disagree with that false reality, the worlds of their inner, private experience.

—A Scapegoat Between Two Wor(l)ds—

In the following two chapters, on Mandel’shtam and his *The Egyptian Stamp*, followed by Nabokov and *Invitation to a Beheading*, we will see all dimensions of Bergson’s and his followers’ philosophies interpreted and realized. I will handle in detail the writers’ personal worldviews and aesthetics at the outset of their respective chapters. But let me at this point set more clearly the scenes of their creative works, as they activate in more vivid and complex ways the ideas introduced above.

The ritual and thematics of the ancient *pharmakos* map cleanly onto the plots of *The Egyptian Stamp* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, where the works’ protagonists are written into the role of the scapegoat. An outsider by blood, the Jewish Parnok (who, as his “double,” always implicates his narrator as well) inhabits a 1917 Petersburg that is, in the novella’s imagery, quite literally beset by plague, and Mandel’shtam’s hero tries unsuccessfully to stop the communal murder of his other double as a suspected thief. As I will demonstrate in due course, the plight of Nabokov’s Cincinnatus follows the idiosyncratic tropes of the ancient ritual even more closely;
but let it suffice to recall that he is deemed a criminal precisely because of his non-conformity. He is at once courted and censured by the state, and he is groomed for the spectacle of his public execution. Just as Derrida’s Theuth, however, these outsiders, by virtue of the gift of writing for which they are disgraced, upend the prevailing order and values. In one sense, they redeem the communities to which they are sacrificed, but not in the ways that the ritual anticipates. More accurately, Parnok and Cincinnatus are the ones redeemed, the individuals delivered from the plague that is the larger community itself.

Since the worlds that would sacrifice Parnok and Cincinnatus are blighted by the “disease of power,” those worlds present all the telltale symptoms. Most obviously, the literal bodies politic in Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s fictions are horrors of homogeneity. The community whose wrath the physically anomalous Parnok incurs is altogether uniform, legible, and obedient: it is a monolithic mob, metonymized as a Bergsonian corpus of ant rumps and articles of clothing. In Cincinnatus’ nightmare world, the surrounding souls are not only transparent (legible) to one another, they are all but identical and, in fact, interchangeable. As they seek to reforge and assimilate the nonconforming subjects, the forces of power exploit all the

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130 The uniform body politic against which the protagonists are contrasted, it bears elaborating, emerges as a character of its own in both creative works, and it makes for a poignantly grotesque upending of Bakhtin’s already “grotesque body” as he explores it in the context of carnival. Itself a social revolution in miniature, Bakhtin’s carnival is a ritual whereby all prevailing social and political hierarchies are temporarily inverted. The champion of the cathartic mock-upheaval is the deindividuated human body, a corpus for a turn empowered and ennobled as the “collective ancestral body of all the people.” In carnival, Bakhtin’s social body is an organic outgrowth of the natural world, and so in its depiction “the stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose.” Many of Bakhtin’s terms describe aptly the populations into which Parnok and Cincinnatus decidedly do not fit. But while in Bakhtin’s carnival this collective body is “positive [and] assertive,” “triumphant [and] festive,” with the “the leading themes of these images [being] fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance,” the corresponding bodies in The Egyptian Stamp and Invitation could not be more different. Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s amorphous collective corpuses bring only contagion, sterility, and cannibalistic appetites; their protuberances are at once threatening and impotent, capable of generating nothing more than violence and vulgarity. For Bakhtin’s description of the grotesque body in carnival, see Rabelais and His World, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), esp. 26-27.
technologies of Foucauldian coercion, discipline, and punishment. In *Invitation*, the coarser methods of physical normativization are visibly at work: Cincinnatus’ tormentors cage him in a cell and scrutinize his freakishly fleshy body.

As Foucault observes, however, the most insidious coercions are exacted not physically but discursively. So it is in Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s creative texts, where the hostile communities are marked by their utterly prosaic modes of communication. More than prosaic, in fact, they are thoroughly *phonocentric*. In both worlds, the main medium of social interaction is speech, especially conspired whispers, idle chit-chat, crass jokes, and clichés. Parnok and Cincinnatus do not speak this language: Parnok speaks a poetically charged “birdy” language that nobody else can understand; Cincinnatus is borderline aphasic, and when he does speak, his complex style remains, like his body, opaque to others. Similarly, where writing is not thoroughly neutered of all productive potential, as in the pervasive mechanistic composition of vapid official documents, it appears as a quietly pernicious presence, especially when it takes the form of biographical novels.

The heroes’ resistance to the prevailing discourse earns them the scorn of the respective authoritarian regimes. Precisely *personal writing*, *self-writing*, then, becomes the means by which the protagonists articulate what is unspeakable in the surrounding world—that is, their inner lives, their private *experience* of the world, which does not align with the apparent “reality.” This inner experience, rather dissonant to the outside world, bears all the hallmarks of Bergson’s poetic “duration”: it travels fluidly through time and space, is populated with the artistic perceptions—the images—of phenomena, and is held together by a logic that cannot be “sentenced” to prose.
Here is where the conflict begins. Though they do not fit into the outside world, the protagonists are, nevertheless, necessarily embedded within it; they cannot fully inhabit their inner lives. Cincinnatus, no less than his tormentors, obsesses over his surface body, treasuring its meticulous construction and solidity. Parnok is similarly attached to his flesh. Their minds are also infected by the prevailing discourse, which demands a narrative composed of clear signs: Parnok’s head is full of romantic novels; Cincinnatus is enthralled by a three-thousand page biography of a tree. Their efforts at self-writing are influenced by this discourse too. Initially, *The Egyptian Stamp*’s narrator’s whole project is to write a biographical novel of his proxy, Parnok, and he fears at points that his own writing is beginning to take the shape of an empty memorandum. Cincinnatus imagines composing a conventional autobiography by starting “at the beginning and gradually, along a high road of logically connected ideas” ending with an account of the solid and stable core of his present self; he likewise finds himself using too many “bookish words.”

Just as the means of discourse ultimately has a physical ends for Foucault, in *The Egyptian Stamp* and *Invitation to a Beheading* the two dimensions of power merge on the bodies of the protagonists. Inhabiting a liminal state between two realities, two subjectivities, and two bodies—between private subject (poetry) and public commodity (prose)—one complex social, political, and linguistic drama gets played out on the protagonists’ bodies. Parnok’s beloved morning coat is, in the novella’s image-system, figured simultaneously as the man’s apparent identity, as his flesh (his “earthly casing”), and as a text. This coat is appropriated by an apparatchik-tailorewriter. Only capable of making a single template garment, the tailor “reforms” Parnok, literally giving him over to the state. In a word, the “parrot” tailor-writer turns Parnok’s
body into a useful, readerly book. As Cincinnatus participates in the superficial discursive world of his gaolers, his own body comes to resemble that of his uniform and legible others. In Nabokov’s novel’s thematic imagery, which literalizes the metamorphosis theme, Cincinnatus’ body is decidedly larval.

Poetic self-writing wins out in both cases. And in both cases the textu(r)al artifact produced vividly realizes Barthes’ writerly text, composed of a private image-system that coheres by the logic of poetry. The resultant texts also realize in graphic ways Barthes’ style, as it externalizes my body. Letting the state have Parnok’s unnecessary “earthly casing,” the narrator internalizes his subject, along with the whole Petersburg landscape, and bleeds it back out as the poetic text we are reading. As Cincinnatus finds his poetic voice, his “fleshily incomplete” surface body is derealized and he, too, is imagined as metamorphosing into the very substance of Invitation to a Beheading itself.

As in any metamorphosis, the process is still a problematic and violent one. In my reading of the texts, both protagonists “die” in the end. But this denouement is also ambiguous (Cincinnatus, for instance, is at once liberated and executed). On the one hand, death is the natural, horrifying conclusion in store for the embodied subject of an authoritarian state. The loss, however, appears less lamentable since only the surface is destroyed—the dimension not integral to the private self. “I know that the horror of death is nothing really,” says Cincinnatus before his ritual execution, apparently at peace with letting that unnecessary body be fed to the machinations of the state; “a harmless convulsion—perhaps even healthful for the soul.”\textsuperscript{131} The protagonists’ physical destruction is made less terrifying, less real and conclusive because it is

\textsuperscript{131} “Ведь я знаю, что ужас смерти это только так, безвредное,—может быть даже здоровое для души.” Nabokov, Invitation 193 / Priglashenie, 800.
compensated for by the poetic texts left behind. In this ending, the *true* subject endures, and it is surface reality that gets bracketed.
—CHAPTER II: TRUANCY & TRUTH IN MANDEL’SHTAM—

—MANDEL’SHTAM & LITERARY SAVAGERY—

In *The Noise of Time* Mandel’shtam proposes the *attitude* necessary to authentic poetic composition that he terms *literaturnaiia zlost’*. Popularly translated as “literary savagery,” it meant rejecting any culture of literary sycophancy and the tendency to imitation and regurgitation to which it gave way, lest poetic innovation settle into prosaic inertia. Literary savagery demanded active disruption of the market of citation and self-praise that Mandel’shtam felt had become the stock and trade of many of his contemporaries. If poetic sentiment was to remain fresh and forceful, the poetic community had to be built on a spirit of internal antagonism and even hostility. Absent such a combative orientation to tradition and to prevailing creative trends, art loses all its effect.

For Mandel’shtam this loss attributed to hackneyed art meant nothing less than a confusion and perversion of one’s senses and, ultimately, an alienation from life itself. Thus he describes the condition of literary camaraderie and complacency: “To remember not living people but the plaster casts struck from their voices. To go blind. To touch and to recognize by hearing. Sad fate! Thus does one penetrate into the present, into modernity, as along the bed of a dried-up river.”

True under any circumstances, the anesthetizing consequences of literary stagnation felt especially immediate to Mandel’shtam in the mid and late 1920s, when he composed *The Noise of Time* and *The Egyptian Stamp*. In the other major prose piece from the period, *Fourth Prose*, Mandel’shtam encodes the term “literature” to mean the organs of official, institutionalized
writing already being established in the 1920s, while the Soviets ramped up enforcement of political ideology through the arts. As the tropes of Socialist Realism were already being implicitly codified, writers who wanted to get published were compelled to produce work that reflected the ideals and the worldview of the state. Those ideals were of course encrypted in the language, which was reformed and nationalized in 1917 and was swelling with new vocabulary and phrases, it seemed, by the day.

In this environment, it seemed writing was threatened with automatization, altogether robbing the poet of a voice. “A writer,” as Mandel’shtam now referred to the literary toady who “prostitutes” himself to the state, “is a mixture of parrot and pope. He’s a polly in the very loftiest sense of the word.” The effects of this anti-art accordingly become even more dire, since “a literary murderer can also be a parrot.” As the individual poet’s voice is increasingly dictated by the authorized outlets, the “editor-coffinmaker” (redaktor-grobovshchik) similarly seals the fate of genuine artistic expression, “If [the writer] starts to irritate his master, they cover him with a black shawl, and this serves for literature as the surrogate of night.”

Mandel’shtam sees himself as incapable of filling the role of writer-apparatchik by virtue of his noble Jewish heritage: “I press the point that writerdom [. . .] is incompatible with the honorable title of Jew, of which I am proud. My blood, burdened with its heritage of sheep herders, patriarchs, and kings, revolts against the thievish gypsinness of the writing breed.”

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2 “Писатель — это помесь попугая и попа. Он попка в самом высоком значении этого слова.” Mandel’shtam, Chetvertaia proza, 3:176.
5 “Я настаиваю на том, что писательство [. . .] несовместимо с почетным званием иудея, которым я горжусь. Мою кровь, отягощенную наследством овцеводов, патриархов и царей, бунтует против вороватой цыганщины писательского отродья.” Ibid., 3:175.
Mandel’shtam’s subsequent fate proved that his portrayal of the post-revolutionary literary environment was not rhetorical bombast. Written in response to an apparent plot to blacklist him from publication, Fourth Prose testifies to the increasingly marginalized poet’s sustained refusal to parrot. His subsequent works proved his prophetic statement that in Russia poetry gets people killed.\(^6\) All those works are live restatements of Mandel’shtam’s commitment to literary “savagery,” which is ultimately a commitment to life—even in the face of physical extermination. For it is in literary savagery that the individual is returned to the right and natural order of things, since “when others speak to [the artist] about reality he only smiles bitterly, for he knows the infinitely more convincing reality of art.”\(^7\) Again in The Noise of Time, Mandel’shtam makes clear that that reality is verified precisely by a restoration of the sensorium of the body:

Literary savagery! If not for you, with what would I eat the salt of the earth? You are the seasoning for the insipid bread of understanding [. . .] And that is why it is so pleasant for me to extinguish the heat of literature with frost and barbed stars. Will it start to crunch like snow? Will it brighten up in the frost of the Nekrasovian street? If it is genuine—then yes.

Литературная злость! Если б не ты, с чем бы стал я есть земную соль? Ты приправа к пресному хлебу понимания, [. . .] Вот почему мне так любо гасить жар литературы морозом и колючими звездами. Захрустит ли снегом? Развеселится ли на морозной некрасовской улице? Если настоящая — то да.\(^8\)

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\(^6\) Nadezhda Mandel’shtam quotes her husband in Vospominaniia (Moskva: Soglasie, 1999), 187.


\(^8\) Mandel’shtam, Shum vremeni, 2:387. The imagery of these passages, with its evocation of New Testament symbols of salt and unleavened bread, integrates Mandel’shtam’s themes of attuned sensory function and martyrdom in art. In his violent self-sacrifice, Christ redeemed man from the illusion of a life divorced from God, a life translated in man’s values and desires; he returned man to a virginal state, perceptive of God’s original system of order and meaning. In the so-called “Salt and Light” passages from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refers to himself and his disciples as the vehicles for this renewed state of perception and knowledge; salt that “has lost its taste” has been contaminated to no longer have the same purity of flavor.
In shattering the platitudes that otherwise ossify in a culture of literary imitation, a cultivated poetic sensibility alternatively (and in Bergson’s terms) invites one back into “immediate communion with things and with ourselves.”

Already this brief account of Mandel’shtam’s aesthetic politics of the time proximate to the composition of *The Egyptian Stamp* evidences how the poet’s policy of literary savagery engages, with graphic gravity, Bergson’s theories of embodied perception and its relation to the violences of language, as well as with succeeding postmodern interpretations describing the political implications of those phenomena. In what follows, I will define those aesthetics in greater detail to explore how they engage more thoroughly with Bergson’s philosophy and that of his intellectual descendants. For this task, I will trace a roughly chronological development (prosaic as that may be) of Mandel’shtam’s “savage” art to further show how his elemental sense of language’s materiality evolves into an understanding of the word as a direct conduit to the material image itself and, consequently, as a polysemic organism whose semantic operations replicate Bergson’s durational chronotope of subjective experience. Ultimately, he imagines that same word as an outgrowth of *my body*—the hyphen between the body and the perceived phenomenon—and the poem as an anatomical fusion of poet and poeticized object.

Mandel’shtam’s poetic practice thus realizes a mode of composition bearing all the marks of Barthes’ writerly text.

Mandel’shtam’s career as a poet effectively began as a revolt against Symbolism, the aesthetic school that had dominated Russian poetics since the late nineteenth century. The revolt took the form of Mandel’shtam’s participation in the small, short-lived, but forceful movement that came to be called Acmeism. The group’s central aesthetic doctrine began to take shape
around 1910 with Nikolai Gumilev, the movement’s initiator and primary theorist. In 1911, Gumilev and Sergei Gorodetsky began meetings of a creative collective called the Guild of Poets (Теkh poetov), where they were soon joined by Anna Akhmatova and Mandel’shtam. Only in 1912 did they call themselves Acmeists, but well before then the group’s work was cohesive and recognizable as it came to characterize the content of the journal Apollon. It was there that in 1910 the early theorist of the movement, and friend of Mandel’shtam, Mikhail Kuzmin, published what is considered the basic aesthetic thesis of Acmeism, in an article titled “On Beautiful Clarity” (1910).

My friend, having talent—that is, the ability to see the world in your own new way, having an artist’s memory, a capacity to distinguish the necessary from the incidental, and a credible inventiveness—write logically, maintaining the purity of the people’s speech; having your own style, feel lucidly a given form’s correspondence with its apparent content and the language that suits it; be a skillful architect both in the details and in the whole, be intelligible in your expressions. . . [L]ove the word, like Flaubert, be economical in method and sparing in words, precise and genuine—and you will find the secret of a delightful thing—beautiful clarity.

Мой друг, имея талант, то есть—умение по-своему, по-новому видеть мир, память художника, способность отличать нужное от случайного, правдоподобную выдумку,—пишите логично, соблюдая чистоту народной речи, имея свой слог, ясно чувствуйте соответствие данной формы с известным содержанием и приличествующим ей языком, будьте искусным зодчим как в мелочах, так и в целом, будьте понятны в ваших выражениях [. . .] [L]юбите слово, как Флобер, будьте экономны в средствах и скупы в словах, точны и подлинны, - и вы найдете секрет дивной вещи - прекрасной ясности.9

Measured though this statement is, and modest the artistic expression it promotes, “On Beautiful Clarity,” asserts a violent attack on Symbolism, as did every element of the Acmeists’ self-presentation and poetic practice: the movement’s name evokes the sharp point of a terrestrial summit, rather than Symbolism’s aspirations of ethereal transcendence into mystical realms; the

Guild’s communal spirit countered Symbolism’s vehement individualism; and the journal title *Apollon* forged an alliance with the sober Greek god of the plastic arts, as opposed to the Symbolists’ appreciation of Dionysus, the god of madness and irrational ecstasy.

Mandel’shtam was one of the most forward polemical voices in the group, a position he announces in his own 1913 manifesto, “The Morning of Acmeism,” where he explicitly counterposes every Acmeist principle to Symbolist values. Retrospectively appraising the efforts of Acmeism in his 1922 essay “On the Nature of the Word,” the poet amplifies his own rhetoric, declaring that Acmeism “arose out of repulsion” for Symbolism.  

Already evident in the earlier tract, the Acmeists spurned most specifically the Symbolists’ disregard for the word itself and, just as crucially, for the material image-objects the word is meant to conjure. A deeply mystical movement, Symbolism sought, through its “musical” poetry, to achieve a transcendent experience of a higher, rationally incomprehensible realm of understanding. Mandel’shtam viewed Symbolist poetic practice as a denial of the value of tangible phenomena, temporal experience, and the image-making force and rich associative capacity of language. In “professional Symbolism,” Mandel’shtam maintained, “perception is demoralized. Nothing is real, authentic. Only a terrible contra-dance of ‘correspondences’ nodding to one another. Eternal winking. Not one clear word, only hints, dissimulation. The rose nods to the girl, the girl to the rose. No one wants to be himself.”  

The Acmeists consequently adopted a poetic vocabulary and imagery counterposed to those of Symbolism.

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In short, while the Symbolists aspired to reach ever higher into the ethereal beyond, Mandel’shtam and his fellow Acmeists, primarily N. Gumilev and A. Akhmatova, wanted to bring poetry back down to earth. Accordingly, Mandel’shtam’s theoretical tracts and verses abound in the language and imagery of weight and density, since “Acmeism is for those who [. . .] do not faintheartedly reject their own weight, but joyously accept it.”

With the poet happily residing in the world of concrete things, the noble phenomena of this world need not be symbols “winking” at some abstract truth; they are all admirable for their intrinsic qualities. Though those qualities may not be the expected ones, for the work of the poet is not simply to praise a given object, but to facilitate an entirely new perception of it. Acmeists produced new perceptions by isolating the poetic object and examining its details. Mandel’shtam’s description of Acmeist poetic perception is thus characterized by language of microscoping and magnification; an effective poem is able to “raise a phenomenon to the tenth power” so that the poem’s deceptively “modest exterior” ultimately exposes the “monstrously condensed reality of which it is possessed.”

A charming example of this operation comes in an untitled 1914 poem about ice cream:

«Мороженко!» Солнце. Воздушный бисквит.
Прозрачный стакан с ледяною водою.
И в мир шоколада с румяной зарею,
В молочные Альпы мечтанье летит.

A transparent glass with ice water.
And to a world of chocolate with a ruddy dawn,


13 “[П]оэт возводит явление в десятизначную степень, и скромная внешность произведения искусства нередко обманывает нас относительно чудовищно-уплотнённой реальности, которой оно обладает.” Ibid., 1:177.
Among the milky Alps daydreams do fly.\textsuperscript{14}

Already the first stanza of the poem sees in the everyday item a fractal concentration of a vast terrestrial topography.

This realignment of poetic commitments promised to elicit from the reader profound new \textit{physiological} responses. Not only does this new poetry adjust the perceiver’s comprehension of the material world, it re-attunes him to his own body, a point Mandel’shtam makes clear when he states that Acmeism’s creative contribution was one “of far greater value than ideas, rather it brought with itself a wealth of new taste sensations (\textit{vkusovye oshchushchenii}).”\textsuperscript{15} His vocabulary is specific and important here, since the novel “sensations” (\textit{oshchushchenii}) he claims Acmeism inspires are precisely those of the pre-cognitive sensory organs, the privileged faculties of \textit{my body}.\textsuperscript{16} These thoroughly somatic sensations were intended to contrast most pointedly with the flights of disembodied spiritual euphoria sought by the Symbolists.

To complement and indeed to facilitate these new creative objectives, Mandel’shtam figured architecture and masonry as his dominant metaphors for poetic composition. Rather than a traditional poetic “circle” (\textit{krzhok}), the Acmeists belonged to a trade school, the Guild, where the words themselves—“the word as such” (\textit{slovo kak takovoe})—constituted the poet-artisan’s building material, his stones. Mandel’shtam laid the foundation for this new poetic language with his first collection of verse, aptly titled \textit{Stone (Kamen’), 1913}). A clear statement of the Word’s

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\textsuperscript{14} Mandel’shtam, “\textit{Morozhennoe Solntse. V oszdushnyi bizkvit. . .},” 1:105.
\textsuperscript{16} The definition of \textit{oshchushchenie} makes this point clear: “The result of the influence of a phenomenon from the objective world on one’s sensory organs.” The sensations accounted for by \textit{oshchushchenie} belong solely to the body, while \textit{chuvtvo} (also “feeling,” “sensation”) can refer equally to one’s “internal, psychical condition.” \textit{Slovar’ russkogo iazyka v cheterekh tomakh} 4-e izd., red. A. P. Evgeneva (Sankt-Peterburg: Institut lingvisticheskikh issledovanii Rossiskoi akademii nauk, 1999) [electronic resource], http://feb-web.ru/feb/mas/mas-abc/0encyc.htm.
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inherent materiality and stability, the stone metaphor cemented another point of ideological
distinction from the Symbolists, whose “musical” verse worked to actively unfetter of words
from their semantic associations; the Symbolists viewed words as thoroughly nebulous entities,
harnessable as indefinite sonic stimuli of the emotions and the poet’s mystical intuition.17

Albeit perfectly targeted and provocative at that moment of ideological brinkmanship, the
same metaphor, with its implicit advocacy of the denotative semantic fidelity and mimetic
capacity of language was, even from the beginning, a bit too rigid. While he stressed a respect
for and command of the word’s signifying potential, a tendency evidenced most saliently in
Acmeism’s professed adherence to Classical aesthetics, Mandel’shtam was always careful to
warn that the poet ought not give way to a slavish adherence to content.18 Already in “The
Morning of Acmeism,” Mandel’shtam distinguished between the commonplace “sense” of the
word and the Word as a robust and dynamic independent object. The essay’s opening evidences
Mandel’shtam’s familiarity with Bergson. Contrasting prose with poetic language, he says,

Right now, for instance, stating my thought as precisely as possible, but by no means in a
poetic manner, I am essentially speaking with signs, not with the word. [. . .] In this way,
if the sense is taken as the content, everything else in the word ought to be considered a
simple mechanical appendage that only impedes the swift transmission of thought. [. . .] To this
day the conscious sense, the Logos, is still taken mistakenly and arbitrarily for the
content.

Сейчас, например, излагая свою мысль по возможности в точной, но отнюдь не
поэтической форме, я говорю, в сущности, знаками, а не словом. [. . .] Таким
образом, если смысл считать содержанием, все остальное, что есть в слове,

17 To avoid confusion or conflation of ideas, I understand the Symbolist intuition to be different in kind from that
theorized by Bergson. I think of it in spatial terms that also suggest meaningful philosophical and ethical
implications: Bergson describes intuition as a penetration into a phenomenon to understand that phenomenon on its
own terms; Symbolism entertains the notion of privileged knowledge imparted as if from on high. One liberates the
object, the other claims authority over it.

18 A greater appreciation for the word’s semantic weight was, to a degree, important to Acmeist aesthetics. Their
recognition of the word’s descriptive potency inspired its members to consider calling their movement “Adamism,”
since the biblical First Man was invested with the power to name the objects of his world, thus rendering them truly
knowable.
Mandel’shtam’s counterposition of the the “word” to the “sign” encapsulates the point: a sign designates a specific referent, it denotes; the word is not fixed to any referent, it remains flexible and has more diverse functions.

Another casualty of Mandel’shtam’s savagery exposes the risks of a poetic diction that errs by being too transparent in its content. In his 1922 essay “Literary Moscow” (“Literaturnaia Moskva,” an article distinct from “Literary Moscow: The Birth of Plot”), Mandel’shtam calls out the Futurist Mayakovsky and his efforts at democratized poetry, which meant poetry that mimicked speech.

Mayakovsky solves the great and elemental problem of “poetry for everyone, and not just for the select.” The extensive expansion of poetry’s base comes, of course, at the cost of intensity, pithiness, poetic culture. [. . .] [He] had to send to the devil everything unintelligible, that is, anything that presumed a modicum of poetic education. However, to address oneself in poetry to an audience that lacks any poetic training is just as thankless a task as attempting to sit on a stake. The utterly untrained will understand absolutely nothing. Either that or poetry liberated from all culture will cease to be poetry at all, and then, by some strange property of human nature, it will become accessible to an unlimited audience.

Маяковским разрешается элементарная и великая проблема «поэзии для всех, а не для избранных». Экстенсивное расширение площади под поэзию, разумеется, идет за счет интенсивности, содержательности, поэтической культуры. . . [Маяковский] должен был послать к черту все непонятное, то есть предполагающее в слушателе малейшую поэтическую подготовку. Однако обращаться в стихах к совершенно поэтически неподготовленному слушателю — столь же неблагодарная задача, как попытаться усесться на кол. Совсем неподготовленный совсем ничего не поймет, или же поэзия, освобожденная от всякой культуры, перестанет вовсе быть поэзией и тогда уже по странному свойству человеческой природы станет доступной необъятному кругу слушателей.20

An early proponent of the Soviet effort at creating poetry for the masses, Mayakovsky infused his poetry with Russian vernacular to make it reflect everyday speech. For Mandel’shtam, colloquial poetry was a contradiction in terms. As vehemently as he railed against the vagaries of Symbolist language, the poet contrasted his aesthetic ideal directly to the vulgarities of public discourse. As Clare Cavanagh describes Mandel’shtam’s poetic language, it “does not indulge in idle chit-chat or polite conversation.”

Communication “on the street”—where Mayakovsky would hold impromptu readings—necessarily stifled the poetic intuition with its demand for the rapid transmission of ideas. Mandel’shtam unambiguously vilifies such speech in an essay about a popular street market, where “bazaar speech, like a little predatory beast, flashes its tiny white teeth.” When he upbraids Mayakovsky for eliminating anything “unintelligible” (neponiatnoe) from poetry, Mandel’shtam does not mean that poetic insight should remain ineffable (that would be the claim of Symbolism), but instead that the truths contained in poetry remain inscrutable if reduced to prepackaged and familiar platitudes—the nourishment of the Bergson’s pragmatic and reductive intellect (as opposed to intuition).

If the word is to erect poetic monuments that might disclose the complex hidden realities in the world of objects, it too must be exposed and renewed, because, as Mandel’shtam writes in his 1912 essay “On the Interlocutor” (“O sobesednike”), “there is only one thing that pushes us into the addressee’s embrace: the desire to be astonished by our own words, to be captivated by their originality and unexpectedness.”

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more versatile, expansive, and accommodating than a mere mechanical one-to-one signifier of a
given object or phenomenon; the word has a unique makeup that reflects its diverse connotative
possibilities. In Mandel’shtam’s patently Bergsonian terminology, the word is an organism.
According to this model, the word is alive—mobile, responsive, and adaptable—precisely in its
polysemy; it may have a stable nucleus of meaning, but it naturally, hungrily even, reaches
out to interact and create associative bonds with other words that are related semantically,
phonetically, or, most importantly, by the images they conjure.

This organic view of language rests as the cornerstone of Mandel’shtam’s mature art, the
central nerve of his semiotic and semantic system, which he terms “philology,” and which
defines how meaning is created in his poetry. The same evolution in his metaphysics of the word
is attended, indeed motivated by, an ontological turn inward, onto the subjectivity of the poet.
The poet lays out his philological aesthetics most methodically in his essay “On the Nature of the
Word,” which opens with a direct and extended interpretation of Bergson’s philosophy: “The
most suitable and, in the scientific sense, the most correct approach, is to regard the word as an
image (obraz), that is, as a verbal representation” he confirms. Elsewhere the poet explicates
just how this image is related to the material phenomena of the world, and here he begins to echo
Bergson’s materialism, since “the living word does not signify an object, rather it freely selects,
as if for a dwelling-place, this or that material significance (predmetnaia znachimost’), a

24 “Самое удобное и в научном смысле правильное — рассматривать слово как образ, то есть словесное
представление.” It is apparent from his surrounding comments that Mandel’shtam does not use the word
“representation” (predstavlenie) in the same way as Bergson, who contrasts it to the “thing” as the object that has
been subjected to utilitarian cognition and thus interpreted, edited, and perverted. Mandel’shtam, “О природе слова,”
1:228. Emphasis added.
‘thingness,’ a dear body. And around this thing the word freely roams, as a soul around its
discarded but not forgotten body.”

Having found, uncompeled by any intellectual will, its own dear body, the word-image
liberates the given object from its shackles of prosaic signification and facilitates a direct, pure
sensual connection to that object in its raw and unadulterated state. The poet’s lexicon, then,
essentially consists of a menagerie of phenomena organized, and organically connected, by the
poet’s creative intuition, since the word-image is itself an “intricate complex of phenomena, a
connection, a ‘system.’” Mandel’shtam elucidates this condition when describing the
Hellenistic spirit that conditions his philology. For the poet, Hellenism means a warm, intimate
relationship to the external world, the “conscious encompassing of man with domestic utensils
(utvar’) instead of indifferent objects”; the collection of personalized objects then forms “a
system in the Bergsonian sense of the term, that man unfolds around himself, like a fan of
phenomena freed of their temporal dependence, and subjected to an internal connection through
the human ‘I.’” This organic system, based on the Russian language’s inherent “principle of

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25 “Живое слово не обозначает предмета, а свободно выбирает, как бы для жилья, ту или иную предметную
значимость, вещность, милое тело. И вокруг вещи слово блуждает свободно, как душа вокруг брошенного,


27 “Эллинизм — это сознательное окружение человека утварью вместо безразличных предметов. [. . .] [Э]то
система в бергсоновском смысле слова, которую человек развёртывает вокруг себя, как веер явлений,
освобожденных от временной зависимости, соподчиненных внутренней связи через человеческое я.”
Mandel’shtam, Ibid., 1:227.
inner freedom” directly opposes the “mortal sin” that is “utilitarianism (utilitarizm) in any form.”

Mandel’shtam’s metaphor of the subjective fan, which collapses time and space to superimpose a diverse catalogue of image-objects, represents his visualization of Bergsonian duration, and it accounts for how meaning is created in a Mandel’shtamian poem—a verbal organism that looks remarkably like Barthes’ writerly text. A certain, often humble, word-image appears and then gets subtly echoed elsewhere. As the quietly corresponding images build up, they also accrue new shades of meaning and invite more expansive networks of association. Mandel’shtam’s real hallmark in this poetic procedure is found in the ways those swelling and multiplying associations often clash with one another, making it nearly impossible to identify a stable semantic function even, if not especially, for the small stock of the poet’s favorite and recurring images. Bees make for the ideal illustration. The bee already embodies powerful, and powerfully different, capacities. An industrious, self-sacrificing, and cooperative laborer whose work, moreover, produces golden, manna-like honey, the bee is an effective, ancient metaphor for the poet and his creative activity. Thus Mandel’shtam opens an untitled 1919 poem with the following, fairly transparent bee imagery:

Возьми на радость из моих ладоней
Немного солнца и немного меда,
Как нам велели пчелы Персефоны.

Take, for your pleasure, from my palms

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28 “Всяческий утилитаризм есть смертельный грех против эллинистической природы, против русского языка.” Ibid., 1:221. In the English, Mandel’shtam’s promotion of domestic “utensils” appears to clash with his subsequent claim regarding the sin of utilitarianism. The Russian clarifies his distinction. The word for utensils, utvar’, derives from the verb tvorit’, “to create”; tvorit’ itself comes from an older Slavic form, tvoriti, meaning “to hold.” The domestic objects that constitute the poet’s material lexicon have a significance beyond utility and are more intimately related to the subject than an object capable of a certain operation; they are precisely those objects that become indiscernible and inseparable from one’s self and that make possible his very being—not just doing—in the world.
A bit of sun and a little honey,
As Persephone’s bees said we ought.

The same bee, however, can have a less pleasant purpose. Bees sting. They also embody the perfect fragility and fleetingness of earthly life: should the bee sting but once, it dies. These more doleful sentiments Mandel’shtam masterfully combines, two stanzas later, where pleasant kisses are tinged with the pain of parting:

Нам остается только поцелуи,
Мохнатые, как маленькие пчелы,
Что умирают, вылетев из улья.

All that is left to us are kisses,
Shaggy, like small bees,
That die upon leaving the hive.  

This very different inflection on the image necessarily modifies and recolors the initial appearance of the bees, whose proximity to the goddess of the Underworld, Persephone, we now understand.

One final example exploits similar associations, while further demonstrating how those associations reach beyond a single image to make broader, more complex semantic networks.

Сестры тяжесть и нежность, одинаковы ваши приметы.
Медуницы и осы тяжелую розу сосут.
Человек умирает. Песок остывает согретый,
И вчерашнее солнце на черных носилках несут.

Sisters—heaviness and tenderness—identical are your marks.
Honey-makers and wasps suck the heavy rose.
Man dies. Warm sand grows cold,
And yesterday’s sun is carried off on a black litter.

29 Mandel’shtam, “Voz’mi na radost’ is moikh ladonei,” 1:147.
These lines, which open an untitled 1920 poem, reiterate the bees’ creative generation/morbidity theme, while expanding these qualities to the broader landscape, as the bees’ characteristic coloration is echoed in the [yellow] sun and the black funereal stretcher carrying it away. This color scheme proves another of Mandel’shtam favorites; it is an important element of his Jewish theme, for instance, especially as the ritual rabbinic shawl is composed of the same colors. The wasps add another dimension. Kiril Taranovsky has investigated at length how these related creatures form a more grim counterpart to the bees, with whom they are harmonized in these lines.31

These brief examples offer only a taste of how Mandel’shtam’s poetics works. The Egyptian Stamp is likewise composed of such multivalently freighted images. Indeed, fabric, another of the poet’s richest stock images, forms the single semantic nexus for the entire work. Mandel’shtam uses fabric, particularly “ornamental” fabrics, as a metaphor for the form and function of poetic compositions. In the introduction, I noted Mandel’shtam’s reference to oriental rugs, whose elaborate arching patterns reflect the atemporal and omnispatial associative action of poetic logic. The rug’s intricate weaving locates these same effects in the rug’s very structure—in the syntax of the poem. In Fourth Prose, Mandel’shtam introduces another fabric that reiterates these same principles, but with meaningful additions—or, rather, absences. “Real work—that is Brussels lace. There the important thing is what holds the pattern together: air, perforations, truancies.”32 Lace, with its criminal truancies (proguly), mimics the absence of qualifying words (words that enable prose to impose “a meaning superseded”) by placing the raw images in

immediate proximity to one another; the absences force intuitive associations. Mandel’shtam explains that this aperture—this invitation for durational cognition—is the poem’s true virtue: “What I prize in the bublik, is the hole. But what of the bublik’s dough? The bublik you can gobble up, but the hole remains.”33 To make the point perfectly clear, Mandel’shtam contrasts these text(ile) ornaments to their alternative: “Poetic discourse is a carpet fabric containing a plethora of textile warps [. . .] braids, figures, and ornaments—not in patterns, though, for a pattern is the equivalent of paraphrase,” which, he has stated earlier, is itself “surely a sign of non-poetry.”34 In The Egyptian Stamp, text(ile) imagery absorbs into itself the very conflict of prosaic and poetic language.

Just as crucial as how these images operate is why they do so. Mandel’shtam’s emphasis on the organizing and meaning-generating schema of poetry coincides with a series of statements about the nature of selfhood and subjectivity that likewise bear a Bergsonian imprint, along with more caustic statements concerning the prosaic subjectivity being imposed on the public by an increasingly encroaching political ideology. In the same year (1922) that he writes “On the Nature of the Word,” Mandel’shtam also pens “The End of the Novel” and “Literary Moscow: The Birth of Plot.” This pair of essays savages the biographical novel, and prose more generally, as forms utterly incompatible with personal experience. In the first essay he observes that “the


34 “Поэтическая речь есть ковровая ткань, имеющая множество текстильных основ, [. . .] в жгутах, фигурах, орнаментах” Mandel’shtam, “Razgovor o Dante,” 3:216. This passage contains yet another barb directed at Mayakovsky. In his 1918 play Mystery Bouffe (Misteria-buff), which imagines the divine triumph of the chosen proletariat over depraved capitalists, Mayakovsky criticizes the latter’s empty rhetoric of egalitarianism by putting the following words into the mouth of Clemenceau (George Clemenceau, Prime Minister of France, 1917-1920): “What are you getting all worked up about? We promised to divide [everything] equally: To one person the bublik, to the other, the bublik’s hole. That’s what a democratic republic is” (Чего кипятитесь? Обещали и делим поровну: одному — бублик, другому дырка от бублика. Это и есть демократическая республика). Mayakovsky, Misteria-buff, in Sobranie sochinenii, 1:296.
thematic pivot of the novel,” is meant to be the life of an individual, inserted into “a plot, along with everything that attends it.” But the “totality” of a human life, the poet states categorically, “is not a biography” and thus cannot be reduced to a linear development; instead, the only true plot of a human life is the individual acting in accord with his “personal sense of time.”35

“For literature, the theory of evolution is particularly dangerous,” says Mandel’shtam in “On the Nature of the Word,” confirming that the teleology of the novel generally distorts the shape of lived personal experience: “the theory of progress is downright murderous.”36 Well before Barthes’ comments on the Marxist novel, Mandel’shtam identifies the most pernicious feature of contemporary prose. If even the nineteenth-century novelistic plot was violently inauthentic to individual experience, the post-Revolutionary novel (the favorite genre of what would become Socialist Realism) utterly destroyed it: “Once we entered the phase of mighty social movements and organized mass actions, when class struggle has become the only real and universally recognized event,” the individual life fell away, subsumed into a collective, relentlessly forward-moving march.37 The manufactured temporal and spatial trajectory of Soviet world-historical progress so effectively inflects the collective and individual consciousness because the whole linguistic and psychic realignment is coded into the novel’s deeper structure.


37 “Ясно, что, когда мы вступили в полосу могучих социальных движений, массовых организованных действий, когда борьба классов становится единственным настоящим и общепризнанным событием, акции личности в истории падают в сознании современников.” Mandel’shtam, “Konets romana,” 2:273. This statement has some subtle wordplay that is difficult to capture in the English, but that meaningfully reinforces the larger political point. The primary meaning of the word I translate as “phase,” polosa, is a “stripe,” a “band,” or a “straight bar.” Mandel’shtam thus poetically expresses the narrow linearity of the Socialist chronotope.
“Literary Moscow: The Birth of Plot,” takes up the issue, contending that the contemporary “craving” for “anonymous prose [. . .] coincided for us with the Revolution,” precisely because the historical momentum of the Socialist project could “unite itself to the tidy movement of the verbal masses” (*deistvie slovesnykh mass*).\(^{38}\)

Such is the subjectivity, and the form of its articulation, that dictates the work of the professional writer derided in *Fourth Prose*. The same condition also informs the behavior of those “verbal masses” themselves, that is, the uniform body politic, molded by discourse. Also in 1922, Mandel’shtam writes “The Bloody Mystery-Play of January 9th” (‘*Krovavai misteriia 9-ogo ianvaria*”) in which he depicts the state massacre of some five hundred government protestors and the ensuing public riots that triggered the initial, unsuccessful revolution in 1905. His rich description captures the momentum of prose, the absence of subjectivity and personal agency, and even the loss of sensuous faculties, all redolent of Bergson’s description of the impact of social obligation.

Historical events have no director. Without instruction, without prior agreement, the participants go out into the streets and the plazas, driven out of their cozy dwellings by some vague agitation. An unknown force throws them onto the city squares, to be under the sway of an unknown authority. It is good if a tribune emerges whose voice can impart a system—an order to the human elements, [and] if there be a common objective—a stronghold, that must be taken, a Bastille that must be destroyed. Then the ant hill, loosened by a stick, transforms into a svelte, orderly system of vessels, running toward the center, where all will be resolved, where some event must invariably take place.

У исторических событий нет режиссурь. Без указаний, без сговору выходят участники на площади и улицы, глухим беспокойством вынуженные из укромного жилья. Неведомая сила бросает их на городские стогны, во власть неизвестного. Хорошо, если найдется трибун, чей голос укажет строй — порядок человеческой стихии, если есть общая цель — крепость, которую нужно взять, Бастилия, которую

Almost all of this imagery will appear again, even more graphically, in *The Egyptian Stamp*, where the ravenous mob relentlessly marches its victim to the Fontanka on the eve of the 1917 Revolution.

Mandel’shtam’s final assault on prose exposes a different dimension of what he understands to be the nature—and more specifically the *anatomy*—of poetic subjectivity, and the process of its articulation. “Literary Moscow: The Birth of Plot” criticizes a species of writing that the poet calls “psychological prose”: “Since the ulcer of psychological experimentation penetrated into the literary consciousness, the prose writer has become a surgeon, and prose—the clinical catastrophe, highly disagreeable to our taste.” In direct contrast to the “obscure, antisocial” procedure of “extract[ing] a pyramid from the depths of one’s own soul” that is poetic composition, this manner of prose seeks to meticulously anatomize the subject, who has offered himself to “vivisectionists—the psychological writers.” Psychological prose problematically endeavors to taxonomize, localize, identify, and diagnose the condition of contemporary subjectivity (and, as Foucault argues, the true purpose of any such analysis is ultimately to *normalize*). Poetry’s associative semantics, by contrast, reflect the psyche’s natural, multivalent condition. What may appear as a personality disorder to the writer of psychological prose is, to the poet, simply the personality in its true state.

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Mandel’shtam identifies the first victim of these verbal and psychological violences as the poet. Indeed, the sentiments expressed in this cluster of essays from 1922 may have been inspired by the death of Blok the previous summer, an event that for many symbolized the death of poetry itself. Many also blamed the state’s vindictiveness for Blok’s death. Mandel’shtam had no illusions that he might be spared the same fate. The poet’s wife, Nadezhda Mandel’shtam, claims that her husband had always been keenly aware of the end that he would meet as an almost necessary consequence of his vocation as a poet. “Poetry is respected only in this country,” Mandel’shtam liked to say, “people are killed for it. There’s no other place where people are killed for it.”

Steeled by this conviction, Mandel’shtam “willfully steered his life toward the destruction that awaited him, toward the most prevalent form of death, ‘herded with the herd.’” The poet’s unwillingness to blunt his poetic voice to meet the demands of prosaic power testifies to his resolution. Even the few pieces of “prose” he did compose in the mid 1920s balked at the new conventions. In 1923, Mandel’shtam penned his unorthodox memoir, *The Noise of Time*, an impressionistic portrait of life as a raznochinets-pisatel’-Jew (non-noble-writer-Jew). The work was a recognition of what Gregory Freidin has described as the literary atmosphere of the post-revolutionary years, “when the Russian language seemed to provide the only ‘institution’ of historical continuity, [and] identity based on [belles] letters grew in symbolic force”; the same condition, however, simultaneously tested “the doubts concerning [the Russian

42 Initially a supporter of the Revolution, by 1921 Blok’s enthusiasm for the project had waned dramatically, and the poet consequently fell out of favor with the state. His change in ideology was attended by a period of poetic silence. When Blok fell ill in the summer of 1921, he was forbidden from going abroad for treatment, despite appeals from his doctors. He died in August.


44 “О. М. властно вел свою жизнь к той гибели, которая его подстерегала, к самой распространенной у нас форме смерти с гурьбой и гуртом.” Ibid., 161.
language’s] actual power and relevance in the revolutionary epoch.”

The Noise of Time largely confirmed the validity of those doubts. In an era when published personal narratives were supposed to follow the clear and approved trajectory of one’s rebirth into Marxist consciousness, the story of an artist’s “philological” awakening was unwelcome “noise” indeed. It was flatly rejected by numerous publishers and printed only in 1925.

Acquaintances positively took fright at the subversiveness of Mandel’shtam’s poetry of the early 1930s; fellow poet Perets Markish, for instance, after a reading in the winter of 1932-33, told Mandel’shtam, “You are taking yourself by the hand and leading yourself to your own execution.”

Treating this awareness of his fate creatively, Mandel’shtam frequently thematizes the image of the poet as a sacrifice to creative culture. Freidin has observed that one of Mandel’shtam’s most important and sustained “mythologies of self-presentation” comprised the role of martyr. Especially in the post-revolutionary years, Mandel’shtam adopts a posture as poet whereby “he could present himself not merely as a victim of the times but as a son of the ‘age the master’ (“1 January 1924”) who had inadvertently absorbed the abomination of his epoch and could therefore, poetically speaking, offer himself as an innocent redemptive sacrifice.”

Mandel’shtam’s 1923 poem “The Age” (“Vek”) asks, “My century, my wild beast, who will dare / To gaze into your pupils / And mend with his own blood / The backbone of two centuries?” (Век мой, зверь мой, кто сумеет / Заглянуть в твои зрачки / И своей кровью склеит / Двух столетий позвонки?) The poem polemically repurposes a “nihilistic” image from

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46 Ibid., 101–02.

47 “Вы сами себя берете за руку и ведете на казнь.” Recorded by N. Mandel’shtam, Vospominaniia, 185.

48 Freidin, A Coat of Many Colors, 207.
a 1915 Mayakovsky poem, wherein a similarly disillusioned poetic voice announces, “Today I will play the flute. / My own backbone” (Я сегодня буду играть на флейте. / На собственном позвоночнике). In Mandel’shtam’s poem, the flute-backbone does not simply represent the poet’s body; instead, the poet’s anatomy houses all of culture: “To tear the age from its prison, / To begin a new world, / The gnarled joints of days / Must be bound into a flute” (Чтобы вырвать век из плена, / Чтобы новый мир начать, / Узловатых дней колена / Нужно флейтою связать). By sacrificing himself, his body, the poet redeems the world.

The poet is able to embrace his fate because “we need not exclude the artist’s death from the chain of his creative achievements, but rather view it as that chain’s last, closing link”; the death of the poet can also be a generative act. In the same essay, “Skriabin and Christianity” (“Skriabin i khristianstvo”), written in the year of the Revolution, Mandel’shtam restates the sentiment more provocatively, while also gesturing more concretely to how the poet’s creations endure after death. Mandel’shtam considered Christ the original poet-martyr, his death having initiated a new worldview and ethics centered on the principal of inner freedom, a freedom mirrored in the nature of language itself. In Christ’s death, then, Christianity “nourish[ed] art in surrendering to it its flesh.” As the anatomical imagery of “The Age”

49 Vladimir Mayakovsky, “Fleita-pozvonochnik,” 1:120. The description of Mayakovsky’s poetic sentiment as “nihilistic” is Freidin’s. See A Coat of Many Colors, 205.
51 Adjusted to reflect the legal realities of the Soviet regime, in the late 1920s Mandel’shtam assumed another iteration of the ennobled persona non grata when he celebrated the “criminality” of his own writing. This motif emerges most forcefully in Fourth Prose, where Mandel’shtam proclaims that the criminality of his noncompliant compositions only testify to their artistic integrity. “My work, regardless of its form, is considered mischief, lawlessness, mere accident. But I like it that way, and I agree to my calling. I’ll even sign my name with both hands” (Мой труд, в чем бы он ни выражался, воспринимается как озорство, как беззаконие, как случайность. Но такова моя воля, и я на это согласен. Подписываюсь обеими руками). Mandel’shtam, Fourth Prose, 3:178.
suggests, it is in the specific corporeality of poetic sacrifice, wherein the body is given over to
the world, to become a part of that world, that the poet transcends death. For Mandel’shtam, it is
the specific materiality of language that makes this event possible.

To understand this final gesture of the poet’s transcendence of death, we must return to
Mandel’shtam’s conception of philology. The organism that is the philological word-image does
not simply gather around the subject his poeticized objects. With a recognizably Bergsonian
logic, Mandel’shtam says that the subject’s sensorium extends out to meet with those objects
through poetic language. Here the word finally emerges not just as an organic phenomenon but a
biological and, indeed, thoroughly somatic substance. Hardly the same raw building material of
Acmeist poetics, this word is in fact an outgrowth of the poet’s body. Elsewhere in “On the
Nature of the Word,” Mandel’shtam describes the metaphysical disposition animating philology:
“Hellenism is an earthenware pot, oven prongs, a milk jug; it is kitchen utensils, dishes—
everything that surrounds the body.” Gradually, those domestic objects—to which one relates not
as utilitarian tools but as extensions of oneself—share in the body’s qualities: “Hellenism is any
kind of stove near which a man sits, treasuring its heat as his own, kindred, internal body heat.”

In one final theoretical gesture, Mandel’shtam suggests that, as an evolutionary heir to the
Hellenistic tradition, the Russian language can likewise fully commune with the world of dear
objects. He thus characterizes his contemporary Russian as “resonant and speaking
flesh” (zvuchashchaia i govoriashchaia plot’), whose word-images we can consider “not only as
objective data of consciousness, but also as human organs, utterly the same as the liver or the

54 “Эллинизм — это печной горшок, ухват, крышка с молоком, это — домашняя утварь, посуда, все
окружение тела. [. . .] Эллинизм—это всякая печка, около которой сидит человек и ценит ее тепло, как
In sum, Mandel’shtam’s philology realizes Bergson’s metaphysics of language, where the poetic word functions as a hyphen, creating a point of immediate contact between my body and the image-objects (matter itself) of the external world; the word’s substance is that of the organic metabody, to which my body is intuitively attuned.

While this seems far from the conservative ideals of clarity and precision promoted in Acmeism, Mandel’shtam did not consider the personal, embodied warmth and expansiveness of philological semiotics to be at odds with the austere Classical aesthetics that he valued. Indeed, already in his “Apollonian” Acmeist days he seemed to have reconciled the apparently antagonistic forces by way the figure of the Gothic cathedral. Mandel’shtam sees the cathedral as infused with the live mobility of the human body.

A love for the organism and for organization is a love Acmeists share with the physiologically brilliant Middle Ages. In pursuing refinement, the nineteenth century lost the secret of genuine complexity. What in the thirteenth century seemed a logical development in the understanding of the organism—the Gothic cathedral—is now, aesthetically, something monstrous: Notre Dame is a festival of physiology, its Dionysian revelry. We do not want to distract ourselves with a ramble through a “forest of symbols” because we have a more virgin, a denser forest—divine physiology, the infinite complexity of our own dark organism.

Любовь к организму и организации акмеисты разделяют с физиологически-генениальным средневековьем. В погоне за утонченностью XIX век потерял секрет настоящей сложности. То, что в XIII казалось логическим развитием понятия организма—готический собор,—ныне эстетически действует как чудовищное: Notre Dame есть праздник физиологии, ее дIONисийский разгул. Мы не хотим развлекать себя прогулкой в «лесу символов», потому что у нас есть более девственный, более дремучий лес—божественная физиология, бесконечная сложность нашего темного организма.56

55 “[P]усский язык стал именно звучащей и говорящей плотью . . . Представления можно рассматривать . . . как органы человека, совершенно так же точно, как печень, сердце.” Ibid., 1:223, 229.
Mandel’shtam admired the artisans of the Gothic world for the way they articulated, in the structure and style of their artistic creations, their own anatomy into the world of things. The cathedral contains no convoluting mediation of symbols because the artistic marvel realizes the immediate point of connection between object, image, and soma. In short, Mandel’shtam sees the cathedral as a materialization of my body and thus a reflection of the procedure taking place in his own work. In other words, if a Mandel’shtam text is meant to read like a writerly text, it is also meant to feel like a textural artifact written with style.

In his masterful poem “Notre Dame” (1912), we see the physiological communion of poet and poeticized object, along with all the other vital dimensions of Mandel’shtam’s poetics. The poem obviously engages with the declaration from “The Morning of Acmeism,” as it ostensibly sings the praises of the architectural wonder’s anatomy. But in the very process of being verbally composed, that anatomy changes, merges with the poet’s own.

Где римский судия судил чужой народ,
Стоит базилика, и—радостный и первый—
Как некогда Адам, распластывая нервы,
Играет мышцами крестовый легкий свод.

Но выдает себя снаружи тайный план,
Здесь позаботилась подпружных арок сила,
Чтоб масса груznая стены не сокуршила,
И свода дерзкого бездействует таран.

Стихийный лабиринт, непостижимый лес,
Души готической рассудочной пропасть,
Египетская мощь и христианства робость,
С тростинкой рядом—дуб, и всюду царь—отвес.

Но чем внимательней, твердья Notre Dame,
Я изучал твои чудовищные рёбра,—
 Тем чаще думал я: из тяжести недобrer
И я когда-нибудь прекрасная создам. . .
Where the Roman judge judged a foreign people,
Now a basilica stands, and—joyous and original—
As Adam once did, spreading its nerves,
The groin vault flexes its muscles.

But from without it presents a secret plan,
Where force attends to the saddling arches,
That the cumbrous mass of the wall not collapse,
And that lies idle the battering ram of the insolent vault.

Primordial labyrinth, inscrutable forest,
Reasoned abyss of the gothic soul,
Egyptian vigor and Christian diffidence,
With a slender reed nearby—an oak, and everywhere a tsar—a precipice.

But, citadel Notre Dame, the more attentively
I studied your monstrous ribs,
The more often I thought: from an inimical heaviness,
One day I, too, shall something beautiful create. . .57

In the end, the poem is less a paean to the cathedral itself than a self-reflexive description of the poetic edifice being composed of the poet’s own body. The poem-cathedral, having been treated to the poet’s subjective “I” and articulated in the poet’s corporeal word-images, is consequently erected with the “ribs,” “muscles,” and “nerves” of the poet’s own living tissue. Clare Cavanagh has nicely characterized the physio-architectural feat of the poem. She describes “Notre Dame” as Mandel’shtam’s expression of his understanding that, in his project of “organizing his own organism, [. . .] the poet is himself both creature and creator, gardener and flower, architect and stone. The architect of his own physical being, he is free to participate in the building of Notre Dame’s body.”58 Such an orientation to oneself, and such a project of textu(r)al self-articulation,

57 Mandel’shtam, Sobranie sochinenii, 1:79-80. “Notre Dame” initially appeared in the March 1913 issue of Apollon. The issue was meant as a programmatic statement of Acmeist ideology, and “Notre Dame” was thus presented as that program in action. See Peter Steiner, “Poem as Manifesto: Mandel’štam’s ‘Notre Dame,’” Russian Literature 5, no. 3 (July 1977): 239-256.

58 Cavanagh, Modernist Creation of Tradition, 84.
is, moreover, precisely that imagined in Foucault’s self-care, where the individual protecting himself against “the vicissitudes of existence” must become his own subject and his own object.

Importantly, the cathedral also reifies and recapitulates the theme of sacrifice. Every Christian church commemorates the passion of the Lamb of God, but Notre Dame in particular celebrates the human vessel through which the Divine itself descended to take on the agonies of the flesh. Christ’s corporeal death made the very form of the church possible since it was his flesh, surrendered to the world, that animated the poetic imagination of his cultural inheritors, allowing them to perceive their own anatomy in the world of things.

Further still, the poetic edifice ideally renders, in its very anatomy, all the complexities and paradoxes of the multiform subjective self. The cathedral operates by harmonizing perfectly oppositional forces. At one level “labyrinthine” and “inscrutable,” the architecture of the building’s “soul” is at the same time “reasoned.” The church’s origins are both alien and domestic, Christian and pagan. All these fundamental paradoxes are then manifest in the seemingly impossible physics of a structure which simultaneously celebrates density and lightness, fragility and durability: the strength and gravity of stone enabling the incredibly high, open vault of the ceiling; the apparently fragile reed assuming the same burdens borne by the mighty oak. Complementing its role as a translation of my body, “Notre Dame” captures the anatomy of the self; in Bergsonian terminology, it is the textu(r)al vehicle of embodied subjective experience in duration.

Notre Dame allows Mandel’shtam to inhabit a form that comfortably exists between worlds and selves without having to invalidate the internal antagonisms. A liminal space, the cathedral is also characterized by its purposeful incompleteness, its constant state of changing
and becoming. Accordingly, the boundaries between inside and out, private and public are always at play in the edifice: the structure’s anatomy is utterly exposed within, “But from without it presents a secret plan.” Put differently, the projected image of the church is a coded image-system that conceals as much as it shares; it thus expresses Barthes’ ideal grammar of personal self-writing.

The poem’s closing line, expressing hope that the narrative voice may create something comparable to the cathedral, is thus wholly ironic, since the narrative voice has composed his own beautiful monument, a monument of verse in which the poet has “organized his own organism.” The same monument is, moreover, also nothing other than the “real” Notre Dame as it has been, in accord with Bergson’s logic, purely perceived—perceived precisely in its essential materiality—by the poet, who has thus entered into communion with it. All told, the poem fully realizes the process whereby the flesh is rendered into word.

For the exiled and persecuted poet, this dramatic vision of creative metamorphosis cannot be reduced to mere metaphor or allegory. Mandel’shtam was acutely aware of his own mortality, and he knew that his poetry would be his only legacy. But he did not conceive of that legacy in the same way as, say, the self-effacing Mallarmé, who wanted to expunge from his poetic statements any trace of his everyday, extra-textual existence and identity. Mandel’shtam makes his point clear in the prose piece “Journey to Armenia” (“Puteshestvie v Armeniiu,” 1931). There the poet recounts one night observing some fireflies. He realizes that in those “little phosphorescent insects . . . I somehow saw the dance of death.” The fireflies’ fleeting illuminations speak of man’s own mortal fate: “Our fleshy, heavy body moulders in just the same way, and our activity will turn into just such a bedlam of signals if we do not leave behind us
some material proof of our existence.”\textsuperscript{59} The poem, as an artistic artifact of verbal images that issues, as a principle, from the poet’s \textit{subjective} “I,” leaves such an individual material footprint.

For Mandel’shtam, a poem does not simply enshrine the artist in the divine realm of immortal forms. Instead, the poem actually \textit{en-crypts} its composer here, in the world of things that was the object of his verse. By the creative act’s process of mutual communion and transference of material properties, the poem also seems to allows for the poet to be inscribed within his menagerie—his “fan of phenomena”—that make up his poetic images. In “On the Nature of the Word,” Mandel’shtam writes that “Hellenism,” the spirit of domestic and bodily warmth that informs Mandel’shtam’s language and aesthetics, “is the funeral bark of the Egyptian dead, in which gets deposited everything necessary for the continuation of a man’s earthly travels, right up to jar of perfume, a mirror, and a comb.” The very same is true of the poem itself: “I compare the poem to an Egyptian bark of the dead,” Mandel’shtam says later, “everything necessary for life is stored in this boat and nothing is forgotten.”\textsuperscript{60} We witness a similar metaphysical transference in “Notre Dame,” as it imagines the poet grafting his body to the cathedral and thus imprinting his form into a tangible monument on the actual landscape.

Such are the aesthetic imperatives and creative processes at work in \textit{The Egyptian Stamp}, the text to which my analysis presently turns. In that work, the actual conflict of literary savagery is dramatically staged, with the positive, generative capacities of poetic composition juxtaposed to the reductive and destructive inertia of state-supervised literary production. Parnok’s body is


the principal field on which that battle is played out, as he becomes the subject of a contest between the two forms of literary articulation.

The time was ripe for Mandel’shtam to treat this confrontation of prose and poetry that is *The Egyptian Stamp*, and those circumstances do much to explain the peculiar form of this truly bizarre text. Published in 1928, the work marks the middle of Mandel’shtam’s “prose period,” that is, an interval from 1925 until 1930 when he experienced, not unlike Blok, an inability to compose verse. Mandel’shtam was no doubt profoundly affected by his difficulties publishing, difficulties that began in the early 1920s, but the vehemence of his attacks on prose and its official organs in the essays of 1922 can also read as a gesture of overcompensation. Perhaps part of Mandel’shtam felt impelled to toe the line? We cannot know Mandel’shtam’s motivations and, in fact, we need not. Bergson and his followers demonstrate that the condition of embodied subjectivity is determined precisely by the subject’s—even the poet’s—necessary embeddedness in the social world, with all its prosaic pressures. This inherent ambivalence of selfhood is certainly the plight of *The Egyptian Stamp*’s narrator, who struggles between the effort to write a prose narrative and the compulsion to compose more a poetic text. He also struggles between the impulse to identify with and the urge to mock his subject Parnok, who, in turn, resembles Mandel’shtam in some important ways. The narrator also rather unambiguously likens himself to the demonic tailor Mervis, the thief of Parnok’s “earthly casing,” who hands that same coat over
Finally, the novella ends with the narrator accompanying Captain Krzhizhanovsky—the embodiment of political power and the inheritor of Parnok’s coat—to the Hotel Select on the Lubianka, that is, to the operating headquarters of the Cheka.

Scholars agree that *The Egyptian Stamp* is a profoundly “autobiographical” work, but they are frequently at a loss to explain the difficult incongruities internal to the self-portrait. It proves challenging enough to digest the resemblances between the “real” author and his “little man” Parnok. Even Nadezhda Mandel’shtam, who dismisses the novella as a failure, suggests that the hardships of the 1920s, which “were perhaps the worst time in M.’s life,” led a disoriented and dejected Mandel’shtam to begin “confusing himself with Parnok, indeed almost making him out to be his double.”61 Nevertheless, Nadezhda recalls that during those difficult years her husband spoke “consistently about his illness, inadequacy and, ultimately, his inferiority,” acknowledging the reality that the anxieties and ineptitudes embodied in Parnok at times belonged equally to her husband’s own sense of self.62 As Charles Isenberg posits of Nadezhda excising *The Egyptian Stamp* from her husband’s representative works, “perhaps the idea of Parnok as Mandelstam’s double is disturbing because it sorts so ill with the canonical Mandelstam, sure of his gifts and his ultimate place in Russian poetry, who appears everywhere else in her memoirs.”63 Freidin, on the other hand, posits that Mandelstam is knowingly making a “cruel parody [of] the particular mythologies and the related symbolic vocabulary of his self-presentation,” and so in Parnok is “flaunting before the reader the exorbitant resemblance

61 “Двадцатые годы, может, самое трудное время в жизни О.М. [. . .] Этот период закончился тем, что он почти спутал себя с Парноком, чуть не превратил его в своего двойника.” N. Mandel’shtam, *Vospominaniia*, 203.


between himself and his alter ego.” Other scholars are a bit more accommodating. Cavanagh allows that Mandel’shtam is a poet possessed of “contradictory desires and fears, and equally contradictory images of the self that fears and desires.” Elsewhere Isenberg suggests that the aim of The Egyptian Stamp’s psychology is “to grasp the possibility of irreconcilable contradiction as the pertinent truth about the self and its literary reflections.” In my estimation, Bergson’s model of the self as multiple unity allows for the self-contradictions to be reconciled. It is through the image-system of the novella that this possibility is realized.

Less speculatively, we can say that the poet undoubtedly worked his sense of outsiderness into the fabric of the The Egyptian Stamp. He makes his condition felt most poignantly in the countless references to Jewish ritual, culture, history, and heritage shared by author, narrative voice, and hero. Moreover, one of the central events in the story echoes the poet’s biography. Parnok’s efforts to advocate for an unknown victim of tyrannical terror (a suspected watch thief, whom a mob parades to the Fontanka for execution), the event that gives such powerful expression to Parnok’s humanity, recalls a well-circulated episode from Mandel’shtam’s own life. Much like the normally timid Parnok, Mandel’shtam harbored an “almost unconscious repulsion toward power,” from which he “always, in an almost childish way, fled all contact.” Nevertheless, the usually mild-mannered Mandel’shtam threw himself into the path of the infamously unstable terrorist and Cheka agent, Iakov Bliumkin. The story goes that shortly after

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64 Freidin, A Coat of Many Colors, 213-14.
65 Cavanagh, Modernist Creation of Tradition, 87.
67 N. Mandel’shtam, Vospominaniia, 123.
the Revolution in 1917, Mandel’shtam was at a political party when Bliumkin began to make a scene by filling out death warrants already signed by the head of the secret police and loudly gloating about having the ability to have anyone killed with the stroke of a pen. Apparently disgusted at the display, Mandel’shtam approached Bliumkin (who always carried a pistol—and liked to use it), snatched and tore up the warrants, and departed hastily. Later Mandel’shtam went in person to the head of the secret police, Felix Dzerzhinsky, and reported Bliumkin’s sick charade.68

In his moment of uncharacteristic intervention, Parnok, from the window of his dentist’s office, sees the mob marching its victim to his execution site. Although recognizing that “someone had only, with the most timid exclamation, to come to the aid of the owner of the ill-fated collar, […] and he would be himself taken into the fray, would be under suspicion, would be deemed outside of the law and drawn into the empty square,” Parnok nevertheless rushes down to the street and right into harm’s way.69 “Sideways along the sidewalk, passing ahead of the sturdy procession of the lynch mob,” Parnok frantically searches for a phone to call the authorities. He eventually spots Captain Krzhizhanovsky, to whom he rushes, “as though to his best friend, beseeching him to draw his weapon.”70

We can also say that the Petersburg conjured in The Egyptian Stamp is very much Mandel’shtam’s own. He includes names of places and things that were important to his

69 “Столпо кому-нибудь самым робким восклицанием прийти на помощь обладателю злополучного воротника […] как его самого взяли бы в переделку, под подозрение, объявили бы вне закона и втянули бы в пустое карз.” Mandel’shtam, Egipetskai marka, 2:476.
70 “Бочком по тротуару, опережая солидную процессию самосуда […] Парнок бросился к нему, как к лучшему другу, умоляя обнажить оружие.” Ibid., 2:477.
experience there, tinging them with his poetic gaze.\textsuperscript{71} Mandel’shtam also includes countless references to other conjurers of Petersburg, Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoevsky being only the most apparent. Clarence Brown notes that the poet imparted to Petersburg his peculiar “nostalgi[c], [. . .] elegiac sense of the past” to indelibly color the landscape and the atmosphere of the novella.\textsuperscript{72} This is significant because, in \textit{The Egyptian Stamp}, Mandel’shtam is working to poetically resurrect a Petersburg that, historically, \textit{no longer exists}, having been violently relegated to the past by the Bolsheviks’ ideology of historical teleology. The fact that the novella refers to the city as “Petersburg” is already anachronistic. The story is set in the “Kerensky Summer” of 1917, that is, the summer between the February and October Revolutions of 1917, when Aleksandr Kerensky was serving as president of the Provisional Government, but already on 12 March 1917, the city’s name had been changed to Petrograd.\textsuperscript{73} Mandel’shtam composed the novella in the winter of 1927-28 in Tsarskoe Selo, a town some fifteen miles south of the city, by which time Petersburg had been rechristened Leningrad in January, 1924. The Petersburg that Mandel’shtam remembers was the true cultural hub of the Russian consciousness, the fertile soil in which intellectual and creative life proliferated for the previous two centuries. Parnok’s imagination inhabits this historically extinct Petersburg—Petersburg in \textit{duration}, where the present is still pregnant with the past. The narrator occupies this city, too, while also being drawn into the historical and political present that he necessarily inhabits.

\textsuperscript{71} Clarence Brown, in his commentary on the novella, remarks on the inclusion of the very specific “Eyler’s flower shop,” near which Mandel’shtam once lived. Such details, Brown suggests, speak to the poet’s keen “acutely developed sense of place.” The “predominant mood” of the Mandel’shtam’s work, he goes on, is nostalgia, nostalgia “heavily dependent upon the actual names of places and things in Petersburg.” Brown, \textit{The Noise of Time}, 48-49.

\textsuperscript{72} Brown, \textit{The Noise of Time}, 47-48.

\textsuperscript{73} Brown, \textit{The Noise of Time}, 236n.
These two autobiographical dimensions—a contemporary political fervor that championed collective action and a remembered Petersburg that celebrated individual thought—overlap in *The Egyptian Stamp*, constituting the novella’s deeper context and conflict. In the novella’s sustained image-system, the present is a disease on the past. Thus it is not Parnok’s body alone that might be preserved in the text, but an entire place alive with its own diverse personalities commingling in the duration of Petersburg’s history.
—Coat, Text, Body: Parnok’s “Obolochka” in The Egyptian Stamp—

Why such a large, huge sarcophagus for a mummy of a dead person, which itself is not at all large: But surely this is the “cocoon” of the chrysalis-man; and the sarcophagus was invariably constructed on the model of a cocoon. Just as oblong and smooth as any cocoon which a caterpillar invariably builds, was the sarcophagus which the Egyptians made for the body “becoming a cocoon.” And the body was put in winding-sheets, was wrapped, as the caterpillar of a silk-worm, just letting out silk threads and, as it were, making a “silk shirt” for itself.

Vasily Rozanov, Solitaria

We can expect clothing to constitute an excellent poetic object: first because it mobilizes with great variety all the qualities of matter: substance, form, color, tactility, movement, rigidity, luminosity; next, because touching the body and functioning simultaneously as its substitute and its mask, it is certainly the object of a very important investment.

Roland Barthes, The Fashion System

The basic plot (if there can be said to be one) of The Egyptian Stamp, can most readily be boiled down to a marriage of Gogol’s “The Overcoat” and “The Nose.” It is the story of Parnok, a meek and lowly Jewish man who entrusts his “dear sister”—his morning coat—to a disreputable tailor; after discovering that his indispensable garment as well as his best shirts have been given to the powerful and worldly military official, Captain Krzhizhanovsky, Parnok sets out to retrieve them. The literary tradition of “little man” misadventure narratives, into which Mandel’shtam inserts his hero, is robust. From Pushkin’s “The Bronze Horseman,” through Gogol’s Petersburg tales, and Dostoevsky’s Notes from the Underground, Parnok is immediately placed in a company of troubled but often sympathetic and abused social outsiders. Mandel’shtam draws liberally from a rich cache of literary tropes found in the model texts, but he also introduces some meaningful novelties that enable his “little man” to reflect Mandel’shtam’s own social and political concerns. Mandel’shtam’s story detours from already established plots when Parnok witnesses a ravenous mob parading some other unknown and unfortunate man to his public execution. Outraged by the
crowd’s brutality aimed at punishing a man for the seemingly petty crime of stealing a watch, Parnok seeks justice in vain.¹

These events, however, make up only a modest portion of the novella, because they are recounted by an impulsive narrator who consistently departs from what should be his narrative task. Not only does this narrator feel a measure of repulsion for Parnok as a man and a subject, he also indulges a private compulsion to voice his own self-examination and personal impressions. In other words, Parnok’s story is, as Jane Gary Harris suggests, an experiment in conventional nineteenth-century novelistic narrative—an experiment that the narrator eventually abandons. Intuitively aware that life, as his author states it, is not a biography, the narrator proposes the same idea in even more concrete literary terms: “Наша жизнь—это повесть без фабулы и героя” (Our life is a story without a plot or hero).² Following this intuition, he ultimately records the experience of that life in a decidedly “writerly” text.

As mentioned, I contend that Parnok, and his body in particular, occupies a liminal space, essentially the space between prose and poetry, and that The Egyptian Stamp consequently presents two treatments of Parnok’s body. Mandel’shtam portrays Parnok’s liminal status, with his poetic potentials and prosaic deficiencies, in a pair of scenes. Just before making his narrative—and very likely mortal—exit, Parnok takes in Petersburg one last time.

On that evening Parnok did not return home to have dinner, he did not drink tea with the biscuits which he loved like a canary. He listened to the buzzing of the blindingly white, shaggy roses of the blowtorches as they approached the streetcar tracks. He received back all the streets and squares of Petersburg in the form of rough galley proofs, he formatted the prospects, bound the gardens.

¹ In the choice of a watch as the object of theft I see a nod to Bergson’s duration. The man’s desire for a personal timepiece attracts the ire of a mob driven by the teleological time of Soviet historical ideology.
² Mandel’shtam, Egipetskaia marka, 2:493.
В тот вечер Парнок не вернулся домой обедать и не пил чая с сухариками, которые он любил, как канарейка. Он слышал жужжание паяльных свеч, приближающих к рельсам трамвая ослепительно-белую мохнатую розу. Он получил обратно все улицы и площади Петербурга — в виде сырых корректурных гранок, верстал проспекты, брошюровал сады.3

This internalized map of Petersburg mirrors “Il’in’s map of the hemispheres,” an item, the narrator tells us, from the very texture of which a young Parnok “drew solace, [. . .] consoled by [its] untearable canvas.”4 More than the the map’s tactile qualities, though, Parnok cherished the flights of fancy that it inspired, the “itineraries of grandiose journeys” he mentally plotted.5 His “respect for Il’in’s map” as a creative agent “had remained in Parnok’s blood,” ingrained in him and nourishing him

since those fabulous years when he imagined that the aquamarine and ochre hemispheres, like two giant balls held tight in the net of latitudes, had been empowered for their visual mission by the molten chancellery of the very bowels of the earthly orb, and that they, like nutritional pills, contained within themselves condensed space and distance.

Charles Isenberg has observed that “the capacity of [the map’s] hemispheres to concentrate within them time and space,” make it an effective “ideal of pure unproblematic representation.”6

In the language of the present study, Il’in’s map perfectly realizes the properties of the ennobled

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3 The episode is marked by poetic perception, as Parnok sees the “shaggy roses” of flames. The image of the streetcar likewise links back to passage cited above, wherein Parnok is seen to turn the “streetcar rattle of life into events of consequence.” All of these impressions at last come back to Parnok, where they are physically incorporated in the form of text and, more than that, a text “in progress” of being composed and taking material form.

4 “[К]арта полушарий Ильина. Парнок черпал в ней утешение. Его усмиряла нервущаяся холщовая бумага.” Mandel’shtam, Египетская марка, 2:466.

5 “[О]н составлял маршруты грандиозных путешествий.” Ibid., 2:466.

Image: internalized into Parnok’s subjective inner life, the map inspires imaginative associations (such as his fantasy of the Italian opera singer Angelina Bosio’s dramatic world tour), and is itself durational in nature. Parnok’s initial artistic experience is thus recapitulated in his final moments.

At the same time, the description of Parnok’s internalized text of Petersburg underscores his fundamental limitation as a subsequent weaver of poetic texts; that is, Parnok cannot overcome the unbreachable disconnect between receiving poetic impressions and translating those impressions into a poetic form. This deficiency is conveyed by the structure his Petersburg text assumes within Parnok, where it comes together specifically as a book—a format the novella’s image-system makes synonymous with prose—with its galley proofs, formatted pages, and stitched binding. A related episode further points to Parnok’s shortcoming. The map scene depicts Parnok as an aspiring artist, agrees Isenberg, since there he “pok[ed] with his penholder at oceans and continents, [and] plotted the itineraries of grandiose voyages,” only for his nascent talent to result in “a failed attempt at writing”: Parnok “made a weak, pleading gesture with his hand, dropped a sheet of scented, powdered paper, and squatted on a road post,” unable to commit his thought to the page. 8 While a profound imagery animates Parnok’s inner life—an inner life attuned to the “molten” core of the earth itself, he struggles to realize it on the page.

The subsequent figurations of Parnok’s body are violent, though the violences have distinct motivations and effects, as the work depicts Parnok as the subject both of a literature that disfigures and distorts and of a genuine art that savages convention to produce a valuable

7 Ibid., 232.
8 “Он сделал слабое умоляющее движение рукой, выронил листочек цедровой пудреной бумаги и присел на тумбу.” Mandel’shtam, Egypetskaia marka, 2:483.
aesthetic artifact. At the mercy of certain outside forces, Parnok’s body is seen to be tortured, mutilated, and recast as a utilitarian object subjected to authoritarian semantic appropriation—a manifestation of “literature” in corpore. Revealing sometimes disconcerting resemblances to and sympathies with those same forces, the artful narrator, on the other hand, ultimately liberates Parnok by poeticizing his flesh, rendering his internal life and his body a poetic textu(r)al artifact that communicates beyond the limited capacities of the visible, surface anatomy.

Admittedly, all this talk of the violence inflicted on Parnok’s body might initially seem overblown, as the hero does not suffer any obvious harm. Instead, the violence is often implied. The nickname with which Parnok was teased by childhood peers—and the epithet that gives the novella its title—marks Parnok as fated for physical cancellation: an “Egyptian stamp” was a particular type of postage stamp, often featuring an image of the Sphinx and a pyramid, manufactured with ink that would dissolve should one try to remove and reuse the stamp. The dissolution suggested by the moniker seems to occur quietly during the course of the narrative. At the barber’s, Parnok places his head onto the “marble executioner’s block of the wash basin”; at the dentist’s, the hero barely escapes the deadly “cobra” of a drill. Other details of Parnok’s narration strongly suggest that he is soon to die, and to do so precisely by “wasting away.” Elsewhere, the violence Parnok suffers is wholly figurative, yet their implications can be readily interpreted.

The most important and provocative figuration of Parnok’s body is unsurprisingly realized through one of Mandel’shtam’s favorite thematic images: fabric. In addition to being a

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10 [Парнок] жмурился и глубже уходил в мраморную плаху умывальника.” Mandel’shtam, *Egipetskaia marka*, 2:472. Brown renders the *plakha* as simply chopping block. But it is of course the same executioner’s block on which Cincinnatus will be decapitated in *Invitation to a Beheading*. See Brown, *The Noise of Time*, 139.
metaphor for the form and function of poetic composition, fabric is treated as an explicit surrogate for Parnok’s body throughout *The Egyptian Stamp*. The various evocations of textiles thus function as sites for commentary on the thematic relationship between soma and text. In fact, the novella’s image-system makes Parnok’s flesh synonymous with both fabric and text, initiating the text(ile) theme through one of the first rhetorical gestures of the work’s very loose *fabula*.

The events of the story are catalyzed when the tailor Mervis steals Parnok’s treasured morning coat. Witnessing Mervis’ deed, the narrator cries out in alarm. In Clarence Brown’s translation the exclamation reads, “Oh, Mervis, Mervis, what have you done! Why have you deprived Parnok of his earthly raiment?” (Ах, Мервис, Мервис, что ты наделал! Зачем лишил Парнока земной оболочки?)¹¹ But what Brown stylistically renders as a lofty “earthly raiment” does not convey the true gravity of Mervis’ appropriation.¹² In Russian the phrase is “zemnaia obolochka,” and the noun, *obolochka*, has strong corporeal associations, as it denotes a shell, a protective tissue, a membranous casing or cover. In losing his coat, Parnok has been stripped of an organic part of his body; he has been robbed of his anterior flesh.¹³ The same noun, however, can also describe part of a book’s anatomy. In Dahl’s dictionary, the technical term for a book’s cover, *pereplet*, is defined as *obolochka knigi*.¹⁴ A more informal word for the same part of a

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¹³ Lekmanov, et. al. observe that, in Romantic poetry and prose, images similar to Mandel’shtam’s “zemnaia obolochka” were common synonyms for the human flesh. *Egipetskaia marka: poiasneniia dlia chitatelia*, 75-76.
book’s anatomy, oblozhka, bears a direct phonetic and lexical relationship to Parnok’s own covering.\textsuperscript{15} In short, Parnok’s body is flesh, \textit{and} fabric, \textit{and} text.

The epithet also possesses a typically Mandel’shtamian ambiguity. Parnok’s “earthly casing” implies a certain superficiality, as if the casing is innate but not entirely \textit{integral} to Parnok’s being. The \textit{obolochka}’s pronounced exteriority resonates with Bergson’s description of the surface, social body as the material analogue of the legible, prosaic, surface self, and thus an insufficient representation of the entire being. This dimension of Parnok’s flesh is important to both narratives of his body: for one, the surface covering is the only part of the man that has any meaning, for the other, the \textit{obolochka} is that which is extraneous and must be discarded.

The forces that would take possession of, reforge, and exploit Parnok’s body are embedded in the novella’s setting: Russia’s cultural capital, Petersburg, as it is coming under the grip of the Bolsheviks, on the eve of the Revolution, a world beset by plague. More specifically, Petersburg is consumed by the biblical scourges of locusts, bloodsucking insects, boils, and befouled waters.\textsuperscript{16} These pestilences only amplify the ubiquitous “influenza” that issues from the perverse, moribund environment into which culture degenerates when under the sway of

\textsuperscript{15} Dahl’s dictionary, under the entry for \textit{obolochka}’s root verb \textit{oblekat’} (to clothe, envelop), in fact brings together all the diverse meanings and associations of Parnok’s “earthly casing”: “Оболок, оболока, оболочка, покрышка, крыша, обложка, обертка, одежда (чего), все, что кроет или оболочает.”

\textsuperscript{16} These plagues refer, of course, to the series of ten scourges visited upon Egypt as Yahweh impels Pharaoh to release the Israelites from servitude. Some of the more memorable plagues seem to be inflicted on Parnok’s Petersburg. First, “somewhere between the Haymarket and Flour Lane, in the druggist’s and the tannery’s gloom, in the savage nursery of dandruff, bedbugs, and protruding ears, there spawned this strange tumult that was spreading nausea and contagion” (Где-то между Сенной и Мучным переулком, в москательном и кожевенном мраке, в диком питомнике перхоти, клопов и оттопыренных ушей, зародилась эта странная кутерьма, распространявшая тошноту и заразу, 2:475). Elsewhere are mentioned “children with boils in their throats” (дети с нарывами в горле, 2:472). Reference to bedbugs (клопы, 2:474) specifically evokes the third plague, which infested men and livestock with bloodsucking insects.

Tellingly, the appearance of these pseudo-plagues is concentrated in Chapter Four, precisely when Parnok catches sight of the crowd leading his unfortunate double off to his ritual execution. Immediately upon witnessing these dreadful marvels, Parnok echoes Moses’ repeated appeals to Pharaoh to “Let my people go” as he futilely attempts to telephone the authorities to aid the poor captive. “He called the police, called the government, the vanished—sleeping, like a carp—state” ([О]н звонил из аптеки, звонил в милицию, звонил правительству — исчезнувшему, уснувшему, как окунь, государству, 2:478).
professional literature. Petersburg, a “savage nursery of dandruff, bedbugs, and protruding ears [. . . ] spreading nausea and contagion” unmistakably echoes the literary environment imagined in *Fourth Prose*. “Writerdom,” Mandel’shtam says in the 1930 work, is “a race with a repugnant stink to its hide and the most filthy means of preparing food. It is a race that roams and sleeps in its own vomit, a race driven out of the cities and hounded in the villages, but it is always and everywhere close to the authorities, who assign them a place in the red-light districts, as prostitutes.” The *Egyptian Stamp* literalizes the graphic rhetoric of *Fourth Prose* to place the poetically sensitive Parnok amid a disease of power that threatens to infect his mind and body. Just as in *Fourth Prose*, the disease is communicable and *communicative*, presenting itself according to a clear pathology of linguistic degeneration.

Realizing a grim interpretation of what Derrida describes as the fantasy of “utopian socialisms,” communication in this world evidences the hallmarks of “transparent proximity.” It operates exclusively on a system of furtive, conspiratorial speech, clichés, and readymade banalities. The narrator captures the state of verbal affairs in one rich passage. Fearing (unfoundedly) that his peculiar poetic voice is escaping him, the narrator senses that his pen begins to compose *automatically*, “as if it were attached to the platform of a telegraph—a public pen, befouled by dimwits in fur coats, having exchanged its swallow’s flourish, its originary *(pervonachal’nyi)* imprint, to write instead ‘Come for God’s sake,’ ‘Miss you,’ ‘kisses,’ —the phrases of unshaved lechers who whisper their little telegraph messages into fur collars warmed

17 “Писательство—это раса с противным запахом кожи и самыми грязными способами приготовления пищи. Это раса, кочующая и ночующая на своей блевотине, изгнанная из городов, преследуемая в деревнях, но везде и всюду близкая к власти, которая ей отводит место в желтых кварталах, как проституткам.” Mandel’shtam, *Chetvertaya proza*, 3:176.
by their breath.” The nightmare of writing that is not only hackneyed but mechanized and communalized imagines the complete breakdown of what is meant to be an individual kinesis, a personal and physiological response to aesthetic stimuli.

That the narrator wields a pen at all is itself remarkable, since writing in Petersburg has been thoroughly debased. Gutted of all real content, the written word is a form of non-communication, a source of non-information. The city’s governmental hub is a perfect vacuum of meaning: “In May Petersburg somehow reminds one of an information booth that does not give out any information—especially in the region of the Palace Square. It is terrifying the degree to which everything has been prepared for the opening of the historic session, with their white sheets of paper and sharpened pencils.” At the seat of state, the lofty instruments of profound poetic composition are employed, but they have been rendered impotent, incapable of conveying anything.


19 В мае месяце Петербург чем-то напоминает адресный стол, не выдающий справок, — особенно в районе Дворцовой площади. Здесь все до ужаса приготовлено к началу исторического заседания с белыми листами бумаги, с отточенными карандашами.” Ibid., 2:480.

20 These and similar characterizations show that Mandel’shtam’s concept of writing is not principally concerned with the physical implements of composition. The material, and especially commercial, artifacts of writing can, in fact, be the object of his distrust. “I have no manuscripts, no notebooks, no archives. I have no handwriting because I never write” (У меня нет рукописей, нет записных книжек, нет архива. У меня нет почерка, потому что я никогда не пишу). Mandel’shtam, Chetvertaia proza, 3:171. Notably, though, in her memoir, Nadezhda Mandel’shtam says that, once his persecution by the state got more intense in 1933, the poet “suddenly changed his attitude toward manuscripts and papers. Previously he wanted nothing to do with them and always got angry that, rather than destroy them, I would toss them into what had been my mother’s yellow traveling suitcase. But after the search [of our apartment] he understood that it is easier to save a manuscript than a man, and he ceased to rely on his memory which, of course, dies along with the man” (О. М. [...] внезапно переменило свое отношение к рукописям и к бумагам. Раньше он их знать не хотел и всегда сердился, что я их не уничтожила, а бросила в мамин жгучий заграничный сундук. Но после обыска он понял, что легче сохранить рукопись, чем человека, и перестал надеяться на свою память, которая, как известно, погибает вместе с человеком.) N. Mandel’shtam, Vospominaniia, 27.
The corrupted institution of “literature” is typified in books—texts already prosaic in that they are bound, packaged, and readied for sale. Dictated by the demands of the state, books are no less vapid that the communiqués from the Palace Square; but in their very feebleness, books also present a real danger. The “contagious pages” of books are coated with “dandruff” and infected with “measles, scarlatina, and chicken pox.” Fated to die like all such inartistic objects, books invariably disintegrate, their pages atrophy until they become “transparent as onion skin” and eventually “melt like chunks of ice brought into a warm room.”\(^{21}\)

All of these conditions of prosaic, diseased Petersburg are ultimately translated onto the bodies of the city’s denizens, bodies already made uniform and rendered tractable by Foucauldian strategies of discipline and control. The figures surrounding Parnok are unvarying in their common vagueness. Accordingly, they are reduced to mere metonymies, either as single body parts or, more alienating still, as articles of clothing. Mandel’shtam’s metonymies echo those of Gogol, and especially in the latter’s “Petersburg Tales.” In those stories, Gogol parodies his contemporary Petersburgers’ near fetishization of the material symbols of the social hierarchy codified in Peter the Great’s reforms by describing the denizens of his often demonic Petersburg as little more than items of clothing, elegantly groomed facial hair, or similar external emblems of social capital. At one point trying to focus his descriptive gaze on one individual, The Egyptian Stamp’s narrator catches himself, saying, “Could you say that this figure had no face?

\(^{21}\)“[К]ниги тают, как ледяшки, принесенные в комнату [. . .] [К]оричневые томики иностранных и российских авторов, с зачитанными в шелк заразными страницами [. . .] В них жила корь, скарлатина и ветряная оспа.” Ibid., 2:489-90. The books’ infection with “scarlatina” (skarlatina) links them with the telephone, another medium of state non-information, the telephone. “Nevertheless, [Parnok] telephoned from a pharmacy, he called the police, called the government—the vanished vanished—sleeping, like a carp—state. [. . .] Pharmacy telephones are made of the very best scarlatina wood (skarlatinoe derevo). The scarlatina tree grows in enema groves and smells of ink” (Однако он звонил из аптеки, звонил в милицию, звонил правительству—исчезнувшему, уснувшему, как окунь, государству. [. . .] Аптечные телефоны делаются из самого лучшего скарлатинового дерева. Скарлатиновое дерево растет в клистирной роще и пахнет чернилом). Mandel’shtam, Egipetskaia marka, 2:478.
No, it had a face, although faces in a crowd have no meaning, only napes of necks and ears live independently. Thus advance the coat hanger-shoulders, puffed up with wadding, the secondhand jackets, richly besprinkled with dandruff, the irritable napes and dog ears.22 Elsewhere this inhuman mob, as it parades a sacrificial victim to his ritual drowning in the Fontanka, is similarly depicted as a homogenous colony of ants, those paragons of mindless, orderly physical labor. A double for the mob’s scapegoat, Parnok, an obvious outsider, is conspicuous in his non-conformity: he attracts the hostility of crowds, and the narrator even warns that Parnok will be thrown out of all the cultural circles and institutions to which he belongs.23 Tellingly, he has his own unique sense of time, since he is “fastened to the present day somehow sideways.”24 In terms of language and creative expression, Parnok demonstrates peculiar and decidedly “philological” capacities that link his own artistic sensibilities to the aesthetic values and practices of both his implied and real authors. He speaks “a wild, elevated birdy language” unintelligible to others as it is composed of his private, domestic dictionary (reestrik domashnykh slovechek). His well-attuned sensory faculties relish the unexpected qualities and connections in the objects of the world: “He loved woodsheds and cordwood. In winter a dry log should be resonant, light, and hollow. And birch should have a lemon-yellow core. In weight, it should be

22 “Сказать, что на нем не было лица? Нет, лицо на нем было, хотя лица в толпе не имеют значения, но живут самостоятельно одни затылки и уши. Шли плечи-вешалки, вздыбленные ватой, апраксинские пиджаки, богато осыпанные перхотью, раздражительные затылки и собачьи уши.” Ibid., 2:475.

23 “They’ll toss you out some day, Parnok,” the narrator promises; “in a terrible scandal they’ll shamefully expel you—take you by the arm and—pfft!—out of the symphony hall, out of the Society of Admirers and Amateurs of the Last Word” (Выведут тебя когда-нибудь, Парнок,—со страшным скандалом, позорно выведут—возьмут под руки и фьюить—из симфонического зала, из общества ревнителей и любителей последнего слова). Ibid., 2:470-71. There is a play on a specific autobiographical detail here in the “Society of Admirers and Amateurs of the Last Word” (obshchestvo revnitelei i liubitelei poslednego slova). An actual group, called Obshchestvo revnitelei khudozhestvennogo slova, was created by Mandel’shtam’s mentor Viacheslav Ivanov, and it met in the offices of the Acmeist journal Apollon. O. Lekmanov, et. al., Egietskaia marka: poiatsnienia dlia chitatelia, 141; Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adversary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 91.

no heavier than a frozen fish. He felt a log as if it were alive in his hand.” These impressions, in turn, inspire poetic reveries: “From childhood he had been devoted to whatever was useless, metamorphosing the streetcar rattle of life into events of consequence.” Parnok stands out in the text as a physical presence; he is unique as a fully embodied character. From his little hoof-like feet, bowed legs, and subsequent lilting stride, up to his balding head, Parnok has, unlike the monotonous mob, an individual appearance and distinct mannerisms.

It is, however, the condition of embodiment that the private subject lives within public reality and is subject to its pressures. (Derrida and the ritual of the pharmakos remind us, too, that the outsider is also partially within the community.) So it is with Parnok who, for all the poetic sensibilities that alienate him, also presents symptoms of the communal “infection.” He fixates on the external artifacts of literary composition and gets preoccupied with distrusted and dangerous books and official documents: Parnok’s greatest desire, it turns out, is to land a position as a dragoman and “to write a memorandum.” The narrator emphasizes Parnok’s misdirected interest in the objects of composition by mocking Parnok’s letters to a woman he is courting, letters written “on laid paper, my dear sirs, on English laid paper with swollen spots and deckle edge [. . .] On such paper, dear reader, might the Hermitage caryatids have exchanged letters, letters expressing their sympathy or esteem for one another.” Similarly troubling, nothing comes of Parnok’s amorous advances because his head is filled with the tropes of

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25 “Он любил дровяные склады и дрова. Зимой сухое полено должно быть звонким, легким и пустым. А береза—с лимонно-желтой древесиной. На вес—не тяжелее мерзлой рыбы. Он ощущал полено как живое в руке. С детства он привык к душой ко всему ненужному, превращая в события тревожный лепет жизни. [О]н говорил [. . .] на диком и высшем птичьем языке исключительно о высоких материалах.” Ibid., 2:471.

26 “Ему хотелось поступить драгоманом [. . .] и написать меморандум.” Ibid., 2:471.

27 “На бумаге верже, государи мои, на английской бумаге верже, с водяными отеками и рваными краями [. . .] На такой бумаге, читатель, могли бы переписываться кариатиды Эрмитажа, выражая друг другу соболезнование или уважение.” Ibid., 2:472.
popular novels. His treasured morning coat, his *zemnaia obolochka*, is material evidence of Parnok’s belonging within the prosaic rabble. The literary descendent of Gogol’s Akaky Akakievich, Parnok sees his identity invested in the coat, and the garment embodies his desire to fit in with the crowd.

The tailor, Mervis, would also like to see Parnok fit in, and so he actively refashions Parnok’s coat of flesh. Some scholars view Mervis positively. Indeed, his profession seems to weave him neatly into Mandel’shtam’s ennobled text(tile) metaphor as an “artist-tailor” (*portnoi-khudozhnik*). Moreover, Mervis seems to personify creative ideals central to Mandel’shtam’s aesthetics and poetic practice. Like the wholly disembodied narrative voice, Mervis seems to exist in an airy, almost incorporeal realm, and he is subtly likened to a poetically charged bird. In the “birdy air of [his] apartment,” Mervis moves about quickly and furtively, as when, to avoid Parnok, “he began to flutter, and vanished behind a partition.” The partition behind which Mervis flits is, moreover, no ordinary screen, but a strange “iconostasis,” analogizing the tailor’s workplace with the privileged *sanctum sanctorum*.

Consistent with his unearthly makeup, Mervis’ work yields similarly enchanted results. In Mervis’ trained hands, a piece of clothing, “the invertebrate companion of young men, [which]
had been a simple sack at the fitting,” is miraculously “inspired with life and grace.”

“Go, my beauty, and live!” Mervis exclaims to his finished garments, “Strut at concerts, give lectures, love, and make mistakes!”

The tailor’s incantation to his clothing immediately evokes the narrator’s proclamation about the animating force of poetry, wherein the writer describes a given image and, “so it is that, on the margins of rough drafts, arabesques emerge to live their own independent, charming, and perfidious lives.” In the middle of a famous inserted aesthetic manifesto, the narrator even makes the resemblance explicit by stating, “I am a tailor” (Портняжу).

Nonetheless, Mervis, the embodiment of Mandel’shtamian ambiguity, is thus equally marked by traits and tendencies that should trigger suspicion. His apparent incorporeality, for instance, also reinforces his decidedly sinister dimension. Thanks primarily to his heritage as the “direct spiritual descendent of Gogol’s Petrovich” (the tailor and “one-eyed devil” of Gogol’s “The Overcoat”), Mervis can be seen to have something of the demonic about him. His physiognomy alone betrays an evil and, moreover, an inartistic side. He has a “blind face, [ . . .] but sometimes a lowered lid sees more than the eye, and the tiers of wrinkles on the human face gaze like a gathering of blind men.”

33 “Беспозвоночная подруга молодых людей [. . .] простой мешок на примерке [. . .] портной-художник [. . .] вдохнул в неё жизнь и плавность.” Ibid., 2:466.

34 “Иди, красавица, и живи! Щеголяй в концертах, читай доклады, люби и ошибайся!” Ibid., 2:466.

35 “Так на полях черновиков возникают арабески и живут своей самостоятельной, прелестной и коварной жизнью.” Ibid., 2:478.

36 Ibid., 2:482.


eyelidded monster Viy, Mervis’ sightless eyes and seeing flesh manifest the same blindness and perversion of the senses lamented by Mandel’shtam in his attack on “literature” in Fourth Prose.

The ambivalence that characterizes Mervis and his trade is portrayed most effectively in an episode at the laundry, with which the tailor is closely associated. As Brown has noted, “the characteristics of [Mervis’ wife’s] smoke-filled kitchen would seem to have been transferred to the furious proprietress of the laundry and her steamy shop, where Parnok also goes in his futile search for his clothes.” And indeed, the laundry appears a gravityless dreamscape, replete with images associated with poetic creativity. Entering the room in search of his shirts, Parnok is immediately immersed in the hot cloud of the laundry, where six chirping girls were goffering, pressing, ironing. Taking a mouthful of water, these sly seraphim would spray it on the zephyr and batiste rubbish. They frolicked with brutally heavy irons but not for a moment did they cease their chatter. The vaudeville trifles, spread like foam on long tables, waited their turn. The irons in the red maidenly fingers hissed, completing their runs. The battleships sauntered along the whipped cream, and the girls sprayed.

Они углубились в горячее облако прачечной, где шесть щебечущих девушек плюли, катали и гладили. Набрав в рот воды, эти лукавые серафимы прыскали ею на зефировый и батистовый вздор. Они куролесили зверски тяжелыми утюгами, ни на минуту не переставая болтать. Водевильные мелочи разбросанной пеной по длинным столам ждали очереди. Утюги в красных девичьих пальцах шипели, совершая рейсы. Броненосцы гуляли по сбитым сливкам, а девушки прыскали.

The sea of “foam” (pena) amidst which the “seraphim” stand seems to signal the girls’ labor as profoundly creative by activating one of Mandel’shtam’s most potent and sustained poetic images. Already in the image-system of his Acmeist period, Mandel’shtam established pena as the originary artistic substance. The 1910 poem “Silentium,” for example, names the primordial foam as the substance of “the word as such”:

40 Mandel’shtam, Egipetskaia marka, 2:474.
Она еще не родилась,
Она и музыка и слово,
И потому всего живого
Ненарушаемая связь.

Спокойно дышат моря груди,
Но, как безумный, светел день.
И пены бледная сирень
В черно-азуровом сосуде.

Да обретут мои уста
Первоначальную немоту,
Как кристаллическую ноту,
Что от рождения чиста!

Останься пеной, Афродита,
И, слово, в музыку вернись,
И, сердце, сердца устыдись,
С первоосновой жизни слито!

She is still yet to be born,
She is music and the word,
And therefore is the infrangible bond
Twixt all living things.

Calmly breathes the bosom of the sea,
But, like a madman, the day is bright.
And the pale lilac of the foam lies
In a gloomy azure basin.

May my lips find
This primordial muteness,
Like a crystalline note,
Pure from nativity!

Abide as foam, Aphrodite,
And, word, return to music,
And, heart, be ashamed of the heart
Mingled with the fundament of life!\(^{41}\)

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\(^{41}\) Mandel’shtam, “Silentium,” 1:50-51
At first glance, the laundresses’ workplace is a hotbed of poetic activity nourished by the primordial foam. The narrator promotes this interpretation when he venerates the toiling seraphim, proclaiming, “I would have given the girls not irons but Stradivarius violins, light as starling houses, and I would have given them a long scroll of musical notes.” Upon closer inspection, however, the same space reveals itself as a netherworld where the laundresses engage in devious work.

The laundry’s full range of seedy and sinister dimensions are rendered more visible through the lens of Mandel’shtam’s 1923 sketch “Sukharevka.” Together the two scenes portray Mervis as an inartistic tailor. Mandel’shtam’s sketch describes a popular marketplace around the Sukharevka Tower in Moscow that Mandel’shtam decries as a sickening spectacle of profiteering in junk, a sight at once “cruel and sad.” Just like the laundry, Sukharevka is a sweltering hive of activity characterized by an airy quality, with the Tower itself being “light, winged, like the white foot of a young girl.” But here the lightness is emphatically negative, signaling not poetic freedom and flight but tawdriness and vacuity: “Sukharevka [. . .] has scattered its goods and chattels right on the main road: booklets used as fans, toys, wooden spoons—the lighter the better: trifles, indifferent wares.”

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42 А я бы раздал девушкам вместо утюгов скрипки Страдивария, легкие, как скворешни, и дал бы им по длинному свитку рукописных нот. Mandel’shtam, Египетская марка, 2:475.
44 “Сухаревка [. . .] здание легкое, крылатое, как белая девицкая ступня.” Ibid., 2:310.
45 “Сухаревка [. . .] уже раскидала свои манатки прямо на крупной мостовой: книжки веерами, игрушки, деревянные ложки — что полегче и в руках не горит: пустяки, равнодушный товар.” Ibid., 2:310.
“vaudeville trifles” (vodevil’nye melochi), at Sukharevka, “female textile workers deal in trifling pins and trinkets” (torguiushchie bulavochnoi meloch’iu).46

The novella continues to undermine the poetic potential of the laundry scene by refiguring the exalted foam of unironed garments as “whipped cream” (sbitye slivki).

Mandel’shtam figured “whipped cream” as one of the “tragically trivialized” phenomena of a moribund culture, the image of noble artistic discernment acquiring a taste for the artificially enhanced and saccharine.47 The description almost exactly echoes the earlier sketch, thereby demoting the image completely, especially in its proximity to bad music: “An astonished man hastened back—he almost tread on the white foam of lace flounces (beluiu penu kruzhevnykh oborok), whipped like cream (vzbitykh, kak slivki), and, not knowing how, found himself in a throng of accordionists.”48 “Silentium” offers a clue as to why both scenes upend the anticipated associations. In the poem, the foam’s majesty is synonymous with its primordial nature. The poet thus implores it to remain untouched, untainted by the influence of human concerns (“Abide as foam, Aphrodite, / And, word, return to music, / And, heart, be ashamed of the heart / Mingled with the fundament of life!”). The laundresses, like the Sukharevka marketeers, debase the foam’s splendor by associating it with cheap baubles and shameless mercantilism.

The same pattern of undermined imagery is translated into the speech of the weightless washer girls. “Silentium” praises the as yet unuttered word, “primordial muteness,” the word outside the bazaar of public speech. The laundry girls, on the other hand, prattle ceaselessly.

46 “Женщины-мануфактурщицы, торгующие булавочной мелочью.” Ibid., 2:311.
47 From Clare Cavanagh’s commentary on Mandel’shtam’s 1931 poem “I drink to military asters,” which alongside cream offers ironic praise of such “noble” phenomena as “asthma” and “bile.” Cavanagh, Modernist Creation of Tradition, 249. Mandel’shtam, “Ia p’iu za voennye astry, za vse, chem korili menia,” 4:49.
Moreover, they do not cease “to chatter” (boltat’) in a decidedly too-casual manner of speech, one carrying deeply negative cultural associations of gossip and the dangers of loose lips.\footnote{The chattering of the girls is just that kind of speech warned against in popular Soviet propaganda, like the famous 1954 poster reading, “Chatter— it helps the enemy!” (Boltat’— vragu pomogat’), and depicting a clearly witless man happily gabbing into the ear of another, the shadowed half of whose face reveals him to be a spy from an enemy, capitalist nation.}

Additionally, their speech seems to issue from somewhere other than their mouths, which should be rendered mute by the mouthfuls of water they spray on the clothing. This may seem a trivial point, but it assumes tremendous weight when compared to a 1931 note by Mandel’shtam on his esteemed fellow poet Pasternak. Where one of the girls, “having taken water into her mouth (nabrav v rot vody), would spray it on the frippery,” Pasternak “took the universe into his mouth (nabral v rot vseleinniu) and was silent. Forever and ever silent.”\footnote{“Набрал в рот вселенную и молчит. Всегда-всегда молчит.”Mandel’shtam, “О Pasternake,” “Iz zapisi 1931-1932 gg.” 3:371.} The true poet enters the muteness of the primordial word, the word not yet trivialized in common chatter.

Illuminated in this light, the haze of the laundry is broken to unveil the place not as one of poetic inspiration but as a hellish factory for cheap and garish public commodities. The laundry becomes a realm where taste has been debased, senses confused, and creativity stifled. In other words, the laundry becomes Mandel’shtam’s ideal poeticized metaphor for the institutionalized “literature” which he attacks throughout his creative and theoretical work: there all potential poetic material is sanitized, then neatly and uniformly packaged according to trade guidelines.

The violence forecast in the laundry becomes very real when we recall that the material handled by the girls is figured as Parnok’s own flesh. Indeed, the laundresses’ “terribly heavy
irons,” their “battleships” that in turn “hiss” like so many serpents, “pleat [and] mangle” the clothing as they mass produce their cookie-cutter goods.

Mervis, it turns out, works no differently. While the narrator seems to ennoble the tailor as a creative genius, Mervis lacks the ability to fashion anything original. What does a tailor do, after all? He does not construct a suit from scratch, but takes prefabricated material and fits it to a similarly prefabricated pattern; more often, he simply adjusts an existing garment to fit an individual body. The narrator meaningfully contrasts Mervis to a group of poetically charged deaf-mutes who, speaking their “language of swallows,” weave a garment from thread.51 The narrator not only admits that Mervis is incapable of performing even the simpler skills of his craft, he also subtly connects Mervis’ tailoring to the denigrated whipped cream: “If you think about it, Mervis has no feel for the cut of a morning coat, he *whips it out* as a frock coat (*sbivaetsia na siurtuk*)—a cut obviously more familiar to him.”52 In short, Mervis can only reproduce garments based on a set template.

Still more can be said. The tailor generally works from a long, solid bolt of fabric, fabric that is, moreover, decorated only with redundant lines or prosaic patterns. Mervis’ material could thus not be more different from the textiles Mandel’shtam champions in Brussels lace, with its ennobled “truancies,” and the oriental rug, poetically ornamented with organically swirling and spiraling arabesques. *The Egyptian Stamp* hints at the uniformity of Mervis’ standard material in a subtle image that condemns Mervis’ trade. At the end of the novel, Charles Isenberg observes,

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52 “[Е]сли вспомнить, Мервис не чувствует кроя визитки — он сбивается на сюртук, очевидно более ему знакомый.” The connection is just as exact in Russian, as it centers on the verb *sbit’/sbivat’ [sia]*, “to whip”: The morning coat *sbivaetsia na siurtuk*, while whipped cream is *sbitye slivki*. Mandel’shtam, *Egipetskaia marka*, 2:468. Emphasis added.
the narrator describes a train journey that quietly evokes the text(ile) theme. In Isenberg’s translation, that passage reads:

Yes, there, where the beefy levers of steam locomotives drip with hot oil, there it breathes, *all stretched out at full length; giving false measure*, the shameless creature, *winding its life-devouring measuring rod* all the sixty-nine versts of the Nikolaev line, with carafes of misted-over vodka.53

As Isenberg shows, the description figures train travel as a spreading bolt of fabric. Nevertheless, Isenberg’s evaluation of the metaphor’s implications are different from mine and, I believe, read against the text’s image-rhetoric. He suggests that the “metaphor converts the dynamism of prose and the speed and distance of the train journey into textural process. The sequence of operations which is described is one which applies to fabric, which can be spread out, given in false measure, and then be rolled up.”54 But the narrator has already identified literature associated with trains as categorically unpoetic, since “railroad prose” reduces word-images to lifeless *mechanisms*—“couplers’ instruments, nonsensical particles, ironware prepositions”—and thus “belongs rather among things submitted in legal evidence: it is divorced from any concern with beauty and that which is beautifully rounded.”55 Similarly, Isenberg’s statement that the bolt of prose-fabric can be “rolled up” forges a link between Mervis’ text(ile) and the novel’s cautionary epigraph, which reads, “I do not like rolled-up manuscripts. Some of them are heavy and smeared with time, like the trumpet of the archangel.”56 Perhaps the greatest problem with

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54 Isenberg, *Substantial Proofs of Being*, 137.


56 “Не люблю свернутых рукописей. Иные из них тяжелы и промаслены временем, как труба архангела.” Ibid., 2:465.
railroad prose, however, lies in its insistent momentum, which Mandel’shtam and Bergson alike identify as one of prose’s most corrosive features. As the novella warns, when the locomotive-text(ile) speeds sixty-nine versts, it races, “devouring,” as all prose does, “life” itself.

Repetitive, uniform, and derivative, Mervis’ garments are categorically unpoetic: the tailor has taken Parnok’s “earthly casing” and turned it into that other obolochka—a book’s cover. Neat, bounded, and easily interfaced, the cozy homes of bad prose, cherished as objects and commodities regardless of their content, books are for the narrator the instruments of institutionalized literature.

And like the sanctioned “writers” of “literature,” Mervis too works in service of the state: he pilfers Parnok’s coat and hands it directly over to Captain Krzhizhanovsky, a high ranking official and member of the Cheka. (The laundresses do the same with Parnok’s finest shirts.) The Captain is identifiable by his clothing and the symbols of social capital that adorn them: he is metonymically described as a walking and talking heap of top coat, saber, and spurs. Parnok’s unique morning coat has become a frock among countless others, lost amid the indistinct and moribund crowd, identically metonymized as the “padded shoulders and dandruff-strewn collar[s]” that do the awful work of their lawful oppressors.\(^{57}\) In perfect keeping with his role as a stooge for the State and its “literature,” Mervis pieces together or adjusts others’ fabric to make a thoroughly utilitarian product, a garment that covers the body and that speaks in the superficial, prosaic language of social exchange.

We know the mortal fate of such “readerly” works. And so the obolochka’s triple associations—as coat, as book, and as flesh—are again brought together, this time in their shared

\(^{57}\) “[Ч]ьи-то ватные плечи и перхотный воротник.” Ibid., 2:475.
death. Echoing the “editor-coffinmaker” imagined by Mandel’shtam in *Fourth Prose*, the narrator figures the ceremonial handing-over of Parnok’s coat as a solemn burial ritual.

When a tailor delivers his finished work, you would never say that he had new clothes on his arm. He somehow resembles a member of a funeral fellowship hurrying to a house marked by Azrael with the implements of the ritual. So does the tailor Mervis. Parnok’s morning coat warmed itself on [Mervis’] coatrack for a short time [. . .] Then [Mervis] took the morning coat down from the hanger, blew on it, as on hot tea, wrapped it in a clean linen sheet, and carried it to Captain Krzhizhanovsky in its white shroud and black calico.

Когда портной относит готовую работу, вы никогда не скажете, что на руках у него обнова. Чем-то он напоминает члена похоронного братства, спешащего в дом, отмеченный Азраилом, с принадлежностями ритуала. Так и портной Мервис.

Визитка Парнока погрелась у него на вешалке недолго [. . .] Потом он снял визитку с плечика, подул на нее, как на горячий чай, завернул в чистую полотняную простыню и понес к ротмистру Кржижановскому в белом саване и в черном коленкоре.58

The description makes a grisly irony of Mandel’shtam’s claims to the eternal nature of art from “Scriabin and Christianity” and “On the Nature of the Word,” and the episode conclusively gives the lie to earlier suggestions that Mervis might impart his garments “with life and grace.” Unlike the narrator’s own poetic weavings, which are animated “with their own independent, charming, perfidious lives,” Mervis’ coat has no real life, certainly not an independent one; nor can there be anything remotely “perfidious” about its existence since it is now the loyal companion of the captain—a perfect literary apparatchik.

In sum, Mervis’ textu(r)al treatment of Parnok emblematizes the false art against which Mandel’shtam so vehemently rails. Paraded, and parading himself, as a genuine artist, the tailor resembles more a machine, disinterestedly reproducing the same neat and tidy but unoriginal and lifeless object. He deals only with Parnok’s surface, his *obolochka*, which he forcibly refashions.

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58 Ibid., 2:488.
to fit the fixed template. In turning Parnok into a mere facsimile—that is, into a cliché, into dead language—he also kills the man. Ultimately, Parnok suffers the fate awaiting any object of conventional *narrative*, of being coerced into established tropes that do not map onto lived experience.

For Mandel’shtam, the State feeds on just this sort of appropriation and translation. While the official writers of *Fourth Prose* relinquish themselves and their artistic talents to become “prostitutes” of the State’s agenda, more rebellious individuals are forcibly sacrificed to it. The text even hints that this is not the first time Krzhizhanovsky has commandeered another’s body and soul to nourish his own: Could the *shinel’* of Krzhizhanovsky’s illustrious uniform be that other coveted topcoat, Akaky Akakievich’s?59 Parnok’s death resembles Akaky’s, suggesting that the removal of the poor man’s “earthly casing” indeed spells his physical death. After the theft of his beloved overcoat, Gogol’s hero seeks help in recovering the garment; after making a disparaging remark to a dismissive official he is berated, leaves dazed, falls ill, and eventually dies. Shortly after his coat has been reallocated, Parnok is by turns similarly dumbstruck, defiant, and dejected.

He thought of Petersburg as his childhood illness and he only had to come to, to wake up, and the hallucination would dissipate: he would recover, become like all other people; he might even—it could happen—get married. . . Then no one would dare to call him “young man.” And then he would be done kissing ladies’ hands. They’ve had their share! [. . .] He would make himself a new morning coat, he would have it out with Captain Krzhizhanovsky, he’d show him.

Он думал, что Петербург—его детская болезнь и что стоит лишь очухаться, очнуться—и наваждение рассыплется: он выздоровеет, станет как все люди; пожалуй, женится даже. . . Тогда никто уже не посмеет называть его «молодым человеком». И ручки дамам он тогда бросит целовать. Хватит с них! [. . .] Он

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59 Ibid., 2:477.
Parnok’s thoughts intimate his physical deterioration as he shrinks and dissolves, like a book, and like the vanishing ink of his fateful moniker.

The mosquito buzzed:
—Look what’s become of me: I am the last Egyptian—a wailer, a nursemaid, a groveling grunt— I am a little bandy-legged prince—a beggarly, blood-sucking Ramses—in the north I have become nothing—so little is left of me—It’s my fault! . .
—I am the prince of poor fortune—a collegiate assessor from the city of Thebes. . .
Everything is the same—not changed one bit—Oh! It’s terrifying for me here—It’s my fault. . . I am a trifle—I am nothing.
— I am nothing—I’m starting to blubber—It’s my fault.

Комарик звенел:
—Глядите, что стало со мной: я последний египтянин — я плакальщик, пестун, пластун — я маленький князь-раскоряка — я нищий Рамзес-кровопийца — я на севере стал ничем — от меня так мало осталось — извиваясь! . .
— Я князь невезенья — коллежский ассессор из города Фив. . . Все такой же — ничуть не изменился — ой, страшно мне здесь — извиваясь. . .
— Я — безделица. Я — ничего. [. . .]
— Я ничего — заплачу — извиваясь.61

60 Ibid., 2:491.
61 Ibid., 2:492. Emphasis added. This passage is incredibly rich with textual references and allusions, quirks of speech and shades of meaning that are very difficult to capture in English. In light of this study’s specific concerns, the most striking aspect of the passage is found in the way the language and imagery conjure, at every turn, inner antagonisms, internal ambivalences. This character is most visible in the juxtaposition of images of the great and the lowly: Parnok the mosquito-prince is, for instance, at once Egypt’s greatest Pharaoh (Ramses II) and a “little man” of humble social rank (collegiate assessor is the rank of such ignoble protagonists as Kovalev from Gogol’s “The Nose,” and the anti-hero of Dostoevsky’s Notes from the Underground). There is also a tension between Parnok’s poetic language and the odd inflections made on it by his non-standard speech, speech colored by patterns peculiar to Jewish communities. His repeated exclamation “izviniaius,” for instance, is a non-standard way of apologizing. The same phrase, however, reinforces the theme of Parnok’s dissolution: the reflexive verb assumes fault on the part of the subject and has a hue of self-abasement. The series of alliterative nouns, plakal’ shchik, pestun, plastun, are tricky to render. A plakal’ shchik was historically a professional lamenter at ancient burial ceremonies, a crier for hire; we get no suggestion of a mercenary motive for Parnok, so it seems that he wants to communicate the action absent the incentive. A pestun is a tutor, but its etymological roots are suggestive: the verb pestovat’ means to nurse, to foster, to give care in place of a parent. A plastun is a Cossack foot soldier, but more specifically a scout; the term derives from plast (layer, bed, stratum) and lezhat’ plastom (to lie flat and motionless). I have opted to read in Parnok’s use of plastun primarily the implied posture of genuflection. One final note, the penultimate word zaplachu could have two very different meanings, since the first-person singular form is the same for the verbs zaplakat’ (to begin to cry) and zaplatit’ (to pay for). All told, the passage reinforces The Egyptian Stamp’s larger theme of the internal multiplicity of the self, its self-contradictory nature and inherent alterity.
It is at this point that the narrator abandons his charge and little more is said about Parnok. The man is now thoroughly dead, having been written off and erased from the text.

This avenue of reading leads to a rather grim view on Parnok, as well as on the condition of art and culture more broadly. It also work as a tragically self-aware vision of Mandel’shtam’s own fate, as he was eventually swallowed by the state machine that sought to erase all thought and expression outside of the new orthodoxy. Like Parnok’s, Mandel’shtam’s entire presence was all but expunged under Stalin. After he was finally transferred to a Siberian camp on 5 May 1938, little more was known about the life or death of the poet for many years; even his wife Nadezhda received confirmation of his December 1938 death only in the summer of 1940. A letter Mandel’shtam sent to Nadezhda and his brother just weeks before his demise, from hunger and exhaustion, horrifyingly reflects his protagonist’s symbolic deterioration: “My health is infirm, I am utterly depleted, I have thinned so much as to be almost unrecognizable.” As an author, too, Mandel’shtam was largely effaced: his writing was suppressed, his work and name kept alive by a relatively small body of avid admirers. Only after the Thaw did the scholarly community bring Mandel’shtam back to preeminence, and most of that academic work came from the West.

Most unsettling in the reading proposed above, I think, are the questions it provokes regarding the figure of the narrator. How do we justify the narrator’s complicity in the violence done to Parnok—the man with whom he so intimately identifies? How to make sense of the narrator’s declaration that he too is a tailor, and that in the end he, along with Parnok’s coat and shirts, accompanies Krzhizhanovsky on a train ride to the Cheka headquarters, proclaiming at that point to “love [and] respect terror” (Ia liubliu, ia uvazhaiu strakh). Could The Egyptian

63 Mandel’shtam, Egipetskaia marka, 2:494.
Stamp be a thoroughly tragic tale mourning the death of art and the artist? Could the narrator in a sense be Parnok’s coat, ripped from its native element and forcibly refashioned into an instrument for his oppressors, whom he then grotesquely praises for his own mutilation—a vision of the poet-turned-“writer”? Indeed, the narrator hints that his love of terror has been coerced: “Terror seizes me by the hand and leads me” (Strakh beret menia za ruku i vedet).64

As I have endeavored to demonstrate throughout this study, however, the personality of the narrator can be understood as but one facet of the implied author’s own—a disquieting one, to be sure, and one whose darker impulses the author tries to restrain, but one whom he must nevertheless confront. This fact accounts, in part, for the narrator’s less attractive tendencies; it also accounts for why his aesthetic values harmonize with those of the implied author. But elements of the narrator’s violences also express the other, necessary and productive form linguistic savagery that Mandel’shtam promotes in the act of writing. This latter, I will show, is ultimately the violence that the narrator performs, and it establishes his scriptive activity as a healthful antidote to the brutal homogenizing forces in which he and Parnok are otherwise mired.

Accordingly, alongside Mervis’ “narrativizing” of him and his obolochka, the novella subjects Parnok to another textu(r)al treatment. The story of Parnok invites itself to a parallel reading, one that exploits both the novella’s network of images and their poetic ambiguity to suggest a wholly different outcome. In this parallel reading, Parnok is delivered from his cruel murder, appropriation, and translation into prosaic spectacle, and is instead refashioned into a work of genuine art. This second reading also does violence to Parnok, but it is a violence different in kind, one that resists the reductive, homogenizing force exerted by Mervis and the

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64 Ibid., 2:494.
state. This time the violence of literary savagery liberates Parnok from the false confines of his “earthly casing” to metamorphose his “dark organism” into its own Gothic cathedral.

The narrator does more, because the process by which he liberates Parnok is that of his own artistic perception and his own act of poetic composition. That is, as agent of the poetic text, it is first and foremost the narrator’s own body that is implicated in Mandel’shtam’s metaphysiology of creative act. Although sometimes resistant to Parnok, loathing the notion of having anything in common with him, in one moment of poetic revelation the narrator disrobes his protagonist to find the beautiful and “monstrously condensed reality that [he] contains,” and admits the exposed man into himself. The gesture encapsulates the difference between the narrator’s work and Mervis’. The latter always remains outside his textu(r)al object: he operates on it and hands it over to the state; he never possesses his own text(ile). The narrator offers a very different method of composition.

The narrator’s work also relies on the metaphor of fabric, but it treats the material very differently, investing it with important new aesthetic and ethical associations. The principal distinction between the two construals can be understood as a matter of construction; or, in Barthes’ language, a distinction between a finalized product and a sustained production. That is, where the first reading witnesses a process of editing Parnok that results in his demise, the second performs an initial exposure and then rearticulation of the narrative object and subject into a more authentic literary and textual form—one that imparts lasting material shape to his durational inner life.

65 I cannot help but think of the “incest taboo” that Freidin, in A Coat of Many Colors, argues is the comprehensive and sustained motif of Mandel’shtam’s writing and performance as author. The Egyptian Stamp’s narrator and hero are not only Mandel’shtam’s creations, they are also avatars of the author himself. The complex episodes of communion among these self-iterations are, then, at once incestuous and masturbatory.
The narrator makes it clear that he, too, will be operating on Parnok’s same “earthly casing,” yet with entirely different motives, methods, and implications than his would-be double the tailor. He begins to make the nature of that operation and its effects on Parnok’s body clear in the novella’s final chapter. Early in Chapter VIII, just after Parnok takes in Petersburg as an internal manuscript, the narrator begins to lament that Parnok’s sacrifice to the state’s machinations is inescapable, as he has been born into his position: “But there was just one misfortune—he had no pedigree. [. . .] Yes, with such relatives one could not go far.”66 Parnok’s relatives are the Akaky Akakievichs of the world, figures outside the prevailing system of social capital, as evidenced by their poor, threadbare clothing and unintelligible speech: “All those people who were shown down the stairs, disgraced, insulted in the [eighteen] forties and fifties, all those babblers, blockheads (bormotuny, obormoty) in cloaks, with gloves that had been laundered to shreds.”67 But the narrator realizes that the “little man” has immense value. “How is that not a pedigree. How not?” he muses, only to assert, “It is.”68 Behind his shabby exterior, Parnok conceals his own tremendous worth, but as with all other phenomena, the observer must penetrate the surface. The narrator immediately explains:

One must only remove the film [sniat’ plenku] from the Petersburg air, and then its hidden layer will be laid bare [obnazhit’ sia]. Under the swansdown, the eiderdown, the Gagarin fluff, under the Tuchkov clouds, under the French bouchées of the dying quays, under the mirrored eyes of grandly servile apartments, there will be revealed something altogether unexpected.

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67 “Все эти люди, которых спускали с лестниц, шельмовали, оскорбляли в сороковых и пятидесятых годах, все эти бормотуны, обормоты в размахайках, с застиранными перчатками.” I highlight the terms bormotuny and obormoty for their lexical and phonetic harmonies that, in Mandel’shtam’s poetics of course, link them semantically. Here, the “gabbler” or “prattler” (bormotun) is directly linked to the mental and, more importantly, creative incompetence of the “blockhead” (obormot). Mandel’shtam, Egietskaia marka, 2:491.


The vision demands that the artistic gaze discard precisely the items associated with prosaic
utility—the items in which the state traffics: meaningless whipped cream-like articles of
clothing. Most provocative, however, is the “film” composed of just those garments. The Russian
plenka does mean a film, primarily in the sense of an organic outer membrane; the word also
assumes provocative associations with fabric. Indeed, the primary definition of plenka is “a fine
pellicle, tissue [lit. fabric, tkan’], serving as a casing [for] a living organism”; in the Russian,
“tonkaia kozhitsa, tkan’, sluzhashchaia obolochkoi [. . .] v zhivotnom organizme.” The film that
obfuscates the phenomena of Petersburg is none other than Parnok’s same textile-flesh—his
“earthly casing.” The narrator reinforces the image’s thematic significance when suggesting that
removal of the obolochka “lay bare” the reality beneath. Obnazhit’ sia is a reflexive verb that
means to be revealed or exposed, but its primary definition is to “strip oneself,” as of clothing, to
“disrobe.”

Parnok’s anterior body, as a visible, public entity—the only part of him which concerns
Mervis and the state—has no use for the artistic narrator who would rather expose the much
more real, inner life of the man. That surface body is a detraction, an obstacle. And since,
according to the novella’s language and imagery, to remove Parnok’s garment-casing is also to
expose the authentic reality of Petersburg, what the narrator discovers beneath Parnok’s surface

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69 Ibid., 2:491-92.
70 Etymologically connected to the word pelena, “shroud,” plenka has it’s roots in Latin and Greek terms for skin.
is nothing other than the world of the novella itself—Petersburg as it has been poetically perceived and interpreted by Parnok.

The novel text(u)r(al) artifact the narrator composes to articulate this complex inner life reiterates the crucial actions and effects of the “disrobing” passage. In contrast to the monotonous, monolithic, and finished garments tailored by Mervis, the narrator produces his own idiosyncratic text(ile), one that resembles Mandel’shtam’s ennobled “Brussel’s lace,” but with equally significant novelties. In Chapter V, the narrator lays out the program of his compositional procedure in imagery that explicitly ties text and textile:

I do not fear incoherence and gaps.
I shear the paper with long scissors.
I paste on ribbons as a fringe.
A manuscript is always a storm, frayed, pecked apart.

Я не боюсь бессвязности и разрывов.
Стригу бумагу длинными ножницами.
Подклеиваю ленточки бахромкой.
Рукопись — всегда буря, истрепанная, исклеванная.71

Hardly linear, ordered, and readily intelligible, this text(ile) is incomplete, impulsive, and jarring. We see the action of composition, the production of ongoing reconfigurations, and ornamental additions. One of the most immediately striking features of The Egyptian Stamp (as the unmediated product of the narrator) is its visible defiance of prosaic conventions. As the narrator frequently, sometimes violently, shifts focus to indulge in flights of unpremeditated poetic reverie, he leaves his text perceptibly riddled with gaps and truancies. Tattooed in the tissue of the text, his scriptive activity meaningfully expresses the durational self’s changeability and mobility.

71 Mandel’shtam, Egipetskaia marka, 2:482.
But I want to stress that the work is not only productive, for its generation relies equally on the destructive impulse. Vital parts of the text must be violently shorn, torn, and punctured before they can be woven into the suitable form. The text(ile) of Parnok’s body displays marks of such a procedure. The artistic narrator is equally responsible, after all, for stripping Parnok of his earthly casing. While Mervis may be charged with the deed of appropriating Parnok’s morning coat, the poetic figuration of the coat as Parnok’s flesh is entirely the work of the narrator—*he* composes the epithet “zemnaia obolochka.” Likewise, he figuratively places Parnok’s head under the chopping block at the barber and transforms the dentist’s drill into a deadly cobra. He links his protagonist with Gogol’s and Dostoevsky’s, and insinuates Parnok as a double for the victim of the mob.

Most importantly, in the terms of the novella’s own sustained textu(r)al metaphor, the part of the text that the narrator’s writing destroys is exactly the *body* of the page—the uniform space of prose, of communiqués, decrees, and proscriptions. For his text, the narrator instead embraces the *periphery*. He promotes this space of the text in another aesthetic proclamation.

Destroy your manuscript, but preserve whatever you have inscribed in the margin, out of boredom, out of lack of skill, and as if a dream. These secondary and involuntary creations of your fantasy will not be lost in the world but will take their places behind the shadowy music stands, like the third violins at the Mariinsky Theater, and out of gratitude to their author start up (*zavariat*) the overture to *Leonora* or the *Egmont* of Beethoven.

Уничтожайте рукопись, но сохраняйте то, что вы начертали сбоку, от скуки, от неуменья и как бы во сне. Эти второстепенные и мимовольные создания вашей фантазии не пропадут в мире, но тотчас рассеются за теневые пюпитры, как третий скрипки Мариинской оперы, и в благодарность своему творцу тут же заварят увертюру к «Леноре» или к «Эгмонту» Бетховена.72

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72 Ibid., 2:494.
The narrator idealizes a text that bears the marks of literary savagery, attesting to the effort to expel the detritus of commonplace thought and expression. The marginalia the narrator extols are not silly whims or simple distractions. The peripheral sketch may be “unskilled” (*ot neumen’ia*), but in Bergsonian terms, where the *intellect* governs all that is pragmatic and, by definition, inartistic. A marginal flourish may be the stuff of dreams insofar as a dream emerges from a pre-cognitive psychic space where the mind remains free to exploit all of its intuitive and imaginative capacities, the capacities, that is, that engender true and lasting art. And involuntary and ephemeral though they may seem, such marginalia become the *inscriptions* that find permanence as they “take up places [. . .] in the world” of things. What is more, the same sketches may even have *curative, remedial* effects. Contaminated water is, we have seen, among the images associated with the Petersburg influenza. In the Russian, when the violins “start up” the Beethoven overture, the action is inflected by the primary meaning of the verb, *zavarit’*, which means “to bring to a boil.” Ultimately, the creative spirit behind the peripheral poetic flourishes might arrest the spread of cultural disease.

A privileged liminal space, at once inside and outside, the margin marks the point at which the text comes into immediate contact with the external world, just as the sensorium of *my body* interfaces with objects so that they might be perceived in their natural and essential state.

Contrast the utilitarian book to the poetic sketches at the fringes of the page:

My pen sketches a mustached Greek beauty and someone’s foxlike chin.
It is thus that on the margins of rough copies, arabesques spring up and live their own independent, charming, and perfidious lives.
Little violin-shaped men drink up milk from the paper.

Перо рисует усатую греческую красавицу и чей-то лисий подбородок. Так на полях черновиков возникают арабески и живут своей самостоятельной, прелестной и коварной жизнью.
Скрипичные человечки пьют молоко бумаги.73

Whereas the contents of the book are wholly contained, the marginalia extend themselves beyond the page to participate freely in the wider environment. Whereas the pages of the book wither and die, the paper nourishes the peripheral sketch of a “little man” with life-giving milk. Indeed, every element of the marginalia is alive and mobile, as opposed to the static and inert “ice” and “onion skin” of the book.

On the margin, the poet translates little men (chelovechki) into music (“shaped like violins”) and invests them with the more authentic poetic life they are denied in the realm of prose. The narrator similarly poeticizes Parnok. Though he obliterates Parnok’s textu(r)al presence at the end of the novella, the narrator nevertheless composes much of the text from his “dead” subject’s poetic perceptions, Parnok’s artistic vision of Petersburg. In fact, in the initial drafts of The Egyptian Stamp, Mandel’shtam depicts Parnok himself as the “illustrator” of the marginal verbal sketches cited above.74 The narrator has taken Parnok’s internal life, including

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73 Ibid., 2:478. The images evoked in these marginal sketches are ripe with intertextual references, especially Pushkin. The pen of Mandel’shtam’s narrator, which elsewhere becomes “insubordinate,” echoes a description in the first chapter of Pushkin’s Evgenii Onegin: “[My] pen, forgetting itself, sketches not, / Near unfinished verses, / Either ladies’ little feet or heads” (Перо, забывшись, рисует, / Близ неоконченных стихов, / Ни женских ножек, ни голов). Pushkin’s drafts are likewise covered in just such doodles—he even made a few sketches of the Grecian beauty Calypso Polychroni, a woman said to have been Byron’s mistress and of whom Pushkin became enamored in 1822. Abram Efros’ 1933 book Drawings of the Poet (Risunki poeta) is dedicated to Pushkin’s marginal sketches. Efros makes a poignant connection between the person of the poet and the drawings, as well as between the word and the image: “The languages of flourishes—the source of Pushkinian drawings. [The flourish] is the bridge between the graphics of his word and the graphic of his image. Flourishes, tails ending in arabesques (the endings of a series of autographs); the arabesque intertwines with a bird; [...] the bird is pierced by sketches of ladies’ little feet [...] and the like” (Языки росчерков—источник рождения: пушкинского рисунка. Это—мост между графикой его слова и графикой его образа. Росчерки, хвосты заканчиваются арабеской (финалы ряда автографов); арабеска завивается птицей [...]; птицы пронизываются очерками женских ножек [...] и т. п.)

74 “Присев к столу, Парнок машинально нарисовал пером усатую красавицу гречанку. Так на полях черновика возникают арабески ...” Lekmanov, et. al., Egipetskaia marka: poiasneniiia dlia chitatelia, 235-36.
the “involuntary creations of [his] fantasy,” and animated them with the verbal and scriptive articulation of which Parnok was himself incapable. Parnok has died into the living text.

This last point, of Parnok’s failure to compose, is important. For as it stands, Parnok remains primarily a poetic object, while I have been arguing precisely for the significance of the writing act for the poetic subject. But the work of The Egyptian Stamp’s narrator is not done. Crucially, he does not submit Parnok’s body alone to his process of disrobing and eversion (turning inside-out). The narrator insinuates himself into the same procedure.

At the same time that the narrator states his objective in aestheticizing Parnok, he also draws greater attention to the action of his own writing. Furthermore, the narrator, until now utterly disembodied, characterizes that writing in increasingly corporeal terms. In Chapter VIII, he portrays the feeling that overcomes him during composition as a febrile madness: “I seem to see in absolutely everything the advance deposit of my dear prosaic delirium.” At first suggesting a troubling sympathy with the thoroughly prosaic mob, itself afflicted by the “delirium of the Petersburg influenza,” the same description goes on—in a gesture of Mandel’shtamian ambivalence—to evidence the unequivocally poetic nature of the narrator’s writing condition. This vital distinction manifests on the narrator’s body.

Are you familiar with this condition? When it’s as if every object ‘has a fever? When they are all joyously agitated and ill: barriers in the street, the sloughing of posters, grand pianos swarming at the depot like an intelligent leaderless herd, born for sonnet-swoons and for boiled water. . .

Then, I confess, I cannot endure the quarantine so boldly I stride, having smashed the thermometers, through the contagious labyrinth; I am behung with subordinate clauses like happy bargain buys. . . and into the readied sack fly the golden brown pastry birds, naive as the plastic art of the first centuries of Christianity, and the kalach, the

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75 “[М]не чудится задаток любимого прозаического бреда.” Ibid., 2:493.

76 “[П]етербургского инфлуэнцного бреда.” Ibid., 2:493.
common kalach, no longer conceals from me that it was conceived by the baker as a Russian lyre of voiceless dough.

Знакомы ли вам это состояние? Когда у всех вещей словно жар; когда все они радостно возбуждены и больны: рогатки на улице, шелушение афиш, рояли, толпящиеся в депо, как умное стадо без вожака, рожденное для сонатных беспамятств и кипяченой воды. . .

Тогда, признаться, я не выдерживаю карантина и смело шагаю, разбив термометры, по заразному лабиринту, обвешанный придаточными предложениями, как веселыми случайными покупками. . . и летят в подставленный мешок поджаристые жаворонки, наивные, как пластика первых веков христианства, и калац, обыкновенный калац, уже не скрывает от меня, что он задуман пекарем как российская лира из безгласного теста.77

The description of his acute delirium immediately restates the effect of artistic perception outlined in the passage describing the removal of Petersburg’s surface “film,” with the otherwise prosaic objects molting their outer layer to “no longer conceal” the ennobled silent music contained beneath. Here, however, the narrator implicates his own body in a process of physical communion with those objects, since he shares his “contagious” feverish state with the objects; the harmony between subject and object thus facilitates the poetic revelation of both. Then, just as Parnok had internalized the world around him, the narrator now receives the newly disrobed phenomena—Parnok among them—into his own body, where they hang as an ornamented garment; or “in the Bergsonian sense of the term,” like “a fan of phenomena freed of their temporal dependence, phenomena subjected to the human ‘I’ to an inner connection.”

Having realized a communion with Parnok, so distinct from Mervis’ prosaic appropriation and reapportioning of the same man, the narrator articulates his revelations in the poetic form of the text we are reading. In the same passage, the narrator alludes to his own act of composition to propose that poetic language itself is the medium through which he translates and

77 Ibid., 2:493-94.
inscribes his body—along with all he has received into it—into the text. In his act of
composition, the narrator realizes the same physiological metamorphosis Mandel’shtam imagines
in “Notre Dame.” Thus the narrator figures the objects that adorn his body as elements of
language. Not just any elements, but thematically charged “subordinate clauses,” which bespeak
the absence of prose: the subordinate clause resides as if outside the primary content and the
linear momentum of prose, a modifying appendage normally unable to function independently.
In other words, the subordinate clause resembles precisely the fragmentary marginalia ornament
and animate the fringes of the poetic page. Appropriately, then, in this moment of poetic
inspiration, the subordinate clause forms the essential grammar of the narrator’s artful text. Once
more, we witness and are invited into this grammar by the narrator’s increasingly frequent poetic
digressions. Indeed, the passages cited above, detailing the compositional procedure, do more
than describe: they are iterations of the narrator’s verbal flourishes, as he departs from his
original effort at straightforward narration; these moments perform the marginal sketch.

Also like the ennobled marginal sketches, the normally auxiliary lexical matter of the
subordinate clauses takes on an independent life. Though they garnish his body, the narrator’s
collection of word-images soon seems to reject that same anterior flesh. “I hasten to tell the real
truth. I’m in a hurry. The word, like powdered aspirin, leaves the after-taste of brassy taste in the
mouth,” as if the “real truth” is incompatible with the proper body.78 Elsewhere, and more
provocatively, the narrator’s pen becomes “insubordinate and splinter[s] and squirt[s] its black
blood out in all directions”: having yielding to the involuntary (extra-conscious) impulse to

compose, the narrator’s body mingles, in the pen’s blood, with the word-images he inscribes onto the page.\textsuperscript{79}

These last descriptions, imagining the narrator projecting the word-images that have united with his body out into the very poetic grammar of his text, have two important effects. First, they graphically suggest the narrator’s own physical self-erasure. Isenberg has identified in the narrator a similar imperative to auto-obliteration, realized in his “declaration that his [poetic] consciousness has been formed through a metempsychosis of suicide [. . .] ‘Ia ne znaiu zhizni: mne podmenili ee eshche togda. . .’ (‘I do not know life: they swapped it out on me long ago’).”\textsuperscript{80}

Mandel’shtam’s metaphysiology of art maintains that something like this is possible: just like Parnok, as his act of writing merges him with the purely perceived phenomena, the narrator’s proper body is “bracketed” as his true inner life “dies into” a new form.

Bracketed but not fully dead. To repeat Bruce Clarke, the metamorph’s anterior body gets “negated as a viable vehicle” of meaningful expression. The narrator of \textit{the Egyptian Stamp} goes on living, for a few more pages, anyway. But this bracketing accounts for his perplexing behavior in those final lines, where he accompanies Krzhizhanovsky to the Cheka headquarters. Having given external form to his inner life, the narrator similarly negates his own “earthly casing,” leaving it to reside in the realm to which it does belong, that of surfaces, appearances, legibility, and all the reductive external pressures that operate upon it. At this point, too, the narrator concludes his writing.

The same passages describing the word-image’s active externalization further draw immediate attention to the text itself—the one into which, abandoning his body, the narrator

\textsuperscript{79} “Не повинуется мне перо: оно расщепилось и разбрзгало свою черную кровь.” Ibid., 2:481.

\textsuperscript{80} Isenberg, “Work in Progress,” 233.
entered and that we are reading. Isenberg observes the same effect in these and other of the narrator’s consistent references to his own processes of inscription. For him the text is marked by the pattern of stressing the tangible, physical side of writing. Mandelstam practices a kind of ekphrasis of the text—that is, through his verbal representation of what writing looks like, he comments on his own writing as if it were a work of visual as well as scriptive art. I know of no other fiction that returns so persistently to the motif of writing implements and inscribable surfaces.\textsuperscript{81}

This effort at ekphrasis reinforces Isenberg’s thesis that the novella’s motley visual aspect, its celebrated gaps and truancies, “evoke the physical look of a work-in-progress.”\textsuperscript{82} In their visceral, “philologically” charged imagery, the same descriptions invite us to see in that text Mandel’shtam’s unique metaphysiology of writing.

All told, the narrator’s act of self-writing, along with its operation on Parnok, reify the constellation of discursive motifs on which, I have suggested, Mandel’shtam centers the ethics and politics of his art. Two social pariahs with poetic sensibilities face the threat of becoming sacrificial victims to a plague-ridden state that would otherwise have them forcibly conformed to its manufactured reality, one structured, quite literally, on a system of prosaic non-communication. That other outsider, the criminal \textit{pharmakon} of writing, saves both narrator and hero. The writing animates and gives form to its subjects’ rebellious inner lives as it grafts them onto the images and the landmarks that are the objects of their common perceptive gaze, all of which it inscribes into the text itself. Upending the teleology of the scapegoat ritual, however, the menace writing saves the would-be victim, remedying him of the plague to which he was initially to be sacrificed. Parnok, the narrator, and the world as it is seen and felt by them, survive, in the most meaningful sense: in art. Every movement in the procedure is one of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 235.
\item \textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 230.
\end{itemize}
metamorphosis and of turning inside out: margins come to the center; inner truths assume
material shape; the prosaic is transformed into poetry; flesh is made word.
—CHAPTER III: NABOKOV’S INVITATION TO ART—

—NABOKOV & THE TEXT(URE) OF THE SELF—

If Mandel’shtam’s metaphysiology of writing emphasizes the materiality of the word per se and the images it produces more than it does the actual ink and paper on which they are inscribed, Nabokov evinces no such mistrust of the physical text itself. In fact, he invests great value in the physical activity of setting pencil to page and in the tangible artifact thus produced—this emerges as the fundamental level at which the physiological metamorphosis takes place. So frequently do Nabokov’s creative works echo themes of the body’s textuality that one could readily find examples in almost any of his novels and stories. But nowhere are the motifs realized more fully than in the strange case of his final, unfinished novel, *The Original of Laura*. Perhaps even more illuminating than the creative treatment of the themes within the work’s narrative are the great and inventive lengths gone to by the text’s posthumous publishers to materialize those themes. In its book form, *The Original of Laura* is a truly unusual textu(r)al artifact, particularly in the ways it announces and actualizes Nabokov’s own investment in the materiality of language and text. Before diving into the *Laura* project itself, however, the strange work warrants a little background on how it was written.

About the time of composing *Lolita*, Nabokov had settled into a unique method of composing his novels and stories. He gives a lengthy account of the method in a 1964 interview for *Playboy* which captures the unique physical and somatic nature of his process. Once he has a mental image of the complete work, Nabokov writes,

all I have to do now is set it down in pencil or pen. Since this entire structure, dimly illumined in one's mind, can be compared to a painting, and since you do not have to work gradually from left to right for its proper perception, I may direct my flashlight at
any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing. I do not begin my novel at the beginning, I do not reach chapter three before I reach chapter four, I do not go dutifully from one page to the next, in consecutive order; no I pick out a bit here and a bit there, till I have filled all the gaps on the paper. This is why I like writing my stories and novels on index cards, numbering them later when the whole set is complete. Every card is rewritten many times. About three cards make one typewritten page, and when finally I feel that the conceived picture has been copied by me as faithfully as physically possible—a few vacant lots always remain—then I dictate the novel to my wife who types it out in triplicate.¹

Of note immediately is the fact that Nabokov composed his works longhand. We need not confer with affirming findings in contemporary neuroscience, psychology, and even educational theory to attest the especial intimacy of composing by hand, an intimacy fostered precisely by the engagement of the body in mental and creative activity. Clearly, for Nabokov, writing involved his whole body. When asked whether he writes only with pencil and paper, the author responds,

   Yes. I never learned to type. I generally start the day at a lovely old-fashioned lectern I have in my study. Later on, when I feel gravity nibbling at my calves, I settle down in a comfortable armchair alongside an ordinary writing desk; and finally, when gravity begins climbing up my spine, I lie down on a couch in a corner of my small study. It is a pleasant solar routine.²

Nabokov’s total somatic involvement in the compositional procedure translates into an equally animate artistic product, a process that the author likens to gestation. When Alvin Toffler asks if he might see some of the cards from “a work in progress,” Nabokov responds, “Certainly not. No fetus should undergo an exploratory operation.”³

The index cards on which Nabokov composed enhance the material and tactile quality of the composition. Thicker and more sturdy than even the finest “English laid paper,” the cards impart to the abstract narrative matter a real substance and density to which Nabokov was

¹ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 32.
² Ibid., 29.
³ Ibid., 29.
sensitive. Nabokov evidences his sensitivity in a passage that we will soon encounter again: “So we are nearing the end. The right-hand, still untasted part of the novel, which, during our delectable reading, we would lightly feel, mechanically testing whether there were still plenty left (and our fingers were always gladdened by the placid, faithful thickness) has suddenly, for no reason at all, become quite meager.” Here, the writer depicts the reading of a novel—Invitation to a Beheading, as it happens—as a thoroughly sensuous, tactile experience. Likewise, in their compact size that facilitates easy reorganization, the cards materialize the imagined structure of the work and can even be seen to literalize Mandel’shtam’s Acmeist architectural metaphor.

Chip Kidd, the book designer for Knopf’s 2009 publication of The Original of Laura, understood the importance of these material qualities and prioritized preserving them in the final product of the work in book form. Not completed before the author’s death in 1977, the manuscript that was to become The Original of Laura never made it into typescript, and so remained a collection of uncollated index cards, all filled to varying degrees with Nabokov’s script.5 What Nabokov had written of Laura fit onto 138 index cards, containing a total of 10,209 words.6 Close to Nabokov’s estimation of “about three cards mak[ing] one typewritten page,” in typical book form The Original of Laura would have taken up roughly 40 pages—hardly the 276 it consumes in the elaborate Knopf publication. The hardcover edition is a perfect tome,
weighing in at over two and half pounds. Printed on card stock, the book reproduces each of the
original index cards, front and back. The top half of each page contains a color photocopy of one
lined index card, while the content is typed out below. Almost all of the unlined reverse sides of
the cards are blank, ballooning the book’s width to 1.7 inches, half of which remains negative
space. To top it off, the index cards are perforated to permit easy removal by readers. While
many critics and readers dislike these gestures (especially the last) as gimmicks (expensive to
produce but cheap in effect), for the purposes of this study, the book’s elaborate production
proves invaluable. Removing the index cards allows the readers to feel and handle the textu(r)al
object according to Nabokov’s own unique method; it even invites them to inhabit the author’s
creative logic and then restructure the narrative.

The same ingenuities of the book’s design meaningfully materialize the themes of the
narrative contained therein, where, as Lilla Farmasi observes, “the complicated relationship of
text, image, and body is foregrounded” throughout. A cohesive plot for The Original of Laura is
difficult to establish, but in Yuri Leving’s reading it “concerns Flora, the daughter of an artistic
couple, who becomes the subject of a scandalous novel, My Laura. Flora’s husband, Philip Wind,
is engaged in a ‘process of self-obliteration’ in which he attempts to erase himself from existence
through the powers of the imagination.”

7 Gennady Barabtarlo, for instance, calls the removable notecards a “coy typographical tease” upon which “nobody
in his right mind” would act; “The German de luxe solution (a separate stack of superbly reproduced cards lurking
beneath a toothy book in a slipcase) is more elegant.” Gennady Barabtarlo, Maurice Couturier, Anna Raffetto, Rein
8 Lilla Farmasi, “Corporeality and Mediality in Vladimir Nabokov’s The Original of Laura,” Intertextuality,
39.
I cite Leving’s summary for his emphasis on Flora and her status as a doubly narrativized subject. The novel within the novel, My Laura—which her husband painfully discovers to be a “maddening masterpiece”—composes the story of Flora’s life.\(^{10}\) Or, more appropriately, the book textualizes Flora. As Marijeta Bozovic states plainly, “[Flora/Laura’s] body is all book.”\(^{11}\) And indeed, her very anatomy, “repeatedly fused and confused with literary texts,” appears synonymous with—in fact becomes the—framework of her “biography.”\(^{12}\) One description echoes the textual quality found in the body of Invitation to a Beheading’s protagonist: “She was an extravagantly slender girl. Her ribs showed. The conspicuous knobs of her hipbones framed a hollowed abdomen. [. . .] Her exquisite bone structure immediately slipped into a novel—became in fact the secret structure of that novel.”\(^{13}\) Flora’s transmutation into an artistic text, however, is not characterized as a wholly creative act; instead, her textual composition performs a parallel and equivalent process of obliteration. In the novel’s own words: “The ‘I’ of the book is a neurotic and hesitant man of letters, who destroys his mistress in the act of portraying her.”\(^{14}\)

The process of Flora’s textualization in turn illuminates the protagonist Philip Wind’s own effort at self-obliteration. According to Wind, the method of self-erasure should be straightforward: “The student who desires to die should learn first of all to project a mental image of himself upon his inner blackboard,” which the student then gradually erases by a similar mental effort.\(^{15}\) Admitting that his “visual imagination is nil,” however, Wind tries

\(^{10}\) Nabokov, The Original of Laura (Dying is Fun) (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 221, 225.


\(^{12}\) Farmasi, “Corporeality and Mediality,” 39.

\(^{13}\) Nabokov, The Original of Laura, 13-15.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 121.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 131.
“various stylizations” of the operation, including the substitution of his own image for its alphabetic and self-reflexive representation. Wind observes that his name encrypts repeated references to the self, the subjective “I”: “Would the letters of my name do? Its recurrent ‘i’. . .”

The experiment proves fruitful, and before long Wind’s body begins to deteriorate. Accordingly, Wind colors the descriptions of his annihilation with a vocabulary of textual de-composition.

“Soon, with the strong thumb of thought I could rub out its base, which corresponded to my joined feet. Being new to the process of self-deletion, I attributed the ecstatic relief of getting rid of my toes (as represented by the white pedicule I was erasing with more than masturbatory joy).”

Narrating the work in the self-reflexive first-person, Wind knowingly performs on himself the creative-destructive act visited unwittingly upon Flora. In this light, Zina’s fear in The Gift (Dar, 1938) that Fyodor’s autobiography will result in “mass executions” becomes, in a sense, fully warranted. Characters in the know, however, understand that the act of writing compensates for the body’s dissolution with the composition of a dissimilar, but equally somatic artistic product. Wind seems to be one such character, and the cross-purposes at which his efforts work are not lost on him.

A process of self-obliteration conducted by an effort of the will. Pleasure, bordering on almost unendurable ecstasy, comes from feeling the will working at a new task: an act of destruction which develops paradoxically an element of creativeness in the totally new application of totally free will. Learning to use the vigor of its own body for the purpose of its own deletion[,] standing vitality on its head.

16 Ibid., 135.
17 Ibid., 139. Emphasis added.
19 Nabokov, The Original of Laura, 213.
Wind’s physical death is simultaneously realized and negated as he dies into the text, entering the crypt. Readers may sense the Nabokov of *Bend Sinister*’s Forward in imaginings of self-decomposition such as this; there the author says that the novel’s hero remains stoic in the face of mortality, having realized that “death is but a question of style, a mere literary device, a musical resolution.” If we can entertain with credulity, as the book designers of *The Original Laura* clearly did, that Nabokov voices and performs his own metaphysiology of writing through Philip Wind, *The Original of Laura*, and all other Nabokov texts, assume a very different substance.

Though we as readers may not want to imagine that in a Nabokov novel what we are holding is the author himself, we are certainly encouraged to do just that with the text of Cincinnatus in *Invitation to a Beheading* where, some forty years earlier, Nabokov established the tropes of anatomical translation in much the same language and imagery as they appear in *Laura*. The sustained prevalence of the theme testifies to its aesthetic and ethical significance to the author. Analysis of Nabokov’s fundamental ideologies of language, image, and writing, which bear the unmistakable imprint of Bergson, helps to illuminate how the author construed the procedure of textualization and to clarify just what it means for him to live in text.

The text itself assumes such significance for Nabokov because, as object in the world, but one composed of the poet’s inner self, it exists on the boundary between the two modes of experience—subjective and objective, private and public. In short, the text occupies the paradox of embodied subjectivity. The same condition allows for the immortalizing achievement of the creative act, which the text fully realizes not in being written but in being read. We have seen graphic evidence of the transmutation into text that Nabokov imagines in his process of writing.

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Something similar occurs with the reader who is, Nabokov insists, meant to read more with his own body than with his mind, the result of which process the author imagines as a rematerialization of the Barthesian “hidden, secret flesh” that composes the structure of the book. Thus, “Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever.”21 In reading, the artist—not the man, not even the author—intimately communes with the reader.

To account for Nabokov’s peculiar metaphysiology of art, I will describe both his personal aesthetics of the tangible as they reflect his vision of the material world and his strategies for inviting the reader to participate in the creative act. Those sets of values and practices, as I conceive of them, amount to a sort of paradox that I will refer to as subjective realism. While maintaining his ardent individualism and belief in the ultimate reality of inner, private, subjective experience, Nabokov, like Mandel’shtam, also demonstrates that his feet are planted firmly in the empirical matter of the “objectively” observable world. With his unique artistic methods, Nabokov consistently problematizes the boundary between the two modalities of embodied experience. By employing realist techniques of mimetic description to conjure private impressions, the author can maintain that the worlds of his fiction are at once grounded in the realia of the “given world”22 and perfect fairytales, “having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know.”23 Nabokov uses his singular style to insinuate into the reader’s

perception the author’s peculiar interpretation of the observable world, a patently Bergsonian concept.

Moreover, Nabokov’s emphasis on the subjective image proves the central tenet of his broader aesthetic worldview. The same concept of the image also operates as the key artistic device that elevates all of his work above the conventions of prose to function as what I have defined in these pages as the logic of poetry. In what follows I will describe how Nabokov employs constellations of thematically pregnant images in a system of semiotic and semantic accrual comparable to Mandel’shtam’s, and to demonstrate that he does so in order capture the same condition—the durational experience of a multifarious and mobile subjectivity.

Echoing the imagery of Bergson’s veil metaphor, Dabney Stuart says of Nabokov’s orientation to the material realm that “few men delight so consciously in the things of this world while making unabashed suggestions that behind, or at the center of the most ecstatic moments experience in this world offers there is still something else of another order altogether.”

Nabokov in fact did more than suggest such a view, he made statements that unambiguously agree with Bergson’s proposal that we inhabit the world in two realms of experience: an apparent and superficial one that we might expose as a simplified silhouette of a deeper reality. “To be sure,” Nabokov admits in one interview, “there is an average reality, perceived by all of us, but that is not true reality: it is only the reality of general ideas, conventional forms of humdrummery, current editorials.” Public, collective, and consisting of trite simplifications, average reality is Nabokov’s term for Bergson’s habitual perception. In his study of Gogol,

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Nabokov identifies, in explicitly Bergsonian language, the homogenizing effects those “conventional forms” have on our perception of “true” reality. Until Gogol introduced his radical novelties of descriptive vocabulary, “Russian literature was purblind”:

What form it perceived was an outline directed by reason: it did not see color for itself but merely used the hackneyed combinations of blind noun and dog-like adjective that Europe had inherited from the ancients. It was Gogol [. . .] who first saw yellow and violet at all. That the sky could be pale green at sunrise, or the snow rich blue on a cloudless day, would have sounded like heretical nonsense to your so-called “classical” writer, accustomed as he was to the rigid conventional color-schemes of the Eighteenth Century French school of literature.26

Inasmuch as they try to communicate a commonly recognizable vision of the world, standardized forms sterilize our sensory faculties by imposing a bland uniformity onto that world.

Nabokov’s art, by contrast, seeks to bring out the unexpected nuances and singularities among the objects of the ostensibly familiar sensual world. His remedy against the deadening platitude is the discerning lens of the individual “I.” In a statement that reads like a précis of The Egyptian Stamp, Nabokov posits that “average reality begins to stink and rot as soon as the art of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture.”27 Brian Boyd clarifies that this subjectivity is no mere “solipsistic fancy” since, as Nabokov defines it, subjectivity is “a kind of gradual accumulation of information”—“a specialization,” Nabokov himself will say28—that results from a “vigilant determination to push beyond the easy generalization [and] approach the endless particularity of things.”29 Consequently, if Mandel’shtam’s aesthetics endeavor to

26 Nabokov, Nikolai Gogol (New York: New Directions, 1959), 86.
27 Nabokov, Strong Opinions, 118. Emphasis added.
28 Ibid., 10.
allow the rose to be appreciated for its rose-ness, David Lodge argues that Nabokov, in like manner,

wonderfully celebrates the thingness of things. His novels are full of objects, often homely and humble, that are noted and described not necessarily because they are of significance in the plot or because they are signifiers of character and milieu, or vehicles of thematic symbolism, but simply because they are there, because the world is full of forgotten, abandoned, contingent objects, every one of which in fact has its own history and pathos, and one duty of the artist is to remind us of this.  

All of Nabokov’s subsequent strategies for bringing the reader into contact with such objects are motivated by the same gravitation toward discreteness and particularity; even when the author seems to acknowledge that he must condescend to average reality if his fictional worlds are to be believable:

The creative writer must study carefully the works of his rivals, including the Almighty. He must possess the inborn capacity not only of recombining but of re-creating the given world. In order to do this adequately, avoiding duplication of labor, the artist should know the given world. Imagination without knowledge leads no farther than the back yard of primitive art.

In short, Nabokov argues that the “knowledge” that aids imagination is the knowledge of the endless diversity of things.

Nabokov’s attendant descriptive techniques, which appear to verge on an effort at mechanical mimesis, especially as the author-lepidopterist frequently makes synonymous literary depiction with taxonomic description, conflate the apparently dissimilar disciplines in their shared demand for accurate graphic representation. Nabokov says they provide the creative scientist the same aesthetic pleasure: “The tactile delights of precision delineation, the silent paradise of the camera lucida, and the precision of poetry in taxonomic description represent the

artistic side of the thrill.” Similarly, in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov states that both skills were mutually nourished by his youthful instruction in drawing. Under the tutelage of a Mr. Cummings, the budding poet and avid butterfly collector internalized the “marble laws of perspective” and developed a firm and steady hand. Describing Cummings’ methods, Nabokov recalls that the artist approached his pupil quietly, “as if afraid to startle me from my verse-making stupor,” before beginning the lesson, then,

he made me depict from memory, in the greatest possible detail, objects I had certainly seen thousands of times without visualizing them properly: a street lamp, a postbox, the tulip design on the stained glass of our own front door. He tried to teach me to find the geometrical coordinations between the slender twigs of a leafless boulevard tree, a system of visual give-and-takes requiring a precision of linear expression, which I had failed to achieve in my youth, but applied gratefully, in my adult instar, not only to the drawing of butterfly genitalia, [. . .] but also, perhaps, to certain camera-lucida needs of literary composition.

Crucial in the description of the art lessons, though, is not that the master teaches to depict in geometrical detail and precision, but that the refined skills of accurate representation are put in the service of rendering the *discrete* object in its *true distinctness*. The camera lucida enables the viewer to see past the generalizations imposed by a habitual perception, the perception that had allowed the young Nabokov to have seen the objects “a thousand times without visualizing them properly.” That Nabokov deems Cummings a “master of the sunset” means the teacher must have wielded one of those “heretical” palettes, like the one Gogol had used to upset the “rigid conventional color-schemes” of his time and give his readers an authentic sunrise.

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32 Ibid., 79.  
33 Ibid., 91.  
34 Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 92.  
35 Ibid., 91.
In *Fine Lines*, his study of Nabokov’s “scientific art,” Stephen Blackwell describes Nabokov’s copious renderings of butterfly wings to observe how “we can follow his interest inward, zooming from the naked eye to the microscopic, as he examines wing patterns with finer and finer grain, ending with the microscopic.” Nabokov then applied the same technique of an ever-approaching and delineating gaze to butterfly genitalia. He pioneered a method of making morphological analysis more exact by “being extremely specific about the shapes of various structures” of the reproductive anatomy, thereby introducing anatomical features and distinctions previously unrecognized. In short, Nabokov discovered a new source of *variety* in what was thought to be a thoroughly documented species.

Nabokov’s instruments for representation in writing may be different, but the principles remain the same and the practices comparable. Commensurate with this commitment to seeking particularity in all objects, Nabokov painstakingly tailored his language to communicate the results of his perception. His verbal art thus transforms its objects in the act of describing them. When translated into the realm of Nabokov’s verbal art, “the material of this world may be real enough (as far as reality goes) but does not exist at all as an accepted entirety.” Instead, the observed material is reshaped to accord with the author’s perception of it: “it is now recombined in its very atoms, not merely in its visible and superficial parts.”

In a more than curious aside, because of a remarkable perceptual quirk, Nabokov *experienced* language as inextricably bound up with his unique sensory experience of the world.

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Gifted with synesthesia, the author witnessed language as a play of colors, and he could even fine tune his words in curious ways to complement his vision. In certain instances, the author exploited the chromatic index of a word to amplify that word’s semantic associations. Similarly, in his descriptive language he could locate an adjective whose color truly reflected for him the object being modified; that is, he could describe a cloud as either gray or grey depending on its particular tint. What is more, Nabokov’s synesthesia had not only cognitive but a physiological dimension, suggesting an even deeper reification of the author’s language as a thing in the world. Describing his synesthesia in Speak, Memory, Nabokov initially presents it as “colored hearing,” but corrects himself. “Perhaps hearing is not quite accurate,” he admits, because the color is instead produced “by the very act of my orally forming a given letter while I imagine its outline.”39 The distinction shows that for Nabokov the color could only be rendered once the given sound was materialized through the body, as the visualization had to be paired with the act of “orally forming” the letter. The author may have ridiculed those who move their lips while reading, but it seems he had to move his own mouth to summon his perceptional gift.

Nabokov may not have been able to fully communicate the peculiar perceptual nuances of his own language to his audience, but he did try to get readers to sharpen their own perceptive faculties through language. One need look no further than Nabokov’s notorious translation of Eugene Onegin (1964) for evidence of his commitment to the word’s descriptive specificity. Contrasting his method of translation to more liberal strategies that attempt to retain the music or spirit of a given work, Nabokov swears loyalty to semantics alone:

In transposing Eugene Onegin from Pushkin’s Russian into my English I have sacrificed to completeness of meaning every formal element including the iambic rhythm, whenever

39 Nabokov, Speak, Memory, 34.
its retention hindered fidelity. To my ideal of literalism I sacrificed everything (elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar) that the dainty mimic prizes higher than truth.\textsuperscript{40}

Nabokov’s translation often reaches deep into arcane lexicons to find the nearest English equivalent of a word, even if the term is abstract or awkward. So strange were some of his word choices in English that the author’s one-time friend Edmund Wilson, in a scathing critique, diagnosed its translator as having an “addiction to rare and unfamiliar words.” He continues his critique with some important vocabulary of his own:

it would be more to the point for the student to look up the Russian word than to have to have recourse to the OED for an English word he has never seen and which he will never have occasion to use. To inflict on the reader such words is not really to translate at all, for it is not to write idiomatic and recognizable English.

After listing some especially “objectionable [. . .] aberrations,” Wilson admits that they “all can be found in the OED, but they are entirely dictionary words, usually labeled ‘dialect,’ ‘archaic,” or ‘obsolete.’

\textsuperscript{41} Wilson was no doubt correct that Nabokov’s vocabulary presented a challenge, but that was because the translator had made what was for him an ethical choice to avoid the “idiomatic and recognizable” precisely because such language mutes and obscures the peculiarity of images. The “aberrant” word, alternatively, locates, isolates, and positively identifies its object.

The \textit{Onegin} experiment was a polemical gesture, but the basic commitment to a targeted language that it demonstrates nevertheless characterizes the whole of Nabokov’s writerly project. The way the author cringed at the very idea of a symbol, for instance, is revealing. “The notion


of symbol itself has always been abhorrent to me,” he declares flatly in one caustic detraction of symbol hunting in his novels.\textsuperscript{42} The consciously chosen words that the misguided reader “mistakes for ‘symbols,’” Nabokov continues, “are not labels, not pointers, [. . .] but live fragments of specific description, rudiments of metaphor, and echoes of creative emotion.”\textsuperscript{43} The writer abhors the symbol for its abstraction of the particular, for its refusal to acknowledge value in a given phenomenon of itself, and for disallowing words to serve more nuanced and more elevated aesthetic functions.

Other elements of language disturbed Nabokov in different ways. For example, the author diagnosed himself with a “communicatory neurosis” which prevented him from making any kind of unscripted public utterance. He famously had Véra handle all professional interactions, especially those over the phone. The author’s 1956 appearance on the television program \textit{Close Up} provides particularly illuminating evidence of his attitude toward unprepared speech. The format of the program intended to give the impression of a casual, almost impromptu conversation among friends. Fellow guest Lionel Trilling projects the desired unceremoniousness: hands engaged only by a cigarette, he seems to speak off the cuff. Nabokov, on the other hand, struggles to raise his eyes from the stack of index cards from which he recites his scripted responses.\textsuperscript{44} Nabokov plainly justified his reliance on his note cards when admitting, “I have always been a wretched speaker. [. . .] Spontaneous eloquence seems to me a

\textsuperscript{42} Nabokov, \textit{Strong Opinions}, 304-5.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 304-5.

miracle.” In short, Nabokov considered speech antithetical to his art: “I think like a genius, I write like a distinguished author, and I speak like a child.”

Amusing as it may be, this last anecdote illustrates Nabokov’s perfect reliance on those same trademark index cards: the material artifacts of writing and the foundation of his creative works. The physical page is vital for Nabokov because it allows the word to be stabilized. In the lexicon of insect taxonomy, the page is the mounting board to which discrete specimen are firmly pinned and steadied for patient scrutiny. Nabokov then demands the same patient scrutiny from the ideal reader—or, and this is the whole point, the ideal re-reader, since “one cannot read a book: one can only re-read it [. . .] In reading a book we must have time to acquaint ourselves with it.”

To acquaint oneself with a book, Nabokov reminded his students at Wellesley and Cornell, means to treat every text as a new world, to make one’s home there by “study[ing] that new world as closely as possible.” When both have done their work well, the reader enjoys a thoroughly sensory experience of the artist’s crafted world in a process of Bergsonian transference, whereby the work of art functions as the hyphen connecting the body of the reader to aestheticized object. Nabokov gestures toward this idea when he affirms, “I don’t think in any language. I think in images.” The images comprising the Nabokovian text thus create a point of entry into the sensual world of fiction, since imagery, in Nabokov’s words,

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46 Ibid., xv.
48 Ibid., 1.
may be defined as the evocation, by means of words, of something that is meant to appeal to the reader’s sense of color, or sense of outline, or sense of sound, or sense of movement, or any other sense of perception, in such a way as to impress upon his mind a picture of fictitious life that becomes to him as living as any personal recollection.\(^{50}\)

If that book has been crafted artistically, we know just how much the artist has put of himself into that imagery. Appropriately, just as Nabokov had to listen to his spine when composing his texts, the reader is to employ his in their reception.

Although we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades. That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art. \(\ldots\) Let us worship the spine and its tingle. Let us be proud of being vertebrates, for we are vertebrates tipped at the head with a divine flame. The brain only continues the spine, the wick really runs through the whole length of the candle. If we are not capable of enjoying that shiver, if we cannot enjoy literature, then let us give up the whole thing and concentrate on our comics, our videos, our books-of-the-week.\(^{51}\)

The experience of artful reading thus becomes an act of creation on par with that realized in composition. The reader who imaginatively inhabits the text conjures and animates and touches the world precisely as it has been perceived by the artist. Ultimately, the reader communes with the artist himself, participating in the psychosomatic processes that gave birth to the shared creative artifact. Even if the artist be gone and dead, Nabokov was confident in a poetic work’s capacity to sustain his presence beyond the ravages of mortal time. The unpublished 1930 poem “To an Unborn Reader” (“Nerodivshemiusia chitateliu”), for instance, fancifully imagines how a future reader would invite a deceased and forgotten poet back into temporal existence. Picking up an anthology of poems, the future reader will “dress in the style / of my frock coat-and-tails days.” The poet himself promises, “I am here with you. You are not


\(^{51}\) Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 64.
free to hide. / Onto your breast I’ll leap through the void.” His 1950 English poem “The Room” more somberly depicts the full scope of art’s potential to resurrect. The poem’s narrative voice takes up a hotel room once inhabited by a now-deceased poet; the first thing he sees upon entering the room are a pair of dead books:

The room a dying poet took
at nightfall in a dead hotel
had both directories—the Book
of Heaven and the Book of Bell.

The telephone book and the Bible are for Nabokov both equally representative of the negation of art, the absence of meaningful creative imagination and expression. Consequently, they inform the space’s atmosphere of anonymous and banal morbidity, a sense that is augmented in the subsequent description:

It had a mirror and a chair,
it had a window and a bed,
its ribs let in the darkness where
rain glistened and a shopsign bled.

Not tears, not terror, but a blend
of anonymity and doom,
it seemed, that room, to condescend
to imitate a normal room.

Whenever some automobile
subliminally slit the night,
the walls and ceiling would reveal
a wheeling skeleton of light.


53 Though I have sought in vain for any direct comment by Nabokov on the New Testament as literature, he did make clear that two of the principal impulses to inspire the text—moralizing and social engagement—were for him synonymous with bad art. He attributed these qualities to organized religion more broadly: “I suppose that my indifference to religion is of the same nature as my dislike of group activities in the domain of political or civic commitments.” Strong Opinions, 48.
Manifesting the bareness and lifelessness typified in the dead texts that introduce it, the
“imitation” room, a cavern furnished only by inert and generic objects, imparts nothing to the
narrator other than the impression of a grim and fleshless corpse. All this changes when the
narrative voice discovers a single line of verse written in pencil on the wall by the departed poet.
The line itself seems to invoke the state of the room, reading ominously, “Alone, unknown,
unloved, I die.” Upon being read, however, the line’s composer suddenly takes distinctive and
vivifying form in the narrator’s imagination: “Was it a she, wild-eyed, well-read, / or a fat man
with thinning hair?” The narrator inquires who the poet was and wonders what inspired his or her
verse. After these musings, the narrator recognizes that there can be no real death in art since

A poet's death is, after all,
a question of technique, a neat
enjambment, a melodic fall,

whereupon the room itself at once reanimates, assuming flesh and a beating heart:

And here a life had come apart
in darkness, and the room had grown
a ghostly thorax, with a heart
unknown, unloved—but not alone.54

In meeting over a poetic text, neither the narrator nor the poet any longer remains alone; rather,
the pair have entered into a remarkably intimate form of intercourse, whose generative power
extends beyond the text to indelibly alter the reader’s perception of the surrounding world,
thereby restoring the poet back to it.

This turn to Nabokov’s poetry is crucial. For while I have accounted for his subjective
relationship to the objects he aestheticizes and the consequent physiological mode of his writing,

we still do not have a thoroughgoing semiotic and semantic system that can be called a poetic mode of writing that realizes the chronotope of duration. But Nabokov has such a system. For while he wants his images to be clear and concrete, they are never meant to be semantically transparent signs. He gestures toward this fact in the statement, cited above, wherein he denounces the symbol to affirm that his word-images “are not labels, not pointers, [. . .] but live fragments of specific description, rudiments of metaphor, and echoes of creative emotion.” The word-image is, in other words, at once precise and figurative, and thus able to perform the bivalent operation of Bergsonian perception by simultaneously isolating the peculiarities of the image-object and tracing its unexpected relations with other image-objects. The latter quality of course allows a given word-image to create additional semantic associations and interconnections. This proves among the most important aesthetic functions of Nabokov’s language. Against the author’s frequent rhetoric professing the inartistry of resemblances and similarities, Nabokov’s poetics come alive precisely in the ways he locates the quiet harmonies between seemingly disparate phenomena.56

Nabokov performs the effect most effectively in his enigmatic “autobiographical” statement Speak, Memory. The memoirist invites the reader into this mode of associative activity with the declaration that “the following of [. . .] thematic designs through one’s life should be, I

55 Nabokov, Strong Opinions, 304-5.

56 A number of Nabokov’s works can be read as extended object lessons on his professed doctrine of particularity and the inartistic nature of a gaze that seeks resemblances. One novel in particular takes the artist’s aesthetic and ethical commitment as its principal thematic concern. Despair (Otchaianie, 1934) is the farcical story of Hermann, a man who believes he has found his perfect doppelgänger, with whom he plots to swap identities. Convinced of his victim’s perfect resemblance, Hermann dresses him in his clothes and murders “himself” in a scheme to collect insurance money for his own death. His quickly foiled crime is but a dramatic symptom of his diseased perception that searches primarily for affirmation of regularity and harmony in the world. The novel demonstrates the foolhardiness of seeking only similarities and common features. Nabokov seems to speak through the character with a more responsible gaze on the world, the artist Ardalion, when the latter attempts to disabuse the anti-hero of his faulty perception: “You forget, my good man, that what the artist perceives is, primarily, the difference between things. It is the vulgar who note their resemblance.” Nabokov, Despair (New York: Vintage, 1989), 41.
think, the true purpose of autobiography.” To illustrate how the procedure works, Nabokov presents the example of two interactions with a General Kuropatkin, the Russian Imperial Minister of War. The author first met Kuropatkin in 1904 when the latter was at the height of his political and social esteem; the military official entertained Nabokov, then a child, with a playful match trick: “[He] placed ten of them end to end to make a horizontal line, and said, ‘This is the sea in calm weather.’ Then he tipped up each pair so as to turn the straight line into a zigzag—and that was ‘a stormy sea.’” Fifteen years later, the author and his father encountered the same man, now rather destitute, asking for a match to light his cigarette. “I hope old Kuropatkin [ . . . ] managed to escape soviet imprisonment,” states Nabokov, only to reveal the true object of his interest: “But that is not the point. What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme.” Throughout the memoir, Nabokov similarly links all the major events to one or more image-objects—material objects that he has “taken in” and subjected to his poetic “I”—from a thematically pregnant constellation ripe with personal associations. The collection of privileged objects constitutes a Barthesian personal-image system and, by encouraging the diverse images and events to communicate with one another by their “innate harmonies,” thus operates as the work’s primary organizing principle and source of meaning.

Commenting on the image-patterns that pervade *Speak, Memory*, Dabney Stuart locates a term, taken from the memoir itself, that effectively conceptualizes *Speak, Memory*’s underlying design: reticulate. In his work *Vladimir Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody*, Stuart observes

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57 Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 27.
58 Ibid., 27.
59 Ibid., 27.
60 Ibid., 170.
that it is fitting, in a book whose purpose is to trace designs, to find “a pattern of images which are themselves reticulate.”\textsuperscript{61} He assembles a fine collection of images that fit the scheme:

The first ones are part of Nabokov’s first memories: the “lateral nets of fluffy cotton cords” on his crib, the “mesh of sunshine” which greeted his emergence from the divan-tunnel, the wire mesh surrounding the new tennis court at Vyra. Two others are poignantly maternal: Madame Nabokov’s veil through which he used to kiss her cheek, and whose “touch of reticulated tenderness my lips used to feel” he remembers with joy; and the “thin fabric that veiled the windowpane” of the oriel in his mother’s boudoir in the large house in St. Petersburg, through which he would look out on the Morskaya. “With lips pressed against [it] I would gradually taste the cold of the glass through the gauze.”\textsuperscript{62}

Stuart identifies one final iteration of the reticulate pattern in the all-important butterfly net, one of Nabokov’s most treasured instruments.

The image-objects that Stuart highlights interconnect thanks to their common gridded structure and each constitutes, moreover, a manner of textile. Additionally, each image clearly evokes either aesthetic sensitivity (the mesh of sunshine) or personal enthusiasms (tennis), or carries special emotional weight. In its meshwork, the butterfly net captures a host of loaded associations, but primarily Nabokov’s passion for lepidopterology, a science and a craft that the author viewed as analogous to poetic composition. Stuart’s menagerie of image-objects does much to introduce the memoir’s semiotic scheme, but the collection remains limited, bound by a definition of “reticulate” as a more or less rectilinear grid. The same design theme can be extended to both accommodate a greater body of evocative images and to reflect more accurately the spontaneous and at times meandering associative poetic process that resists the grid’s rigidness and regularity.

\textsuperscript{61} Stuart, \textit{The Dimensions of Parody}, 185.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 185.
A reticulated structure can be much more elaborate and ornamental than a fixed series of cross sections, and Nabokov exploits these broader structural possibilities. “Reticulated” is used primarily to describe the branching and curving matrix of leaf venation; mirroring the subdividing process on a much larger scale, the same term can apply to a winding system of rivers and streams, footpaths, roads, or railroad tracks—all potent images in *Speak, Memory*, as they are the sites and scenery of the author’s contemplative and romantic strolls and fervid butterfly hunts. They also appear as the avenues of transportation associated with themes of exile and emigration.

In biology, “reticulated” designates certain skin or scale designs characterized by their interlacing patterns; most notably the term describes the fine vein and scale figurations on the wings of butterflies. As Blackwell, along with his co-author, the entomologist Kurt Johnson, observes in *Fine Lines*, “the large numbers of butterfly renderings in Nabokov’s laboratory scrapbooks show his fascination with the intricately reticulate and cryptic colorations of many butterflies, especially butterfly wing mimicry.”*63* Nabokov considered the phenomenon of insect mimicry an organic embodiment of “artistic perfection usually associated with man-wrought things” but realized most majestically in nature, as “when a butterfly has to look like a leaf.” He elevated the clever act of beguilement to an aesthetic imperative: “I discovered in [mimicry] the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception.”*64* In this one gesture, the memoirist marries the reticulated structure of leaf venation to the intoxicating complexity of the butterfly wing. In so doing he

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*64* Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 124-25.
invites the basic pattern of the former to participate in the labyrinthine workings of the latter, uniting the two in his most profound metaphor for art.

Lest the prevalence and significance of this design feature in the memoir appear overemphasized, observe that Nabokov promotes it almost explicitly in the Forward to *Speak, Memory*. Discussing proposed alternative titles for the work, Nabokov “also toyed with The Anthemion” which he defines as “the name of a honeysuckle ornament, consisting of elaborate interlacements and expanding clusters.” Also called a “palmette,” the anthemion originated in ancient Egypt and later became a prominent Greek artistic and architectural motif. At first depicting relatively simple foliate structures, the anthemion evolved to incorporate ever more complexly textured fronds with reticulating and twisting tendrils. These more elaborate designs were later revived and amplified in baroque embellishments. They were also reinterpreted in the arabesque that rapidly came to typify Islamic ornamentation.

The branching, twining courses traced in these reticulating foliate designs offer a perfect template for the associative process operating in *Speak, Memory*: the nexus of a theme or image radiates out, constantly evoking subtle variations of the principal motif, encouraging otherwise discrete episodes and events to be brought into communication with and be mutually nourished by their common connective tissue. Just as Dabney Stuart observed, the structural design of the

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65 Ibid., 11. Emphasis added.

66 The *arabesque* is meant specifically to replicate vegetal, or foliate, designs and is characterized by “surface decorations based on rhythmic linear patterns of scrolling and interlacing foliage, tendrils, etc., usually covering the entire surface with a network of fine ornaments in zigzags, spirals, knots, etc.” The history of the decorative ornament reveals other peculiarities that speak in intriguing ways to the concerns of Nabokov’s and Mandel’shtam’s creative projects. For instance, as the arabesque was normativized according to the ethics of Islamic art, the depiction of human bodies (the *surface body*) was strictly prohibited. As it happens, the word arabesque emerges from the design’s use in book arts: it derives from the French and Italian, means “in the Arabic style,” and dates “to the 15th or 16th century, when Renaissance artists used Islamic designs for book ornament and decorative bookbinding.” See Gordon Campbell, ed., *The Grove Encyclopedia of Decorative Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 25; and John Fleming and Hugh Honour, *The Penguin Dictionary of Decorative Arts* (London: Viking Penguin, 1989), 33.
work is reinforced by the sustained appearance of images within the text that mirror the overarching pattern.

To piece together all instances of the reticulated theme would be needless and excessive. Allow one central example to demonstrate how it operates as a basic structuring principle, offering a broad framework that subdivides into ever finer interlacements. Chapter Eleven of *Speak, Memory* recounts Nabokov’s immersion in poetic composition. The description of the setting that inspires his first attempts at versification combines many of the images addressed above and introduces potent new iterations. The complexity and density of the thematic network warrants a lengthy citation.

In order to reconstruct the summer of 1914, when the numb fury of verse-making first came over me, all I really need is to visualize a certain pavilion. [. . .] I dream of my pavilion at least twice a year. [. . .] It hangs around, so to speak, with the unobtrusiveness of an artist’s signature. I find it clinging to a corner of the dream canvas or cunningly worked into some ornamental part of the picture. At times, however, it seems to be suspended in the middle distance, a trifle baroque, and yet in tune with the handsome trees, dark fir and bright birch, whose sap once ran through its timber. Wine-red and bottle-green and dark-blue lozenges of stained glass lend a chapel-like touch to the latticework of its casements. It is just as it was in my boyhood, a sturdy wooden structure above a ferny ravine in the older, riverside part of our Vyra park. Just as it was, or perhaps a little more perfect. In the real thing some of the glass was missing, crumpled leaves had been swept in by the wind. The narrow little bridge that arched across the ghyll at its deepest part, with the pavilion raising midway like a coagulated rainbow, was as slippery after a rainy spell as if it had been coated with some dark and in a sense magic ointment. Etymologically, “pavilion” and “papilio” are closely related. Inside, there was nothing in the way of furniture except a folding table hinged rustily to the wall under the east window, through the two or three glassless or pale-glassed compartments of which, among the bloated blues and drunken reds, one could catch a glimpse of the river [. . .]

Beyond the park, above the steaming fields, a rainbow slipped into view; the fields ended

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67 The patterned configuration of the trees is already suggested in this line, as the trees are “in tune” with the “baroque” and “ornamental” pavilion. But I want to draw the reader’s attention to an earlier passage, wherein Nabokov more evocatively brings trees into the “reticulate” theme. He describes near the St. Petersburg home of his youth a park, the trees of which formed “a pattern of silver filigree in a mother-of-pearl mist” (*Speak, Memory*, 184. Emphasis added). A filigree is an “ornamental work of fine (typically gold or silver) wire formed into delicate tracery” and is synonymous with “latticework” and “lacework.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, https://premium-oxforddictionaries-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/us/definition/american_english/filigree.
in the notched dark border of a remote fir wood, part of the rainbow went across it, and that section of the forest edge shimmered most magically through the pale green and pink of the iridescent veil drawn before it: a tenderness and a glory that made poor relative of the rhomboidal, colored reflections which the return of the sun had brought forth on the pavilion floor.\footnote{Nabokov, \textit{Speak, Memory}, 215-17.}

The pavilion emerges as a tremendous butterfly wing whose individual scales glisten in the lozenges of colored glass; the reticulated latticework of the pavilion then gives views onto countless images that echo back with the same pattern, and in one vignette all of \textit{Speak, Memory}’s major themes—art, love, exile, loss, memory—converge, finding their point of anastomosis.\footnote{I borrow this term from Nabokov himself. Anastomosis describes “a cross-connection between adjacent channels, tubes, fibers, or other parts of a network.” The author uses it in \textit{Speak, Memory} to describe the conjunction of railroad tracks. Nabokov, \textit{Speak, Memory}, 144.} Certain image-themes in the pavilion description may not yet fully resonate, as with the twice-evoked \textit{river}. While the image does connect to the immediately preceding description of a thirteen-year-old Nabokov observing with “disgust and desire” girls frolicking at a river’s edge, thus binding it to themes of sexuality and romance, since the author has not yet had to embark on the maritime travels that mark his departure from Europe, that vital theme is presently subdued. The full scope of the river’s associations only surfaces in full relief at the very end of the memoir (and in its re-reading) when the Nabokov family stands before the liner that will carry them to America. But the virtue of the foliate pattern is realized precisely in this effect of deferral and retrospective revelation.

This phenomenon of retrospective illumination embodies part of the experience of psychic life to which Nabokov refers when he famously insists that the constructs of linear, progressive time have no place in matters of personal memory: “I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the
pattern upon another.”70 Subtly evoking the arabesque motif, Nabokov suggests that the act of layering the image highlights the stability of the pattern as it allows one to revisit previous iterations. As the fan and the rug do for Mandel’shtam, the folded carpet performs the experience of duration and stabilizes it as an independent textu(r)al artifact.

More can be said about the pavilion description. With its fine latticework, the pavilion itself consists of reticulate and foliate patterns, as are all of the major and minor image-themes that surround it. The rivers, the paths, the leaves and the trees, the “papilio,” the colored veil of the sky—these all are revealed as so many visual mises en abyme of the book’s—and, more importantly, the life’s—organizing principle, its primary method of inscribing private meaning. In this effect of magnifying and telescoping scale, the pattern not only repeats, but assumes a fractal quality that realizes Bergson’s notion of the organic harmonies that connect all phenomena in the universal metabody. Nabokov even echoes Bergson’s cosmic imagery, while adding, perhaps, his own Platonic inflection. “Whenever I start thinking of my love for a person,” he writes in the final chapter,

> I am immediately in the habit of drawing radii from my love—from the tender nucleus of a personal matter—to monstrously remote parts of the universe [. . .] That slow-motion, silent explosion of love takes place in me, unfolding its melting fringes and overwhelming me with the sense of something much vaster, much more enduring and powerful than the accumulation of matter or energy in any imaginable cosmos.71

This continuous reflection and recreation of a central design allows for the process of folding the magic carpet, “superimposing one part of the pattern upon another,” to be repeated infinitely, connecting otherwise remote realms of experience, knowledge, and feeling.

70 Ibid., 139.
Given the dynamic action of the reticulated foliate design in the memoir and its intimate relation to the act of composition itself, it comes as little surprise that the pattern begins to trace itself in Nabokov’s very first effort at poetic composition. Immediately following the description of the pavilion, Nabokov informs the reader that, “a moment later my first poem began.” That first poem details a bead of water gliding down the “center vein” of a “cordate leaf”; and the effect of that simple drama creates nothing less than a “fissure in time.”

But *Speak, Memory* has an important limitation, since in that “memoir” constitutes not so much a self-statement of Nabokov *the man*, but of Nabokov the artist-author. In his performance as author, Nabokov affects a monolithic persona; by this I mean that he presents himself as having a perfectly stable identity with perfectly fixed values, desires, attitudes, and impulses. This persona performs the consummate artist: a self-assured figure outside of culture who cares—and lives—only for the virtue that is his craft. This figure also enjoyed a blissful childhood whose harmonies and pleasures prefigure his mature aesthetics. Thus the “memoirist” is selective, if not manipulative, in his depiction of the past, the person who occupied it, and the present identity of the writer. Nabokov makes almost no mention of his siblings, for instance; and the individuals who do appear in the narrative function almost solely as sources of creative inspiration—even the artist’s beloved parents. He likewise leaves out parts of his past that may have been less pleasant and comfortable, elements of himself and his own behavior that do not align with the self-portrait he carefully composes. Where are his moments of regret, of shame? The result of this agenda in *Speak, Memory* is that the image-system, though rich and dense, still has what Barthes calls a “closed” quality to it.

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72 Ibid., 217.
In more candid moments, however, and through his creative works, Nabokov allows us to penetrate the authorial performance and to glean aspects of the man’s condition that the memoirist elides. This man lives a more complex and more troubled inner life, is possessed of a more multifarious and dispersed identity. A poem Nabokov composed, in Russian, in 1943, provides a glimpse of the artist’s true condition. “The Paris Poem” (“Parizhskaia poema”) is about the artist’s process of composing his life into verse. It opens with an external gaze on the poet as he wanders mentally through his cultural heritage; a voice tells him to preserve figures from the past—from across time—, especially less reputable ones: “Это—люди [. . .] Позаботьтесь об этом прохвосте / [и подайте крыло] смерду, князю, предателю, вору” (They are all human [. . .] Give some thought to the needs of that scoundrel [. . .] to the slave, prince, traitor, bandit). Among this company, though, the poet recognizes some of his artistic and cultural kin: “И подайте крыло Никанору, / Аврааму, Владимиру, Льву” (And extend a wing to Nicander, / Abram, Vladimir, and Leo, too). But these lines also suggest that the poet is inhabited by a diverse mixture of personalities who form part of the poet’s self-image. Brian Boyd sees the same condition in these lines, saying that they depict a poet, “his consciousness dispersed, his self scattered.” Nabokov maintained that the opening stanzas are about the spectral beginnings of a composition, before it has fully formed.

Elsewhere, though, Nabokov himself admits—inadvertently it seems, in a Derridean slip—to having such a wild menagerie of personalities. When asked in a 1962 interview for BBC about his relationship to his many unseemly fictional personae, the author responds, “Some of


74 Ibid., 114-15.

75 Boyd, American Years, 68.
my characters are, no doubt, pretty beastly, but I really don’t care, they are outside my inner self like the mournful monsters of a cathedral façade—demons placed there merely to show that they have been booted out.” Yet precisely in the way he rejects those beastly others as part of his inner life, the author confesses to their presence there. A character [trait] cannot be booted out without having been inside; even when “removed,” there must remain, Derrida tells us, at least a trace of the exile. What is more, the personalities that Nabokov claims to eject remain perfectly safe from expulsion; they constitute, in fact, an integral part of the Gothic Cathedral that is the self—an important part of the structure’s semiotic grammar: gargoyles have a practical purpose in diverting rain water, and a symbolic one in warding off evil. Nabokov’s characters are his own private scapegoats, displaced outside to protect the sanctity within, but all the while testifying to their inherent belonging.

The rest of “The Paris Poem” confirms these propositions. Boyd’s gloss of the poem’s subsequent arc proves instructive: “The poet’s lyric voice finds command of its material, spurning the desolate fragmentation of all that has gone before and proclaiming a unity and power in life, a mastery and transcendence of the self.” Importantly, that “poet’s lyric voice” is, in the Russian, referred to in the “othering” third-person, signaling the lyric voice’s inherent alterity within the poet-man. Nabokov changes this in his English translation so that the act of composition witnessed in the poem is performed in the first-person, as in the following lines which depict the poet-subject writing on a curious sort of page: “Лист бумаги, громадный и чистый, / стал вытаскивать он из себя: / лист был больше него и неистовствовал, / заниваясь в трубу и скрипя” (A huge clean sheet of paper I [he] started / to extract from myself

76 Nabokov, Strong Opinions, 19.

77 Boyd, American Years, 68. Emphasis added.
[himself]. The sheet / was bigger than me [him] and frenetically / it rolled up in a funnel and creaked). It is on this text, drawn from the body of the subject-poet, that he comes to reconcile the disparate parts of himself so that subject and poet become one. In writing the poem, he composes himself. The textu(r)al product of that composition emerges as nothing other than the same magical (durational) oriental rug of Speak, Memory.

В этой жизни, богатой узорами
[. . .]
я почел бы за лучшее счастье
так сложить ее дивный ковер,
чтоб пришелся узор настоящего
на былое, на прежний узор;
чтоб опять очутиться мне—о, не
в общем месте хотений таких,
не на карте России, не в лоне
nostальгических неразберих,
но с далеким найдя соответствие,
очутиться в начале пути,
наклониться—и в собственном детстве
кончик спутанной нити найти.
И распутать себя осторожно,
как подарок, как чудо, и стать
серединою многодорожного
громогласного мира опять.

In this life, rich in patterns
[. . .]
no better joy would I choose than to fold its magnificent carpet in such a fashion as to make the design of today coincide with the past, with a former pattern, in order to visit once again—oh not commonplaces of those inclinations, not the map of Russia, and not a lot of nostalgic equivocations—but, by finding congruences with the remote, to revisit my fountainhead,

to bend and discover in my own childhood
the end of the tangled-up thread.79

The patterns discerned by the subjective gaze on the past make order and meaning of the chaos
and help the poet to understand his current state, “узнать свой сегоднящий миг” (my present
moment to recognize).80 And just as the poet extracted the page from his body, he weaves his
entire anatomy, along with his inner life, into the carpet, which he (first-person) now imagines
unweaving and extending out into the world of things:

И распутать себя осторожно,
как подарок, как чудо, и стать
серединою многодорожного
громогласного мира опять.

And carefully then to unravel myself
as a gift, as a marvel unfurled,
and become once again the middle point
of the many-pathed, loud-throated world.81

To end, I want to draw attention to the lines of the long stanza above that I have excised.
For these lines testify to the inherent tumult of experience before it is poeticized; the lines, set in
parentheses, say that the life rich in patterns is “(неповторной, поскольку она / по-другому, с
другими актерами, / будет в новом театре дана)” (unrepeatable, since it will / in a different
manner, with different actors, / in a new theater be given).82 The personalities reconciled in art
also change in becoming subjected to poetry, where they will be, moreover, performed rather
than lived. Art, for Nabokov, always has an element of artifice. But Barthesian writerly self-

80 Ibid., 124-25.
81 Ibid., 122-23.
82 Ibid., 123. I have offered my own translation here. Nabokov renders s drugimi akterami as “a different cast.” Ibid.,
124.
articulation perforce entails a measure of artifice and dissimulation, since the act of externalizing is also one of privatizing; the self-writer creates a personal image-system transparent only to himself, always somewhat opaque to the other.

Strange though it may seem, since the novel has been widely treated as a dystopian fantasy, *Invitation to a Beheading* emerges as the ideal text to demonstrate Nabokov’s values regarding intimate self-writing. In skeletal form, the plot of *Invitation* records the final days of Cincinnatus C., a man imprisoned and condemned to death for a crime termed “gnostical turpitude”; in the novel’s more graphic terms, Cincinnatus is deemed unlawfully opaque in a world of transparent beings. Sensing in himself some essential difference from the homologous herd that surrounds him, Cincinnatus withdraws into himself and has little intercourse with others. Cincinnatus’ diffidence renders him incapable of any sort of meaningful action, making him not just an easy victim of tyranny but a perfect patsy, a doormat, especially for his serially unfaithful wife and overbearing mother. The narration recounts the various ploys of Cincinnatus’ incarcерators as they attempt to interrogate their illegible inmate, expose his internal life, and turn him into someone like themselves. Through all of this, Cincinnatus pleads desperately for reprieve or escape; but ultimately he places hope in the text he attempts to write in his confinement, a substantive record of himself that might endure after his physical destruction.

While the narrative’s apparent events are doubtless invented, thematically, *Invitation* certainly reflects a vital part of Nabokov’s personal sense of himself in the world. The fascist but farcical political forces that persecute Cincinnatus, for example, scathingly lampoon the real
regimes that Nabokov was twice compelled to flee. Nabokov always spoke liberally of his
disgust at social and political coercion and oppression in all forms, but in *Invitation* he clearly
directs his most pointed satirical barbs at Soviet thought and practice. In the project of fashioning
the New Soviet Man, Bolshevik ideology endeavored precisely to make uniform all citizens, that
is, to render them all legible—transparent.

Much as in *The Egyptian Stamp*, the pernicious political forces operating in *Invitation* are
symptomatic of a more broadly diseased culture. The novel thus expresses opprobrium for bad
art. Robert Alter, emphasizing the nightmare-world’s implications for creativity and aesthetics,
makes those fields of discourse synonymous with the political environment: “the most essential
quality of the world that imprisons [Cincinnatus] is cheap, false, meretricious, mechanical art.
More succinctly, Nabokov’s ideal model of the totalitarian state is, to invoke the embracing
Russian term he explains so elaborately in his study of Gogol, a world of *poshlust*.”83 In this
study’s terms, Cincinnatus finds himself imprisoned nowhere other than in the average reality of
prose. Julian Connolly sees both the novel’s political and literary dimensions encrypted it its
three principle antagonists—Rodion (jailer), Roman Vissarionovich (lawyer), and Rodrig
Ivanovich (warden)—in their common ancestor and namesake, *Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov*
(Connolly’s italics), the protagonist of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. In Nabokov’s
estimation the embodiment of “cheap, meretricious art,” *Crime and Punishment* functioned on

83 Robert Alter, “*Invitation to a Beheading*: Nabokov and the Art of Politics,” in *Nabokov’s Invitation to a
57-58. Alter maintains Nabokov’s idiosyncratic transcription of the “untranslatable” Russian word *poshlust*, which
the novelist describes at length in his 1944 literary biography of Gogol. Elsewhere Nabokov offers a more concise
description of *poshlust*: “Corny trash, vulgar clichés, Philistinism in all its phases, imitations of imitations, bogus
profundities, crude, moronic, and dishonest pseudo-literature—these are obvious examples. Now, if we want to pin
down poshlust in contemporary writing, we must look for it in Freudian symbolism, moth-eaten mythologies, social
comment, humanistic messages, political allegories, overconcern with class or race, and the journalistic generalities
we all know.” Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 101.
nothing but prosaic convention in its “implausible character development, crude narrative tricks, and time-worn literary platitudes,” not to mention a cheap brand of morality that Nabokov found ludicrous and insulting.\textsuperscript{84} For Nabokov, as for Barthes and even Bergson, bad art and a dangerous worldview are largely interchangeable conditions.

Nabokov did not have to endure, in the same way as Mandel’shtam did, much of that abusive and stultifying external pressure. He managed to evade first the Bolsheviks and then the Nazis. But he was certainly sensitive to the brutality of the authoritarian regimes; he lost a number of family members and dear friends to their firing squads and labor camps. The opportunities that enabled Nabokov to escape the grip of communism and fascism, however, created other challenging circumstances that \textit{Invitation} treats thematically. A perennial foreigner, the Russian émigré Nabokov consistently felt conspicuously out of place amid lands, languages, and cultures into which he could never fully assimilate. It is in fact when describing his years of emigration in Paris and Berlin that Nabokov employs language and imagery echoing unmistakably of \textit{Invitation}, especially as they evoke Cincinnatus’ ostensibly ennobling sense of alienation.

As I look back on those years of exile, I see myself, and thousands of other Russians, leading an odd but by no means unpleasant existence, in material indigence and intellectual luxury, among perfectly unimportant strangers, \textit{spectral} Germans and Frenchman in whose more or less \textit{illusory cities} we, émigrés, happened to dwell. These aborigines were to the mind’s eye as \textit{flat and transparent as figures cut out of cellophane}, and although we used their gadgets, applauded their clowns, picked their roadside plums and apples, \textit{no real communication of the rich human sort so widespread in our own midst, existed between us and them}. It seemed at times that we ignored them the way an arrogant or very stupid invader ignores a \textit{formless and faceless mass} of natives; but occasionally, quite often in fact, the \textit{spectral world} through which we serenely paraded

our sores and our arts would produce a kind of awful convulsion and show us who was the *discarnate captive* and who the true lord.\(^85\)

The surreal experience of exile mirrors the horrors of Cincinnatus’ captivity: the outsider, faced with the impossibility of meaningful intercourse, feels conspicuously and freakishly visible in his isolation, while the collective other appears uniformly two-dimensional and vague; the minority figure’s sense of ethical and moral superiority meets the physical and political might of the dominant culture; the alien feels that he is made constant spectacle before locals whom he regards as the real boors and buffoons.

This last sensation, the feeling of “parading [one’s] sores” to the unsympathetic other, engages in other pertinent ways with the concerns of this study. Though not an exile or a victim of war, Cincinnatus has been alienated even within what should be intimate relationships. His tormentors compel him to parade just these sores of profound otherness. He suffers the mistreatment of Marthe, for instance, a wife devoted only to her infidelity. In Chapter Nine, Cincinnatus’ wife and illegitimate children, along with all of his in-laws and Marthe’s new lover, are brought into the prison to do little more than humiliate the poor inmate. Cruel spectacles of this sort underscore the thematic need for personal privacy in the face of public scrutiny, a need felt acutely by Nabokov himself.

Though his figurations of the dignified outsider falling victim to the violent and/or vulgar rabble were rarely so brutal or dramatic as Mandel’shtam’s, the theme no less poignantly motivates almost all of Nabokov’s work. One concentrated and, for the purposes of this study, especially meaningful iteration of the motif gets embodied in the remarkable number of “monsters” (to use one of the author’s favorite epithets) that people Nabokov’s creative worlds,

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\(^85\) Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 276. Emphasis added.
individuals with glaring physical or other abnormalities. Not always monstrous in the sense of frightening or threatening, such characters usually elicit sympathy, and more often appear quietly heroic. The conspicuous oddity is honored for announcing and affirming his uniqueness; he is to be admired for his positive and absolute resistance to assimilation. “True art,” insists Nabokov, “deals not with the genus, and not even with the species, but with an aberrant individual of the species.”

In Chapter Four of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov suggests the status he affords “aberrant individuals” when he recalls the enjoyment he found as a child in Golliwog books, which often featured the diminutive character Midget. One story in particular, “The Golliwog’s Air-Ship,” gave the young author a special thrill.

And yes—the airship. Yards and yards of yellow silk went to make it, and an additional tiny balloon was provided for the sole use of the fortunate Midget. At the immense altitude to which the ship reached, the aeronauts huddled together for warmth while the lost little soloist, still the object of my intense envy notwithstanding his plight, drifted into an abyss of frost and stars—alone.

Midget’s “plight” in this adventure immediately recalls Nabokov’s paean to the solitary goalkeeper, and both figures meet in the poetically charged imagery of soaring flight. To be alone is to be free to drift in the endless and eternal heavens of one’s own imagination.

Nabokov’s 1937 short story “Cloud, Castle, Lake” (“Oblako, ozero, bashnia”) notably explores the grim side of the heroic freak’s fate, but recapitulates many of the themes and tropes important to *Invitation to a Beheading*. Most provocative in the story, however, is the unmistakable imagery of Christian martyrdom applied to the hero. One of the narrator’s

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87 Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 83.
cryptically unspecified “representatives,” Vasiliy Ivanovich is a quiet and sensitive Russian émigré living in Berlin who wins a pleasure tour through the German countryside. Joined by eight Germans on the trip, Vasiliy stands out as the immediate outsider in terms of language and culture; he also looks very different from the indistinguishable others, whose already amorphous bodies “all gradually melted together, merged together, forming one collective, wobbly, many-handed being.”

On the trip, Vasiliy keeps to himself by reading Russian poetry, but his aloofness inspires the indignation of his fellow travelers who begin to ridicule him and force him to sing their silly songs and play their vulgar games. While on a hike, the sight of a natural tableau, utterly ignored by the others, seizes Vasiliy’s heart in aesthetic bliss, and he decides to abandon life in the city so that he can live forever near the beloved sight. On the trip back, however, his tormentors intensify their abuse. For their final punishments, the Germans dig a corkscrew into Vasiliy’s hands and feet, and lash him with a homemade knout. The all but crucified Vasiliy returns to the narrator and begs to be released, not having “the strength to belong to mankind any longer.”

The narrator obliges and the story ends.

On its surface, as well as in the prevailing scholarly interpretations, Invitation to a Beheading depicts another such “aberrant” figure. Cincinnatus sticks out as the lone authentic human being in a sham world—a cheap theater production staged and performed by a cast of featureless and soulless dummies. Leona Toker, for instance, maintains that although the novel is almost unique in the way it opens itself to a variety of interpretive lenses—political, metaphysical, aesthetic—, all readings boil down to the same conflict: “Cincinnatus emerges as a

89 Nabokov, “Cloud, Castle, Lake,” 433.
90 Ibid., 437.
Nabokovian avatar of the artist in conflict with his environment.”91 In this view, the figures surrounding Cincinnatus embody forces external to him and represent an unimaginative culture of fabricated values and imposed homogeneity. My reading assumes the same, but it views those outside forces as they have been internalized by Cincinnatus, who of necessity belongs within the social world with its attendant powers of discourse. I thus look thoroughly inward to insist that all of the novel’s action takes place within Cincinnatus’ mind. There, his psychic phenomena have been realized materially as the novel’s surreal setting and chronotope, as well as somatically, as the surrounding characters literally embody facets of his personality. Nabokov himself has almost endorsed such a reading. When asked in a 1967 interview whether in Invitation “the totalitarian state becom[es] an extreme and fantastic metaphor for the imprisonment of the mind,” Nabokov’s simple answer was, “Yes, possibly.”92 Cincinnatus may be an artist in conflict with his environment, but that environment is himself, as he occupies nothing more or less than the condition of embodied subjectivity.

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—CINNINATUS THE SCAPEGOAT & WRITING THE REMEDY: INVITATION AND PHARMAKOS—

Transformation . . . Transformation is a marvelous thing . . . I am thinking especially of the transformation of butterflies. Though wonderful to watch, transformation from larva to pupa or from pupa to butterfly is not a particularly pleasant process for the subject involved. There comes for every caterpillar a difficult moment when he begins to feel pervaded by an odd sense of discomfort. It is a tight feeling—here about the neck and elsewhere, and then an unbearable itch. Of course he has moulted a few times before, but that is nothing in comparison to the tickle and urge that he feels now. He must shed that tight dry skin, or die.

—Vladimir Nabokov, Lecture notes on the theme of transformation

As in the political sphere, the child is taught that he is free, a democrat, with a free will and mind, lives in a free country, makes his own decisions. At the same time he is a prisoner of the assumptions and dogmas of his time, which he does not question, because he has never been told they exist.

—Doris Lessing, 1971 Introduction to The Golden Notebook

Though often compared to Kafka’s Trial, Invitation to a Beheading’s basic thematic concerns share more with another of the Austrian author’s famous tales. Characterizing his favorite literary insect-metamorph, Nabokov said that The Metamorphosis’ Gregor Samsa embodied “the isolation, and the strangeness of so-called reality,” while “the Samsa family around the fantastic insect is nothing else than the mediocrity surrounding genius.”¹ Cincinnatus finds himself in very similar circumstances. The environment that imprisons Cincinnatus reflects a concentrated vision of “average reality” as Nabokov conceived of it, and the hero’s plight plays out the drama of an artist trying to express the deeper truth he has long sensed behind his apparent condition. In both tales, the existential dilemma materializes on the changing body of the hero.

Much like Parnok’s body in The Egyptian Stamp, Cincinnatus’ body simultaneously presents the potential for two distinct interpretations and uses, each associated with particular forms of language and modes of communication. One figurative iteration of his body belongs to

¹ Nabokov, Lectures on Literature, 260.
the vulgar, decrepit world of dead language, another inhabits the space of poetic expression. Cincinnatus’ subsequent development reifies a process of translation from the former mode into the latter. More specifically, the novel communicates this process of transformation through a familiar Nabokovian symbol dense with metaphorical possibilities. As Cincinnatus emerges into artistic consciousness, he undergoes a physical metamorphosis.

Naturally, the novel’s icon for that metamorphosis is a moth. Immediately ripe for critical commentary, the lepidopteral imagery of *Invitation* has received extensive interpretation, often as an important vehicle for communicating Nabokov’s “Neoplatonic” metaphysics. For Vladimir Alexandrov, pioneer of such readings of Nabokov’s works, the moth that haunts Cincinnatus’ cell embodies “an obvious symbol of the soul” which, in its escape from the maw of the predatory spider, also lurking in his cell, and from the prison altogether, represents Cincinnatus’ own flight from this world to the benign hereafter—“that realm that is comforting in the face of physical death.”

My reading of Cincinnatus’ metamorphosis remains in the realm of the mundane and examines Nabokov’s convictions regarding the problems of the embodied self and how the body gets then implicated in the act of translating that self into language and text. This reading affirms that the anterior object-body is not only inessential to but is misrepresentative of the authentic self: subjected to technologies public observation, public scrutiny, and public manipulation, the surface, object-body necessarily belongs to the sphere of public discourse, that is, to the conventions of prose. Thus while the immature—indeed the “larval”—Cincinnatus takes pride in his body and clings to it jealously, the narrator exposes it as the real and only site of

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Cincinnatus’ prison. His escape from that prison comes with his own self-writing: in the course of the narrative, Cincinnatus composes a text of himself, while simultaneously erasing his “fleshily incomplete” surface body in due proportion. We feel the transference of Cincinnatus’ substance from flesh to text in Invitation’s own increasingly “firm” and “plump” pages.

The world that imprisons Cincinnatus reflects a nightmarish realization of Platonic and Derridean phonocentrism. The novel’s opening scene immediately announces the general predominance of speech and, more specifically, the unsettling qualities of that speech which actualizes the talk of “transparent proximity.” In the first paragraph, as the judge whispers Cincinnatus’ death sentence into the condemned man’s ear, the narration zooms in on the speech act to present it as a grotesque parody of a lover’s intimate susurrations: “The hoary judge put his mouth close to his ear, panted for a moment, made the announcement and slowly moved away, as though ungluing himself.”

A preponderance of whispering throughout the novel echoes this initial utterance, though such actual proximity is almost unnecessary because, aside from Cincinnatus, everyone in that world “understood each other at the first word.”

Cincinnatus’ tormentors’ communicative immediacy results from the very character of their language, which consists entirely of trite phrases and readymade expressions, offering its speakers “no words that would end in an unexpected way.” As Leona Toker has stated simply, in the world of Cincinnatus’ prison, “meaningful communication [has been replaced] by an exchange of clichés.”

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3 “Седой судья, припав к его уху, подышав, сообщив, медленно отодвинулся, как будто отлипал.” Nabokov, Invitation, 11. / Priglashenie, 740.
4 “Окружающие понимали друг друга с полуслова” Ibid., 26 / 745.
5 “[Н]е было у них таких слов, которые бы кончались как-нибудь неожиданно.” Ibid., 26 / 745.
6 Toker, The Mystery of Literary Structures, 128.
typifies the quality of the prison-world’s intercourse with his “glib and oily art” of smooth but stupid speech.

Complementing the dominance of verbal communication, the same sociolinguistic environment has rendered text perfectly impotent. Remindful of the vapid bureaucratese lamented by Mandel’shtam in *Fourth Prose*, most all of the writing produced by *Invitation’s* prison staff is mechanized and meaningless. Julian Connolly has commented on the “debased” state of writing in *Invitation*, positing that “perhaps the most astonishing example of the emptiness of the conventional written word is the stenography of Cincinnatus’s lawyer” who records the non-existent words of a silent Cincinnatus, and does it “so quickly that the flashing of his pencil hurt the eyes.” The lawyer’s same empty minutes, I will add, are also to be summarily mimeographed. Like the stenographer, the prison director, Rodrig Ivanovich, at one point suddenly sits down to “write rapidly,” though he had not been doing any paperwork. True to the “utopian socialisms” that this world parodies, though, the dutiful apparatchiks revere the senseless documents. Suspecting Rodrig of having tampered with Cincinnatus’ certified “menu of last wishes,” Pierre lashes out, “I don’t understand, how you dared. This is an official

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8 “Адвокат писал так быстро, что больно было глазам от мелькания его карандаша.” M. Pierre then says, “Вы мне дайте, Роман Виссарионович, просмотреть протокол, прежде чем гектографировать.” *Invitation*, 177 / 795. Clear from this citation, in the Russian, the instrument that will produce the facsimile of the meeting’s minutes is more precisely a hectograph. Developed in 1869, the design of the hectograph evolved in the succeeding decades. One later generation, unveiled in 1923, employed alcohol as the primary solvent in the inks used in the copying process and was thus in English known as a “spirit duplicator,” and a “spirit hectograph” (*spirtovoi gektograf*) in Russian. With his fluency in English, Nabokov may well have been aware of this name’s possibilities for verbal irony, since he sets up just such a duplicator as an emblem of the soulless, inartistic, mechanical reproduction of text. The author certainly seems to be thinking along these punning lines when he conjures a similar contraption in his 1947 English novel *Bend Sinister*. A dystopian vision in many ways similar to *Invitation*, *Bend Sinister* likewise satirizes the banalities of authoritarian power and the vapidity of its modes of communication. The novel’s tyrant, Paduk, is inspired by one of his father’s inventions called a “padograph,” a complex instrument that can reproduce any individual’s handwriting. Paduk admires the contraption as “proof of the fact that a mechanical device can reproduce personality.” *Bend Sinister*, 70.
document! Why, this is a personal insult,” his outrage a perfect response to the near fetishization of paperwork and stamps in the Soviet Union.\(^9\)

Cincinnatus, however, has no command of the language of “transparent proximity.” His first utterance in the text comes out aphasiaically garbled. Addressing Rodrig, the prison director, Cincinnatus sputters out, “Kind. You. Very” (\textit{Liubeznost’. Vy. Ochen’}) before an “additional Cincinnatus” steps in to put together a more coherent, “You are very kind.”\(^10\) But even the additional Cincinnatus remains unintelligible to the figures surrounding him. Cincinnatus’ next words—which form an eloquent (and syntactically complex) appeal to know exactly when he will be executed—are interrupted by Rodrig’s irritated rebuke, “Oh, will you please stop mumbling.”\(^11\) In the world of swift transmission and easy reception, others hear Cincinnatus’ thoughtful language as gibberish. More telling still, Cincinnatus tends to remain all but silent in his interactions with others, preferring to express himself in writing.

Precisely because he does not fit in with the prevailing traits and practices of the community, the surrounding world singles Cincinnatus out, regarding his nonconformity as a crime that demands the penalty of his life. Like the scapegoat of the ancient ritual, who was frequently in some way an aberrant figure—exceedingly ugly or poor—Cincinnatus catches the other’s eye as the “lone,” and thus potentially toxic, “dark obstacle” in an otherwise transparent world. His subsequent treatment at the hands of his executioners follows salient tropes of the

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\(^9\) “Вот тут для простоты дела, […] готовое меню последних желаний. […] Я не понимаю, кто тебя просил? Официальный документ! Это же по отношению ко мне более чем возмутительно.” In the Russian, Pierre’s outrage over manipulation of the document is slightly more subdued, reading something closer to, “I don’t understand, who asked you to . . . ? An official document! As far as I am concerned, this is beyond scandalous.” Nabokov, \textit{Invitation}, 208 / 805-06.

\(^10\) “Любезность. Вы. Очень. […] Вы очень любезны, — сказал, прочистив горло, какой-то добавочный Цинциннат.” Ibid., 15 / 741.

\(^11\) “Ах, пожалуйста, не надо бормотать.” Ibid., 16 / 742.
actual *pharmakos* practice. Deemed a criminal to justify his murder by the state, the scapegoat was subjected to a symbolic mock trial. Cincinnatus’ day in court plays out as a perfect farce, a ludicrous stage production, where the costumed and makeup-wearing lawyers speak with “virtuoso rapidity” (*govor*[i]*t* *s* *virtuoznoi skorost’i*) to the delight of the “spectators” (*zritel’i*) in the “audience” (*publika*). As Derrida explains, the scapegoat fills the peculiar role of an individual simultaneously inside and outside of the larger community, and so in ancient practice the state regaled the condemned man with all the customary honors of noble hospitality, dressing him in fine clothes and treating him to a feast. At times, Cincinnatus’ incarcerators clearly follow the ritual’s prescribed practices, adhering, for instance, to the rule stipulating that “those condemned to death were entitled to the same meals as the wardens”; elsewhere, their gestures appear as grotesque mockeries of the actual custom. For the period of Cincinnatus’ confinement, his jailers aim their efforts at making him one of them, encouraging him to participate in their activities and rituals. Pierre waxes on about his and Cincinnatus’ apparent similarities and tries to engage the condemned man in small talk and games. Yet Pierre subliminally signals the duplicitousness of his efforts—the lie they conceal about the scapegoat’s fate. Bloviating about the success of his campaign to befriend his “fate-mate,” Pierre says to Cincinnatus, “Our friendship has flowered, [so that] I think I know you better now than anyone else does in the whole world. [. . .] To me you are transparent as [. . .] a blushing bride is transparent to the gaze of an experienced bridegroom.” Two nights later, when the prison stages a lavish pre-execution feast, Pierre revisits his “sophisticated simile” of marriage and unwittingly

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12 Ibid., 20-21 / 743-44.

13 “Харчи смертникам полагались директорские.” Ibid., 14 / 741.

14 “Наша дружба расцвела [. . .] Думаю, что я вас знаю теперь лучше, чем кто-либо на свете [. . .] Для меня вы прозрачны [. . .] как краснеющая невеста прозрачна для взгляда опытного жениха.” Ibid., 162 / 790.
describes Cincinnatus’ true role in this perverse relationship. The “wedding ceremony,” as Pierre
discusses it now, “more closely resembl[es] a human sacrifice—when the submissive virgin was
hurled by her parents into the tent of a stranger.”

But the outsider introduces his own remedy. Cincinnatus’ skill of writing promises
productive and generative capacities utterly lacking in the claptrap and memoranda of his
gaolers. Cincinnatus recognizes the vapidness of speech and writing in the surrounding world,
since he was initiated into those linguistic practices when he first learned the alphabet:

Well do I remember that day! I must have just learned how to make letters, since I [see]
myself wearing on my fifth finger the little copper ring that was given to children who
already knew how to copy the model words from the flower beds in the school garden,
where petunias, phlox and marigold spelled out lengthy adages.

When he and his peers had to translate the live images of flowers into their lexical signifiers,
they all entered the world of “adult dummies.” Cincinnatus’ powerful scriptive art, however,
issues from a source that predates his training in that codified language. Cincinnatus’ writing is,
in a word, pre-literate. And as I will show, Cincinnatus in fact expresses his “ancient inborn art
of writing” (drevnee vrozhdennoe iskusstvo pisat’) more as a series of graphic and anatomical
signs than as proper letters and punctuation. Cincinnatus’ archi-writing will prove the vehicle
that redeems his private world as well as the very vessel that contains it. In the analysis below, I

15 “[3]аключение браков, похожее скорее на заклание,—когда покорная девственница швырялась родителями
в шатер к незнакомцу.” Ibid., 173 / 794.
16 Ibid., 96 / 768.
17 Ibid., 93 / 767.
will demonstrate how this narrative literalizes the physiological context and associations of the *pharmakos*/poison/remedy to tell a story of writing the body.

Immediate, shallow, rapidly reproducible, the speech that unifies the hostile social forces communicates precisely at the surface level. It is no coincidence that Cincinnatus’ social deviance is ultimately figured as physical abnormality. According to Cincinnatus’ own description, he is the lone opaque figure in a world of transparent dummies. The identity—Bergson’s surface personality, with its “sharply cut crystals”\(^{18}\)—that he presents to the world in order to [dis]appear like others is in fact an “optical illusion, [. . . ] a manipulation of cunningly illuminated facets.”\(^{19}\) And though those others are not literally transparent, their bodies are remarkably uniform, making them somatic analogues of their language that requires—and permits of—nothing “unexpected.” The three principal figures in the prison—Roman, Rodrig, and Rodion—are physically identical. Near the end of the novel, there enter into Cincinnatus’ cell two men,

whom it was almost impossible to recognize as the director and the lawyer: haggard, pallid, both dressed in coarse gray shirts, shabbily shod—without any makeup, without padding and without wigs, with rheumy eyes, with scrawny bodies that once could glimpse through candid rips—they turned out to resemble each other, and their identical heads moved identically on their thin necks, pale bald bumpy heads, with a bluish stipple on the sides and protruding ears.

dвое, в которых почти невозможно было узнать директора и адвоката: осунувшиеся, помертвевшие, одетые оба в серые рубахи, обутые в опорки—без всякого грима, без подбивки и без париков, со слезящимися глазами, с проглядывающим сквозь откровенную рвань чахлым телом,—они оказались между собой схожи, и


одинаково поворачивались одинаковые головки их на тощих шеях, головки бледно-плешивые, в шишках с пунктирной сизостью с боков и оттопыренными ушами.\textsuperscript{20}

In Véra Nabokov’s phrasing, Cincinnatus’ persecutors represent the different visages of a single “many-faced monster,” since the apparently discrete figures share the same template body and are all homogeneously banal.

As if responding to their own lack of deeper substance, these same figures display a general preoccupation with the body—and with the \textit{surface, social} dimension of Cincinnatus’ body in particular. Pierre, for instance, demonstrates his fixation on the flesh when he asks to see Cincinnatus’ tongue, insisting, in a parody of the famous aphorism about the eyes, that “the tongue is a mirror of the stomach.”\textsuperscript{21} Pierre displays a curiosity about anatomical \textit{interiority}, but only in its most vulgar functions—those of the object-body. Pierre then takes great pleasure in palpating the anatomy of the man he is going to execute, as when “with his small but muscular hand he was rapidly touching Cincinnatus’s neck and examining it carefully.”\textsuperscript{22} Rodion at one point upbraids his carceral charge for not giving due respect to the attention paid his “earthly casing,” while subtly referencing the indefiniteness of his own form. “Shame on you,” the jailer says with a sob, “day and night you do nothing . . . a body feeds you here, tends you lovingly,

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\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 207 / 805.
\textsuperscript{21} “Язык—зеркало желудка.” Ibid., 110 / 772.
\textsuperscript{22} “Маленькой, но мускулистой рукой он быстро трогал Цинцинната за шею, внимательно осматривая ее.” Ibid., 109 / 772.
\end{flushright}
wears himself out for your sake, and all you do is ask stupid questions. For shame, you thankless man . . .”

Indeed, the gaolers’ fixation on his body causes Cincinnatus’ greatest torment. He finds himself the constant object of his incarcerators’ visual scrutiny, since “the peephole in the door was placed in such a way that in the whole cell there was not a single point that the observer on the other side of the door could not pierce with his gaze.” Under that gaze Cincinnatus sits, “naked, his entire skinny back, from coccyx to cervical vertebrae, exposed, to the observers on the other side of the door.” Cincinnatus’ uncommon visibility and unassimilable opacity disturb his observers to violent desires: “his veins of the bluest blue pulsed; crystal clear saliva moistened on his lips; the skin quivered on his cheeks and his forehead, which was edged with dissolved light . . . and all this so teased the observer as to make him long to tear apart, cut to shreds, destroy utterly this brazen elusive flesh.”

The others express their apparent desire to master Cincinnatus’ body most potently in what becomes a thematic imagery of consumption. In contrast to the abstinent Cincinnatus, the

23 “Стыд и срам. [. . .] деннонощно груши околачиваете. . . кормишь вас тут, холишь, сам на ногах не стоишь, а вы только и знаете, что с неуменными вопросами лезть. Тьфу, бессовестный . . .” In the Russian, Rodion’s grammar plays up a poignant semantic dimension only very subtly present in the English, a dimension that evidences my proposal that Cincinnatus is the sole persona of the text. What the English renders as “a body feeds you here, tends you lovingly,” is in the Russian, “kormish’ vas tut, kholish’.” The clause’s two verbs, kormit’ and kholit’, are conjugated in the second-person singular (taking the ending -ish’ to read “you feed” and “you tend for”), while their object (Cincinnatus) is vas, the pronoun [in the accusative case] for the second-person plural used in formal address to a single person (so also “you”). The clause thus literally reads, “you feed you here, you tend for [you]”. The second-person singular is commonly used to signal an abstract subject (“a body”), but in light of the proposal that the only setting of the novel is Cincinnatus’ mind, with its fragmented personalities, we can read the more literal transcription just as productively. The same possibility of a single-subject self-reference is also quietly hinted in the English, but in a different way: the body that feeds Cincinnatus is his own, as the fleshy housing of his psychic self—the real subject of the text. Ibid., 125 / 778.

24 “[Б]ыло так устроено окошечко в двери, что не существовало во всей камере ни одной точки, которую наблюдать за дверью не мог бы взглядом проткнуть.” Ibid., 24-25 / 744.

25 “[Г]олый, всю тонкую спину от куприка до шейных позвонков показывая наблюдателям за дверью.” Ibid., 65 / 758.

26 “[Г]олубые, как самое голубое,пульсировали жилки, чистая, хрустальная слюна увлажняла губы, трепетала кожа на щеках, на лбу, окаймленном растворенным светом. . . и так это все дразнило, что наблюдателю хотелось тут же разъять, искорсать, изничтожить нагло ускользающую плоть.” Ibid., 122 / 776.
jailers consistently take enormous pleasure ingesting their meals, though it seems they have a particular source of sustenance in mind. Pierre subtly suggests as much when, at his and Cincinnatus’ symbolic “wedding ceremony,” he sings the praises of the banquet’s lavish menu, while alluding to the “slaughter” of which Cincinnatus will soon be the victim. “Gastronomic pleasures,” begins Pierre, “see the best varieties of fruit hanging from the tree branches; see the butcher and his helpers dragging a pig, squealing as if it were being slaughtered; see, on a pretty plate, a substantial chunk of white lard.”27 Not just in the final ritual feast, however, do the surrounding specters attempt to fatten up a very real but also very skinny Cincinnatus. Consistent efforts to feed their scapegoat (who just as consistently refuses to eat) mirror Rodion’s daily feeding of the voracious and malevolent spider that lurks in the corner of Cincinnatus’ cell.

Serving most obviously as a political commentary on the typically authoritarian tendency to reduce citizens to mere caloric units, simple organic batteries of energy for labor production—a practice honed to a horrifying science by the Stalinists, the same cannibalistic hunger presents but one symptom of the state’s general impotence. That is, the jailers’ desire to consume life compensates for their perfect inability to produce it. Just as their language generates nothing original, the others in Invitation seem incapable of creating new bodies on their own. Pierre, for instance, when speaking of the “raptures of love,” reveals that, for him, intercourse more accurately resembles masturbation: “There is nothing more pleasant, for example, than to surround oneself with mirrors and watch the good work going on there. Wonderful!”28 More importantly, he colors his crass innuendoes with the imagery of food, and even conjures again

27 “Гастрономические наслаждения [. . .] вот—лучшие сорта фруктов свисают с древесных ветвей; вот—мясник и его помощники влекут свинью, кричащую так, как будто ее режут; вот—на красивой тарелке солидный кусок белого сала.” Ibid., 153 / 787.

28 “Ничего нет приятнее, например, чем окружиться зеркалами и смотреть, как там кипит робота,—замечательно!” Ibid., 145 / 784.
more graphically his disturbing simile of the sacrificial scapegoat-bride. Pierre views Marthe, for instance, as a comestible; more specifically, he figures her as a piece of meat not unlike the slaughtered pig praised above, and he pays particular attention to the woman’s neck, where the sacrificial animal would be cut and bled. “I caught just a glimpse of your spouse—a juicy little piece, no two ways about it—what a neck,” the self-proclaimed “aficionado of women” teases Cincinnatus; and later, “when it comes to caresses I love what the French wrestlers call ‘macarons’: You give her a little slap on the neck, and the firmer the meat. . .”29 In other words, Pierre perverts the act of pro-creation into a grotesquerie of consumption and slaughter.

As the apparent mastermind of Cincinnatus’ torment, Pierre perfectly encapsulates the prison’s body-language. One scene in particular concisely conflates the two phenomena in this one voluble and voluminous figure. After failing to engage Cincinnatus in oxymoronic “intimate chit-chat,” Pierre aims to impress his double with a series of feats of brute strength and agility.30 The performance’s climax sees Pierre as a singularly strange physical specimen. The “nimble fatty [. . .] hopped up on the table, stood on his hands, and grasped the back of the chair in his teeth [. . .] M’sieur Pierre was lifting the chair, clenched firmly between his teeth; his tensed muscles were quavering; his jaw was creaking.”31 The chair remains as evidence of the garrulous gourmand’s most salient feature, as it retains the “deep imprints of bulldog teeth on the top edge of its straight back.”32 Unconvinced that his little circus act left the proper impression on

29 “Вашу супругу я мельком видел,—ядреная бабенка, что и говорить,—шея больно хороша. [. . .] Я в смысле ласок обнимаю то, что у нас, у борцов, зовется макароны: шлеп ее по шее, и чем плотнее мясо. . .” Ibid., 144-45 / 784-85.

30 Nabokov introduces this oxymoron only in the English. In the original Russian, Pierre wants to engage in much less nonsensical “intimate whisperings” (задушевые шушукания). Ibid., 108 / 772.


Cincinnatus, though, Pierre presents this bit of dental evidence to the prisoner, along with an explanatory note in which he adamantly professes his physical substantiality and prowess—the capacities, in Bergson’s formula, of the vulgar object-body, as the dimension of body responsible for acting upon and impacting other objects. The style of Pierre’s missive, however, proves just as informative as its content.

A fleecy curling script, elegant punctuation marks, signature like a seven-veil dance. In jocular and kindly words his neighbor thanked him for yesterday’s friendly chat and expressed hope that it would be repeated shortly. “Let me assure you,” thus ended the note, “that I am physically very, very strong [twice underlined with a ruler], and if you are still not convinced of this, I shall be honored some time to show you further interesting [underlined] demonstrations of agility and astounding muscular development.”

Beautiful and ornate, Pierre’s writing, like his speech, is pleasant, but only superficially—and in all the wrong places at that: his fancy punctuation marks only distract from the dearth of meaningful content. If a semantic openness characterizes the poetic text, in its every feature Pierre’s note announces its circumscribed prosaic intent. His underlining, with a ruler, of certain phrases at once graphically enforces the prose’s linearity and actualizes its purposeful semantic narrowness by literally underscoring a desired meaning and thus delimiting the possibilities of interpretation. The “meaning superseded” for which Pierre does all this amounts to, once more, an assertion of the capabilities of his equally prosaic surface body.

33 Ibid., 118 / 775.
That his language is not only dead but even murderous Pierre ultimately communicates in his relationship to the elemental and all-powerful image. Pierre repeatedly gabs about his avid enthusiasm for photography, a medium that is problematized in the novel’s image-system as the embodiment of superficial representation. The photograph, like Invitation’s similarly dubious mirrors, can present only a static, two-dimensional reproduction of surface reality; as does the mimeograph, highlighted above, the photograph further produces this empty image automatically. Playing up their inadequacy, Pierre’s sterile photographs get provocatively juxtaposed to the generative capacities of poetic verbal images. Pierre’s strange “photo-horoscope,” which he ironically describes as “a series of photographs depicting the natural progression of a given person’s entire life,” clearly depicts the moribundity inherent to his medium of “image delivery.” Pierre manufactures the photo-horoscope of Emmie, the prison director’s young daughter, by placing “extensively retouched snapshots of [her] present face” on the pictures of other people’s bodies, “for the sake of costume,” and to simulate “the entire décor and stage properties of her future life.” Not surprisingly, this fabricated narrative has quite the opposite effect: it depicts Emmie, in the clichéd get-ups of magazine advertisements, at various “aspects and poses” of life, “even to the very last, horizontal.”34 The photo-horrorshow commits, like Barthes’ Novel, a murder. This episode retroactively inflects another some eighty pages earlier, when Pierre interrupts Cincinnatus, who has “opened a book and buried himself in it” (Tsintsinnat raskryl knizhku i uglubilsia v nee), to say “Yes, we were talking about photographs. Some time I’ll bring my camera and take your picture. That will be fun. What are

you reading?” We will soon see the dramatically different implications of a life captured in textual images.

For now though, inasmuch as the surrounding figures, Pierre especially, embody facets of his own personality, Cincinnatus suffers, to a degree, from the same preoccupations and insufficiencies. Compared to the ramshackle mannequins that surround him, Cincinnatus imagines himself to be the picture of stability, a miracle of craftsmanship, “fashioned so painstakingly”: “The curvature of my spine has been calculated so well,” he affirms to himself, “so mysteriously.” The source of his pain thus also serves as the source of his pride, and at times he locates the tragedy of his imminent execution precisely in the loss of his surface, material body. “As he dried himself, trying to find some diversion in his own body, he kept examining his veins and could not help thinking how he would soon be uncorked, and all the contents would run out.”

Curiously, many scholars read with credulity Cincinnatus’ claim to physical exceptionalism. Barabtarlo, for instance, maintains that “the only persona, litso, Cincinnatus C., is surrounded by masks, the lichiny, who wear false faces, false teeth, dummy beards, interchangeable heads, the head of a Borzoi, wigs, and so forth.” Indeed, the surrounding figures do slap phony body parts on top of their uniformly featureless frames. Hardly those figures’ more integral and stable antithesis, however, Cincinnatus exposes his own body to be

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35 “Да—мы говорили о фотографиях. Как-нибудь я принесу свой аппарат и сниму вас. Это будет весело. Что вы читаете, можно взглянуть?” Ibid., 87 / 765.

36 “А я ведь сработан так тщательно [. . .] Изгиб моего позвоночника высчитан так хорошо, так таинственно.” Ibid., 21 / 744.

37 “Отбираясь, стараясь развлечь себя самим собой, он разглядывал все свои жилки и невольно думал о том, что скоро его раскупорят и все это выльется.” Ibid., 65.

exactly as wan, as frail, and as loosely assembled. Their common mannequin-like body creates
an essential link between Cincinnatus, his jailer, his lawyer, and the prison director. Reflecting
the latter’s “scrawny bodies,” for instance, Cincinnatus, who “might have passed for a sickly
youth, [. . .] was very thin, and [. . .] the light of the setting sun exaggerated the shadows of his
ribs.” After giving it a good examination, Pierre likewise comments on the thinness of
Cincinnatus’ neck. The prisoner is similarly garbed as his persecutors, too, with a “black
dressing gown, [. . .] black slippers with pompoms” and a skullcap. And just as those actors are
able to remove their fleshy “costumes,” as when Rodion “crossly remov[ed] his beard together
with his shaggy cap of hair,” Cincinnatus can likewise disrobe himself. In Chapter Two
Cincinnatus fully dismembers himself with even more ease than does Rodion: “He stood up and
took off the dressing gown, the skullcap, the slippers. He took off the linen trousers and shirt. He
took off his head like a toupee, took off his collarbones like shoulder straps, took of his ribcage
like a hauberk. He took off his hips and his legs, he took off his arms like gauntlets and threw
them in a corner.”

Critics’ find a favorite feature of the mannequin trio in their tendency to swap roles, as it
were, mid-scene, right before the audience’s eyes. In Chapter Three, for instance, the prison
director momentarily appears to turn into the jailer; a few pages later the two switch identities
and even seem to make a confusing exchange of costumes. In Chapter Six, Rodrig Ivanovich’s

39 “Цинциннат мог сойти за болезненного отрока [. . .] был такой маленький и узкий, что [. . .] при закатном
свете, подчеркивавшем тени ребер.” Nabokov, Invitation, 65 / 758.
42 “Родион наконец удалился, сердито снимая на ходу бороду вместе с лохматой шапкой волос.” Ibid., 204.
43 “Он встал, снял халат, ермолку, туфли. Снял полотняные штаны и рубашку. Снял, как парик, голову, снял
клющицы, как ремни, снял грудную клетку, как кольчугу. Снял бедра, снял ноги, снял и бросил руки, как
рукавицы, в угол.” Ibid., 32 / 747.
daughter, Emmie, says that her father is coming, and the narrator confirms, “it was true: Rodion was approaching.” Near the end of the novel these perplexing inconsistencies find explanation when the audience witnesses the director and the lawyer out of costume and sees them to be a physically identical pair of stock actors. But what no scholar has, to my knowledge, recognized is the fact that Cincinnatus himself gets implicated in one of the strange moments of identity swapping: in Chapter One, Cincinnatus and the prison director inexplicably change places. In the scene, “the prison director entered” Cincinnatus’ cell for a brief conversation, at the end of which, however,—no one having moved—“[the prison director] sat down at the table and began to write rapidly, thus indicating that the audience was over. Cincinnatus went out.” If all the others’ interchangeability manifests the essential uniformity of the prosaic crowd, Cincinnatus’ tendency to share in that condition testifies to his inherent belonging within the very world he wants to reject.

For all his own and others’ fixation on it, Cincinnatus’ surface body emerges as but one more shabby sack of skin and bones among the rest, and it thus poorly represents the man’s authentic self—a fact that Cincinnatus’ vaguely intuits. At one point unable to stop his body shaking from cold and fear, Cincinnatus comforts himself with the insight that his flesh is not integral to his sense of self: “Even if I can’t control my chills and so forth—that does not mean anything. A rider is not responsible for the shivering of his horse.” Such moments of self-awareness are fleeting, however, and so long as Cincinnatus remains attached to his body, he

44 Ibid., 77.  
46 “Пускай не справляюсь с ознобом и так далее,—это ничего. Всадник не отвечает за дрожь коня.” Ibid., 16 / 742.
remains incapable of meaningful self-expression and -articulation. In this way, the imprisoned Cincinnatus remains opaque not just to his external others but to himself.

Just like Pierre, whose emphatic physicality complements his empty speech, the imprisoned and embodied Cincinnatus suffers from an insufficiency of language. Not only unable to speak even the public language of “transparent proximity,” for much of the text Cincinnatus in fact possesses no language in which to express himself. The result is the same: in adopting the dead language of cliché, the outside world has also killed meaningful communication; until he finds his voice, Cincinnatus has a language that is no more viable or vital. Early in the novel, “Cincinnatus is unable to set down his thoughts in a clear and orderly way,” according to Connolly’s diplomatic assessment.47 More accurately, Cincinnatus’ initial jottings are altogether unfocused and disjointed. The sheer number of ellipses that riddle his early diary pages render visible one apparent symptom of his general incoherence. In this simple visual aspect, those initial writings evoke the scattered speech of a Raskolnikov, Dostoevsky’s distraught and aphasic anti-hero from that detested Crime and Punishment.48 Painfully aware of the inadequacy of his own language, Cincinnatus, somewhat ironically, describes that language as moribund in a wonderful poetic image that likens the vapidity of his words to the superficiality of his mortal flesh. “[W]ill nothing come of what I am trying to tell,” the prisoner


48 Meghan Vicks has commented on the ellipses in Invitation. She contends that the abundant absences are in fact meaningful as “the only way Cincinnatus can express the [liminal] state that he has come to embody, […] a state that does not exist in the ‘reality’ he occupies”; the ellipses thus bespeak the point where “language reaches its limit of representation.” Vicks’ reading in turn maps nicely onto what D. Barton Johnson terms Invitation’s “prison-house of language theme,” or the apparent fact of the “artist’s restricted capacity to convey his vision in the existing language and his audience’s inability to understand even that which can be expressed.” According to these interpretations, we are meant to accept that Cincinnatus’ language must perforce be insufficient because all language is limited in its ability to express. Cincinnatus, however, has a very different sense of language’s potential; and it has been the project of this study to demonstrate that this sense is shared by the author. Meghan Vicks, Narratives of Nothing in 20th Century Literature (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 93-94; D. Barton Johnson, Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985), 34.
muses, “its only vestiges being the corpses of strangled words, like hanged men [. . .] evening silhouettes of gammas and gerunds, gallow crows” (Или ничего не получится из того, что хочу рассказать, а лишь останутся черные трупы удавленных слов, как висельники... вечерние очертки глаголей, вороны).\textsuperscript{49} In other words, Cincinnatus’ language still risks functioning as lifelessly—as prosaically—as Pierre’s. Appropriately, the figures’ parity in this regard has a bit of material evidence: Pierre still dons on his “auricular,” or pinky, finger the same ring that Cincinnatus received and wore on his “fifth finger” upon learning, as a child, language’s dead mechanics by copying out “model words.”\textsuperscript{50}

Leona Toker has proposed a reading of Cincinnatus’ self-dismemberment, cited earlier, that approaches my contentions about the prisoner’s body-language. She sees the “clothes and other parts of the body” that Cincinnatus removes as emblems of individuated elements of the man’s character and heritage. The “philosopher’s cap,” according to Toker, represents Cincinnatus’ gnostic bent; his dressing gown represents the uniform of Hitler’s and Stalin’s victims in their respective concentration and labor camps. “The other items of clothing and parts of the body may be read as symbols of the oppressiveness of ‘dead, ready-made art,’ as of the pressure of bourgeois society on an authentically living individual, of the stifling effect of a consumer audience, of the consciousness of the prison house of language and literary history, or of reading.” “None of these layers, however,” Toker poignantly concludes, “envelops the whole of Cincinnatus.”\textsuperscript{51} That is, none of the external expressions of Cincinnatus’ identity can speak for
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\item \textsuperscript{49} Nabokov, \textit{Invitation}, 90 / \textit{Priglashenie}, 766. D. Barton Johnson has pointed out the sustained harmony of imagery of “hanging” in this passage. “Gamma” corresponds to the Russian letter “Г,” which itself graphically mimics the “gallow[s]” where men hang and words go to be strangled. See, D. Barton Johnson, \textit{Worlds in Regression}, 36.
\item \textsuperscript{50} In the Russian the mirroring is more explicit: on “both” men the ring appears \textit{na mednitse}. Ibid., 96, 58 / 768, 756.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Toker, \textit{The Mystery of Literary Structures}, 33.
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the whole of the man. I expand a similar criticism to the entirety of the body as a visible and legible phenomenon to contend that, according to Invitation’s logic, the outer, surface body—any outer body—is perforce a poor text of the inner self.

Cincinnatus’ apparent state of body-language renders him essentially mute and inert—a point the enlightened Cincinnatus (the narrator) makes unequivocally. “The subject will now be the precious quality of Cincinnatus; his fleshy incompleteness,” he asserts, again undoing the illusion of Cincinnatus’ stable and meaning-producing body, to expose a surface body that only disguises “the fact that the greater part of him was in a quite different place, while only an insignificant portion of it was wandering, perplexed, here—a poor, vague Cincinnatus, a comparatively stupid Cincinnatus, trusting, feeble and foolish as people are in their sleep.”

The novel’s subtle metamorphic imagery depicts this fleshily incomplete Cincinnatus as the man in the larval stage. Indeed, the thin, shapeless, pale, and bald body that Cincinnatus shares with his captors already suggests a decidedly larval quality in the man. A subtle linguistic connection only present in the Russian text reinforces their anatomy that signals a common genus. When under the illusion that he is the lone physically substantial being in his prison, Cincinnatus imagines himself to be “surrounded by some sort of wretched specters” (Ia okruzhen kakimi-to ubogimi prizrakami, a ne liud’mi). The Latin word larva means “specter,” “ghost,” or “mask.” While the larval Cincinnatus fails to notice his anatomical parity with the others, the narrator is not so purblind. In Chapter Two, when Cincinnatus fantasizes stepping on Rodion’s face, the Russian narrator writes that his “specter” performs the act: “Это красивое русское

52 “Речь будет сейчас о драгоценности Цинцинната; о его плотской неполноте; о том, что главная его часть находилась совсем в другом месте, а тут, недоумевая, блуждала лишь незначительная доля его,—Цинциннат бедный, смутный, Цинциннат сравнительно глупый,—как бываешь во сне доверчив, слаб и глуп.” Nabokov, Invitation, 120 / Priglashenie, 776
53 Ibid., 36 / 748.
“This handsome Russian face was turned upward toward Cincinnatus, who stepped on it with his bare sole, that is, his specter stepped on it, Cincinnatus himself had already come down from the stool onto the table.”  

A few pages later, a still unenlightened Cincinnatus takes comfort in the cocoon of his own skin, admitting, “my soul has grown lazy and accustomed to its snug swaddling clothes”—echoing the very image Nabokov used to describe the pre-metamorphosis butterfly pupa (“a swathed-baby like thing”). The narrator exposes the comfortable casing of the “immature” Cincinnatus as nothing other than the space of the prison itself: “The very structure of his rib cage [...] expressed the barred nature of his surroundings, of his gaol.”  

Maintaining belief in the significance of his surface object-body, Cincinnatus remains confined to its limitations.

Thus problematized as an insufficient text of the whole identity, the surface body must be exchanged in favor of a different mode of expressive articulation. Cincinnatus sees the possibility for such a transformation when he proposes that his “soul” might jettison its fleshy shroud to instead “surround itself with a structure of words”; he seeks only the language, and the

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54 Nabokov, Priglashenie, 746. In his official English translation, Nabokov changes Cincinnatus’ specter to his “double”: “This attractive Russian countenance was turned upwards toward Cincinnatus, who stepped on it with his naked sole—that is, his double stepped on it, while Cincinnatus himself had already descended from the chair to the table.” Invitation, 29. Emphasis added.

55 “[Д]уша моя обленилась, привыкла к своим тесным пеленам.” The Russian here at once stresses again that Cincinnatus’ surface flesh is not integral to his inner life and makes a poignant connection to the fabric theme in The Egyptian Stamp. The English “swaddling clothes” Nabokov renders in Russian as more lofty telesnye peleny, “corporeal shrouds.” The pelena, we will recall, is the etymological root of Mandel’shtam’s plenka, the tissue of flesh that is synonymous with Parnok’s obolochka and that conceals the true reality accessible by poetic perception. Ibid., 36 / 748.


medium, appropriate to the task. He perhaps unwittingly diagnoses the problem, and its remedy, in a letter he writes to his unfaithful wife, Marthe. Cincinnatus expressly drafts the letter to describe to Marthe the nature of what society has deemed his “unutterable” (neudobskazemoe) condition: “This is why I am writing—this is my last attempt to explain to you what is happening.” Just as Roland Barthes theorizes, precisely that which cannot be uttered in social language can be written.

To appreciate the full effect of Cincinnatus’ writing in this scene, it must be noted that Marthe embodies, in the world of Cincinnatus’ flesh prison, little more than a sex object. Insatiable in her own libidinous cravings, others likewise make her the conspicuous site of their desires. In other words, Marthe reifies the carnal body, pure object-body. Referenced in a citation above, Pierre sees Marthe, quite literally, as a piece of meat. Cincinnatus’ own initial description of her body manages to be even less flattering. His portrayal of her as a lump of flesh does, however, meaningfully evoke an important theme, since she appears decidedly larval. “Tell me,” read early lines of Cincinnatus’ letter, “how many hands have palpated the pulp that has grown so generously around your hard, bitter little soul?” He then recounts the plump “little cannibal” (kanibalka) “devouring” all kinds of fruit (which are in fact thinly guised euphemisms for sex organs, once more recapitulating her essential carnality).

Naturally, grub-like Marthe speaks only the language of “transparent proximity.” Endeavoring to express himself to her, Cincinnatus states plainly that Martha’s commonplace

58 Ibid., 72 / 760.
59 “[П]этому пишу, это—последняя попытка объяснить тебе, что происходит.” Ibid., 140 / 783.
60 “Скажи мне, сколько рук мяло мякоть, которой обросла так шедро твоя твердая, гордая, горькая, маленькая душа?” Ibid., 142 / 783.
61 Ibid., 141 / 783.
language limits her understanding: “I do not know the words I must choose to make you understand . . . Such words do not come in the small size that fits your everyday needs.” But he points to a new way in written words that will be louder than speech: “I want to write this in such a way that you will cover your ears. Your membranous, simian ears that you hide under strands of beautiful feminine hair—but I know them, I see them, I pinch them, the cold little things, I worry them with my fingers, bring them to life, render them human, force them to hear me.”

Not only does Cincinnatus’ scriptive language promise to disrupt the constant conspiratorial whispering of transparent proximity, it already, with its detailed descriptive force, imparts definite shape, texture, and life to the otherwise vague, pulpy mass of Martha’s larval flesh.

Writing, in other words, offers the lingual medium in which speechless Cincinnatus can begin to articulate his more sensitive and poetic perception of Marthe, a perception that sees beyond her carnal body to focus on the finer and more nuanced dimensions of her form. Similarly, it is also through his writing that Cincinnatus is able to touch, to make contact with, Marthe’s body, a contact that is denied him in their “actual” physical interactions.

The imaginative transmutation from formlessness to definition, from death to life, that this moment witnesses—metamorphoses facilitated precisely by the transition from the spoken to written word—are the same to which Cincinnatus subjects himself in his process of self-authorship. Cincinnatus makes the gravity of his new mode of self-articulation most apparent when he ceases to appeal for his body and pleads instead for the preservation of his writings.

“Save these jottings—I do not know whom I ask, but save these jottings,” now beseeches the

62 “Я хочу это так написать, чтобы ты зажала уши,—свои тонкокожие, обезьяньи уши, которые ты прячешь под прядями чудных женских волос,—но я их знаю, я их вижу, я их щиплю, холоденькие, мну их в своих беспокойных пальцах, чтобы как-нибудь их согреть, оживить, очеловечить, заставить услышать меня.” Ibid., 142 / 783.
soon-to-be-beheaded Cincinnatus near the end of the text; “I must have at least the theoretical possibility of having a reader, otherwise, really, I might as well tear it all up.” The final image poignantly harks back to the passage, cited above, wherein the sight of Cincinnatus’ “brazen flesh” so “teased the observer as to make him long to tear [it] apart.” In this restatement, however, Cincinnatus redirects his destructive impulse onto his autobiographical text, his body’s surrogate.

The novel’s imagery conflates Cincinnatus’ transfiguration into text with his metamorphosis from larval “chunk of white lard” into magnificent moth, reifying on Cincinnatus’ body Nabokov’s symbolic portrayal of the butterfly/moth as artistic text incarnate. To trace the transformation of Cincinnatus’ body, we must examine the action of writing and its product. More specifically, I will look with particular care at the nuanced references to the implement of that composition, the pencil, since it constitutes the exact nexus between the body and the text. The pencil is introduced in the novel’s opening pages, where it is immediately juxtaposed to Cincinnatus’ mortal condition. Just after having his death sentence whispered to him, the condemned man enters his cell where, “on the table glistened a clean sheet of paper and, distinctly outlined against this whiteness, lay a beautifully sharpened pencil, as long as the life of any man except Cincinnatus, and with an ebony gleam to each of its six facets.” Initially appearing as a mocking counterpoint to Cincinnatus’ short life, the pencil will prove his salvation.

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64 “На столе белел чистый лист бумаги, и, выделяясь на этой белизне, лежал изумительно очищенный карандаш, длинный как жизнь любого человека, кроме Цинцинната, и с эбеновым блеском на каждой из шести граней.” Ibid., 12 / 740.
Reading quite different implications in this same initial appearance of the pencil, Gennady Barabtarlo has written an intriguing account of the “life” of the writing instrument in the novel. He characterizes it as a visual countdown, a “reliable chronometer” to Cincinnatus’ execution, since “each time the pencil is sharpened and ready anew to be used by the doomed diarist, it naturally gets shorter, and so does his life in prison.” For Barabtarlo, the pencil ultimately functions as one of Nabokov’s trademark tricks, a cruel tease to his fictional plaything. While the reader can conclude that Cincinnatus is essentially writing his way to his own extermination, the scholar contends, “[Nabokov’s] creature [. . .] must not discover it, for, if Cincinnatus had found this simple method of monitoring the quickly approaching end of the book, he ‘could’ have stopped using his pencil, eo ipso ending the narration at once.”

Thus Barabtarlo reads the pencil only as a negative presence, not just a material reminder of the approaching end, but ultimately the agent of Cincinnatus’ annihilation. This view, however, fails to address the pencil’s most important attribute and the cause of its contraction, namely, that the pencil only shrinks because it produces text. That is, to state only that the pencil’s “length decreases in direct proportion to the steadily shrinking number of pages remaining” ignores the fact that the same pencil has also composed the steadily increasing number of pages that have been read. Invitation explicitly manifests this point, since Cincinnatus’ diary entries make up large swaths of text. But more than this, the text itself compensates materially for the loss of Cincinnatus’ mortal, surface body, offering him a new

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66 Ibid., 24.
corpus and a new life. (I will further show that Cincinnatus’ writing in fact composes more than just those pages signaled as his diary entries. Rather, the whole of the book, Invitation itself, is, in the novel’s image-logic, composed by Cincinnatus.)

From the moment of its introduction in the novel’s opening, the pencil, that “enlightened descendant of the index finger,” conspicuously straddles the boundary between the body that wields it and the text it produces. Contrary to Barabtarlo’s interpretation, though, the pencil does not represent an analogue of the body, but offers an alternative to it. An interstitial object, the medium between body and text, consubstantial with them both, Cincinnatus’ pencil thus facilitates the transition from the former to the latter. In some overt ways, the pencil suggests remarkable possibilities for the not-so-doomed diarist, as it provides Cincinnatus’ comfort and security, or even functions as a protective talisman. “With the pencil extended toward it,” the ravenous spider, for instance, “would begin to back away, without taking its eyes off of it.” The pencil thus promising to keep the consumptive forces at bay, Cincinnatus displaces his anxieties about his physical visibility and vulnerability onto the pencil and the pages upon which it

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67 Significantly, the only thing that Cincinnatus ingests is the pencil itself, having a habit of “chewing [it] through to the lead” (догрызаясь до графита). He also describes his writing as a process of purging: he writes the letter to Martha, in which he recounts her hurtful deeds, also in order “to get it out of my system, to purge myself” (для того чтобы отделаться, выделить из себя, очиститься). Amounting to auto-cannibalism, Cincinnatus’ self-directed and regenerative diet is nonetheless distinct from his tormentors’, as they ravenously consume the other. Nabokov, Invitation, 91, 141 / 766, 783.

68 Dale Peterson has identified a more sinister undertone present in this evocation of the pencil, one that resonates of the far-reaching hand of official “literature” (which was so reviled by Mandel’shtam, for instance): “Yet this instrument of escape has a double edge. Nabokov’s language playfully recognizes the latent executive powers of the as yet unwielded pencil—in Russian, it is the promising regal extension of the ‘pointing’ or ‘dictating’ finger (ukazatel’nui perst’). But who or what commands those powers of execution? Why is every man’s life (except Cincinnatus’s) as long as the offered pencil? Who controls the public articulations of prisoners and characters?” Dale Peterson, “Nabokov’s Invitation: Literature as Execution,” in Critical Companion, 75.

inscribes. “I am trembling over the paper, chewing the pencil through to the lead, hunching over to conceal myself from the door through which a piercing eye stings me in the nape.”

But the pencil does not simply shield. It generates. Cincinnatus’ first diary entry, a cryptic thesis statement for the rest of his work, prefigures just what possibilities the pencil proposes for the man and his body in this regard. Having at first printed the statement, “After all I had premonitions, had premonitions of this finale,” Cincinnatus promptly “crossed out what he had written and began shading gently; an embryonic [ornament] appeared gradually and curled into a ram’s horn.” Initially starting at his own “finale,” the writer summarily cancels out the conclusion and takes up a new beginning, one characterized by the composition of an original and originary (“embryonic”) bodily form. The observable switch in the diarist’s “language,” from the codified word to the flexible image that facilitates the new birth in text realizes, moreover, nothing other than the adoption of the poetic language that defines Invitation as a whole.

70 “Дрожу над бумагой, догрызаясь до графита, горбом стараюсь закрыться от двери, через которую сквозной взгляд колет меня затылок.” Ibid., 91.

71 The paper on which Emmie’s drawing and other documents—namely Cincinnatus’ diary—are composed is one more clue that all the activity in the jail is the product of Cincinnatus’ mind. Everyone writes on the same ruled paper. In Chapter One, even Rodrig Ivanovich “produce[s] a sheet of ruled paper, obviously torn from a school notebook” (вытащил линованный листок, явно вырванный из школьной тетради) on which he invites Cincinnatus to write any of expressions of gratitude to his gaolers. The pencil is much the same. The “stubby” pencil with which Emmie draws is, for instance, the very same pencil that Cincinnatus wears down to a “stunted” nub by book’s end (206). 17, 206 / 742, 805.

72 “Цинциннат написал: «И все таки я сравнильно. Ведь этот финал я предчувствовал этот финал.» [. . .] Он вычеркнул написанное и начал тихо тушевать, причем получился зачаточный орнамент, который постепенно разросся и свернулся в бараний рог.” I have edited Nabokov’s translation of “an embryonic embellishment” to reflect the Russian text’s unambiguous use of “ornament,” Mandel’shtam’s favorite epithet for the poetic phrase. Zachatochnyi (primarily meaning “rudimentary”) is not quite as charged with anatomical associations as the English “embryonic,” but it does capture the crucial sense of being “originary” in its definitions as “germinal,” “primordial,” “in the beginning of growth, development” (находящийся в начале своего роста, развития). Ibid., 13 / 740-41.

73 The shape of the ram’s horn also bears a striking resemblance to the comma, thus quietly conflating Cincinnatus’ illustration to Emmie’s, further suggesting their singularity.
Despite this prescient first inscription, Cincinnatus, as discussed above, initially struggles to find his poetic language on the page. But he gets help. The warden’s precocious daughter Emmie uncannily resembles—and in no way coincidentally—the pre-literate child-Cincinnatus precisely in how she shares in that former self’s artistic intuition and abilities. In just these capacities, Emmie does not communicate in the language of “transparent proximity”—she remains, in fact, wholly unversed in it. Unlike the judge’s quiet death sentence, Emmie’s attempt at a whisper produces only “a hot, moist and utterly unintelligible noise in [Cincinnatus’] ear.” It is thus to Emmie’s chirographic activity that we must first look for authorship of Cincinnatus’ metamorphosis.

One of the sole sources of comfort in his confinement, Emmie frequents Cincinnatus’ cell, offering playful company. In Chapter Five she does much more; she authors an escape plan for Cincinnatus. Her text presents a playful but potent specimen of writerly style, as she literally composes it out of her own private image-system. “A child’s hand, undoubtedly Emmie’s, had drawn a set of pictures, forming (as it had seemed to Cincinnatus yesterday) a coherent narrative” which tells of a “fleeing prisoner [. . .] being led by a little girl.” The picture-essay goes on, “only in the form of a plan: a square for the cell, an angled line for the corridor, with a dotted line indicating the route and an accordionlike staircase at the end. And finally an epilogue: the dark tower, above it a pleased moon, with the corners of its mouth curling upward.” Not

74 “[Эммочка] жарко, влажно и совершенно невнятно загудела ему в ухо.” Nabokov, Invitation, 149 / 786.
75 “Детская рука, несомненно Эммочки, нарисовала ряд картинок, составлявших (как вчера Цинциннату казалось) связный рассказ, [где] утекающего узника [. . .] ведет девочка.” Ibid., 61 / 757.
just a child’s scribbles, the decidedly criminal illustrations communicate something outside of both speech and acceptable convention, but to which Cincinnatus nevertheless has access.

He understands Emmie because she writes in his very language, the language he had before he learned to make transparent signs—his archi-writing. A pair of crucial scenes makes this point clear. In the lines leading up to his creative Fall in the garden of the schoolyard, Cincinnatus has a flash of insight:

There is something I know, there is something I know, there is something . . . When still a child, [...] I knew without knowing, I knew without wonder, I knew as one knows oneself, I knew what it is impossible to know—and, I would say, I knew it even more clearly than I do now. For life has worn me down: continual uneasiness, concealment of my knowledge, pretense, fear, a painful straining of all my nerves—not to let down, not to ring out . . . and even to this day I still felt an ache in that part of my memory where the very beginning of this effort is recorded, that is, the occasion when I first understood that things which to me had seemed natural were actually forbidden, impossible, that the thought of them was criminal. Well do I remember that day! I must have just learned how to make letters. . . .

In the Russian, the childish and lawless sense of intuitive insight is not “recorded” in Cincinnatus’ psyche, but “imprinted” there, precisely as an archi-script: “и до сих пор у меня еще болит то место памяти, где запечаталось самое начало этого усилия.”

Cincinnatus as if transfers this capacity for intuitive insight onto Emmie shortly before she shows up with her

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77 Ibid, 95-96 / 768. Emphasis added.
78 Nabokov, Priglashenie, 768.
illustrated escape plan. Here Cincinnatus understands more clearly that insight to be poetic in nature, and he invests in it, and in Emmie, the hope of his deliverance.

When she came rushing in today—only a child—here is what I want to say—only a child, with certain loopholes for my thoughts—I wondered, to the rhythm of an ancient poem—could she not give the guards a drugged potion, could she not rescue me? If only she would remain the child she is, but at the same time mature and understand—and then it would be feasible: her burning cheeks, a black windy night, salvation, salvation. . .

Когда она сегодня примчалась,—еще ребенок,—вот, что хочу сказать,—еще ребенок, с какими-то лазейками для моей мысли,—я подумал словами древних стихов—напоила бы сторожей . . . спасла бы меня. Кабы вот таким ребенком осталась, а вместе повзрослела, поняла,—и вот удалось бы: горящие щеки, черная ветреная ночь, спасение, спасение. . .

To state it plainly, just as Pierre manifests the “comparatively stupid Cincinnatus,” fully absorbed “here” in the grammar of average reality, Emmie embodies the intuitive, poetically sensitive element that equally resides inside Cincinnatus. Signaling the pair’s essential oneness of identity, Cincinnatus inscribes, encrypts his selfhood in his child-self’s name, as Emmie sounds out the letters Em and Ee to spell “Me.”80 Inflected by the language of Bergson’s formula of the self as multiple unity, Cincinnatus intuitis that Emmie is but his former-yet-still-present self, though his intellect, still imprisoned in the delimiting discourse of average reality, cannot fully digest the fact, and projects her as an external other.

Thus it is also in Emmie-Cincinnatus’ unity that Invitation conjures Nabokov’s most important image of poetic self-writing. Recall that in “The Paris Poem,” the threads of the magic carpet—the carpet that weaves the poet’s diverse personalities together and into a unified and enduring textu(r)al artifact—reach back to the poet’s childhood. Accordingly, in the blissful

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80 Unfortunately, this little bit of word play does not operate in the Russian, where the little girl is always referred to in the diminutive as Emmochka.
Tamara Gardens of his childhood, Cincinnatus recalls that “time takes shape according to one’s pleasure, like a figured rug whose folds can be gathered in such a way that two designs will meet—and the rug is once again smoothed out and you live on, or else superimpose the next image on the last, endlessly, endlessly.”81 A later scene again evokes the potent image and language, when Cincinnatus, while falling asleep, feels Emmie climbing on him, “endlessly folding some shiny fabric, taking it by the corners and folding, and stroking it with the palm, and folding it again.”82

The language that Cincinnatus rediscovers in his effort at self-writing demonstrates all the salient poetic features. Just before he meditates on the magic carpet of poetic duration,

Cincinnatus articulates to himself how his ideal language operates:

Not knowing how to write, but sensing with my criminal intuition how words are combined, what one must do for a commonplace word to come alive and to share its neighbor’s sheen, heat, shadow, while reflecting itself in its neighbor and renewing the neighboring word in the process, so that the whole line is live iridescence.

Не умея писать, но преступным чутьем догадываясь о том, как складывают слова, как должно поступить, чтобы слово обыкновенное оживало, чтобы оно заимствовало у своего соседа его блеск, жар, тень, само отражаясь в нем и его тоже обновляя этим отражением,—так что вся строка—живой перелив.83

Not prosaically encoded with fixed, determined meanings, these words come alive and expand; they operate in the associative networks of a universal poetic energy. In one flight of poetic fancy immediately remindful of The Egyptian Stamp, Cincinnatus even imagines a language animated

81 “Там время складывается по желанию, как узорчатый ковер, складки которого можно так собрать, чтобы соприкоснулись любые два узора на нем,—и вновь раскладывается ковер, и живешь дальше, или будущую картину налагаешь на прошлую, без конца, без конца.” The detail of Cincinnatus being on the edge of sleep in this episode is, I think, crucial, since sleep is the state in which we depart from our conscious, intellectual mind—precisely the dimension of mind in which Cincinnatus is presently stuck. Sleep thus facilitates this moment of union between Cincinnatus and Emmie. Nabokov, Invitation, 94 / 767.

82 “Засыпая, он чувствовал, как она перелезала через него,—и [. . .] что она [. . .] без конца складывает какую-то блестящую ткань, берет за углы, и складывает, и поглаживает ладонью, и складывает опять.” Ibid., 150 / 786.

83 Ibid., 93 / 767.
with the independent life of Mandel’shtam’s marginal flourishes. Lamenting the vulgar world’s words that have no “unexpended” endings, Cincinnatus envisions words that end—or, rather, cease to end—“perhaps in some archaic letter, an upsilamba, becoming a bird or a catapult with wondrous consequences.”

The various aesthetic functions of Cincinnatus’ decidedly poetic language become pronounced in the textu(r)al production that he composes—in the end, in Invitation itself. For instance, much illuminating scholarship has analyzed the patterns of sound, fraught with semantic potentials, that echo throughout the novel. The most potent example in this regard is the play on the sounds tut and tam. Russian for “here” and “there” respectively, the sounds read as phonic signals to the dismal “here” of the prison and average reality, and the idyllic “there,” the realm, typified in the Tamara Gardens, where Cincinnatus may walk with “beings akin to him.” Repetitions of the words tut and tam resonate frequently as relatively transparent iterations of the phonetic theme; more effective still are the moments when the sound patterns are less obviously encrypted in the text. D. Barton Johnson brilliantly highlights one particular line written by Cincinnatus as he contemplates his present state: “Тупое ‘тут,’ подпертое и запертое четою ‘твёрдо,’ темная тюрьма, в которую заключен неуемно воющий ужас, держит меня и теснит” (The horrible “here,” the dark dungeon, in which a relentlessly howling heart is incarcerated, this “here” holds and constricts me).

The word tut proper only occurs once, but as Johnson observes, the entire sentence is “structured on the phonetic framework of the key word tut,” as the word’s component phonemes echo through the proliferation of “T” and “U” sounds,

84 “[И]бо не было у них таких слов, которые бы кончились как-нибудь неожиданно, на ижицы, что ли, обращаясь в праху или птицу, с удивительными последствиями.” Ibid., 26 / 745.
85 Ibid., 767 / 93.
and “specifically TTTUUUUUUTTT with six ‘U’s’ encapsulated by the twin ‘T’ triplets.” Every
dimension of the line—content, phonics, even the graphic pattern, whose “T’s” resemble “tall
sentinels […] towering over and confining the ‘u’ of Cincinnatus”—performs in its poetics the
semantic “sentencing” of the subject that is the very condition of tut, the prison of average
reality.\footnote{Johnson, Worlds in Regression, 38. Johnson has performed, to my knowledge, the most detailed study of this
acoustic phenomenon in the novel. And he locates other intriguing iterations on the theme, even positing that tam
gets meaningfully reversed in negatively charged words and figures like mat’ “mother,” material’nost’ “matter,” and
Marthe.}

Renditions of the same poetic play on tam elsewhere testify to why the there of the
Tamara Gardens holds such privileged meaning for Cincinnatus. For one, the phonic design
weaves itself into the magic carpet of Cincinnatus’ cherished past, since it is “tam—
неподражаемой разумностью светится человеческий взгляд; там на воле гуляют
умученные тут чудаки; там время складывается по желанию, как узорчатый
ковер” (there, tam, là bas, the gaze of men glows with inimitable understanding; there the freaks
that are tortured here walk unmolested; there time takes shape according to one’s pleasure, like a
figured rug).\footnote{Nabokov, Priglashenie na kazn’, 767 / Invitation, 94.} Realizing the action of the poetic carpet imagined by the narrative voice in “The
Paris Poem,” the Tamara Gardens, interlaced with and conjured by the key phonetic cues,
function as the recollected space where Cincinnatus frequently finds himself immediately
transported, à la Proust’s hero, in moments of Bergsonian pure memory. Another example, again
facilitated by the repetition of tam, conjures important aspects of this phenomenon of embodied
memory. The following passage about the Tamara Gardens evoke the sensual faculties as they
repeat the rhythmic patter of the key word:
Now and then a wave of fragrance would come from the Tamara Gardens. How well he knew that public park! [..] There, where, whenever life seemed unbearable, one could roam, with a meal of chewed lilac bloom in one’s mouth and firefly tears in one’s eyes. . . That green turfy tamarack park, the languor of its ponds, the tum-tum-tum of a distant band.88

Presenting a rich and vibrant alternative to the prison’s homogeneously drab surroundings, this one brief vision of the Gardens activate all of Cincinnatus’ senses—smell (fragrance), taste (lilac bloom in one’s mouth), sight (green), texture (turfy), sound (drumbeat of a band). Where tut confines Cincinnatus to the limitations of his fleshily incomplete surface body, the tam of his beloved childhood Arcadia not only allows him to “roam” freely, it opens him to the perceptive sensorium of my body, the somatic dimension that is the very source of poetic impressions, poetic imagery. In sum, the psychic site that Cincinnatus identifies as the source of his poetic language harmonizes with the dimension of self wherein, disabused of the illusory significance of his prison-flesh, Cincinnatus reconnects with his sensitively attuned body.89

This conflation of Cincinnatus’ language and body returns us to Cincinnatus-Emmie’s writerly text and the important implications it holds for Cincinnatus’ physiology. As the little artist Emmie writes, she begins to compose Cincinnatus into a new form, one that reflects the

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88 Nabokov, Priglashenie, 743 / 19.
89 Another poignant treatment of tam reiterates the same effects on Cincinnatus’ senses, this time additionally conjuring the same obfuscating plenka so central to The Egyptian Stamp’s metaphysiology of artistic perception. Near the end of the novel Cincinnatus “suddenly, with an abrupt start of the soul” finds himself inhabiting a vision of the Tamara Gardens, “which he remembered so well and which had seemed so inaccessible to him”: “Now, exploring the surroundings with a diligent eye, he easily removed the murky film of night [osvobozhdal of plenok nochnoi mgly] from the familiar lawns [..] so as to make them exactly as they were in his memory” (Вдруг с резким движением души Цинциннат понял, что находится в самой гуще Тамаринных Садов, стол памятных ему и казавшихся стол недостижимыми [..] Теперь, хлопотливым взглядом обследуя местность, он без труда освобождал от плёнок ночной мглы знакомые лужайки [..] дабы сделать их точно такими, какими были они в памяти). Nabokov, Invitation, 187 / 799.
possibilities promised in the tam theme. Let us look first, then, at Emmie’s body, since her physical capacities prefigure her artistic potential. “You have noticed,” states Nabokov in a graphic, if less than clinical, taxonomic description of butterfly metamorphosis, “that the caterpillar is a he, the pupa an it, and the butterfly a she.”90 Emmie’s body is, accordingly, all moth. An analogue of the “tiny black aerialist” (krokhotnyi akrobat) that flitters about Cincinnatus’ cell, the girl, with a back “evenly covered with a blond down [as if] combed in a symmetrical pattern” is characterized by her graceful, gravity-defying movement, and she is most frequently imagined as a little ballerina.91 At one point, “in ballet shoes on her bare feet and a tartan dress, Emmie dart[s] in[to]” Cincinnatus cell “and leap[s], as though flying, and finally pirouetted in one spot, flinging out a multitude of arms.”92 The promise of flight and freedom communicated through Emmie’s body gets further condensed into one synecdochic feature. More than once, little more than a “flash” of her distinctive “ballerina calves” signals the young aerialist’s appearance.93 Those same “marble calves” also highlight Cincinnatus’ otherwise spare physique, and they intimate the same capacity for liberating movement. “I feel, tightly rolled up in my calves, so many miles that I could yet run in my lifetime.”94

Cincinnatus’ full physical transformation is only ever suggested in the text, but even while he is not yet the “fantastic insect” of “genius,” Cincinnatus’ body does nevertheless

92 “В балетных туфлях на босу ногу и шерстяном платьице в шотландскую клетку, шмырила Эммочка, [. . .] и потом прыгнула, будто летя, и наконец закружилась на месте, раскинув множество рук.” Ibid., 147-49 / 785-86.
94 “Я чувствую в икрах так много туто нарукученных верст, которые мог бы в жизни еще пробегать.” Ibid., 22 / 744. Testifying to his own odd but integral belonging to the multiple unity of Cincinnatus’ identity, Pierre is, in the English anyway, marked by also by his “plump calves” (the Russian renders this image as жирны[e] ляжк[и], “plump thighs”). Ibid., 108 / 772.
presage its “future stage of development”—in quotation marks because it is actually a return into himself, into his inborn intuition. Between his own uniquely sectioned body which is, additionally, “light as a leaf” (legok kak list) his “big limpid eyes” (bol’shie prozrachnye glaza) —as well as the “third eye” that seems to be growing “on the back of [his] neck” (u menia, kazhetsia, skoro otkroetsia tretii glaz szadi, na shee)—along with other subtle details, such as a “long but thin mustache” that “flutter[s]” in the wind, Cincinnatus’ own body quietly forecasts his transition into the “splendid insect” that is finally described at length in the penultimate chapter.95 “It was only a moth, but what a moth! [. . .] It had thick, dark brown wings with a hoary lining and gray-dusted margins; each wing was adorned in the center with an eye-spot, shining like steel. It’s segmented limbs [. . .] and the upraised vanes of its wings, through whose underside the same staring spots and wavy gray pattern showed, oscillated slowly.”96 Something of the transition from larva-Cincinnatus into moth-Emmie-Cincinnatus is, however, as if performed precisely in the young artist Emmie’s act of writing. In the episode when she is depicted creating her writerly map, Emmie’s bodily movements appear uncannily like those of a moth emerging from a chrysalis, especially as that description echoes Nabokov’s own account of actual butterfly eclosure: “One wriggle, another wriggle—and zip the skin bursts down the back,
and he gradually gets out of it working with shoulders and hips like a person getting out of a sausage dress.”

Emmie’s creative emergence reads as follows:

Yes, the child . . . With the tip of her tongue showing a the right corner of her mouth, tightly holding the stubby pencil, pressing down upon it with a finger white with effort . . . And then, after connecting a particularly successful line, leaning back, rolling her head this way and that, wriggling her shoulders, and, going back to work on the paper, shifting her tongue back to the corner . . . so painstakingly . . .

Да, дитя . . . Высунув справа язык, крепко держа изрисованный карандашник, напирая на него побелевшим от усилия пальцем . . . А затем—после удачно замкнувшейся линии—откидываясь, поводя так и сяк головой, вертя лопатками, и опять, припав к бумаге и переводя язык налево . . . так старательно . . .

The physical effort Cincinnatus-Emmie exerts on her drawing translates into the work of metamorphosing Cincinnatus-prisoner’s body. The word “painstakingly” particularly compels us to reevaluate Cincinnatus’ illusory sense of his body having “been fashioned so painstakingly.”

Subsequent depictions of Cincinnatus reveal that he has not so much been painstakingly fashioned, but is being painstakingly composed. The most striking moment where Cincinnatus appears to be getting drafted into a textual form appears in Chapter Eleven. Immediately after describing the fleshily incomplete Cincinnatus, the narrator describes the “greater part” of the man—the part that promises to effortlessly escape to the air beyond the prison—precisely as an illustration.

Cincinnatus’s face, small and still young despite all the torments, with gliding eyes, eerie eyes of changeable shade, running through the transparent hair on his temples completed the picture, the full indecency of which it is difficult to put into words—produced as it was of a thousand barely noticeable, overlapping trifles: of the light outline of his lips,

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98 Ibid., 62 / 757.
99 This pointed repetition is made exact only in the English translation. In the Russian, Cincinnatus believes he has been fashioned “tak tshchatel’no,” while Emmie works at her drawing “tak staratel’no.” Nabokov, Priglashenie na kazn’, 744, 757.
seemingly not quite fully drawn but touched by a master of masters; of the fluttering movements of his empty, not-yet-shaded-in hands.

[Л]ицо Цинцинната, со скользящими, непостоянного оттенка [и легкое шевеление] прозрачных волос на висках—дополняли этот образ, всю непристойность которого трудно словами выразить,—она складывалась из тысячи едва заметных, пересекающихся мелочей, из светлых очертаний как бы не совсем дорисованных, но мастером из мастеров тронутых губ, из порхающего движения пустых, еще не подтускевших рук.100

Another related description, though less sustained, still more provocatively suggests Cincinnatus’ somatic inscription into the text of Emmie’s poetic escape plan. On her manuscript, Emmie depicts Cincinnatus with one poignant detail: “Then he himself, with commas (s zapiatymi) on his head instead of hair.”101 The comma-hair pointedly contrasts to average adult Cincinnatus’ sometimes stilted writing. Where the components of the latter (words, gammas, gerunds) can result in dead language and dead bodies (corpses, hanged men, gallow crows), Emmie’s rendering translates Cincinnatus’ body into the very grammar (commas, which are also the little “ram’s horn” in Cincinnatus’ initial writing) of her “coherent narrative” of pencilled images—language and image fully converge in the inscriptions of Emmie-Cincinnatus’ primordial poetics.

As he is composed in this way, the fleshy, incomplete part of Cincinnatus is effectively obliterated. Thus we encounter a pointed harmony of images, set up by a description of the pencil being readied for use, that further complicate the analogizing of Cincinnatus’ body and the

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100 Nabokov, Invitation, 121 / Priglashenie, 776. Emphasis added. Emmie’s compositional technique is, once again, Cincinnatus own. In the passage cited above, where Cincinnatus makes his first diary entry, he does not so much write as illustrate in the same manner as Emmie: “He crossed out what he had written and began shading gently; an embryonic embellishment appeared gradually and curled into a ram’s horn.” Just more evidence that Emmie is Cincinnatus; Cincinnatus is all the while writing himself.

101 “Он сам, с запятymi на голове вместо кудрей.” Ibid., 61 / 757. Perhaps not so curiously, in Speak, Memory Nabokov describes a Comma butterfly—named after the punctuation mark—in an episode recounting Mademoiselle O. reading to the young Nabokov on his beloved veranda at the family’s summer estate in Vyra. See, Speak, Memory, 105-06.
writing implement. “There are some who sharpen a pencil toward themselves, as if they were
deeing a potato, and there are others who slice away from themselves, as though whittling a
stick,” muses the narrator in the opening lines of Chapter Eight, whereupon Cincinnatus sits
down to write “with the pencil” which, the narrator knowingly observes, “had lost more than a
third of its length.” 102 On the next page, Cincinnatus replicates the pencil peeling by once again
shedding the layers of his outer body, but this time to expose his true and essential self.

I am alive. I had a strange sensation last night—and it was not the first time—: I am
taking off layer after layer, until at last . . . I do not know how to describe it, but I know
this: through the process of gradual divestment I reach the final, indivisible, firm, radiant
point, and this point says: I am! like a pearl ring embedded in a shark’s gory fat—O my
eternal, my eternal—and this point is enough for me—actually nothing more is
necessary. 103

On its own, the English version of this scene, as it witnesses Cincinnatus distill his true identity
from the flesh that encases it, unmistakably engages with Bergson’s formula of the body’s two
dimensions. For the purposes of this study, however, the original Russian introduces another
compelling point of comparison, since there Cincinnatus removes nothing other than the very
same earthly “casing” that kept The Egyptian Stamp’s hero mired in his own average reality. In
the Russian, Cincinnatus “snima[et] s sebia obolochku za obolochku, i nakonets. . .” 104

The text then proves not the cause of Cincinnatus’ demise, but the very means by which
he escapes death. Or, rather, not escapes death, but transitions into a new life. For Cincinnatus
was right when asserting, with regard to a book, that “the only real, genuinely unquestionable

102 “Есть, который рвут карандаш к себе, будто картошку чистят, а есть, которые рвут от себя, как
палку. [. . .] «Нынче восьмой день,—(писал Цинциннат карандашом, укоротившимся более чем на
треть) . . .»” Ibid., 89 / 766.

103 Ibid., 90.

104 “[Я] жив. На меня этой ночью,—и случается это не впервые,—нашло особенное: я снимаю с себя
оболочку за оболочкой, и наконец . . не знаю, как описать,—но вот что знаю: я дохожу путем постепенного
разоблачения до последней, неделимой, твердой, сияющей точки.” Nabokov, Priglashenie, 766. Emphasis
added.
thing here was only death itself, the inevitability of the author’s physical death.”105 But the peculiar physiology of metamorphosis is a wonder of simultaneous degeneration and growth that sees the larva “die into” the butterfly. Cincinnatus goes through just such death-defying transition.106 His final diary entry treats precisely the ambivalence of its author’s “death.”

Here the page ended, and Cincinnatus realized that he was out of paper. However he managed to dig up one more sheet. “. . . death,” he wrote on it, continuing his sentence, but he immediately crossed out that word; he must say it differently, with greater precision: “execution,” perhaps, “pain,” or “parting”—something like that; twirling the stunted pencil in his fingers, he paused in thought, and little brown fuzz had stuck to the edge of the table where the moth had quivered only a short time ago, and Cincinnatus, remembering it, walked away from the table, leaving on it the blank sheet with only the one solitary word on it, and that one crossed out.

Connolly has concisely parsed Cincinnatus’ cryptic inscription by way of Derrida’s “grammatology” of the crossed-out word, which gets defined as a sign both necessary and inaccurate. “For Cincinnatus, ‘death’ is both ‘necessary’ and ‘inaccurate’: ‘necessary,’ because he must forcibly be separated from the world in which he feels imprisoned; ‘inaccurate,’ because for him, such a ‘death’ does not mean the cessation of life, but rather a transition to another state of

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106 This idea of “dying into” a new life can certainly acquire metaphysical implications. But according to the process of apoptosis (programmed cell death) integral to metamorphosis, butterfly and moth larva, then pupae, in a very real sense “die into” their next developmental stage. The haunting language of this more mundane resurrection is frequent in descriptions of the biological process. In Ada (1969), Nabokov picks up the exact term to describe his heroes’ desire to “die, as it were, into the finished book” that they have composed, that is, Ada itself. Nabokov, Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle (New York: Vintage, 1990), 587.

107 Nabokov, Invitation, 205-06 / 805.
being.” Cincinnatus’ mortal body may very well pass away in the final scene on the scaffold, but at that point, the text completed, his flesh is only so much “dead” slough. Cincinnatus’ body has now fully transubstantiated into the book that he produced. Similarly, upon his “execution,” Cincinnatus walks off to join “beings akin to him,” while the sham world of average reality crumbles down and is swept up in a whirlwind. The scapegoat has upturned the ritual, proving that his private reality is the one worth preserving.

Just this bodily death into text produces the novel’s opening gag. Having announced that its hero is going to die, the novel seems to begin at the end, with the narrator lamenting that “the right-hand, still untasted part of the novel, which, during our delectable reading, we would lightly feel, mechanically testing whether there were still plenty left (and our fingers were always gladdened by the placid, faithful thickness) has suddenly, for no reason at all become quite meager.” Precisely here Cincinnatus sits down with the clean sheets of paper and full-length pencil, and begins to compose. At the novel’s actual end, Cincinnatus echoes, with a provocative and meaningful twist, this opening meta-moment, when he projects the novel’s material properties onto its thematic analogue, the moth. Immediately after crossing out the word “death” on his last piece of paper, Cincinnatus finds the moth on the ground. The creature’s “forewings” are remarkable for the book-like “monolithic straightness of the upper margins and the perfect symmetry of all the diverging lines—and this was so enchanting that Cincinnatus, unable to restrain himself, stroked with his fingertip the hoary ridge near the base of the right wing, then

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108 Connolly, “Cincinnatus and Différance.” The terms “necessary” and “inaccurate” as applied to the crossed-out word are, more accurately, Gayatri Spivak’s, from her introduction to Of Grammatology.

109 “Винтовой вихрь забирал и крутил пыль, тряпки, крашенные щепки, мелкие обломки позлащенного гипса, картонные кирпичи, афиши; летела сухая мгла; и Цинциннат пошел среди пыли и падших вещей, и трепетавших полотен, направляясь в ту сторону, где, судя по голосам, стояли существа, подобные ему.” Nabokov, Invitation, 223 / 811.

110 Ibid., 12 / 740. Passage cited in full above.
the ridge of the left one (what gentle firmness! what unyielding gentleness!).” In all significant ways dead at the novel’s opening, in the end Cincinnatus finds solace in the “gentle firmness” of the text with which he has successfully surrounded his soul. The circle is closed as the conclusion of Invitation witnesses its own birth in Cincinnatus’ physical death.

And it is precisely Invitation itself that Cincinnatus composes. This makes for an uncommon interpretation of the novel. An orthodox and Nabokov-promoted reading suggests that the “real” author quietly asserts himself as the narrative voice, producing the artistic artifact of which Cincinnatus himself is incapable. But the novel’s internal logic invites the reader to accept Cincinnatus as his own narrator, to maintain a firm and hermetic distance between the narrator and the implied author. First, all the things the text does stylistically have been articulated as desires by Cincinnatus himself; that is, the text realizes precisely what Cincinnatus hopes to perform in his writing, and so who better to fulfill his desires than a poetically-empowered Cincinnatus himself?

The most compelling evidence, however, that Cincinnatus narrates himself comes in a remarkable moment when Cincinnatus’ voice merges seamlessly with the narrator’s, where at most other points Cincinnatus’ speech and inner thought are clearly demarcated. In Chapter Thirteen, in the middle of a paragraph that begins as the narrator’s objective observation of Cincinnatus, the narrator performs an unsignaled transition into the voice of Cincinnatus as he writes a letter to his wife. Vladimir Alexandrov comments at length on the significance of this otherwise inexplicable “continuity between Cincinnatus [. . .] and the narrator” to suggests that it does “significantly change” the relationship between the two. “Cincinnatus seems to be suddenly

111 “[C]литная прямизна передних граней и совершенная симметрия всех расходящихся черт,—столько пленительная, что Цинциннат не удержался, кончиком пальца провел по седому ребру правого крыла у его основания, потом по ребру левого (нежная твердость! неподатливая нежность!).” Ibid., 206 / 805.
elevated to the privileged position of (relative) omniscience,” Alexandrov goes on, only to conclude that Cincinnatus has temporarily become the narrator’s *amanuensis*.112 If the setting of the novel is Cincinnatus’ psychic landscape, however, and the text—his body, how can we imagine the narrator to be anyone but Cincinnatus? Indeed this remarkable moment of merger is not isolated; rather, this more obvious episode only illuminates similar gestures made throughout. Take, for instance, these lines in Chapter One, when the “narrator” observes Cincinnatus in his cell: “It was then and only then (that is, lying supine on a prison cot, after midnight, after a *horrible, horrible, I simply cannot tell you what a horrible day*) that Cincinnatus C. clearly evaluated his situation.”113 Whose anguished voice could this be but Cincinnatus’ own?

Other peculiarities support this reading, which includes my contention that Cincinnatus is the sole persona of the text and that he projects as the surrounding “others” facets of his fragmented personality, many of whom he would prefer to “boot out” but who nevertheless belong to him, embodying his darker impulses and his social conditioning as a necessary inhabitant of average reality. Thus in the scene where Cincinnatus sheds his flesh to find the stable nucleus of his self, Bergson describes more accurately the actual anatomy of that point: “[I]f I draw myself in from the periphery towards the center, if I search in the depth of my being that which is most uniformly, most constantly, and most enduringly myself, I find an altogether different thing: [. . .] a succession of states [. . .] all extend[ing] into each other.” In Bergson’s


further description and imagery, it is difficult not to see Cincinnatus’ “optical illusion,” the “manipulation of cunningly illuminated facets” that he presents to the world as his fixed identity:

There is, beneath these sharply cut crystals and this frozen surface [personality], a continuous flux which is not comparable to any flux I have ever seen. There is a succession of states, each of which announces that which follows and contains that which precedes it. They can, properly speaking, only be said to form multiple states when I have already passed them and turn back to observe their track. Whilst I was experiencing them they were so solidly organized, so profoundly animated with a common life, that I could not have said where any one of them finished or where another commenced. In reality no one of them begins or ends, but all extend into each other.¹¹⁴

One scene from Invitation in particular affirms that this reading of Cincinnatus’ Bergsonian selfhood is no reaching speculation. In a remarkable moment nearing the end of the book, Cincinnatus finds some peace within himself and in the promise of his eventual journey tam, while, at the same time, he accepts into himself all the figures around him. For its wealth of imagery, often echoing Bergson’s own, I cite much of the long description:

[P]erhaps because the nearing of the friendly sounds promised him a change of fortune, Cincinnatus spent this night in a mental review of the hours he had passed in the fortress. [. . .] Involuntarily (be careful, Cincinnatus!) forging into a chain all the things that were quite harmless as long as they remained unlinked, he inspired the meaningless with meaning, and the lifeless with life. With the stone darkness for background he now permitted the spotlighted figures of all his usual visitors to appear—it was the first time that his imagination was so condescending toward them. There was the tiresome little co-prisoner, with his shiny face; [. . .] there was the fidgety, lean lawyer; [. . .] there was the somber librarian, and in smooth black toupee, corpulent Rodrig Ivanovich, and Emmie, and Marthe’s entire family, and Rodion, and others, vague guards and soldiers—and by evoking them—not believing in them, perhaps, but still evoking them—Cincinnatus allowed them the right to exist, supported them, nourished them with himself. Added to all this was the possibility that, at any moment, the exciting knocks might resume, a possibility that had the added effect of an intoxicating anticipation of music—so that Cincinnatus was in a strange, tremulous, dangerous state—and the distant clock struck with a kind of mounting exultation—and now, emerging from the darkness the lighted figures joined hands and formed a ring—and, slightly swaying to one side, lurching,

¹¹⁴ Bergson, Introduction to Metaphysics, 9-10.
lagging, they began a circling movement, which at first was stiff and dragging, but then gradually became more even, free and rapid, and now they were whirling in earnest. . .

[O]ттого ли, что приближение спасательных звуков сулило перемену в судьбе,—но в эту ночь Цинциннат мысленно занимался тем, что делал смотр часам, проведенным в крепости. [. . .] [H]евольно (осторожно, Цинциннат!) сковывая в цепь то, что было совершенно безопасно в виде отдельных, неизвестно куда относившихся звеньев, он придавал смысл бессмысленному и жизнь неживому. На фоне каменной темноты он сейчас разрешал появляться освещенным фигурам всех своих обычных посетителей. . . впервые, впервые воображение его так снисходило к ним. Появлялся докучливый сосед-арестантик, с наливным личиком; [. . .] появлялся адвокат, подвижной, поджарый; [. . .] появлялся мрачный библиотекарь, и в черном, гладком парике дебелый Родриг Иванович, и Эммочка, и вся Марфинькина семья, и Родион, и другие, смутные сторожа и солдаты,—и, вызывая их,—пускай не веря в них, но все-таки вызывая,—Цинциннат давал им право на жизнь, содержал их, питал их собой. Ко всему этому присоединилась ежеминутная возможность возвращения волнующего стука, действующая, как разымятивое ожидание музыки,—так что Цинциннат находился в странном, трепетном, опасном состоянии,—и с каким-то возрастающим торжеством били далекие часы,—и вот, выходя из мрака, подавая друг другу руки, смыкались в круг освещенные фигуры—и, слегка напирая вбок, и кренясь, и тащась, начиная—сперва тугое, влажающееся—круговое движение, которое постепенно выправлялось, легчало, ускорялось, и вот уже пошло, пошло.115

Only Bergson’s model of the self’s peculiar anatomy can account for the novel’s seemingly impossible chronotope, wherein Cincinnatus seamlessly mirrors, merges with, and exchanges

115 Nabokov, Invitation, 155-56 / 788.
places with the other personalities; wherein he travels with equal ease through time and space to inhabit “distant” periods of his life.\textsuperscript{116}

This Bergsonian anatomy of Cincinnatus’ mind likewise motivates the style of the novel he composes. He initially hopes to preserve himself in a piece of writing that follows the tropes and teleology of the conventional autobiography: “I would have \textit{begun at the beginning} and gradually, along a high road of \textit{logically connected ideas}, would have attained, would have \textit{completed}, my soul would have surrounded itself with a structure of words.” But such a prosaic narrative of himself perforce clashes with the unpredictable and fluid nature of Cincinnatus’ identity—“the dreams, the coalescence, the disintegration” that truly characterize his \textit{experience} of self.\textsuperscript{117} Instead he turns to the poetic language of his intuitive self. This language builds semantically pregnant patterns of sound and image that accrue more complex meaning in their repetitions and that, when woven together, communicate the true story of the man, a story that adheres as if behind and in spite of the apparent narrative.

\textsuperscript{116} An important image from the novel enigmatically recapitulates this proposed composition of Cincinnatus’ self as a melange of personalities. In Chapter Twelve, Cincinnatus’ mother, Cecilia C., introduces him to strange toys called \textit{nonnons}, consisting of “absolutely absurd, [. . .] incomprehensible, monstrous objects” that “made no sense to the eye,” but once held up to a “crazy mirror” are miraculously translated into cohesive, coherent images. Clearly playing on the novel’s sustained mirror theme, the \textit{nonnons} creatively explain Cincinnatus’ condition. With his own “optical illusion” produced by a system of “cunningly illuminated facets,” Cincinnatus is a \textit{nonnon}; the “monstrous” object is nothing other than the equally “monstrous,” swirling orgy of the personalities that make up Cincinnatus’ self. His mother suggests as much when she says that, among the “sensible images” that can be rendered in the mirror, in addition to “flowers, a ship, [. . .] a landscape,” is “a person.” But not just any person. In her subsequent repetitions of “you,” Cecilia unwittingly signals that Cincinnatus \textit{himself} can be made whole and sensible: “\textit{You} could have \textit{your} own portrait custom made, that is, \textit{you} received some nightmarish jumble, and this thing was \textit{you}, only the key to \textit{you} was held by this mirror.” The same effect is more pronounced in the Russian, where the “you,” instead of being rendered by the abstracting second-person singular \textit{ты}, is given in forms of \textit{вы}, continuing Cecilia’s formal, third-person plural address to Cincinnatus proper throughout: “Можно было—на заказ—даже собственный портрет, то есть \textit{вы} давали какую-то кошмарную кашу, а это и были \textit{вы}, но ключ от \textit{вас} был у зеркала.” The plural address is, of course, perfectly fitting, since the apparently singular Cincinnatus is an agglomeration of personalities. Ibid., 135-36 / 781.

\textsuperscript{117} [O], мне кажется, что я все-таки высказал все—о сновидении, соединении, распаде,—нет, опять соскользнуло [. . .] [Я] бы начал с азов и, постепенно, столбовой дорогой связных понятий, дошел бы, довершил бы, душа бы обстроилась словами.” Ibid., 205 / 805.
Whether or not we fully accept this last contention concerning Cincinnatus’ psychic makeup, with *Invitation* we undoubtedly hold in our hands a unique textu(r)al artifact. The novel’s bookending references to the book itself both relish precisely the text’s very real material substance, its density and durability—in a word, the very qualities that Cincinnatus had desired and that his physical body lacked. While the poetic text offers a grammar to reflect the syntax of subjective psychic experience, the book presents a suitable housing for the self’s unique chronotope: at once delimited and self-contained while extending through time. And as we read the text we are consistently cued to its peculiar thingness. Connolly has noted that *Invitation* further resists Derrida’s phonocentrism in the many ways the novel “draws upon the visual, iconic potentialities of the written language.”

I insist that we can add to this the tactile qualities of the written language. Just as we are directed at the novel’s beginning and end to the material that we are holding, the work throughout reminds us, in strategies similar to those of *The Egyptian Stamp*, that it is an object to be seen and heard and touched. The novel’s peculiar image-system, the style, as I have outlined it above, suggests a serious irony in D. Barton Johnson’s claim that *Invitation* is “the most inhuman and abstract of Nabokov’s novels,” a book thoroughly “stripped of any human flesh [. . .] in order to achieve maximal focus on form and style,” and instead invites us to see the union of flesh and style in the unique substance that is Cincinnatus’ text.

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118 Connolly, “Cincinnatus and Différance.”  
This study germinated from a realization that one must read Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s “prose” in the same way. By this I mean that the process of reading one of Mandel’shtam’s or Nabokov’s works demands a different sort of activity, a different kind of practice, than other—even other brilliant—prose requires. This activity operates more like celestial cartography (it helps tremendously to be familiar with certain of O. M.’s and V. N.’s personal myths for guidance). It is best to read the work fairly quickly the first time around, so as to get a feel for the characters and the events. You are now oriented; you have your horizons and you have located the North Star in the plot. The rereading involves searching among those other bright signals—not signifiers—of language and image, and tracing lines of connection between them in an effort to form something of a coherent picture, that is, a cyphered meaning drawn as if from behind and beyond the foregrounded story. Because the signals are so many and so vast, each one inviting points of connection in multiple directions (the rigid planes of the prose must be disrupted, contorted), the resulting picture always remains inexact, and always only a subjective interpretation. What I see as a lion, another sees as a lamb.

Yet this analogy of diagraming the heavenly bodies necessarily lacks a vital element because those bodies are perforce distant, flat, and cold; they lack the kindred heat of the human body, the organism so sensually present in Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s art. The celestial cartography analogy also accounts only for the text’s reception, while I am equally concerned with understanding its conception. Thus for the terms in which I imagined the dimensions of this study, I am partial to another set of images that unites the cosmic and the corporeal. In
Nabokov’s final, masterful Russian-language novel, *The Gift* (*Dar*, 1938), the protagonist, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, outlines his own peculiar project of self-authorship (which, naturally, ends up being nothing other than *The Gift* itself). He proposes the following: “Well, let’s suppose that I so shuffle, twist, mix, rechew and rebelch everything, add such spices of my own and impregnate things so much with myself that nothing remains of the autobiography but dust—the kind of dust, of course, which makes the most orange of skies.”¹ I see in Fyodor’s mode of writing an ideal statement—ideal precisely because it is cryptic—to describe the semiotic and semantic logic of Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s poetic texts, as well as for ways the authors inscribe themselves into those texts.

Fyodor’s mode of writing begins with the body and, more specifically, the parts of the body involved in both digestion, where an *outside* substance is introduced and assimilated *inside*, and reproduction, where a miraculous inverse action takes place. In other words, Fyodor is dealing, in his idiosyncratic way, with *my body*, as the dimension of the soma capable of communing with the objects of the external world. The imagery describing this first quality of the text also suggests a sort of formal counterpart, namely, the mixing and shuffling of raw personal matter, matter ripped out of chronology and context to be reorganized into a textu(r)al artifact that is thoroughly dissimilar to its source because aestheticized, but no less truthful or authentic for the metamorphosis. And here is the strange quality of the truly poetic personal statement: it simultaneously offers an honest exposure of the subject (“so much [of] myself”) and conceals him behind a conspicuous and willful dissimulation (“nothing is left”). The subject obliterates his apparent form, yet enables his essence to endure as an elemental component of the

natural, terrestrial landscape, an element that, moreover, also communicates and harmonizes with the poetry of the cosmic metabody (the sunset, in Fyodor’s imagery).

The preceding pages have endeavored to show that Mandel’shtam’s and Nabokov’s creative projects followed something of this formula. They argue that the artists’ systems of expression took shape according to their related convictions, grounded in Bergson’s philosophy, regarding the possibilities of art to record the experience of being and perceiving in the world, as that experience is conditioned by the fact of embodied subjectivity, with its peculiar anatomy and chronotope. No less important as this ideal mode of writing, Mandel’shtam and Nabokov are concerned with the implications of narrating a subject by a more conventional, prosaic method. If Paul de Man argues that in writing, and especially in self-writing, the subject is “de-faced” by being composed into figurative language, then Nabokov’s and Mandel’shtam’s writerly practice insists that this is just as it should be, for experience of the world and experience of self cannot be mimetically reproduced—a feat prose presumes to accomplish; that experience exists rather in the transubstantiating medium of metaphor, in the open and mobile grammar of poetry.² The defacement or, perhaps more appropriately, the displacement, of an apparent and already inadequate form that occurs in figuration results in a verbal artifact more authentic to a phenomenon’s true nature in duration.

While these ideologies of writing and art are born of deeply personal ontologies of subjectivity and reality, they are undoubtedly amplified by the circumstances of the historical moment. The methods, not just of writing, but of experiencing the world, which Mandel’shtam and Nabokov understood to be dangerously ingenuine and reductive were not simply accepted,

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but were being enforced as official policy. *The Egyptian Stamp* and *Invitation to a Beheading* capture just such a state of affairs: the poetically-inclined individual cannot be tolerated by the pervasive and invasive “rage for unity”; that same individual even struggles to exploit language in a discursive environment where organic words have ossified into fixed signifiers.

Although it has been the work of this study to emphasize the above parallels between Mandel’shtam and Nabokov, the comparative process also exposes important points of divergence that begin to account for the artists’ abundant idiosyncrasies. One such point can be construed as their respective notions of the self’s source. That is, while Mandel’shtam and Nabokov understand in like ways the self’s structure and operation (a multiple unity in duration), they have radically different views on its origins and the forces that shape it. These differences become palpable in their creative products. The artists’ most direct efforts at memoir present an effective place to start locating these discretenesses of personal philosophy. The memoirs share a number of unusual traits and make some similarly unorthodox gestures, though the authors ultimately put them to different ends. Nabokov paints the portrait of an artist as a young *artist*, Mandel’shtam records the story of his “philological” awakening; both avoid intimate reflections on loved ones: Nabokov’s parents primarily reflect and nurture his artistic sensibilities, Mandel’shtam’s parents materialize only as the source of his language. But the works’ titles, *Speak, Memory* and *Noise of Time*, already broadcast the differences in self-conception that they each promote.

In his memoir, Nabokov seeks to trace the shape of the private “watermark” of his identity. The author had full faith in the absolute singularity of his identity, singular in that it was not forged by anything outside of himself. This is the essential point of his claim, cited in the
Introduction, that “neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me.” In this claim, we might locate the artist’s basic sympathy with Platonic metaphysics, since Plato maintains that the soul (synonymous with the self) belongs to the realm of Forms, outside of history and causality. Cincinnatus seems to manifest his author’s conviction in the episode when he sheds all the layers of himself to discover the “eternal [...] radiant point” at the center of his being—even if that point is not so fixed and stable, but is instead characterized by the mobility of duration. Bergson describes this state, and *Invitation* performs it: their common source is the reason why all the characters in the novel basically mirror Cincinnatus’ form. Emmie, the “manyfaced monster” of Rodrig, Roman, and Rodion, appear as only slight variations of Cincinnatus’ template. Even Pierre announces his unity with Cincinnatus by being his perfect physical and dispositional opposite; he is a referent for the man in the same way that a photographic negative is for the final image; Pierre is the apophatic statement of Cincinnatus, with his negation simultaneously assuring his belonging.

Mandel’shtam took the diametrically opposed view. If Nabokov contends that the self is found precisely in memory, Mandel’shtam responds by declaring in his “autobiography,” “I want to speak not about myself but to trace the age, the noise and the germination of time. My memory is inimical to all things personal.” Mandel’shtam feels that what he knows as his self is thoroughly a product of culture. In fact, he conceives of himself—especially in his role as poet—as a *vessel* of culture: he emerged at a particular time, in a particular place, and his personality *became* in parallel with his milieu.

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Mandel’shtam’s theory of the self’s fashioning provides a satisfying explanation for the arguably more diverse dispersal of the poet’s identity in The Egyptian Stamp, where the narrative voice at once plays the roles of victim and executioner, tailor and tailored, pariah and agent of power: the poet absorbs the whole world into himself. This capacity of the poet forms the central conceit of Mandel’shtam’s first published essay, “François Villon” (1910), wherein he coins the term “lyrical hermaphroditism” (liricheskii germafroditizm) to describe the popular French poet’s ability to inhabit and channel a kaleidoscopic array of identities, “the one who grieves and the one who consoles, mother and child, the judge and the accused, the proprietor and the pauper.”

Thus in The Noise of Time, we may find a cause for the narrator’s unsettling attraction even to oppressive power in the spectacles of imperial might and glory that enchanted Mandel’shtam as a child. Mandel’shtam introduces the term “police aesthetics” (politseiskaia estetika) to describe the ceremonious displays of militarism that pervaded Petersburg streets at the turn of the century. The memoirist recalls being “in ecstasy” at the sight of the emblems of state power: “I was delirious over the armor of the Horse Guard and the Roman helmets of the Cavalry Guard. [. . .] To see the attack of the cavalry!” Among all the enthusiastically recounted spectacle, we may even catch a glimpse of Captain Krzhizhanovsky:

I enjoyed the physical selection of the men: they were all taller than average. My nurse fully shared my tastes. So together we took a fancy to one sailor, the “black mustache,” as we called him, and we would come to look at him personally and, having already picked him out of the formation, would not take our eyes off him till the end of the exercises.

Мне нравился физический отбор людей: все ростом были выше обыкновенного. Нянька вполне разделяла мои вкусы. Так мы облюбовали одного матроса—


5 “Я бредил конногвардейскими латами и римскими шлемами кавалергардов [. . .] Увидеть кавалерийскую лаву.” Mandel’shtam, Shum vremeni, 2:352, 351.
“And I say now, without a doubt,” Mandel’shtam openly admits, at the time “I regarded [it all] as something sacred and festive,” and that “the Petersburg street aroused in me a craving for spectacle, and [. . .] impressed upon me a kind of childish imperialism.” In no way diminishing the effect the pageantry of power had on his youthful self, Mandel’shtam also acknowledges an internal antagonism, saying that it all “squared poorly with the kitchen fumes of a middle-class apartment, with father’s study, suffused with the odors of leathers, kidskins, and calfskins, and with conversations about Jewish business affairs.” Mandel’shtam weaves the diverse aspects of culture, even those potentially dangerous to him, with equal validity into the fabric that constitutes the poet’s personhood.

A phenomenon inborn or a thing gradually imprinted; nature versus culture. These fundamental differences between Nabokov’s and Mandel’shtam’s understandings of the self’s conception, and the processes of its becoming, affect the meaning and the ethics of their subsequent artistic productions, as well as those productions’ imagined substance. With Nabokov’s fixation on the absolute singularity of his identity, his conviction of it being an isolated, extra-social entity, and his sureness in the self as an active conscious state (he even despised sleep), he was horrified at the prospect of no longer possessing himself; he was, in a

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6 Mandel’shtam, Shum vremeni, 2:350.


8 “Весь этот ворох военщины и даже какой-то полицейской эстетики [. . .] очень плохо вязался с кухонным чадом средне-мещанской квартиры, с отцовским кабинетом, пропахшим кожами, лайками и опойками, с еврейскими деловыми разговорами.” Ibid., 2:352.
word, terrified of death and had expectations of an eternal afterlife. Nabokov’s metaphysics addresses this concern with a decidedly gnostic bent, communicated in a sustained imagery of the consciousness’ deliverance from the bondage of the temporal world and its average reality, a rising up of the identity to a realm where it would be preserved, intact. The author gives a taste of what he anticipates in a letter he wrote to his mother on the third anniversary of his father’s death. Nabokov is twenty-five at the time he declares, “every trifle relating to father is still as alive as ever inside me. I am so certain, my love, that we will see him again, in an unexpected but completely natural heaven, in a realm where all is radiance and delight. [. . .] You must live in expectation of that hour. [. . .] Everything will return.” The world as it exists within Nabokov’s consciousness will be reiterated in all its fullness. The “watermark,” superimposed onto and only faintly visible through his mortal life, will cease to be a “trace” and will become reality entire. Invitation to a Beheading can be, and very often is, read along just these lines. “I have discovered it,” proclaims a poetically awakened Cincinnatus; “I have discovered the little crack (dyrochka) in life, where it broke off, where it had once been soldered to something else, something genuinely alive, important and vast.” Through that very crack, Cincinnatus, as the moth (Psyche), “will fly away at night through the broken window,” leaving the prison of his body to its mortal fate, “so that nothing of me will remain within these four walls, which are already about to crumble.”

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9 “Sleep is the most moronic fraternity in the world, with the heaviest dues and the crudest rituals. [. . .] I simply cannot get used to the nightly betrayal of reason, humanity, genius. No matter how great my weariness, the wrench of parting with consciousness is unspeakably repulsive to me.” The memoirist even goes on to liken the condition of sleep to Cincinnatus’ mortal plight, saying, “I loathe Somnus, that black-masked headsman binding me to the block.” Nabokov, Speak, Memory, 108-09.


11 Nabokov, Invitation, 205.

12 Ibid., 211.
Where, exactly, does consciousness go? Familiar notions of an immaterial realm of pure spirit do not map onto the “natural heaven” that the young author describes to his mother. That heaven, is, I propose, mislabeled by many as Nabokov’s “otherworld,” mislabeled because it is not entirely other; it may have “broken off” from this world but the two are necessarily of a piece. More accurately, his heaven is composed of nothing other than the experience of this world as filtered and refined to its pure state (Bergson) through the illuminating, subjective prism of art. Thus when Cincinnatus exits the stage of average reality, the novel’s image-system indicates that he goes there, tam—not to a realm of unknown and unspeakable bliss, but to the lived space of the very real Tamara Gardens that abides in Cincinnatus’ memory, a space where, in Nabokov’s words, “art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm.”

Barabtarlo suggests that the same aperture also offers Cincinnatus access to a realm “beyond the book whose hardbound covers limn Cincinnatus’s real and truly inescapable jail.” This reading, too, does not align with the Cincinnatus, or the Nabokov, depicted throughout this study. Nabokov hopes to eventually abandon average reality; writing proves his means to articulate, to truly materialize, his parallel realm. His poem “To an Unborn Reader” makes clear that as much as he wants to live on in the dimension of pure consciousness, he wants also to live on in our consciousness. Once more, writing alone enables readers to perceive the poet’s distinctive watermark. The author’s metaphysiology of art ensures that the texts he leaves behind reaffirm the singularity of his identity. As demonstrated through Cincinnatus’ self-writing, the style of Nabokov’s creative works insists that it is his self in this text.

The principles that guide Mandel’shtam’s consummate performance as Poet, the voice of culture, admit of no such discreteness between the self and the world, nor such a personal claim to the material of the text. Fyodor’s thesis of writing describes how the external world passes through the artist, who himself remains unchanged by the interaction, and then how the artist inscribes his private self into a textu(r)al artifact that occupies a definite place in the world of things. Mandel’shtam’s relationship with the world is, by contrast, symbiotic, mutually nourishing; his word and his body always extend out to the world to meet it. In “Notre Dame,” Mandel’shtam’s organism fuses with the Cathedral; in “The Age,” his blood congeals to close the wound between the centuries. The Egyptian Stamp begins with Parnok taking in Petersburg, and ends with the narrator opening his body to expose nothing other than that same city; the monstrously condensed reality within the subject is the world itself, though poeticized, having been committed to the translating processes of the human “I.” Parnok’s body becomes the very landscape of Petersburg.

In Mandel’shtam’s metaphysiology of art, then, the text operates as a mere conduit, the substance that allows for the communion of subject with object, but which need not remain—the text itself can disintegrate much like an Egyptian stamp. In the terminology of metamorphosis, the text is the chrysalis, the papery tissue in which the transformation takes place, but which the metamorph ultimately discards. We can, in fact, go even further to say that the text is altogether unnecessary. Much of Mandel’shtam’s poetics, and his compositional practice, involves no actual writing. For most of his career, the poet made a principled decision to not set his verses down in ink, where they would be fixed. Instead, he composed in his mind, where the organic words could continue to move and adapt, where the poem could continue its own endless becoming.
The work properly came alive in being spoken aloud, and Mandel’shtam was known for giving intoxicating recitations of his poetry, performances wherein the usually mild-mannered man transformed into charismatic oracle.

If Nabokov emphasized the graphic character of language, Mandel’shtam worked primarily through its phonemic properties. One observed the law of the text, the other the required the openness of the living word. And like that other prophet of the living word, Mandel’shtam, with his ideology of the endurance of the poetic utterance, saw no room for fear of death. Of the world and of culture, Mandel’shtam, through his art, also lived for them and, ultimately, died into them.

At the risk of straining this lofty religious metaphor, is this not one of the wonders of the Jewish and Christian traditions’ respective texts: that they can live their own independent, charming, and vibrant lives, while also occupying the same tome, their points of distinction also, somehow, enriching their harmonies? It is my hope that this modest text has initiated something of that order by inviting Osip Mandel’shtam and Vladimir Nabokov to come together in a meaningful creative dialogue, without having to force a connection or forfeit any of the unique qualities that make these two artists endure, each in his own right.
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