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Cincinnatus and *Différance*: Subversive Discourse in *Invitation to a Beheading*

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The names of Vladimir Nabokov and Jacques Derrida are not frequently linked in critical essays, and the reasons for this are understandable. Derrida's dense philosophical explorations would seem to have little in common with Nabokov's exquisite imaginative fictions. A reading of Nabokov's novel *Invitation to a Beheading*, however, suggests that the two writers may have shared at least one area of common interest: both writers evince concern with the way in which authoritarian traditions work to suppress or eliminate traces of otherness found in their midst. In the following essay, we shall examine some of the parallels between Nabokov's treatment of Cincinnatus's imprisonment by an oppressive society and Derrida's polemical observations on the way the tradition of Western philosophy has tended to impose its various systems of thought "by ignoring, or suppressing, the disruptive effects of language" (Norris, *Deconstruction* 18).

Although one ultimately finds more differences than similarities between Nabokov and Derrida, there are two factors which give particular resonance to an association between their works. First is the place that "writing" itself plays in Nabokov's novel. The "suppressed" figure in the work — Cincinnatus C. — uses writing as a tool in his effort to resist the totalitarian order which has marginalized him. Second, Cincinnatus utilizes this writing to advance a metaphysical position that stands at odds with the belief system or "rules" of the world around him. This essay will refer to Derrida's work as it focuses on the ways in which Cincinnatus disrupts the totalizing pressures of his jailers, and it will comment on the divergences between Derrida and Nabokov in its discussion of the implications of the novel's final scene.

We should begin by making a few observations about the society which has imprisoned Cincinnatus, and about the ways in which he is regarded as a disruptive element. Two of Derrida's central premises prove especially useful here: first, the tendency of the Western philosophical tradition to downplay the disruptive effects of language (and particularly of writing), and second, the tendency of this tradition to privilege "the concept of the same" and to suppress "differences in favor of similarities" (see McGowan 89-90).

Cincinnatus's society evinces abundant evidence of the latter tendency. In the first chapter, for example, we learn that the law required that the defense counsel and the prosecutor "be uterine brothers"; if such were not available, then makeup would be used to make them look as much alike as possible.[1] This trend toward uniformity affects even those who are not known to be related. Indeed, three of Cincinnatus's tormentors are so similar as to be interchangeable as we see from the excursion to the prison tower near the end of Chapter Three (see IB 39-44; PK 50-55).

Significantly, this principle of identity, or "rage for unity" (see Spivak xvi), also operates in the sphere of *language*, where it emerges in a tendency toward duplication. One example of this occurs at the outset of Chapter Six, when Cincinnatus receives a letter containing an apology for a delay in a promised interview. A moment later, the prison director enters Cincinnatus's cell and delivers the same apology "verbatim" (IB 69; PK 76). Toward the end of the novel, as Cincinnatus is being driven to the execution spot, M'sieur Pierre announces:

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[1] See Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* 21. The corresponding passage in Russian is found in Nabokov, *Priglashenie na kazn'* 34. All subsequent citations from these texts will be noted by a parenthetical reference with the abbreviation IB or PK and the relevant page number.

"In a moment we shall be driving past your house" (IB 216; PK 211). His words are immediately repeated in a louder tone by the driver of the carriage.

Repetition, then, is one principle which operates in this society as a medium of reassurance and support for its inhabitants.[2] In this regard we should recall Derrida's critique of the Hegelian dialectic: "Repetition *summarizes* negativity, gathers and maintains the past present as truth, as ideality. The truth is always that which can be repeated" (*Writing and Difference* 246). John McGowan makes this point even more explicit, stating: "one sign can be easily substituted for another […] because all signs are recognized as representatives of the same in merely slightly different guise" (McGowan 95).

More importantly, it is in the principle of repetition that we begin to approach what the narrator identifies as a central trait of Cincinnatus's society: its "transparency" — in communicative capacity as well as in physical characteristics. As the narrator points out, those around Cincinnatus "understood each other at the first word, since they had no words that would end in an unexpected way" (IB 26; PK 38).[3] This image of immediate interpersonal understanding brings to mind the Rousseauistic dream of what Derrida calls "transparent proximity," a dream of a small "community of speech where all the members are within earshot" (*Of Grammatology* 138 and 136). For Rousseau, writing is a suspect activity, a "dangerous supplement" that threatened "to poison the springs of authentic human understanding" (Norris, *Derrida* 97).

In *this* society, however, writing has been sufficiently weakened or debased so as to pose no real threat to its members. In scene after scene, we find that the written word itself seems curiously impotent, at least when it is produced by the accepted members of the establishment. The prison director notes more than once that he has written complaints about conditions in his prison but that these complaints have been ineffectual (see IB 16 and 69, PK 29 and 76). Perhaps the most astonishing example of the emptiness of the conventional written word is the stenography of Cincinnatus's lawyer during the scene in which M'sieur Pierre's identity is revealed. Pierre announces that "according to the law," the floor belongs to Cincinnatus. Cincinnatus, however, refuses to speak. Yet his lawyer is undaunted by the silence, and continues writing, "so quickly that the flashing of his pencil hurt the eyes" (IB 177, PK 175). We shall consider the peculiar properties of the written word in more detail below, but for now we should turn to Cincinnatus.

Cincinnatus, of course, represents a problem for those around him in several respects. From their perspective, he represents an unsettling alterity. His mere physical presence "perplexes" (IB 24; PK 36) and "alarms" (IB 31; PK 44) them. What is specifically different about him is that he is "opaque" in a world of figures who are "transparent to each other" (see IB 24; PK 36). Moreover, he seems to have the remarkable ability to disassemble himself (see IB 32-33; PK 44-45). At the conclusion of the scene in Chapter Two in which he dismantles his body, the narrator remarks: "Cincinnatus, your criminal exercise has refreshed you" (IB 33; PK 45). Significantly, Cincinnatus uses this very epithet — "criminal" — when he later characterizes his own intuitive sense as to how one should combine words to make them come alive and to animate a line of writing (IB 93; PK 98). Indeed, from the perspective of his society, Cincinnatus reveals himself to be a subversive criminal as he manipulates words and images to "deconstruct" not only his body but ultimately the entire world which has imprisoned him.[4]

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[2] These characters like to engage in "self-repetition — that is, looking at mirrors (see IB 21, 71, 99; PK 34, 78, 103).

[3] Unlike Nabokov's novel itself, which "ends" in a very unexpected way.

[4] Nabokov's narrator makes the connection between Cincinnatus's body and his prison explicit when he writes that the structure of Cincinnatus's rib cage "expressed the barred nature of his surroundings, of his gaol" (IB 65; PK 73).

Cincinnatus's deconstructive capacities, however, are just one manifestation of a more general difference. In the long passage which begins, "The subject will now be the precious quality of Cincinnatus; his fleshy incompleteness […]" (IB 120; PK 122-23), we find numerous indications of how difficult it is to define the figure. As the narrator admits, all his attempts to characterize Cincinnatus "still could not fully explain" him.

From the perspective of Cincinnatus's society, then, Cincinnatus functions something like an elusive signifier whose signified can never be found "in its full being" (Spivak xvii). When we read Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's description of the "being" of the sign: "half of it is always 'not there' and the other half is always 'not that'" (Spivak xvii), we think of the narrator's description of Cincinnatus: "the greater part of him was in a quite different place, while only an insignificant portion of it was wandering, perplexed, here […] it was as if one side of his being slid into another dimension" (IB 120-21; PK 123). This very indeterminacy, of course, represents a challenge to Cincinnatus's world. Momentarily adopting the perspective of Cincinnatus's jailers, the narrator writes that "all this so teased the oberver as to make him long to tear apart, cut to shreds, destroy utterly this brazen elusive flesh, and all that it implied and expressed, all that impossible, dazzling freedom […]" (IB 122; PK 124).

In terms of his relationship to the world around him, Cincinnatus can perhaps be said to embody Derrida's beloved "*différance*" (spelled with an "a"). For those around him, Cincinnatus's authentic identity (or signified?) is at once "different" and "deferred." It cannot be "fixed or pinned down for the purposes of conceptual definition" (Norris, *Derrida* 15), at least within the confines of the world in which it appears. Moreover, *différance* possesses a quality which Cincinnatus shares. As John McGowan puts it: "The 'absolute alterity' ascribed to *différance* […] grants it the power to disrupt the very system that it also makes possible" (101-2). In this regard, we should recall the narrator's observation that even though Cincinnatus was imprisoned by his spectral jailers because of his "otherness," it was he who "allowed them the right to exist, supported them, nourished them with himself" (IB 156; PK 156). Thus, Cincinnatus's presence is both disruptive *and* necessary to the beings who surround him.

Of course, the disruptive component of Cincinnatus's identity is what stands out most sharply to those around him. As Derrida writes: "*différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening [to] and infallibly dreaded by everything within us that desires a kingdom" (*Margins of Philosophy* 22). For Derrida, "the fear of difference, of the other, is a crucial constitutive feature of all totalizing systems" (McGowan 91). Such a fear is evident within Cincinnatus's society too, and the novel begins with the sentence of death being announced to Cincinnatus "in accordance with the law" (IB 11; PK 25).

It is somewhat puzzling, however, that Cincinnatus's jailers do not rush to carry out the sentence. On the contrary, they continually try to engage him in their rituals or to make him conform to their notions of accepted order. Indeed, at one point, M'sieur Pierre actually "implores" Cincinnatus to cooperate with him and to drink *bruderschaft* with him (IB 185; PK 182).[5] In this striving toward engagement and appropriation we may see a curious reflection of Derrida's perception of the central tendency of the Western philosophical tradition. Derrida writes: "Absolute fear would then be the first encounter of the other as *other*: as other than I and as other than itself. I can answer the threat of the other as other (than I) by transforming it into another (than itself), through altering it in my imagination, my fear, or my desire" (*Of Grammatology* 277). McGowan explains: "Derrida's crucial premise is that philosophy continually works to bring the other inside its boundaries, where it can be

[5] We also find repeated appeals for Cincinnatus to "repent" (IB 104, 154, 200; PK 108, 154; 196), and reproaches directed at him for his failure to behave in a proper manner (see, e.g. IB 88, 125; PK 94, 127).

controlled by being subordinated. Left outside, the excluded would remain too dangerous, would be free and independent" (McGowan 94).

The way in which "philosophy" does this has affinities with Nabokov's vision of Cincinnatus's society. As McGowan puts it: "philosophy neutralizes its other […] by locating it within a system of asymmetric relationships that try to fix the other in a secondary position" (94). One recalls that those around Cincinnatus, and particularly M'sieur Pierre, continually try to include Cincinnatus in rituals in which he is meant to play a passive role. Indeed, in several episodes, M'sieur Pierre and the others attempt to treat him as if he were something like M'sieur Pierre's spouse, as for example, in the grotesque parody of a wedding feast that occurs in Chapter Seventeen.

How does Cincinnatus react to these attempts at subordination and envelopment? At first, he strives to adapt himself to the prevailing norms. As a child, he tried various strategies to conceal his difference (see, *e.g.* IB 24; PK 36), and later, after his imprisonment, he has fantasies of escaping the prison, not however, into a different land, but rather, back to familiar surroundings (see, *e.g.*, IB 18-20; PK 31-33). Again, it is interesting to consider these "non-exits" in light of Derrida's writings about the monolith of Western metaphysical humanism. As Derrida put it in *Margins of Philosophy*: "A radical trembling can only come from the outside" (134). But, he goes on to point out, "the 'logic' of every relation to the outside is very complex and surprising. It is precisely the force and the efficiency of the system that regularly change transgressions into 'false exits'" (135). From the inside, one can choose only between two strategies. First, one can "attempt an exit and a deconstruction without changing terrain, […] by using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house, that is, equally, in language" (135). Here, however, "one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating […] that which one allegedly deconstructs. The continuous process of making explicit, moving toward an opening, risks sinking into the autism of the closure" (135).

The metaphors Derrida uses in this description provide an apt characterization for two of Cincinnatus's pseudo-escapes from his confinement. In Chapter One, he vividly imagines leaving the prison and returning through the moonlit streets to his home. Yet as he opens the door to his "home," he finds himself entering his prison cell (Pk 20; IB 33). His problem here (and also in Chapter Six: see IB 73-75; PK 80-82) is that he clings too much to the original "terrain". Unwilling to let go of the familiar stones of his environment, he finds that his move toward an opening is only a return to the "autism of the closure".

The second strategy articulated by Derrida may also have a rough parallel in Cincinnatus's experience. Derrida writes: "To decide to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion, by brutally placing oneself outside, and by affirming an absolute break and difference" (135). This impulse too has its drawbacks: "Without mentioning all the other forms of *trompe-l'oeil* perspective in which such a displacement can be caught […] the simple practice of language ceaselessly reinstates the new terrain on the oldest ground" (135).

Perhaps this second strategy can be associated with Cincinnatus's recurrent fantasies of a fabulous escape. First, he imagines being rescued by Emmie, a dream enhanced by "the rhythm of an ancient poem" (IB 53; PK 63; see also IB 47; PK 57). Then, his imagination is captured by the sounds of digging behind the wall of his cell: he is sure that a rescuer is tunnelling to help him escape. These two fantasies merge when he crawls out of the underground passage and finds Emmie waiting for him. For a moment, before she leads him back into the prison again, he believes himself to be free. Alas, this fantasy of "brutally placing oneself outside" the prison proves indeed to result in just one more *trompe l'oeil* effect. "Dizzy from liberty," he contemplates the landscape spread out before him, a landscape which, with its "blurred blue city" and "fiery cloudlets" (IB 164, 165; PK 164), directly recalls the *trompe l'oeil* painting of the Tamara Gardens which Cincinnatus had seen

during an earlier excursion within the prison walls (see IB 76; PK 83-84).[6] Cincinnatus's strategies of escape, as long as they rely on the instruments of his world, are found to be entirely inadequate for the task.

What, then, *can* he do? At several moments, Cincinnatus acknowledges that he is surrounded by "specters," "parodies," and "dummies," and that he must withdraw his belief in them (see, *e.g.*, IB 36, 40, 70, 142, 193; PK 47, 51, 77, 143, 189). In the extended writing exercise found in Chapter Eight, Cincinnatus sketches out his vision of an alternative state of being, a realm more authentic than the one in which he currently finds himself. Many of the novel's readers have turned to this passage to help elucidate the metaphysical dimension of the novel, whether this be Gnostic, Neoplatonic, or something uniquely Nabokovian.[7]

What we shall focus on, however, is not the specific content of Cincinnatus's speculations, but rather what he has to say about writing and language itself. Derrida perceives a "phonocentric" bias in Western metaphysical thought. He detects in the works of several leading thinkers from Plato to Saussure evidence that "speech" has been privileged over writing. As Christopher Norris puts it, "*Voice* becomes a metaphor of truth and authenticity, a source of self-present 'living' speech as opposed to the secondary lifeless emanations of writing" (*Deconstruction* 28); writing is treated "as a merely derivative or secondary form of linguistic notation, always dependent on the primary reality of speech and the sense of a speaker's 'presence' behind his words" (*Deconstruction* 26).

Yet Cincinnatus's written record may offer a different view. As he wrestles with the problem of trying to find the right words with which to express his intuitions, he states: "Alas, no one taught me this kind of chase, and the ancient inborn art of writing is long forgotten" (IB 93; PK 98). The epithets Cincinnatus applies to the art of writing here — "ancient" and "inborn" — may indicate that "writing" is not something derivative or secondary, but is itself primary and essential to the spiritualized, conscious being. We shall come back to this point later. A second feature of Cincinnatus's discourse worth considering is the fact that his document itself draws upon the visual, iconic potentialities of the written language. As D. Barton Johnson has pointed out (in *Worlds in Regression* 35-42), Cincinnatus (or, more properly, his maker) has utilized in his text words and letters which, through their very shapes, convey meaning to a sensitive reader. Perhaps the view of writing advanced in this novel is not quite as phonocentric as Derrida has found in the Western philosophical tradition.

In any case, although Cincinnatus himself feels that his powers of expression are not fully adequate to convey what his intuition indicates to him, it is clear from the reaction of those around him that his words *do* have power. For example, Pierre instructs him at one point not to use "such words" when Cincinnatus speaks disparagingly about the impending execution (IB 113; PK 117); and Martha declares that "everyone was horrified" by the letter he wrote

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[6] The connection between the two moments is confirmed by the presence of Emmie in each episode. In the earlier scene, Cincinnatus had asked Emmie to "take" him "out of here" (IB 76; PK 84). Now, she leads him back to the prison and to M'sieur Pierre. A connection between Emmie and Pierre also appears in the earlier prison scene. While walking in the corridor, Cincinnatus hears a tapping noise which sounds "like an invisible woodpecker" (IB 75; PK 82). At first he concludes that it is Emmie throwing a ball against the wall, but soon thereafter sees Pierre tacking a calendar on the wall: it was he who was tapping "like a woodpecker" (IB 78; PK 85).

[7] For an explication of the Gnostic motifs in the novel, see Davydov, *Invitation to a Beheading*; for a discussion of Neoplatonism in the novel, see Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld,* Chapter Three. Cincinnatus's struggle to recall and express what he "knew without knowing" (IB 95; PK 100) reminds one of the Platonic concept of *anamnesis*, which, as Christopher Norris explains it, "involves, literally, an act of 'unforgetting', a recollection of spiritual truths which the soul has forgotten in its fallen state, its confinement to the prison-house of the senses, but which can still be summoned to mind through wise teaching and the disciplines of self-knowledge" (*Derrida* 31). This kind of "good" memory can be contrasted with "bad" memory, which substitutes mnemonic devices for genuine, living wisdom (*Derrida* 31), much like M'sieur Pierre consulting his crib sheet to check the accuracy of his oration (IB 152; PK 152).

her (IB 200; PK 196). As she puts it: "every word of yours was impossible, unspeakable" (IB 200; PK 196). Perhaps we can draw a fundamental distinction between the kinds of "words" which circulate among the members of Cincinnatus's society — words which are weak and empty — and the kinds of "words" that Cincinnatus is capable of uttering — words which have a certain power and forcefulness.

Indeed, it may be significant that Cincinnatus first became aware of his own special nature and knowledge (which he again characterizes as "criminal") on the day he learned to "make letters" which he used to "copy the model words from the flower beds in the school gardens, where petunias, phlox and marigold spelled out lengthy adages" (IB 96; PK 101). Introduced for the first time to the imitative, didactic purposes to which writing has been put in this society of puppets, Cincinnatus instinctively recognized his own essential difference. It is no wonder, then, that he regards the novel *Quercus* — "the best that his age had produced" — as "distant, deceitful and dead" (IB 123; PK 126). Cincinnatus, in contrast, has the capacity to utilize language in a creative, "living" way.[8]

We find this most clearly evident in Cincinnatus's last verbal inscription, the celebrated moment when he writes the word "death" and then crosses it out (IB 206; PK 201). Although he at first continues to hunt for a more precise word to express his perception, he ultimately leaves the cancelled word as it is, and he further realizes that "everything had in fact been written already" (IB 209; PK 204). The significance of this moment is well understood: the graphic sign which Cincinnatus has left on a blank sheet of paper indicates that for him, death will be annulled. Yet the specific shape of this sign — a word with a line through it — also brings to mind Derrida's notion of writing "*sous rature*" ("under erasure"). As Spivak characterizes it, "Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible" (xiv). 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 being.

Cincinnatus's reluctant recognition that death may represent the only exit from the world which imprisons him may have parallels in Derrida's writing. Derrida perceives that death serves as a kind of liberation for one trapped within the [monolithic] realm of representation. As McGowan writes: "We are prisoners of an order (of thought, of representation) that we can escape only through death, and Derrida calls upon us to affirm that death as a means toward unsettling the order" (119). Of course, as he observes, such a "liberation" is highly "problematic" (119), since it "aims for a freedom that is achieved in the very moment that there is no self to enjoy that freedom" (118).

What Derrida finds as an impossible paradox in *life*, however, can perhaps be achieved in *fiction*, as Nabokov indicates in the concluding scenes of his novel. In a physical re-enactment of the gesture through which Cincinnatus both writes the word "death" and then crosses it out, Cincinnatus undergoes an experience that represents both a beheading and a salvation.[9] In the end, we are left with an image of Cinncinnatus both "cancelled" and very much alive. From the perspective of the predictable and uniform creatures surrounding him, such an entity is truly "different."

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[8] Such a distinction may parallel Derrida's observation that the Western tradition has distinguished between writing in the literal sense — the dead letter", "the carrier of death" — and writing in the metaphoric sense, seen as "natural," "divine," and "living" (see *Of Grammatology* 17). Cincinnatus's writing lives, while that of his jailers is "dead."

[9] For Cincinnatus, the beheading scene contains the very kind of contradictory meanings that Derrida found in Plato's use of the Greek word *pharmakon* (and, by extension, in the concept of "writing" itself): it is both "poison" and "cure" (see Norris, *Derrida* 37). In this scene, it appears that Cincinnatus is both beheaded and *not* beheaded. As Leona Toker has argued, Nabokov's depiction of this scene provides "doubly directed clues: that is, clues that can be read in mutually excluding ways" (*Nabokov* 137).

Cincinnatus's recognition of his own unique nature leads to the dissolution of the world around him. Writing in the journal entry which ends with the word "death" crossed out, Cincinnatus speaks of "a fatal flaw": "I have discovered it. I have discovered the little crack in life, where it broke off […]" (IB 205; PK 200). He has realized that the world around him is an illusion, and his subsequent perceptions of this world enlarge the crack he has now discovered. As he proceeds toward the site where his execution is to take place, this figure of utter alterity dismantles his surroundings with the critical gaze of a deconstructionist: the conventional framework begins to peel and crumble before his very eyes. Finally, at the moment of his execution which is also not an execution, Cincinnatus rises up and beholds a world in utter collapse, a world which he destroys by the very fact of his refusal to play by its rules. Through the violence of his deconstructive rebellion, Cincinnatus now "reappears." But to what end?

In the last sentence of the novel, we find Cincinnatus making his way "in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him" (IB 223; PK 218). Most readers would conclude that Cincinnatus is at last drawing near to that "other world" about which he had written in Chapter Eight. Yet what is especially interesting about this passage in light of Derrida's writings is the narrator's reference to "voices." This is the only feature of those "beings" which he discloses to us. Does this suggest a new embrace of phonocentricism? Does oral speech turn out in the end to be the primary marker of authentic "presence" after all?[10] We simply cannot tell. Nabokov's novel is ultimately open-ended. His final sentence spirals on toward new discourses whose content can only be dreamed of.[11]

On the other hand, Cincinnatus's very movement toward another realm points to one of the most fundamental differences between Nabokov and Derrida. Whereas the latter continually reminds us of the difficulty (if not the impossibility) of moving outside of the prevailing systems of language and thought, Nabokov the fiction writer allows himself to imagine just such an escape. Here he conjures up an image of a passage to a realm of authentic presence, whatever that might be.[12]

We cannot doubt that Derrida's writings on the tradition of Western philosophy have a scope and an aim that are quite different from Nabokov's achievements in *Invitation to a Beheading*. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe that Nabokov's vision of tyranny and dissidence touches upon some of the same concerns that the poststructuralist theorist addresses. The two writers shared an interest in the way totalizing systems of thought work to suppress signs of otherness, and in the way that language itself can be seen to disrupt or subvert the very order which seeks to tame it. One could perhaps find further affinities in some of Nabokov's later works, such as in the word games and the play of signifiers found, for example, in the Index to *Pale Fire*, but that would lie beyond the scope of the present inquiry. The aim of this essay is more modest: it merely seeks to show how a reading of Derrida's work may provide a new angle of perspective with which to view Nabokov's imaginative triumph in *Invitation to a Beheading*.

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[10] Derrida writes of phonocentrism in *Of Grammatology* as follows: "the heritage of that logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning" (11-12).

[11] As Nabokov himself declared in a well-known declaration that could perhaps have been uttered by Cincinnatus: "I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more."

[12] Standing outside the novel, of course, is the creator Nabokov, who gives form and completion to Cincinnatus and the world in which he lives.

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