

Title: A Cup of Tepid Chocolate: Nabokov's Response to Tarasov-Rodionov

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The theme of art as the fullest expression of human consciousness occurs throughout Nabokov's oeuvre. In *Invitation to a Beheading*, true art is also a response to the falsity and artifice, as well as the lack of individuality, that is present in the world that Cincinnatus inhabits. In writing about an imaginary totalitarian state, Nabokov may well have looked not merely to the actual totalitarian world of the USSR, but also to the literature produced there. Indeed, Nabokov's novel may be seen not as an ideological statement but rather as, at least on one level, a response to and commentary upon Soviet literature. One work of fiction in particular, Aleksandr Tarasov-Rodionov's novel *Chocolate*, seems to have been encoded into the text of *Invitation to a Beheading*, in a series of allusions, parodic references, and metaliterary devices.

The connections between the novels are evident immediately on the level of plot: both novels center on the imprisonment and execution of the main character, and in both cases the issue of psychological submission to the execution is a primary concern. Furthermore, Nabokov inserts specific details into his text that recall *Chocolate*. For instance, the name of Cincinnatus' jailer (Rodion) calls to mind the Soviet author's last name. In several scenes, this character is responsible for providing the prisoner with chocolate. Other resonances include parallel scenes, parodic inversions of characters, and shared imagery. Instead of merely alluding to *Chocolate*, Nabokov brilliantly parodies and challenges its literary conventions and assumptions.

In addition to these connections, the themes of art and artifice in *Invitation to a Beheading* may be viewed as responses to *Chocolate* and other works of Soviet fiction. The falseness and theatricality of Cincinnatus' world, the interchangeability of the three figures of prison director, lawyer, and jailer, the hackneyed language that most of the characters habitually speak, are in one sense commentary upon the formulaic language and undifferentiated characters in Soviet fiction. Moreover, the execution of Zudin (the protagonist of *Chocolate*) is political theater of the deadliest variety; he is not guilty but the investigating commission determines that he must be executed because the people are not sophisticated enough to understand the truth. Zudin accepts his fate and even celebrates the fact that his life and death will become part of the larger revolutionary narrative, unconcerned that this story is based on deception. Cincinnatus, on the other hand, who ultimately rejects the terms of his execution, represents both true artist and true art.