

Dictionary of Literary Utopias

Edited by
Vita Fortunati and Raymond Trousson



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Raskol'nikov's nightmares in the epilogue of the novel. The protagonist is now prisoner in Siberia and suffers for a terrible fever who makes him dream obsessively of an epidemic coming from Asia to which only few people will survive. But in fact such epidemic represents a spiritual illness* that deeply affects human psyche in a sort of terrific apocalypse. Man has lost his prime paradise and together with it he has lost his innocence and universal harmony. But Dostoevsky will find a special ending for his character, an ending that is a prelude to a new liberty in a world where other people who are very different from humans do live. In such place Raskol'nikov will be able to start a new life. In his new world he will be with Sonya Marmeladova (the name means intelligence through grace humility and suffering), the woman who will show the protagonist a new horizon of faith.

In the sixties, after his Siberian imprisonment, he started describing a new perspective of utopia that soon became the centre of a new *idea* for moral and metaphysical thinking and for new artistic and philosophical elaborations.

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[H. Pessina Longo]

PRIGLASHENIE NA KAZN' [INVITATION TO A BEHEADING]

Vladimir V. Nabokov (1899-1977, RUS)

Dates: Published in *Sovremennye zapiski* n. 58-60 in 1935-36, with the pseudonym of Sirin. The novel was then republished by Dom Knigi in Paris, 1938 and by Petropolis in Berlin, 1938.

Summary: Cincinnatus, a tiny innocent poet and alter ego of the author — very unlike the real Roman hero — is the protagonist of this meta-novel. His resistance against the collective spirit is considered to be a crime, therefore he is condemned to death. In accordance with the Laws*, a soft ambiguous whisper will tell Cincinnatus the verdict. The prisoner then leaves his jail to visit the city*, but when he opens the door of his house he finds himself in prison again. A dubious complicity links Cincinnatus to M'sieur Pierre, another

prisoner who is actually Cincinnatus' executioner, who forces Cincinnatus to establish a disgusting relationship with him. The executioner first compromises Cincinnatus' identity, then destroys it to obtain an ambiguous and negative communion with him, and finally brings Cincinnatus to be witness and party to his own death. The faithless wife of Cincinnatus goes to visit him with the whole family and tries to convince him to confess and be saved, but Cincinnatus refuses. At this point another female character is presented. Emma, the daughter of the director of the prison, wants to become the prisoner's wife because she promised to save him. During the night Cincinnatus can hear someone digging a tunnel, but when the wall of his prison finally breaks down it is M'sieur Pierre who appears. Cincinnatus is taken through the tunnel to the jail of his executioner. Here he can see the shining axe with which he will be beheaded. According to the tradition, on the eve of the execution the executioner brings his condemned to greet the City authorities. In the very last moment of his life, when the axe is ready for the execution, Cincinnatus asks himself: "Why am I here?" His destiny is written but the date of his execution has always been kept secret so that the condemned will never be able to fulfil his mandate, that is to express in his writings how one feels "the very first day [...] in a foreign land."

Analysis: V.V. Nabokov, writer, poet, university professor and translator, is one of the most interesting and complex representatives of the Russian emigration of the Thirties. In *Priglasenie na kazn'* the action is transposed into a surreal, fantastic situation showing the unreal and inhuman characteristics of Socialist utopias in the 20th century. Nabokov is here near to some Soviet works of the twenties that stressed how slavery and misery were often consequences of a claim for justice and wealth (see *Chevengur** by Andrey Platonov). Nabokov always refused to admit that his work was inspired by his personal experience. But we can suppose that the first words of the Hitlerian melodrama — performed in Berlin as soon as Nabokov's novel was published — do refer to that what made his youth and his Russia gloomy. Nabokov's anti-utopian* novel appears to be a political allegory in which his memories of the Soviet regime and of Hitlerian Nazism are reflected and deformed as if in a mirror.

Nabokov's utopia* is based on the negation of itself. In this novel the utopian universe is observed by an internal visitor. Totalitarianism is seen as the cause of barbarism through mass-identity and of the death of all values. Cincinnatus is condemned to death* because he preserves a personal secret, that is, his personal crime. Complete transparency is a necessary condition to live in the Unreal city*. This is the reign of doubles.

Here the lawyer is identical to the Public Prosecutor: "... according to the Law they had to be twins but this was not always possible, therefore they would disguise themselves." According to custom the condemned and his executioner have to become friends, therefore M'sieur Pierre pretends to be a fellow-prisoner in order to accomplish his duty. The director of the prison is also its doctor; the lawyer is the executioner's assistant and characters continuously shift from one role to another. This is an apparently grotesque world where objects and people distort themselves. Clownish faces laugh with a terrible grin. Sex too is described in a very absurd way. During her last visit to her husband Marfin'ka offers herself to him as if throwing a coin to a beggar. Her only preoccupation is to do it as quickly as possible and in doing so she thinks she is fulfilling her husband's last wish. For M'sieur Pierre – who is impotent – sexual pleasure and the pleasure of evacuation are the same thing. Even the sign which can be read during the execution scene sounds absurd "Tickets for the circus performance are valid." At the end of the drama the scene will disappear together with the scaffold while all witnesses become transparent and Cincinnatus slowly moves to reach "beings similar to him," that is to say all those people deprived of a happy childhood. The question that remains is whether Cincinnatus is dead or alive. What seems probable is that even if Cincinnatus is among the dead he still is on this earth. Cincinnatus is in a dead-vital dimension similar to the condition of the chrysalis that is to turn into a butterfly.

This novel reminds us of *We** by Zamyatin, 1984* by Orwell and *The Process* by Kafka, above all where the phantoms announce a terrifying reality. It is a strange fairy tale* that proves to be as a tragic presentiment.

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[N. Malinin]

PROGRESS → HISTORY

PROGRESS → SCIENCE

PROPHECY → HISTORY

PROUD MAN

Katharine Burdekin (1896-1963, GB)

Dates: It was published in London in 1934 and reprinted in New York in 1993.

Summary: The novel is narrated from the perspective of a "Genuine Person," who travels thousands of years back in time from a future society whose citizens are androgynous, peaceful, self-fertilising, and vegetarian. Their society has neither a national government nor social divisions of gender and class. Taking on first female, then male form, the Person visits the troubled reality of England in the 1930s. The novel is divided into four parts: the first reports the Person's dream experience and journey to the past; the second recalls the encounter with Andrew, a priest; the third the meeting with Leonora, a woman writer; and the fourth the stay with Gilbert, a child-murderer, and the final awakening from the dream*. In the second part the Person living in the priest's house learns to read and write English. Their discussions focus on religion and women's and men's position in society, and Andrew shows conventional views. The latter topic is also the subject of the dialogues between the Person and the woman writer. They discuss love*, motherhood, art*, and, above all, the position of women* writers at the time. The Person's final experience with a psychotic man represents a psychoanalytic journey through the man's mind.

Analysis: *Proud Man* is "speculative fiction" that explores Burdekin's preferred themes: the construction of gender* roles, violence, religion*, and nationalism. Through the conventions of time travel* and the dialogue between traveller* and guides, Burdekin offers an incisive, feminist critique of the politics of privilege, gender, violence, and militarism in the West. Contemporary society and culture is perceived by the Person that in the novel represents the stranger's point of view. Besides the conventional estrangement produced by this device, the narrator reinforces this effect because of its features: brown-skin, telepathy, androgyny*, self-fertilisation, and above all unselfishness. In the encounters the narrator has with the three guides, it recounts the situation from a detached and neutral position, without showing any ethical judgement.

The distance of the traveller's perspective and its emphasis on language lead to a redefinition of key concepts of Western thought. This redefinition estranges the reader from familiar notions such as humanity, civilisation, privilege, paganism. For example, the traveller redefines *patriotism* as "national general hostility," *soldier* as "killing male," and *war** as "large organised killing," while the word civilisation is used ironically to depict human's pretentiousness. Accord-