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**Vulgarity as Springboard for High Art—A Comparative Study of Vladimir Nabokov and Qian Zhongshu's Notions of Vulgarity**

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**Derong CAO,**

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**Abstract:** In his article, "Vulgarity as Springboard for High Art," Derong CAO compares and contrasts Nabokov and Qian's notions of vulgarity. The two authors have similar understandings of vulgarity. Both identify pretense/ affectation and triteness/ mediocrity as its fundamental characteristics. Moreover, both believe that the quintessential feature of vulgarity lies in its downplay of individual consciousness. The two authors' understandings of vulgarity also differ in major ways. Qian's *Fortress Besieged*, though showing deep social and moral concerns, did not seem to suspect a direct causal link between vulgarity and cruelty. By contrast, Nabokov believes that vulgarity can lead to severe moral or political consequences. Despite the above difference, both acknowledge the great potential of vulgarity to be transformed into aesthetically pleasing artworks. This essay explores the techniques Nabokov and Qian adopted—among them the most important are defamiliarization and irony—to turn vulgarity into a reservoir of materials for serious literature.

## Derong CAO

### "Vulgarity as Springboard for High Art—A Comparative Study of Vladimir Nabokov and Qian Zhongshu's Notions of Vulgarity"

The affinity between Vladimir Nabokov and Qian Zhongshu is striking. They were contemporaries. Both were inspired fiction writers of genius. They were also poets, literary scholars, university professors, translators and polyglots. Their erudition often made them seem standoffish or even supercilious. Both were born into families with long pedigree.<sup>1</sup> Both witnessed catastrophic world wars and suffered many hardships as war refugees. Interestingly, both were blessed with a happy marriage, with model wives who provided them substantial assistance in their literary careers.

In this essay, I aim to place Nabokov and Qian in a position of mutual elucidation, especially their exploitation of vulgarity's aesthetic potential in their work. Nabokov and Qian's notions of vulgarity will be compared and contrasted. The value of the comparison is twofold: by discovering their resemblances, I hope to clear up Nabokov's cloudy notion of *poshlost*<sup>2</sup> with the aid of Qian's comparatively lucid definition of vulgarity. To reveal their differences is perhaps even more fruitful in that it enables us to arrive at a more accurate, detailed and in-depth understanding of both, a gain not otherwise possible except through comparison. For instance, though both authors acknowledge the potential of vulgarity to be transformed into aesthetically pleasing artworks, they bring about the transformation in vastly different ways.

Nabokov and Qian's keen interest in vulgarity is not accidental. Personally, and also historically, the grievance of losing his beloved father in an assassination, the woe of having to flee his home country due to the Bolshevik Revolution, his compatriots' suffering under the totalitarian regime of Soviet Union ruled by Joseph Stalin and the appalling atrocities committed by Nazi Germany, all prompted Nabokov to explore the roots of human misery, one of which he firmly believes is vulgarity. Aesthetically, Nabokov believes that the worth of a literary work lies in presenting the author's unique and individualized version of reality. Vulgar authors, chiefly characterized by their disuse of individual consciousness and inattentiveness to details, inevitably fail to perceive the world in a refreshing manner but instead fall prey to triteness and banality in their literary creation.<sup>3</sup> By fustigating vulgar authors, Nabokov is in fact writing his aesthetic manifesto by negation.

Similarly, a number of personal, historical and literary factors combined to arouse Qian's lasting interest in vulgarity. Personally, just like Nabokov, Qian is a staunch individualist. Summarizing "a seasoned old hand[']s book written in 1920s] ... on how to succeed on the literary scene," Leo Lee proposes the following qualities of prewar Chinese writers: "4. *Social intercourse*. He should ... visit literary celebrities, form societies, engage in factional fighting; ... 7. *Advertising*. He should print calling cards with full titles, ... make announcements in newspapers, attend meetings and give long speeches" (39-40). Hutters draws our attention to "the large number of literary coteries and factions [during this period which] was a manifestation of this phenomenon on a collective level" (Huters, *Qian Zhongshu* 1). Literary historians have reached a consensus as to the great impact of literary clubs and associations in the 1920s and '30s (Qian Liqun 16-19 & 163-74; Cheng 45-49 & 162-67). Qian, by contrast, showed no interest in participating in this scene and "sought as much as possible to avoid it and remain a private" (Huters, *Qian Zhongshu* 1). According to Yang Jiang, during their one-year stay (1937) stay in Paris, Qian "made substantial efforts to read 下功夫扎扎实实地读书" (91); "Neither of us was much into socializing, and we didn't have time for that either 我們兩個不合群, 也沒余多餘的閒工夫" (92). Interested readers would be familiar with Qian's "hen-egg" metaphor.<sup>4</sup> As will be explained later,

<sup>1</sup> Nabokov was born into an old aristocratic family in St. Petersburg, Russia, which traced its roots back to "a fourteenth-century Tatar prince, Nabok Murza" (Boyd, *Nabokov* 16). The Qian clan can trace its ancestry back to the tenth century when their ancestor 錢鏐 Qian Liu, a warlord of the late Tang Dynasty, founded the Wuyue kingdom. Qian's father and two paternal uncles are distinguished scholars of traditional Chinese philology. Besides celebrated humanities scholars, the Qian clan also boasts of several scientists of international fame.

<sup>2</sup> A simplistic English equivalent for the much more complicated Russian concept of *poshlost* is vulgarity. The Russian word will be discussed in greater detail later in this article.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the aesthetic, ethical and metaphysical significance of details for Nabokov, see Cao 60-112.

<sup>4</sup> For more on Qian's self-marginalization, see Rea, "Introduction to *Humans, Beasts, and Ghosts*" 7-8; Lu, "對錢鐘書學術境界的一種理解(Dui Qian Zhongshu xueshu jingjie de yizhong lijie)"; Zhang, "Qian Zhongshu and World Literature" 134; and almost any of Qian's biographies. In "Introduction to *China's Literary Cosmopolitans*," Rea

both Nabokov and Qian regard the eagerness to join a clique as a distinctive feature of vulgarity in that it evinces a strong inclination to give up individual consciousness and join the "communal mind."<sup>5</sup> The recluse quality in Qian may have been the first reason that led him to explore the nature of vulgarity. Historically, the clash between oriental and occidental civilizations peaked in the first half of the twentieth century during which Qian gradually matured as a writer and scholar. The awkwardness of the Chinese nationals in coping with the drastic changes in the tumultuous transitional period readily attracted Qian's attention. More importantly, the deep suffering of the Chinese people during the Japanese invasion propelled Qian to investigate its cause. As we can infer from both his creative and scholarly works, Qian believes that Chinese people's own moral weaknesses—among which vulgarity is a most glaring one—at least partly account for the miseries in their lives. And he undertook to tackle these weaknesses in human nature in his creative writing, beginning with an anatomy of Chinese academia. Decades of academic life allows Qian to observe the Chinese intellectuals closely and conduct in *Fortress Besieged* a Swiftian dissection of the vulgarity-infested intelligentsia, which is nothing short of the wartime China in miniature. Aesthetically, like Nabokov, Qian is a master stylist, particularly renowned for his innovative use of metaphors and similes. Qian contends that metaphors and similes are the distinguishing characteristic of literary language; and the value of metaphors and similes lies in their freshness and novelty: "不同處愈多愈大，則相同處愈有烘托；分得愈遠，則合得愈出人意料，比喻就愈新穎" (Qian, *Qizhui ji* 44; "the more and greater these aspects of dissimilarity, the more sharply set off are those aspects of similarity; the greater the difference between two things, the more unexpected is their conjoining, and the more novel the resulting metaphor," Campbell 96). Qian therefore would denounce in his literary criticism vulgarity which means making no individual innovative efforts and following the clichéd instead. Moreover, Qian also sees the potential inherent in vulgarity to serve as raw materials for literature.

In this essay, I'll discuss Nabokov's three novels—*Invitation to a Beheading* (1935), *Bend Sinister* (1947) and *Lolita* (1955), and Qian's *Fortress Besieged* (1947) and several pieces of prose writing. *Invitation* and *Bend Sinister* are widely acknowledged as Nabokov's most politically and ethically concerned novels. They well serve as cases for exploring Nabokov's understanding of the ethical and political consequences of vulgarity. In *Lolita*, Nabokov not only presents us a rich assortment of vulgarity but also completes its artistic transformation through parody and defamiliarization. Qian's *Fortress Besieged* is his only completed full-length novel, which is also nothing short of an encyclopedia of vulgarity. In this essay, Qian's essays will also be investigated to supplement the discussion of his notion of vulgarity.

### What is Vulgarity?—Attempts at a Definition

In "論俗氣" ("On Vulgarity") (1933), Qian carefully examines previous formulations of vulgarity and proposes his own definition of the term. He identifies two distinctive features of vulgarity: "When one thinks something vulgar, that entity must contain an element that is excessive, either in form or content. The element in itself may be positive and desirable, yet when there is too much of it (too much of a good thing), the entity as a whole will be judged as vulgar. Vulgarity, therefore, is not a negative default but a positive fault" (Translation mine. "因此，我們暫時的結論是：當一個人認一樁東西為俗的時候，這一個東西裏一定有這個人認為太過火的成分，不論在形式上或內容上。這個成分的本身也許是好的，不過，假使這個人認為過多了 (too much of a good thing)，包含這個成分的整個東西就要被判為俗氣。所以，俗氣不是負面的缺陷 (default)，是正面的過失 (fault)。" Qian, "論俗氣")

To see excessiveness as the defining characteristic of vulgarity, Qian notes, would tally with the theorization of many previous critics. Qian draws our attention to Huxley and Reynolds in "On Vulgarity." In "Vulgarity in Literature" (1930), Aldous Huxley expresses his aversion to Edgar Poe's poetry in that he finds "it hard to forgive ... the wearing of a diamond ring on every finger. ... It is when Poe tries to make it too poetical that his poetry takes on its peculiar tinge of badness" (161). In

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proposes the interesting idea of "virtual sociability: converse between writers conducted through the medium of literary texts" (3). For a negative assessment of Qian's hermit quality, see Liu, "絕食藝人(Jueshi yiren)" 174-77. Egan's "*Guanzhui bian*, Western Citations, and the Cultural Revolution" can be read as a response to accusations represented by Liu's essay.

<sup>5</sup> Nabokov's aversion to "teamwork"—reading groups, literary coteries and co-authorship, for instance—is well documented. See Nabokov, "Good Readers and Good Writers"; *Strong Opinions* 64-65; *Dear Bunny* 8-9; *Bend Sinister* 11.

*Discourses* (1778), Sir Joshua Reynolds discusses the respective merits of the Roman and Venetian schools of painting. The Roman school, which aims to "give a general air of grandeur at first view" and avoids "all trifling or artful play of little lights or an attention to a variety of tints" will never be considered vulgar (105). By contrast, the Venetian school, which meticulously attends to elegance, ornament and "splendor of style," is much more liable to vulgarity (109). Besides excessiveness, Qian finds another distinguishing feature of vulgarity—the capacity to delight the majority: "... things are described as vulgar when they can please the majority—in the negative sense of the word—in terms of not only quantity but also quality..." (Translation mine. "俗的東西，就是可以感動「大多數人」的東西——此地所謂「大多數人」帶着一種譴責的意味，不僅指數量說，並且指品質說..." Qian, "論俗氣")

The argument is also backed up by previous literati. Qian cites Thomas Carlyle ("Don't worship the majority") and Henrik Ibsen ("A Majority is always wrong") as evidence. By the end of "On Vulgarity," Qian succinctly summarizes his main argument: "when someone criticizes something as vulgar, the criticism may connote: first, s/he feels that the quantity of an element of the entity is more than appropriate; second, the entity can please a larger number of people than those in the class to which s/he belongs." ("假使一個人批評一樁東西為「俗」。這個批評包含兩個意義：(一)他認為這樁東西組織中某成分的量超過他心目中以為適當的量。(二)他認為這樁東西能感動的人數超過他自以為隸屬着的階級的人數。" Qian, "論俗氣")

Another distinctive feature of vulgarity Qian detects is pretense or, more specifically, pretentiousness. In "On Vulgarity," Qian quotes Hazlitt's "On Vulgarity and Affectation" (1821): "The true vulgar are the *servum pecus imitatorum*—the herd of pretenders to what they do not feel and to what is not natural to them, whether in high or low life" (Qian, "論俗氣"). Besides, Qian goes a step further. We see vulgarity in affectation, he argues, because affectation is an exterior expression of a more essential quality of vulgarity—excessiveness—as he has proposed: "A rough fellow/ boor who puts on an air of refinement to cover up his crudeness will never admit to be posing; people find him vulgar, feel that he is posing, and discern an inner contradiction between his affected refinement and coarse nature, all because his refinement is excessive.... People who can speak a foreign language perfectly are often more idiomatic than native speakers; yet it is precisely the excessive idiomaticness that makes them sound non-native to a native ear." (Translation mine. "粗人裝細膩就為要遮蓋他的粗，絕不肯承認他的細膩是裝出來的。我們所以覺得他俗，覺得他「裝」，覺得他裝出來的細膩跟他本性的粗魯相矛盾 (inner contradiction)，還是因為他細膩得太過火了...好比說外國話極好的人，往往比說那國話的土人更成語化 (idiomatic)，這一點過度的成語化反而證明他的非本國籍。" Qian, "論俗氣")

To sum up, Qian defines vulgarity as (a) excessiveness (in terms of the quantity of a constituent part of an entity); or (b) the capacity to please the majority; or (c) pretense or pretentiousness.

Qian wrote "On Vulgarity" in the 1930s when he was still a budding writer. By the time he worked on "Cat" (1946) and *Fortress Besieged* (1947) in the '40s, his notion of vulgarity remained largely the same. Both works offer lifelike portraits of vulgarians. In "Cat," Qian presents a coterie of vulgar intellectuals that are centered around the arch vulgarian couple—Aimo and her husband Jianhou. Frequently dwarfed by his socialite wife who dominates almost all their social gatherings, Jianhou determines to lift himself up a peg or two by accomplishing something truly remarkable. After careful consideration, he chooses to publish a book. The decision to write a book itself is ostensibly vulgar as it merely serves to convince the public about his well-educatedness. In other words, Jianhou who "had few brains, no ideas, and no ideals" undertakes to write a book only to conform to a widely held notion about good education. Writing a book is surely too demanding for Jianhou who has his graduation thesis written by a ghost writer. Therefore, Jianhou hires a secretary, who he suspects is having an affair with his wife. Surprisingly, Jianhou retaliates by having his own affair with a young female student. Qian here seems to be having a telepathic conversation with Nabokov who comments that Emma's way to break from convention (adultery) is downright conventional.<sup>6</sup> In "Cat," Qian also portrays a galaxy of pretentious vulgarians. Indispensable to the couple's family salon is Fu Juqing, a critic who believes his lofty views should not be read on a table with bowed head but instead be pasted on the ceiling and "read as one might appreciate Michelangelo's frescoes in Roman's Sistine Chapel" (Qian, "Cat" 126). During his college years, Fu comes across Pope's *The Dunciad*, in which he

<sup>6</sup> I'm indebted to Prof. Christopher Rea for pointing out the striking similarity between Qian and Nabokov in their understanding of adultery as vulgar.

reads lines about the discerning "critic Eye." Exhilarated, he believes that the lines serve well as his self-portrayal and "saw to it that everything he did and said was consistent with the appearance of his eyes" (125). The phrase "critic eye" from Pope appears in English in the original Chinese text, and Qian did his reader a favor by rendering it into Chinese pīyǎn 批眼, clearly a pun on piyǎn 屁眼 (asshole), thus cutting Fu down to size. Another regular of the couple's salon is Zhao Yushan, director of a certain academic institute. The institute hires many college graduates to "edit esoteric and profound research papers, the most famous of which was Zhao Yushan's 'A Statistical Study of Misprints in Chinese Publications since the Invention of Printing'" ("Cat" 122). The inanity of Zhao's research project is self-evident yet he constantly brags that "the import of finding one misprint is no less than that of Columbus's discovery of the New World" (122). Zhao is reminiscent of Pnin's colleagues at Waindell college. In *Pnin* (1957), Nabokov presents a bunch of academics who concoct frivolous research projects only to swindle funds. Among them the most ridiculous is Dr. Rudolph Aura, a psychiatrist, who applies "to ten thousand elementary school pupils the so-called Fingerbowl Test, in which the child is asked to dip his index finger in cups of colored fluids whereupon the proportion between length of digit and wetted part is measured and plotted in all kinds of fascinating graphs" (Nabokov, *Pnin* 103).

In "On Laughter" (1939), Qian takes Lin Yutang and his fellow humor advocates to task. During the 1930s, Lin actively promoted humor, not least in his magazine *The Analects Fortnightly* 論語半月刊. A persistent critic of Lin, Qian places "humor literature" on a par with "the idiot's dull-witted laugh, [and] the blind man's naughty and mischievous laugh" (Qian, *Humans* 48). Qian believes that smile, as a sign of humor, is "the quickest and most fluid of expressions" (48). Just as lightning cannot be immobilized and then transform into the eternal sun and moon, humor cannot be turned into a "fixed, collective expression" (48). Any attempt to find a recipe for humor is doomed to failure as it drains the vitality of humor: "Such a mechanical smile is akin only to the bared teeth of a skull—not nearly as agile as in a living person" (48). Moreover, Qian believes that when humor is avidly advocated as a group activity, it inevitably bears a trace of vulgarity. Qian apparently resists fossilizing true humor into a stale convention, a collective vulgar vaudeville.

Based on Bergson's theory that comic effect arises when a living person acts with mechanical rigidity, Sohigian analyzes several vulgarians in Qian's creative writing. Putting Bergson's *Le rire* (1900) in the context of his oeuvre, Sohigian links Bergson's theory of laughter with his conception of time as duration. Bergson distinguishes between two conceptions of time: true time (*durée*) and mechanical time. True time, also known as lived time, is qualitative and indivisible. By contrast, mechanical time, also called clock time, refers to the artificial cutting of time into even and homogeneous chunks. It is a "bastard concept," an attempt to congeal the flowing time for scientific convenience. Similarly, a living being, by accepting long-established social norms and conventions, constructs a phantom self via which s/he thinks and acts. It is the social persona a living being adopts, consciously or unconsciously. It is the process of "something flexible becoming stiff and awkward" (Qian, *Humans* 48). Laughter arises when something mechanical encrusted on the living ("*le mécanique plaque sur le vivant*") and it can "convert such mechanized life back to a living free self" (Sohigian, 24). According to Sohigian, Fang Hung-chien is vulgar because, short of materials for his classes, he becomes a "'living' person straining to be in sync with the lecture hall clock (the machine)" (27). Moreover, Fang loses many chances for redemption, such as the moments when the family heirloom clock offers the couple a moment of mutual laughter and when moments of insight (Fang's true self underneath) surface to take over sovereignty from his socially constructed self. Fang's acquaintances and colleagues also willingly allowed social conventions and expectation to encrust on them. Ch'u Shen-ming, for instance, boasts of his intimacy with Bertrand Russell, addressing the latter by his diminutive "Bertie." Russell respected him so much as to "ask [his] help in answering several questions" (Qian, *Fortress Besieged* 99). Readers immediately find out that the questions Ch'u helped Russell with are trivia such as his time of arrival in England or the number of sugar cubes he'd like to have in his tea. He sends greeting letters to celebrated western philosophers and uses their courtesy replies as recognition of his academic achievements. *Fortress Besieged* is full of such pretentious people. Pretension indicates a slack in intellectual efforts and a willingness to follow. Pretentious people painstakingly conform to long-established notions of superiority—high social status, widespread fame, great wealth, profound erudition, to name a few. It is not through independent critical evaluation that they come to accept the above-mentioned qualities as signs of superiority. Both Qian and Nabokov view pretentious people as downright vulgarians because they display the fundamental feature of vulgarity—a willingness to give up individual consciousness.

We have no textual evidence to prove whether Qian's conception of vulgarity changed in his post-1950 years during which he produced few creative works. My speculation is that the political situation in China especially during the '60s and '70s urges Qian to notice the social and political factors that could give rise to vulgarity. Vulgarity as analyzed in Qian's pre-1950 creative writing is more or less an active choice out of one's free will. Or it could be a malaise the intellectually weak easily fall prey to. However, during the Cultural Revolution, people were *forced* to give up their individuality and instead adapt themselves to a totalitarian regime that advocated uniformity and conformity. Qian came to realize that vulgarity could be externally imposed as well as internally developed. Qian's broadened understanding of vulgarity, I believe, can be inferred from Yang Jiang's creative writing as critics have "noted similarities between their works, not least the humorous and satirical skepticism with which they appraise their fellow human beings—intellectuals in particular" (Rea, "Institutional Mindset" 158).<sup>7</sup> According to Larson, "Yang's model intellectual is based on a consistent set of moral and intellectual qualities: *independence, discernment, honor, aloofness, purity, and cosmopolitan taste*. The intellectual valued by the Communist Party, in contrast, is *self-sacrificing, passionate, engaged, and committed to a unified vision of the political and cultural goals of the nation*" (137; emphasis mine). Rea draws our attention to a dream Yang recalls in *We Three* (2003) about how nameless functionaries whisking away her beloved husband in a black car. The nightmare gives expression to Yang's deep-seated fear for the authoritarian state's invasion of privacy. In "Guanzhui Bian, Western Citations, and the Cultural Revolution," Ronald Egan argues that Qian deliberately composed *Limited Views* in classical Chinese to frustrate the Red Guards and other perpetrators of violence during the Cultural Revolution. Since the Red Guards were not classically educated, the classical Chinese became Qian's effective strategy for self-protection— "a screen he deliberately erected between himself and potential political enemies" (Egan, "Guanzhui bian" 121). The Red Guards, intellectually mass-produced by the authoritarian state, are the most vulgar because they unhesitatingly gave up their individual consciousness and submitted to a central communal mind. Qian was fully aware of the large-scale violence and destruction they were capable of. It is reasonable to surmise that Qian by that time had noticed this socially and politically generated type of vulgarity. To combat Cultural Revolution's all-inclusive rejection of China's intellectual and cultural past, Egan argues, Qian took care to place that past on a pedestal by expanding the range and scope of the Chinese material discussed in *Limited Views* to an unprecedented extent ("Guanzhui bian" 125). Moreover, countless comparisons between Chinese and Western materials were conducted to put "Chinese letters on an equal footing with the great literary and intellectual traditions outside of China" (126). Qian's conscious efforts to offset Cultural Revolution's negative intellectual impact testify to his awareness of the destructive power of the Cultural Revolution, which is a perfect embodiment of vulgarity. Egan also notes that in the short preface to *Limited Views* written in 1972, Qian compares the work to two types of seemingly worthless medical herbs. Through the comparison, Qian implies that the society was ill, waiting to be treated ("Guanzhui bian" 129). Considering the historical background against which the preface was written, it is easy to realize what the social ailment is. By the 1990s, Qian became more outspoken about the Communist repression of academic research and true intellectuals. In the Foreword Qian wrote in 1993 to Monika Motsch's essay, Qian pokes fun at Andrei Zhdanov, Soviet Communist Party leader and cultural idealist, whose doctrines "forced Soviet artists, writers, and intellectuals to follow the Communist teachings in their writings and creative works" (Egan, "Guanzhui bian" 131).

Nabokov is also famous for his ferocious attack on vulgarity. Comparatively speaking, Nabokov discussed vulgarity<sup>8</sup> in a more extended manner than Qian. Yet due to the complexity of the notion, Nabokov's references to it "are often veiled in synonymous abstractions and variations" (Farina 4). In *Nikolai Gogol* (1944), Nabokov strove to establish an adequate definition of the Russian word yet only ended up with a list of rough approximations—"cheap, sham, common, smutty, pink-and-blue, high falutin', in bad taste"—which barely capture the word's nuances (64). In an interview conducted by Herbert Gold, Nabokov further explains: "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 *poshlost* in contemporary writing, we must look for it in Freudian symbolism, moth-eaten mythologies, social comment, humanistic messages, political allegories, over concern with class and race, and the journalistic generalities we all know" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 101).

<sup>7</sup> For a comparison of Qian and Yang's prose writing, see Fan & Zhang.

<sup>8</sup> *Poshlost* is a central concept in Nabokov's criticism. A rough English approximation of the Russian term is vulgarity though the Russian term is much broader in range and depth.

In "Philistines and Philistinism" (1980), Nabokov defines a philistine as "a full-grown person whose interests are of a material and commonplace nature, and whose mentality is formed of the stock ideas and conventional ideals of his or her group and time" (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 309). "Vulgarian," Nabokov further explains, "is more or less synonymous with 'philistine'" (309). We may now try to distill some basic features of *poshlost* from Nabokov's comments: (a) pretense or affectation ("sham," "high falutin'," "bogus profundities," "over concern with class and race," etc.); (b) triteness and mediocrity; lack of originality, discernment and sound judgement ("common," "bad taste," "clichés," "imitations of imitations," "journalistic generalities," etc.); besides, to be a philistine also implies a willingness to blindly follow customs, routines, and empty rituals; and the inability to think critically and independently.<sup>9</sup> These traits in fact point to a more subtly concealed characteristic of vulgarity, i.e. vulgarity arises from the abandoning of what Nabokov views as the most precious property of a human being—consciousness. In an interview conducted by George Feifer who asked Nabokov "What surprises you in life," Nabokov replied: "the marvel of consciousness—that sudden window swinging open on a sunlit landscape amidst the night of non-being" (22). The "wrench of parting with consciousness is [so] unspeakably repulsive" to Nabokov that he stayed "a poor go-to-sleeper" all his life (Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* 108). Vulgarity precisely represents the tendency to give up one's individual consciousness and merge into the "communal mind" Nabokov so vehemently abhors (Nabokov, *Ada* 91).

From the above analysis, we see that Nabokov and Qian have surprisingly similar understanding of vulgarity. They identify the same characteristics of vulgarity, i.e. pretense/ affectation and triteness/ mediocrity.<sup>10</sup> According to Katie Kitamura, the numerous connotations of the word vulgarity can be organized into two primary senses—"one that is first and foremost aesthetic, and another that is more specifically class-inscribed" (6). To fully grasp the word, it is necessary to turn back to its root meaning, which is concerned with the people, or more specifically, the masses. Aesthetically speaking, Kitamura further argues, the key characteristic of the mass is "limited consciousness" or "the lack of developed consciousness" (7-8). By contrast, vulgarity also has a very specific class inscribed meaning closely related to the "aspirational middle classes," which is characterized by its "capacity to mimic and appropriate the appearance of class and exclusivity" (11). It is easy to see that the aesthetic and class-inscribed connotations of vulgarity correspond to the characteristics of triteness and pretense respectively as we've summarized. In fact, the class-inscribed connotation of vulgarity is in essence also a manifestation of limited consciousness, as I've explained earlier.

Vulgarity often goes hand in hand with pretense and affectation. *Poshlust*, a term nicely-devised by the Russians, may have grown out of "the cult of simplicity"—the very opposite of affectation—in old Russia, as Nabokov conjectures. "Poshlism is not only the obviously trashy but mainly the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive," Nabokov argues (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 313). Poshlism often presupposes a "veneer of civilization"—a mask put on to shield something unrepresentable behind. Homais in *Madame Bovary* (1856) perfectly epitomizes this type of vulgarity. In the pub scene which took Flaubert three months to write, a few major characters engage in a lively conversation, during which Homais make a rambling speech about climate and health: "The climate, however, is not, truth to tell, bad, and we even have a few men of ninety in our parish. The thermometer (I have made some observations) falls in winter to 4 degrees, and in the hottest season rises to 25 or 30 degrees Centigrade at the outside, which gives us 24 degrees Reaumur as the maximum, or otherwise 54 degrees Fahrenheit (English scale), not more...." (Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* 148).

Nabokov, with a discerning eye, would never let pass the little chink in Homais the philistine's armor: Homais forgot to add 32 when switching from the Centigrade scale to the Fahrenheit scale; his thermometer should read 86 Fahrenheit instead of 54. Homais is a typical vulgarian in that his speech is "a jumble of pseudoscience and journalese": "he tries to cram all his knowledge of physics and chemistry into one elephantine sentence," only to reveal how insufficient his scientific knowledge is.

The other type of vulgarity—characterized by triteness and mediocrity—is also perfectly embodied in *Madame Bovary*. Vulgarians of this kind not only entertain "a collection of stock ideas" but also frequently adopt "set phrases, clichés, banalities expressed in faded words" (Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature* 310). "[T]he complete universal product of triteness and mediocrity," they "indulge

<sup>9</sup> It is useful to make clear that vulgarity for Nabokov has nothing to do with obscenity in language or lewdness or indecency. One is vulgar not because he writes pornography but because he writes pornography *badly*, in an *unartistic* way.

<sup>10</sup> Qian contends that affectation/ pretense is in fact a form of excessiveness. The point will be further explained in later parts of this essay.



too much in the automatic process of exchanging platitudes" (310). Usually unable to think critically and independently, they can be easily influenced or manipulated. Emma Bovary the heroine is a specimen of such a type. In *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov draws our attention to Emma Bovary's reading in childhood: her childhood is steeped in shallow romanesque culture. According to Nabokov, Flaubert takes care to make the point that Emma is a bad reader:

She reads books emotionally, in a shallow juvenile manner, putting herself in this or that female character's place. ... In several passages he [Flaubert] lists all the romantic clichés dear to Emma's heart.... In the convent, the novels she read "were all love, lovers, paramours, persecuted ladies fainting in lonely pavilions... heart-aches, vows, sobs, tears and kisses, little skiffs by moonlight, nightingales in shady groves, 'gentlemen' brave as lions, gentle as lambs, virtuous as no one ever was .... She would have liked to live in some old manor-house, like those long-waisted chatelaines who, under the foils of ogives, pointed arches, spent their days leaning on the stone, chin in hand, watching the approach of a cavalier with white plume galloping on his black horse from the distant fields. (136-138)

Nabokov contends that the worst thing a reader can do is identify him- or herself with a character in a book. Nabokov suggests that readers should use "impersonal imagination" in reading literature, i.e. to establish an "artistic harmonious balance between the reader's mind and the author's mind"; to "remain a little aloof and take pleasure in this aloofness while at the same time ... passionately enjoy ... the inner weave of a given masterpiece" (*Lectures on Literature* 4). Apparently, Emma fails to do so. She allows her mind to be eroded by trashy clichés from cheesy romances. She ravenously takes in all the worn-out images of romantic love—paramours, fainting ladies, heart-aches, vows, sobs—and believe this is *the* way love should be. In other words, her mind and behavior are shaped by banal ideas popularized by mass culture. Nabokov ingeniously comments that even her violation of the conventional is conventional—"adultery being a most conventional way to rise above the conventional" (133).

Qian also presents us a perfect embodiment of this strain of vulgarity—Miss Chang, a minor character in *Fortress Besieged*. Fang Hung-chien, the protagonist, an eligible young man to whom Miss Chang's father would like to marry his daughter, is invited to dine at the Chang House. Miss Chang's father is the manager of the Golden Touch Bank, a name which compounds the vulgarity of the man and his profession. He is obsessed with showing off his English as well as his good education in the US. After the meal, Fang notices a little bookcase, in which he guesses are stored Miss Chang's reading materials. There are, among others, Shakespeare's Complete Works, the Bible, *Interior Decorating*, and *Teach Yourself Photography*. The narrator jocosely calls all these books "immortal classics" (Qian, *Fortress Besieged* 57). Even more amusing than the radical juxtaposition of the serious with the trivial is a small blue volume with gilt title—*How to Gain a Husband and Keep Him*, in which we find stale maxims: "You must be sweet and gentle to the man in order to leave a good impression deep in his heart. Girls, never forget always to have a bright smile on your face" (51). Also noteworthy is the inclusion of Lin Yutang's *My Country and My People* in Miss Chang's bookcase. Christopher Rea offers three reasons for Qian's distaste for Lin. First, Qian believes Lin's promotion of humor is vulgar in that humorist as a profession is "incompatible with the essential disinterestedness of humour" (Rea, "The Critic Eye 批眼"). Second, Qian "genuinely considered Lin to be a facile writer" who gained popularity by pandering "to popular tastes and prejudices." Third, Qian thinks little of Lin's approach to East-West cultural interaction. A celebrated cultural figure, Lin seldom aimed to "strike connections 打通."<sup>11</sup> He was no more than a "cross-cultural impresario" (Rea, "The Critic Eye 批眼"). Miss Chang, an avid reader of such books, inevitably falls victim to such banal truisms. Prolonged exposure to the stereotyped images of ideal womanhood fossilizes her mind. Embarrassed by Fang's finding out her magic code for husband-hunting, Miss Chang slanderously comments on Fang's manners after he leaves: "Does he look like someone who's ever been abroad! When he drank his soup, he dipped his bread in it! And when he ate the roast chicken, instead of using a fork and knife, he picked a leg up with his fingers! I saw it all with my own eyes. Huh! What kind of manners is that?"

<sup>11</sup> For more on Qian's efforts to "strike connections 打通," a key concept in Qian's scholarly works, see Zheng, "管錐編作者的自白," in which the author includes Qian's own explanation of his 打通 approach; Egan, "Introduction"; and Zhang, "Difference and Affinity," "Qian Zhongshu and World Literature," "Qian Zhongshu as Comparatist." Diao classifies Qian's efforts to strike connections into four categories: connections between creative writing practices and literary theory studies, between different disciplines, between the past and the present (temporal); and between East and West (spatial). Cai analyzes Qian's dialectics about striking connections: to strike connections only when it is possible; but never try to force far-fetched connections on ideas irrelevant in spirit (49-51).

If *Miss Prym*, our etiquette teacher, ever saw that, she'd certainly call him a *piggy-wiggy!*" (52; original emphasis).

Girls like Miss Chang, mass-produced from finishing schools<sup>12</sup>, are targeted here. Manners and formalities are the central concerns of her life. One difference between Miss Chang and Emma is noticeable. Qian's portrayal of Miss Chang is in a cheerful and humorous tone while Flaubert's treatment of Emma assumes a certain degree of seriousness. Miss Chang is a representative of the mindset of the upper-middle class and a mere target for ridicule; Emma, by contrast, arouses the author's compassion and ours as well. Yet both female characters are nurtured by long-established and widely-accepted beliefs.

### The Ethical and Political Consequences of Vulgarity

Qian's "On Vulgarity" is unfolded in a largely light-hearted tone. He didn't dwell too much on the possible ethical or political consequences of vulgarity. In *Fortress Besieged*, Qian presents a panoramic view of Chinese society during the Japanese invasion. He strives to get to the root of the immense suffering of the Chinese nation by carefully examining the psyche of individual Chinese nationals. As Qian wrote in the preface to *談藝錄* (Discourses on Literary Art) (1948), "The book is on the surface one of literary appreciation; yet deep down it is a record of hardships and worries" (translation mine. "談藝錄一卷，雖賞析之作，而實憂患之書也。" Qian, *談藝錄* 1). The statement is also true with *Fortress Besieged*. Qian anatomizes the numerous instances of vulgarity in the novel and seems to imply that the Chinese people's moral weaknesses—vulgarity in particular—may have been the root of their worries and hardships. Yet Qian did not state explicitly a direct causal link between vulgarity and cruelty.

For Nabokov, however, vulgarity can lead to significant ethical and political consequences. "To apply the deadly label of *poshlism* to something," Nabokov asserts, "is not only an aesthetic judgment but also a moral indictment" (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 313). When invited to comment on the aphoristic statement "All is Vanity," Nabokov offered the following seemingly irrelevant answer, which can be seen as an indirect response to those who criticized his works for lack of moral concerns: "In fact I believe that one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist: kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel—and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent and pride" (*Strong Opinions* 193).

Here "the vulgar" and "the cruel" are placed side by side, seeming to suggest a close connection between the two. In fact, Nabokov suggested on many occasions that vulgarity can lead to cruelty. In *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935), Cincinnatus is sentenced to death for the crime of "gnostic turpitude." While all the other citizens are transparent, Cincinnatus is opaque. The other citizens' transparency, a symbol for their lack of individuality, closely aligns them with the other members of the vulgarian family Nabokov created. As I explained earlier in this essay, vulgarians are naturally inclined to conform and yield: "He is the conformist, the man who conforms to his group" (Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature* 310). They probably will take seriously the ironic epigraph ("the majority is always right") of Flaubert's satiric *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* (1913). At Cincinnatus's trial, both the defense council and the prosecutor wear makeup and look "very much alike" because law dictates that they are "uterine brothers." When uniformity is not naturally available, makeup is used. Aaron Botwick points out that the world Cincinnatus lives in is one "where even the different are the same, and when they are not, special effects are employed in order for them to *appear so*" (68). The herd mentality, Nietzsche believes, is the danger of dangers in that it reduces all individuals, even those with the potential to rise above the average mass, into "a smaller, almost ridiculous type, a herd animal, something eager to please, sickly, and mediocre" (*Beyond Good and Evil* 57). Cincinnatus's compatriots are not only submissive themselves; they demand that everybody else do exactly the same. Rodrig the prison director thinks himself generous for providing Cincinnatus decent food and waits impatiently in expectation of "any expression of thy gratitude, preferably ... in written form" (Nabokov, *Invitation* 17). In other words, he is desperately trying to engage Cincinnatus in an almost ritualistic exchange of sham amiability. Moreover, in such a society those who fail to conform will be persecuted. Cincinnatus, equipped with an alive individual consciousness, can therefore never be tolerated. The close bond between vulgarity and cruelty gradually surfaces. In "Cloud, Castle, Lake" (1937), a story written not long after the publication of *Invitation*, Nabokov displays in a more straightforward manner the link between the two. Vasiliy Ivanovich the protagonist accidentally wins a

<sup>12</sup> Qian seems to have a low opinion of such schools as we can infer from the fact that another vulgarian—Aimo in "Cat"—is also a graduate from such a school.

pleasure trip at a charity ball. Surprisingly, among his four male fellow travelers two have the same name and so do two of the four females. This counts as the first fun Nabokov poked at the slavish subservience to uniformity. During supper, all are required to hand over their provisions to be redistributed evenly. Everybody takes the same food except Vasiliy, whose favorite Russian cucumber is declared inedible and thrown out of the window. There is already a hint of violence in this leveling act (i.e. arbitrarily throwing away the cucumber). Later Vasiliy's fellow travelers maliciously make him eat a cigarette butt. Vasiliy's tormenting journey is redeemed by a vision of idyllic harmony, i.e. the sight of the cloud, castle and lake to which the story owes its title. The protagonist almost immediately decides to settle down there. Yet the highly personal decision is ruthlessly vetoed: "Tomorrow, according to the *appointed itinerary*—look at your ticket—we are all returning to Berlin. There can be no question of anyone—in this case you—refusing to continue this *communal journey*" (*The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* 436; emphasis added).

For these vulgarians, the itinerary must be strictly followed and the communal opinion should definitely be placed above a personal one. They would not leave Vasiliy alone even after he agrees to go back to Berlin: "As soon as everyone had got into the car and the train had pulled off, they began to beat him—they beat him a long time, and with a good deal of inventiveness. It occurred to them, among other things, to use a corkscrew on his palms; then on his feet. The post-office clerk, who had been to Russia, fashioned a knout out of a stick and a belt, and began to use it with devilish dexterity. Atta boy! The other men relied more on their iron heels, whereas the women were satisfied to pinch and slap. All had a wonderful time" (Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* 436-37).

The vulgarians' last wisp of inventiveness is brought to bear in the infliction of pain. What a carnival of torture they stage! In the story, Nabokov further explores what is only hinted at in *Invitation*: vulgarians will not be content with being conformists themselves; they take delight in putting everyone through the standardizing process, even when that means extreme inhumanity.

M'sieur Pierre, the embodiment of quintessential *poshlost*, is a good case to further illustrate the point. M'sieur Pierre is Cincinnatus's executioner. During his first encounter with Cincinnatus, he produces from his wallet a thick batch of home snapshots in which he is captured in various poses—"now in a garden, with a giant prize tomato in his hand, now perching with one buttock on some railing (profile, with pipe), now reading in a rocking chair, a glass with a straw standing near him" (83). Such stale images speak volumes for M'sieur Pierre's triteness and mediocrity. In a poem titled "Ode to a Model," Nabokov catalogues the overused poses often adopted by a model "in magazine ads"—"On a lawn, in a parody/ Of Spring and its cherry tree,/ near a vase and a parapet,/ virgin practicing archery./ Ballerina, black-masked,/ near a parapet of alabaster" (*Collected Poems* 151). These lines, which read like a doggerel, perfectly displays Nabokov's hostile attitude. By the end of the poem, we learn that the model often appears in a magazine titled "Sham"—the contemptuous tone is self-evident.

As a "photography enthusiast," M'sieur Pierre devises a "photo-horoscope"—"a series of photographs depicting the natural progression of a given person's entire life" (Nabokov, *Invitation* 170). He manages this by placing retouched snapshots of Emmie's present face in montage with other people's photographs to create a simulacrum of her future life. Such an "art work," if it can be called so, is utterly unconvincing. Robert Alter maintained that Pierre's photohoroscope "is an ultimate achievement of anti-art, using purely mechanical means to produce a patently false contrivance, impotent to cope with the rich enigma of experience in time, blind to the dimension of consciousness, profaning the mystery of human life" (59). As Nabokov well explains, "A philistine neither knows nor cares anything about art, including literature—his essential nature is anti-artistic" (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 311). Besides, M'sieur Pierre takes pride in his "art" of execution. He fancies himself an *artiste*, carrying his headsman's axe in a velvet-lined case as if it were a musical instrument. Yet the cheap imitation only gives away his true nature as a vulgarian.

M'sieur Pierre boasts about his deep fascination with rural quiet ("fame and honor are nothing to me compared with rural quiet") and the "love of nature" (186). Yet all such great words "become masks and dupes when the smug vulgarian employs them" (310). This is strikingly similar to another arch vulgarian Nabokov ridicules in his analysis of *Madame Bovary*—Léon Dupuis, who utters "a trickle of stale poetization" in a conversation with Emma Bovary (Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* 149). Nabokov cites Flaubert's letter to further illustrate Flaubert's ingenious mockery of the vulgar: "I am in the act of composing a conversation between a young man and a young woman about literature, the sea, mountains, music, and all other so-called poetic subjects. It may all seem to be seriously meant to the average reader, but in point of fact the grotesque is my real intention" (149).

Vulgarians willingly engage in discussions of fashionable topics, which they unquestioningly believe is a trademark of refinement and good taste. They often indulge in the "automatic process of

exchanging platitudes" (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 310). In Cincinnatus's prison cell, M'sieur Pierre delivers an excruciatingly tedious speech about the pleasures of life, all the way from erotic to gastronomic. Crudely gregarious or even ingratiating, M'sieur Pierre meticulously attends to formality. He takes care to always wear "a kind smile" on his face and talk in polite and refined manner. The false kind of sociability is "inevitably a mark of vulgarity (*poshlost*)" for Nabokov (Bethea 700). Besides, M'sieur Pierre is eager to please. Once he even performs handstand on a table for his inmates. When he gets down from the table, an accident happens: "Apparently, however, not everything was well. He at once covered his mouth with his handkerchief, glanced quickly under the table, then inspected the chair, and suddenly seeing what he sought, attempted, with a subdued oath, to yank off the back of the chair his hinged denture, which was embedded there" (Nabokov, *Invitation* 116).

M'sieur Pierre's hinged denture that clings to the back of a chair is a carefully devised metaphor by Nabokov to suggest the lameness of Pierre as a whole. Despite his ostensible amiability, vulgar M'sieur Pierre is a monster at heart. He is not only about to execute Cincinnatus physically; more importantly, he torments Cincinnatus mentally, depriving him of the last flicker of hope. He keeps harassing Cincinnatus with inane gossip and constant importunities. He demands that Cincinnatus strictly observe the farcical rules and regulations in prison. Even the stench from his feet—obviously also a metaphor for M'sieur Pierre's moral degeneration—makes Cincinnatus breathless.

The hideous face of *poshlost* can be seen everywhere in *Invitation*. The publications well reflect the social and cultural milieu of the world in *Invitation*. As can be inferred from the title of a popular local paper, *Voice of the Public*, Cincinnatus's fellow citizens are obsessed with the voice of the "communal mind". *Quercus*, "unquestionably the best [novel] that his age had produced," has an oak as protagonist: "At the place where Cincinnatus had stopped the oak was just starting on its third century; a simple calculation suggested that by the end of the book it would reach the age of six hundred at least" (Nabokov, *Invitation* 122). A novel whose narrative progression accords perfectly with page numbers is entirely predictable. Such a profoundly unaesthetic novel—actually no better than a ledger—is precisely the epitome of the zeitgeist of the *Invitation* world.

By unifying vulgarity and cruelty in headsman Pierre, Nabokov is clearly indicating a correlation between the two qualities. As in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the juxtaposition of "two seemingly incongruous pictures" in Knight's dead brother's library—a pretty curly-haired child playing with a dog and a Chinese man in the act of being beheaded—suggests the "the close relation between banality and brutality" (Nabokov 22-23).<sup>13</sup>

On a larger scale, vulgarity can cause political catastrophe. We witness in *Bend Sinister* (1947) a totalitarian state organized by a philosophy known as "Ekwilism" (a pun on "equalism"), which strongly discourages differentiation and individuality. According to Skotoma, the progenitor of the philosophy, the root of all our woes lies in the uneven distribution of human consciousness, the amount of which is fixed at a given time. Human beings, he argues, are simply vessels containing "unequal portions of this essentially uniform consciousness" (Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* 75; emphasis added). Skotoma's theory completely deprives individual consciousness of its uniqueness since he believes consciousness is "essentially uniform." If Skotoma's theory is to be believed, the solution to our woes is also quite clear: "to regulate the capacity of the human vessels ... by eliminating the fancy vessels and adopting a standard size" (75). The danger inherent in the intention of "eliminating the fancy vessel" is obvious. Very often cruelty is involved in the annihilation of the dissident. Particularly popular in this Ekwilist nation is a cartoon sequence published in a "blatantly bourgeois paper," depicting the home life of Mr. and Mrs. Etermon (Everyman). The couple wallow in all the modern conveniences a bourgeois life can offer: "cosy armchairs and all sorts of electric thingumbobs and one thing-in-itself (a car)"; "life was positively crammed with these and similar delights, whereas the worst that might befall one was hitting a traditional thumb with a traditional hammer or mistaking the date of the boss's birthday" (78; emphasis added). Particularly noteworthy is Nabokov's passing reference to the "blatantly bourgeois paper"—bourgeois in the Flaubertian rather than the Marxist sense of the term. The bourgeois mindset—"the lace-curtain refined vulgarity"—implies a willingness to live a programmed ideal life promoted by advertisements or propaganda. The life style depicted above is therefore the very incarnation of *poshlost* as Nabokov conceives it. TV and magazine commercials played a vital role in the formation of automatons such as Mr. and Mrs. Etermon. The philistinism

<sup>13</sup> The image of a curly-haired child playing with a dog is to Nabokov a typical example of *poshlost*. In "Philistines and Philistinism," Nabokov discusses a similar image of freckled little boys and girls in ads. Nabokov insists that he has nothing against freckles as such yet "there is considerable philistinism involved in the use made of them by advertisers and other agencies" (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 311-13).

emanating from advertisement help create a world where "nothing spiritual remains" and where "the game of the senses is played according to bourgeois rules" (Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature* 313).

When the truckler mentality becomes the order of the day, totalitarianism arises. Erich Fromm's idea of the "pseudo self" is a handy tool for illuminating the cause-and-effect relationship between the readiness to be manipulated and totalitarian rule. The pseudo self, according to Fromm, refers to "an agent who actually represents the role a person *is supposed to play*" as opposed to the original self—"the self which is the originator of mental activities" (205). As for Nabokov, the greatest danger of the advertisement fetish lies in that "neither sellers nor buyers really believe in their heart of hearts" yet they willingly participate in the false show of gratification and delight (313). "The loss of the self and its substitution by a pseudo self," Fromm further argues, "leave the individual in an intense state of insecurity" (*Escape from Freedom* 206). The individual seeks to overcome the panic through unthinking submission to authority and mindless conformity, which are conducive to the growth of totalitarianism. As Nabokov points out, the vulgarians have a "passionate urge to conform, to belong, to join" (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 310). Nabokov reiterated his abhorrence of any work of a communal nature: "any ... communal aura involuntarily prejudices me against a novel, making it harder for me to peel the offered fruit so as to get at the nectar of possible talent" (*Strong Opinions* 113). David Rampton once expressed his astonishment at Nabokov's contempt for "members of reading clubs": "If these people are all imbeciles and the objects of his disgust, there is not much hope for the rest of us" (*Critical Study* 42). Nabokov's disdain is surely not directed at the intellectual activity *per se* but at the psychological need to belong. Charlotte Haze in *Lolita* (1955), the spokesman for *poshlost*, is such a lover of group activity: "she was, obviously, one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club or a bridge club or any other deadly conventionality, but never her soul" (Nabokov, *Lolita* 37). Most surprisingly, Nabokov even links up drug abuse with group mentality: "Drug addicts, especially young ones, are conformists flocking together in sticky groups, and I do not write for groups, nor approve of group therapy (the big scene in the Freudian Farce)" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 114).

Fromm would concur with Nabokov when he wrote that "nothing is more difficult for the average man to bear than the feeling of not being identified with a larger group" (*Escape from Freedom* 234). The Ekwilist party Paduk the dictator founded is precisely called "The Party of the Average Man." The seemingly harmless Ekwilist state is actually capable of great evil and cruelty. In this totalitarian state, all means available—even extremely inhumane ones—are used to ensure uniformity in thought. In order to convert Adam Krug the protagonist, a philosopher of international fame, to the Ekwilist teaching, Paduk incarcerates many of Krug's friends and acquaintances and threatens to execute them. Finding the method ineffective, Paduk orders Krug's son David to be kidnapped. Krug gives in and promises to promote the Ekwilist philosophy as long as he can have David back. Yet David has been mistakenly sent to the Institute for Abnormal Children, which doubles as a prisoner rehabilitation clinic and where orphans are used to serve as a "release-instrument" for the benefit of criminals. Even more horrendously, a government officer named Crystalsen is sent to offer Krug a detailed account of the tortures David suffers before death. The gory scenes in Colosseum are reenacted. David is thrown to eight ruffians who are allowed to do whatever they want with the boy. We witness such atrocities as "limb tearing, bone breaking, deoculation" (Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* 219). All these outrages are believed effective in promoting the "gang spirit" or "community spirit" (219). The neologism "deoculation" (i.e. the gouging out of the eyes)—neutral, "scientific" and objective—perfectly exemplifies the callousness of the vulgarians.

Nabokov's literary battle against the vulgar constitutes a major way in which he contributes to moral elevation. In a letter dated 1945, Nabokov offered his most balanced statement about the relationship between art and morality: "I never meant to deny the moral impact of art which is certainly inherent in every genuine work of art. What I do deny and am prepared to fight to the last drop of my ink is the deliberate moralizing which to me kills every vestige of art in a work however skillfully written" (*Selected Letters* 56).

If "deliberate moralizing" is not the proper way in which a literary work expresses its moral concern, then what, according to Nabokov, is the acceptable approach? I believe the answer is already implied in Nabokov's intention of "ridiculing the vulgar and cruel." Since vulgarity can lead to cruelty and the opposite of vulgarity is aesthetic sensitivity, we may almost argue that one can only be moral if s/he is artistically sensitive. David Rampton once seriously questioned the validity of Nabokov's criticism of vulgarity: "The liberal Nabokov has taken aim at tyranny in these novels [i.e. *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*] while the ethical one conveys his distinctly patrician contempt for vulgarity. The tyranny is Fascist or Communist, but the vulgarity is American: the juke-box lovers and

the people who will beer in pubs happen to be the ones who fought totalitarianism in the Second World War. By folding half the world over on the other half, he lessens the political impact of his work" (Rampton, *Critical Study* 42).

For Rampton, Nabokov should not have targeted his criticism at such a wide-ranging group. Anyway, some of the vulgarians constitute the major force against Fascism and totalitarianism. If I were to respond to Rampton's challenge on behalf of Nabokov, I would argue that Nabokov by directing an extensive criticism at all varieties of vulgarity actually delves more deeply, revealing vulgarity as the root of barbarity and inhumanity. If some of the vulgarians are suffering under other vulgarians, it is likely that they are paying a price for their vulgarity which is the very source of their miseries. Nabokov also shows us a way of avoiding such tragedy. In *Lectures on Literature*, Nabokov proposed his theory of "irrational standards":

I remember a cartoon depicting a chimney sweep falling from the roof of a tall building and noticing on the way that a sign-board had one word spelled wrong, and wondering in his headlong flight why nobody had thought of correcting it. In a sense, we all are crashing to our death from the top story of our birth to the flat stones of the churchyard and wondering with an immortal Alice in Wonderland at the patterns on the passing wall. This capacity to wonder at trifles—no matter the imminent peril—these asides of the spirit, these footnotes in the volume of life are the highest forms of consciousness, and it is in this childishly speculative state of mind, so different from commonsense and its logic, that we know the world to be good. (373-74)

How are we to believe that the highest form of consciousness is evinced in the capacity to wonder at trifles? The "capacity to wonder at trifles" involves, according to Horgan, "not just noticing things but delighting in them, being surprised by them, being curious about them, speculating about them" (96). It implies "a special way of disposing ourselves toward things that allows those things—even the most apparently trivial, least obviously wonderful among them—to show up as sources of wonder, joy, value and meaning" (87). It is in a society where even trifles are treated with due respect that each individual—even "freaks" like Cincinnatus and dissenters like Adam Krug—can be left "wholly unmolested" (Alter, 64). It is suggested in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that those with an individual consciousness should not try to impose their unique vision of life on other: "My brother, if you have one virtue, and it is your virtue, then you have it in common with no one. ... Then speak and stammer: "This is my good, I love this, thus I like it entirely, thus alone do I want the good. ... I do not want it as a divine law, I do not want it as a human statute and requirement" (24).

In Nietzsche the idea is only proposed as a suggestion or exhortation. In fact, I believe it is more likely for a highly differentiated individual to respect others' individuality. And it is precisely the ceaseless efforts Nabokov made to ridicule the vulgar that qualify him as "a rigid moralist."

Qian applies similar "irrational standards" to his reading of books and life. Rea draws our attention to Qian's preface to *Written in the Margins of Life* (1941), in which Qian likens life to "one big book." The preface begins with a mild mockery of book critics who can "churn out a pile of commentary and wrap up a book review in no time" without having to carefully peruse the book first (Qian, *Humans* 31). Qian then describes another type of readers: "When an opinion strikes them, they jot down a few notes or write a question mark or exclamation mark in the blank margins of the book ... These piecemeal, spontaneous impressions do not constitute their verdict on the entire book, and having been written in passing they may contradict one another or go overboard" (31).

Qian shares Nabokov's attentiveness to details and disbelief in grand and all-inclusive theoretical constructs. Nabokov ridicules people's "love of generalities (encyclopedias) and a contemptuous hatred for particularities (monographs)" (*The Gift* 240). "Closely argued and comprehensive philosophical and ideological systems" often fail to survive "the vicissitudes of time and have already lost their integrity" (Qian, *Patchwork* 80). What remains after the theoretical edifice collapses are the scintillating bits and pieces that once constitute grand systems: "A viewpoint that pays attention only to major theories or that holds such isolated sentences or phrases in contempt, intoxicated with quantity and thus ignoring a gram of worth for a ton of verbiage, is superficial and vulgar—if it is not in fact an excuse for laziness and sloppiness" (80).

### **Vulgarity as Springboard for High Art**

From the above analysis, readers might easily get the impression that Nabokov's attitude toward vulgarity is one of downright animosity. Such a hasty conclusion, however, blinds us to Nabokov's nuanced relation to the vulgar. In fact, Nabokov clearly recognized the potential in vulgarity to be transformed into art works. The vulgar, if properly utilized, can be turned into an object worthy of artistic appreciation. In *Lolita*, Humbert explicitly acknowledges the dual nature of Lolita's charm—"the

twofold nature of this nymphet—of dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity" (44). Emma in *Madame Bovary*, who is "irresistibly attractive and enchanting to three men," is also described by Nabokov as a mixture of vulgarity and "a dreamy childish tenderness" (Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* 133). Humbert never tries to conceal the fact that *poshlost* frequently manifests itself in *Lolita*. He calls Lolita his "vulgar darling"; "she believed, with a kind of celestial trust, any advertisement or advice that appeared in *Movie Love* or *Screen Land* ... She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster" (148). Lolita nevertheless remains the light of Humbert's life because Humbert manages to verbally aestheticize Lolita into an artwork. Critics have noticed Humbert's impulse to "turn his own life into a work of art" (81).<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Patnoe noticed that Humbert frequently feeds the reader with deceptive image of Lolita, who is "a kid *molded* to fulfill a role in a destructive fantasy" (120). Humbert once laments that he has "only words to play with" (32) and promises the reader "a fancy prose style" (9). Most strikingly, Humbert confesses that for him Lolita has no other reality than literary: "What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own" (62).

When filtered through Humbert's artistic mind, the vulgarity in *Lolita* is ingeniously transformed into an object for artistic appreciation. As we can tell from the scene in which Lolita slowly walks up to the fancy dress—a gift from Humbert to purchase her affection—Humbert is intentionally molding her into a graceful ballerina: "She stepped up to it, lifting her rather high-heeled feet rather high and bending her beautiful boy-knees while she walked through dilating space with the lentor of one walking under water or in a flight dream" (120).

We should note that the fancy dress—a symbol for the consumer culture Humbert disdains—acts as the catalyst for Humbert's aestheticization of Lolita. Though Lolita is in thrall to the lavish gifts rather than her enchanted hunter, Humbert nevertheless gets the precious opportunity to enclose Lolita in an aura palatable to his highbrow taste. Art and vulgarity are thus closely bound together.

No doubt, Nabokov's efforts to poeticize the vulgar do not always take the simple and straightforward form illustrated above. Melissa Lam notices his frequent recourse to defamiliarization (3-9). According to Shklovsky, the technique of art is to defamiliarize the object in question, "to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (12). To create *Lolita*, Nabokov needed "a certain exhilarating milieu" (*Annotated Lolita* 315). Since "[n]othing is more exhilarating than philistine vulgarity," the American middle-class suburbia naturally becomes Nabokov's first choice (315). Instead of rendering the vulgarity of the middle-class suburban neighborhood faithfully, Humbert enters into a dynamic relationship with it. Humbert's sojourn at Ramsdale unfolds as the gradual process of his being assimilated into the suburb community, from a complete stranger to a pseudo-insider. As he stays in Ramsdale, he keeps interweaving a strand of European elitism into the fabric of American middle-class life. Humbert arrives in "a marvelously old-fashioned, square-topped" limousine, which is strikingly at odds with our expectation of casually entering a middle-class American home. "A polite European" at heart, Humbert subverts the stereotypical scene of a middle-class father coming home, which flaunts the ideals of congeniality and solidarity and of home as haven of peace and love. Lam also draws our attention to how intoxicated Humbert defamiliarizes the commonplace suburb setting by turning it into a grotesque sight. Humbert decides to take care of the unkempt lawn—"une petite attention" (72). The Gallicism Humbert unconsciously throws in gives expression to the staying power of his European upbringing. In fact, Humbert's Europeanism persistently reappears throughout the entire novel, ranging from his arcane research on French literature to his adherence to European decorum. Here the dandelions to be rid of are likened to "suns" and "moons"; the folding chairs that stands in his way "incarnadine zebras"; even his burps "sound like cheers" (72-73). The involvement in lawn mowing, a most typical household chore in suburbia, presents a Humbert in the midst of being assimilated into the middle-class milieu. Yet the assimilation is not complete and probably can never be complete. Humbert's integration into the bourgeois community is infallibly obstructed by his inborn elitism. He constantly infuses a strain of exotic imaginativeness into the insipidity of suburban life. American suburbia and Humbert engage in a mutual transformative process: while the former strives to engulf the latter, it is also subtly altered by the latter. The suburban neighborhood is thus no longer vulgarity incarnate but prime fodder for serious literature. In the final scene in Ramsdale, Humbert is in an almost euphoric state, convinced that he has cunningly camouflaged himself as a loving husband and devoted father. Ramsdale is now

<sup>14</sup> For a brief summary of critics' comments on Humbert's urge to turn his life into art, see Kitzinger 5.

full of charm for him: "The cicadas whirred; the avenue had been freshly watered. Smoothly, almost silkily, I turned down into our steep little street. Everything was somehow so right that day. So blue and green" (95). The suburb is now a locale of idyllic serenity. From a series of "I knew" and "as usual," we easily tell that Humbert has grown accustomed to suburban life. Humbert asserts with such confidence that "everything was somehow just so right." Ironically, this is not the case. His deeply hidden perversion is soon to be discovered by Charlotte Haze. When we are about to see him as a newly converted middle-class husband, we realize that his inner perversion allows him to be no more than a parody of it. Through defamiliarization, Nabokov manages to not only ridicule the insipid banality of American middle-class suburbia but also invigorate and elevate it to a status of art.

In "The Culture Industry" (1944), Theodor Adorno delineates a bleak scene of modern life as characterized by monotony. Cultural industry, with mass media at the helm, dictates that all cultural products be homogenized and standardized. Many modernist writers actively engage in a battle against such an alarming tendency by resisting the commodification of their works. Andreas Huyssen identified in modernism an "insistence on the autonomy of the art work, its obsessive hostility to mass culture, its radical separation from the culture of everyday life" (vii). Modernism "has also been characterized as a response to mass culture and to feminisation, and thus as resting upon a masculinist elitism," as Peter Childs succinctly summarized (32). According to Farina, in *Ulysses* and *Molloy*, Joyce and Beckett consciously and conscientiously "resist identification with the opposing force of mass-culture" (23-24). Nabokov, by contrast, discerns in vulgarity the potential to be transformed into artistically pleasing literary works. With the aid of techniques such as defamiliarization, Nabokov manages to recycle the vulgar and deftly weave it into the texture of his works.

Qian also understands the value of vulgarity in the pursuit of high art. *Fortress Besieged* is nothing less than an encyclopedia of vulgarity. The elevation of the vulgar to the status of high art in *Fortress Besieged*, however, is accomplished through methods different than those in *Lolita*.<sup>15</sup> Unlike *Lolita*, a memoir by a radically unreliable narrator, *Fortress Besieged* is under the firm control of a third-person omniscient narrator who also serves as the moral arbitrator of the fictional world.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes the arbitrator appoints a character as his surrogate, often Fang Hung-chien, the protagonist or Chao Hsin-mei, Fang's close friend.<sup>17</sup> Once, from an extremely well-made notebook, Fang reads a poem titled "Adulterous Smorgasbord," carefully annotated by Ts'ao Yüan-lang, the pretentious poetaster himself:

<sup>15</sup> It must be pointed out that defamiliarization is also widely used in *Fortress Besieged* though not in the portrayal of the vulgar. Besides, Qian perfectly understands its mechanism and function. In *談藝錄*, Qian offers an extended analysis of the defamiliarization technique. He quotes from *Collected Poems of Hou Shan* 後山集 a story about a poetry enthusiast in Min (modern-day Fujian Province, China) who took pains to avoid clichéd expressions. The enthusiast sent his works to Mei Shengyu, a renowned Song Dynasty poet, for review. In his feedback, Mei wrote: "your poems are indeed delicate and ingenious; yet you are not good at making use of worn-out materials and are not able to transform the vulgar into the refined and use the stale in a way that refreshes it" (Translation mine. "子詩誠工、但未能以故為新，以俗為雅爾。" Qian, *談藝錄*, 42.) "Russian Formalist critic Victor Shklovsky believes that literary diction easily falls victim to habitualization or automatization," Qian further explains, "It is the writers' top priority to make the familiar strange again, i.e. through defamiliarization or rebarbarization. 近世俄國形式主義文評家希克洛夫斯基 (Victor Shklovsky) 等以為文詞最易襲故蹈常，落套刻板 (habitualization, automatization)，故作者手眼須使熟者生 (defamiliarization)，或亦曰使文者野 (rebarbarization)" (*談藝錄*, 42). According to Qian, defamiliarization is not only an effective rhetorical device; it is equally instructive in the choice of subject matter, as was argued by many great European authors such as Goethe, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Dickenson, Flaubert, and Nietzsche. For a more detailed account of the above literati's comments on defamiliarization, see Qian, *談藝錄*, 43-44.

<sup>16</sup> Mao describes the narrator as "observant, witty and rhetorical" (397). For a more detailed analysis of the narrator in *Fortress Besieged*, see Mao, 397-98.

<sup>17</sup> Scholars have noticed that sometimes the protagonist's views, comments and judgments coincide with the narrator's, while at other times they greatly differ. Theodore Hutters, for instance, draws our attention to a thorny problem faced by *Fortress Besieged*, i.e. how to prevent the narrative from being so far removed from the protagonist "as to leave the reader unsympathetic to his plight" while at the same time staying at a certain distance from him so that readers won't "wallow together with him in his despair without obtaining any overall vision of its significance" (*Qian Zhongshu* 126). Qian manages to bridge the gap between the subjective and objective, Hutters further argues, by his skillful manipulation of point of view: "The contrast between investing the narrative center of consciousness in and withdrawing it from the mind of Fang Hongjian [i.e. Fang Hung-chien] mirrors the dual approach to reality" (*Qian Zhongshu* 126). C. T. Hsia argues that though Fang buys his fake PhD degree "to please others at the price of personal mortification, he is made an imposter among imposters. This trait of moral cowardice he exemplifies throughout the novel" (442-43). In "Cosmopolitan Imperative," Hutters concurs with Hsia in viewing Fang's decision to purchase a fake degree as sowing the seed of his moral cowardice (219). In



The stars of last night tonight stir ripples on the wind  
swirling into tomorrow night (2).  
The full, plump white belly of the pregnant woman is  
pasted tremblingly to the heavens (3).  
When did this fleeing woman who had maintained a chaste  
widowhood find a virile husband? (4)  
Jug! Jug! (5) In the mud—e fango è il mondo! (6)  
a nightingale sings (7) (Qian, *Fortress Besieged* 79)  
(昨夜星辰今夜搖漾於飄至明夜之風中 (二) ;  
圓滿肥白的孕婦肚子顫巍巍貼在天上 (三) ,  
這守活寡的逃婦幾時有了 virile 老公 (四) ?  
Jug ! Jug ! (五) 污泥里——E fango è il  
mondo ! (六) ——夜鶯歌唱 (七) .....” (Qian, *圍城* 匯校本 87)<sup>18</sup>

There are several passable metaphors in the excerpt: the “belly of a pregnant woman” refers to the moon; the “fleeing woman” is Chang O, the Chinese goddess of the Moon; and the nightingale in the mud is a frog. Otherwise, the poem is no more than a hodgepodge of abstruse foreign terms. More importantly, Qian makes sure that the peripheral parts of the poem are also noticed—especially the meticulous endnotes (i.e. by the poet himself) in which allusions to famous poets both home and abroad—Li I-shan, T. S. Eliot, Tristan Corbiere, Leopardi and Franz Werfel, etc.—are made clear. It is likely that Ts’ao’s pretentious style here, apparently derived from *The Waste Land*, is Qian’s implicit criticism of Eliot. Commenting on Eliot’s idea that an artist “will be aware that he must inevitably be judged—not amputated—by the standards of the past,” Qian scathingly remarked: “Do you mean to say all great artists are consciously ‘aware’ of all these in their creation? Perhaps a special pleading for your patchwork which is by courtesy called poetry” (Qian, *錢鐘書手稿集·外文筆記* 27). At least, Qian’s

“The Phantom of the Clock,” Sohigian offers a Bergsonian reading of Fang’s vulgarity, calling him a “colorless shadow, adept at conversation and manipulating language” (34). The judgment Huang passes on Fang is comparatively lenient. She does not view Fang’s incapability of action completely as a trait of moral cowardice. Instead, it could “serve as an example of Isaiah Berlin’s concept of negative freedom” (85). Among all the critics, Mao’s assessment of Fang is the most balanced: “The author is careful to make clear that neither Sun nor Fang is evil. They are, in fact, both virtuous when compared to the monsters we see elsewhere in the book. It is just that both are passive. Fang, in particular, is without the training, the discipline and the strength of character necessary for initiating any positive action” (405). Mao further writes, “Despite Fang’s unattractiveness as a hero, the author’s sympathy is clearly with him, for Ch’ien Chung-shu feels a man is responsible neither for the evils the world puts in his path nor for the weak nature heredity may have given him” (407). To me, although the protagonist is not free from his own flaws and is frequently undermined by the narrator, he is by far the more admirable one when compared with his vulgar and hypocritical colleagues, especially Li Mei-ting, Kao Sung-nien and Ku Er-chien. Qian’s sentiments toward Fang are similar to Cao Xueqin’s treatment of Jia Baoyu in *The Story of the Stone*. Despite the scathing sarcasm he frequently directed at Baoyu (the two sets of verses in Chapter 3, for instance. See Cao, *The Story of the Stone*, Vol. 1, 102), Cao nevertheless views Baoyu as far superior to the social climbers [the “祿蠹” (career worms)] in the book, such as Jia Yucun. Interestingly, Chao Hsin-mei’s (and highly likely also Qian’s) comment on Fang “You are not annoying, but you’re completely useless 你不討厭，可是全無用處” is also applicable to Baoyu. Since any generalization on the protagonist-narrator relation in *Fortress Besieged* is liable to oversimplification, it is more advisable to investigate the implied author’s intention on a case-by-case basis. In this particular case, I argue that the narrator would agree with the protagonist in terms of the judgments the latter passes on the various forms of vulgarity around him.

<sup>18</sup> All references to the Chinese edition of *Fortress Besieged* are to the 1991 critical edition prepared by Xu Zhifen 胥智芬. Despite the fact that the edition is unauthorized (Qian filed a lawsuit against the annotator Xu Zhifen for copyright issues), it is nevertheless of great value to researchers as the annotator carefully noted down all the textual variants between three major editions—the instalments published in *文藝復興* (Literary Renaissance) from February 1946 to January 1947; the 1947 edition published by 上海晨光出版公司 (Shanghai Chenguang Publishing House); and the 1980 edition published by 人民文學出版社 (People’s Literature Press). The convenience the 1991 critical edition renders to researchers is comparable to the famous Norton Critical Edition of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, & Stephen Gill, eds.), which incorporates the 1798, 1799, 1805 and 1850 editions of the long poem. For more on the value of this critical edition of *Wei-cheng*, see Gong Mingde (龔明德); Chen Sihe (陳思和), “為新文學校勘工作說幾句” and “再為新文學的校勘工作說幾句.”

distaste for Ts'ao's showiness is unmistakable. The narrator, through Fang, critically comments: "No wonder your honorable work is such a hodgepodge. ... Onion and garlic eaters wouldn't find each other's breath fetid; it is the bystanders that grievously suffer" (83).<sup>19</sup> A few days later, Fang makes a follow-up comment: "You saw that poem of his, something about the 'smorgasbord and adulterer.' You can't tell what it's all about. And it's not honest, unpretentious incoherence, but presumptuous, arrogant, and shameless. It insults the reader's intelligence" (85). By instituting himself or his surrogate as the arbitrator—the center of a referential framework—of the fictional world, the omniscient narrator furnishes the reader with valuable clues for moral judgment. The interaction between the vulgar and the commentator is aesthetically enjoyable and edifying as well. By setting up a referential framework, readers are enabled to detect for themselves the various faces of vulgarity. Chao Hsin-mei, with his characteristic candor, is often held up as yardstick to assess other characters. Su Wen-wan, Chao's old flame, thinks Chao vulgar for his great fondness for food and lack of interest in music. The referential framework would invite us to reconsider whether music is really a sure sign of refinement. Thus guided, readers are expected to realize that Miss Su's notion of vulgarity is far from valid; and Miss Su, who often mocks others for being vulgar is herself the perfect embodiment of that quality.

Qian also made stylistic maneuvers to transform vulgarity into aesthetic enjoyment. Qian patiently initiates the reader into the fictional world by familiarizing them with the techniques it works by—irony, metaphors, similes, etc. Tone of voice is pivotal for a sufficient understanding of the ironies in *Fortress Besieged*. As soon as Qian wishes to make a shrewd observation about the vulgar, his voice takes on a certain tone, either playful or inflated. Han Hsüeh-yü, dean of the History Department—a hypocrite who bought a fake PhD degree from a diploma mill—is described as prematurely bald because "his brain was so filled with knowledge it was bursting forth and crowding out his hair" (224). Han claims to have published articles in major academic journals in the US. Yet the narrator gleefully informs us that the so-called articles are either published in the "Personals" column ("Well-educated Chinese youth wishes to assist Sinologists. Low rates") or in the "Correspondence" column ("Seeking back issues of this journal from twenty years ago"). When introducing Miss Fan, a moral tutor at San Lü University, the narrator makes a passing reference to her reading. Her mind is filled with slogan-like clichés from third-rate playwrights: "Enjoy life to the full and die unflinchingly," or "When the night is so dark, can day be far behind" (260-61). She's obsessed with loftily romantic ideas of tragic love. The elevated style in which the narrator portrays Miss Fan is set in stark contrast with the mischievous witticism that immediately follows: "Men never make passes/ At girls wearing glasses" (261). When readers discern a sudden shift in tone from the calm and sincere to the playful, they should be alert to the upcoming irony against the vulgar.

Sometimes Qian's treatment of vulgarity is fairly subtle. Only careful examination and critical reflection can help detect it. Once Fang pays Chao a visit at his apartment. Before Fang enters, he hears playing inside a popular love song by "the universally acclaimed Chinese female movie star": "Spring, spring, oh why has it not come? / The flowers in my heart already are in bloom! / Oh, my love -" (134).

Huters draws our attention to the "sharp judgment of taste" ("Cosmopolitan Imperative" 221) Fang passes on Chao: "*Hell! Listening to a song like that is like looking at pornographic books or pictures. It's a sign of intellectual backwardness and mental abnormality.* He had never expected Chao Hsin-mei to sink so low after being jilted" (Qian, *Fortress Besieged* 134; original italics).<sup>20</sup> Huters believes that Fang here begins with an aesthetic judgment—"he feels superior based on distinction of taste" ("Cosmopolitan Imperative" 221-22)—and then leaps to a moral conclusion. The leap, according to Huters, "demonstrates yet again the easy commerce between taste and morality" (222). It is questionable however whether Fang's judgment is aesthetic or moral. "Intellectual backwardness and mental abnormality" are not, strictly speaking, aesthetic judgment. Fang's (and Huters's) problem lies precisely in the fact that he should have made an *aesthetic* judgment instead of a *moral* one. A quick look at the lyrics suffices to inform us that the love song is not so morally degenerate as trite and banal. Fang should have criticized Chao for being aesthetically vulgar rather than morally depraved. Later, Fang sees on the wall a picture of Su Wen-wan: "... Miss Su with a stick in her hand herding a flock of sheep. She had a kerchief tied around her head and was dressed like a shepherdess in a

<sup>19</sup> The latter half of the quote (i.e. the onion and garlic eaters metaphor) is my own translation. It appears on page 92 of the edition of *Wei-ch'eng* I chose. See note 18. It is not included in the Kelly and Mao translation, which used a slightly different source text of which the metaphor was edited out.

<sup>20</sup> A more straightforward translation of the last sentence in Fang's judgment would be: "He had never expected Chao Hsin-mei to *become so degenerate* after being jilted," which is clearly a moral judgment.

classic, romantic, rustic setting. Unfortunately she did not seem to be wholly occupied with tending the sheep but was looking out of the picture frame and smiling slyly at the viewer" (134-35).

Fang, though not without moral defects, is largely trustworthy in terms of the opinions he expresses. If he thinks the photo a fine one, readers are likely to agree. However, the picture is an artifact of sheer vulgarity. Besides posing as a shepherdess—possibly highly fashionable during her time—she acts unnaturally, affectedly showing her charm to future viewers. Readers are required to be particularly attentive so that they can dig out the nuanced meaning between the lines.

Vulgarity easily catches the attention of aesthetically refined and artistically sensitive writers like Nabokov and Qian. Yet both dispose themselves subtly in relation to the vulgar. Instead of taking toward vulgarity a position of extreme antagonism, both acknowledges its value and potential. Qian, with his gifted pen, transforms the vulgar into an integral part of his refreshing and exuberant account of human nature, social mores and national ethos. In Qian's criticism of the vulgar is embedded his deep concern with the sufferings of both individual Chinese nationals and the nation as a whole. Nabokov, on the other hand, vigilantly sensed the latent danger in vulgarity and warned about the far-reaching ethical and political consequences it may lead to. Nabokov's unobtrusive rendition of the vulgar in *Lolita* and other works apparently exacts more mental labor from the reader. Yet what the two authors share are their pioneering efforts in exploring the possibility of involving vulgarity in the pursuit of high art.

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