Mary: “Without Any Passport”

We know each for himself, that none of us would perpetrate such a folly, yet feel as if some other might.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Wakefield”

Nabokov’s first novel, Mary (Mashen’ka, 1926), initiates the theme of the need for a balance between human commitment and aesthetic pursuit, focusing on the conflict between sympathy and self-protective detachment. This conflict is reproduced in the tension between the different layers of the novel’s meaning: the moral value of the protagonist’s actions clashes with their aesthetic value and their symbolic significance.

I

Mary is set in a Russian pension in Berlin in the mid-twenties. Nabokov breathes new life into the conventional pension setting (as of Balzac’s Père Goriot) by exploring the significance of the proximity imposed on the characters. People from different social and cultural circles suddenly find themselves brought together in shared premises. The partitions between the rooms are thin, and a great deal of the protagonist’s irritation with his well-meaning neighbors stems from his want of privacy. The son of a rich upper-class family, Lev Ganin is accustomed not just to greater spaces but also to protected spaces in which he can dream undisturbed. Therefore, when he starts reliving

1The doors to the rooms of the pension are labeled with calendar pages bearing the dates of April 1 to April 6. This is discussed by Alex de Jonge as the first of the elaborate patterns in Nabokov’s novels; see “Nabokov’s Uses of Pattern,” in Peter Quennel, ed., Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute (New York, 1980), p. 60.

2The pension thus presents a marked contrast to the house on Ganin’s country estate, which is a perfect illustration of Bachelard’s “oneiric house” (The Poetics of Space, pp.
his past in memory, he spends most of his time outdoors, away from noisy rooms and neighbors knocking at the door.

The use of the outdoors as the arena of the action is a major feature of the carnivalistic mode in fiction. The collapse of social barriers between exiles sharing an apartment is another expression of this mode. Finding themselves in unwonted proximity, the characters are exposed to the temptation of intimacy, of Dostoevskian confidences and confessions during which the partitions between individual identities are likewise knocked down. Such a carnivalization is threatening to Ganin, as it is to most of Nabokov's protagonists and narrators: if death is "divestment" and "communion" (P, 20), then unrestrained communion is deathlike. Yet Ganin's uncompromising attempts to preserve the discreteness of his emotional life lead him to the opposite error: his inner life becomes hermetic, and his solipsism threatens to become as destructive to others as communion is to him.

At the beginning of the novel, Lev Ganin, a former White Guard officer, learns that a fellow boarder by the name Alfyorov is expecting his wife to arrive from Russia in a few days. Shown a picture of this woman, Ganin thinks he recognizes her as his first love, Mary. A sudden influx of emotion enables him to terminate a burdensome affair with a woman called Lyudmila, after which he spends four days in blissful recollection of his lost love. He plans to meet Mary at the railway station and carry her off. Yet as the hour of her arrival draws near, the remaining portion of the novel becomes disconcertingly thin under the reader's fingers. As Ganin is waiting for Mary's train, the sordid parting with Lyudmila flashes through his memory. Her words "I know he won't be able to forget me as quickly as he may think" (M, 76) prove to be perversely prophetic. The aftertaste of the recent liaison suggests that even Mary may turn out to be different from Ganin's Galatea. Realizing "with merciless clarity that his affair with Mary was ended forever" (M, 114) and remaining true to the fantasy,

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6-7), which shelters daydreaming, protects the dreamer, allows one to dream in peace.

3The carnivalistic mode and its expression in the works of Dostoevsky are described in Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, Minn., 1984), pp. 122-70. The intensity of the carnivalistic element in Dostoevsky's work must have been one cause for Nabokov's wary dislike of this writer.

4Cf. the metaphor of the still-thick remainder of a novel at the beginning of Invitation to a Beheading (IB, 12)

5Cf. The Gift: "O swear to me that while the heartblood stirs, you will be true to what we shall invent" (G, 169). Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's fidelity to fantasy has a different meaning from Ganin's: the lovers must live authentically in a creatively
he beats a hasty retreat, which is almost unanimously applauded by Nabokov’s critics.

A young novelist may be suspected of sabotaging a long-anticipated reunion merely in order to avoid the triteness of “happily-ever-aftering.” This, however, is not the case with Nabokov, who will eventually show great inventiveness in tackling this overworked theme (see, for instance, the liberating effect of a frustrating reunion in “The Doorbell,” 1927; the partial success that looks like failure in “The Reunion,” 1932; and the triumph that masks itself as a failure in Ada, 1969). The strange ending of Mary is not due to the fear of a cliché; aesthetically and symbolically it is appropriate that Ganin should not meet Mary in the fictional present. Still, this appropriateness does not justify the callous attitude of the protagonist, an attitude that masks itself as a version of moral autonomy.

II

The reunion, indeed, can hardly take place in the novel without disrupting the elegance of the pattern of events. Ganin remembers falling in love with Mary during a summer’s stay on his family’s country estate in prerevolutionary Russia. In the happy days of his recuperation after typhus he conceived for the first time the image of a girl that he would like to meet: “Now, many years later, he felt that their imaginary meeting and the meeting which took place in reality had blended and merged imperceptibly into one another, since as a living person she was only an uninterrupted continuation of the image which had foreshadowed her” (M, 44). Unlike Ganin’s original meeting with Mary, a reunion has not been rehearsed imaginatively and has nothing to blend with. It is therefore appropriate that the romance which started solipsistically in the imagination should end, no less solipsistically, in the memory, with the events of “real life” sandwiched between.

Like all his subsequent writing, Nabokov’s first novel thus describes a circle. Unlike Kurt Dreyer of King, Queen, Knave, who regrets meeting his former mistress because afterward he can never remember Erica as he remembered her before—“Erica number two will always perceived world of their own and keep this world from becoming soiled by plagiaristic conformism.
be in the way" (KQK, 176)—Ganin retains his image of Mary intact. He wishes to believe that this image will not die with him—and indeed it does not, though it takes the real artist, Nabokov, rather than the fictional artist manqué, Ganin, to ensure its survival. "Beauty is momentary in the mind," as Peter Quince thinks at Wallace Stevens's clavier, "but in the flesh it is immortal." The flesh is, of course, the written word.

The reunion might also have been inappropriate symbolically. Ganin's decision to avoid meeting Mary is parallel to giving up hope of returning to his motherland: he can go there only in his memories—without any passport (see M, 109). Never appearing in the drab fictional present, Mary can be understood to stand for Mother Russia. The resurrection that the crucifix in young Ganin's sickroom suggests is, here, a resurrection of (and in) memory. When in chapter 1 the elevator in which Ganin and Alfyorov are stuck suddenly revives and takes them to their destination, Alfyorov comments, "I thought someone had pressed the button and brought us up, but there's no one here. . . . Up we came and yet there's no one here. That's symbolic too" (M, 4). The words are oddly prophetic: scores of emigrants who succumbed to the temptation to return to their native country found "no one there"—Russia had changed beyond recognition. Yet the symbolism of Mary is held in check: symptomatically, the quoted remark, as well as one about the stalled elevator as a symbol of émigré existence (see M, 3), comes from a philistine character, an apt exponent of the theme of poshlost' (or "posh-lust": see NG, 63–74), the smug phoniness ridiculed throughout Nabokov's fiction. Moreover, unknown to Alfyorov, his words "up we came and yet there's no one here" also apply to Mary's arrival at the Berlin railway station after the curtain falls. The "merciless clarity" of Ganin's last-minute insight suggests not only the rigid self-discipline of an aesthete but also a touch of cruelty that invites moral criticism of Ganin's conduct.

III

Because of the autobiographical element of Mary (its story of the protagonist's first love is similar to the material of chapter 12 of

6See Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, p. 128.
readers tend to be uncritical of Ganin's conduct. Yet it is Nabokov's general practice to bestow parts of his own experience upon his characters, much as they may otherwise differ from himself. Ganin is not a Nabokovian lyrical hero; to a large extent he is Nabokov's version of a charismatic villain, a dynamic force of infinite potentialities for the world of fiction. In Mary this force is used to explore the tension between the moral and the pseudoaesthetic, as well as the tension between sympathy and detachment.

The idea of detachment is explored through the motifs of proximity versus distance—distance in time, space, and personal relationships. On the last page Ganin realizes the metaphor of distance by boarding a train that will take him far away from Berlin. This act, like his attempts to maintain a sort of aesthetic detachment from actual experience, is associated with the rudimentary nature of his power of sympathy.

Ganin, indeed, passes through the novel leaving pain and confusion in his wake. The romantic lover of the fictional past is an inconsiderate and somewhat rude drifter in the fictional present. When his memories are first evoked, he takes care to “re-create[e] a world that had perished” in order to “please the girl whom he did not dare to place in it until it was absolutely complete” (Mary, 33). Ironically, in the fictional present he also creates a setting for her arrival, yet not one that could please her. As the novel ends, the reader is left to imagine how Mary would painfully seek out the pension only to find the poet Podtyagin dying, the landlady exhausted by his bedside, the “cosy” Klara brokenhearted after Ganin’s departure, and her husband Alfyorov insensible—because Ganin had gotten him drunk and set his alarm clock to a late hour in order to forestall him at the railway station.

Ganin’s romantic image of himself is quite remote from his image in the eyes of his fellow boarders (Nabokov will develop such a contrast more fully in The Eye, 1930). Klara, who has seen him opening Alfyorov’s drawer and been offered no explanation, will remain convinced that she has been in love with a thief; the others will regard his tampering with Alfyorov’s alarm clock as a piece of wanton hooliganism. Like Ganin’s self-image, the latter view is not completely devoid of truth: in the past Ganin had played with his will power by “making himself, for instance, get out of bed in the middle of the night in order to go down and throw a cigarette butt into a postbox”

In chapter 1 Alfyorov mentions that Mary “wrote the address in a very funny way” (Mary, 2), suggesting that she does not know German.
(M, 10), without even regarding his experiment as a practical joke on the owners of the box. This is a self-emulating game rather than a Schopenhauerian exercise in subduing one's will by forcing oneself to do things contrary to the desires of the flesh. By his entropy-promoting unconcern for the discomfort of his neighbor, whom he does not bother to love as himself, Ganin increases the gulf between himself and others. In effect, he becomes as consummate a solipsist as Van Veen in Ada, and it is not accidental that Van Veen elaborates on Ganin's youthful trick of walking on his hands, turning the world upside down.

Ganin never seems to think about Mary's unhappiness. At the cinema he is annoyed with Lyudmila's whispering to Klara something about the material for a dress but never notices how sick Klara is of wearing the same dress every day. Having little else to do, he helps Podtyagin get his exit visa for France but does not prevent the old man from losing his precious passport; the reader, however, is allowed to notice the precise moment when Podtyagin lays his passport on the seat of a bus, never to pick it up (see M, 80). Podtyagin suffers his fatal heart attack as a result of the setback, yet Ganin has no feelings of guilt on leaving him. For the sake of the poetic image of Mary he not only sacrifices Mary herself but also spurns commitment to the essentially kind people around him. Such solipsistic single-mindedness prefigures that of Martin Edelweiss in Glory: in his pursuit of victory over fear, Martin does not regard his mother's anguish as too high a price for his self-emulating exploit.

Ganin's personal standard is not ethical, like Martin's, but aesthetic. He is repelled by anything that smacks of banality, of poshlost'; he is annoyed by Alfyorov and Lyudmila, and even by Mary when she uses the heavy-duty formula of surrender ("I am yours, . . . do what you

9According to Schopenhauer, a truly virtuous man is one who "makes less distinction than is usually made between himself and others. . . . He perceives that the distinction between himself and others, which to a wicked man is so great a gulf, belongs only to a fleeting, deceptive phenomenon. He recognizes immediately, and without reasons or arguments, that the in-itself of his own phenomenon is also that of others, namely that will-to-live which constitutes the inner nature of everything and lives in all" (The World as Will and Representation, 1:372). Ganin, the artist manqué, is to some extent a wicked person, yet in Nabokov (as in Joyce) the image of the true artist almost invariably contains a touch of cruelty. This is not a Nietzschean reinterpretation of Schopenhauer; rather, it is the consequence of art's mandatory emphasis on difference, on distinctive features. Art cannot reveal the universal inner nature of things without first capturing the "fleeting, deceptive phenomenon," the uniqueness of individual identities that increases distance at the expense of carnivalesque sympathy.
like with me”: *M*, 73) during their tryst in the park. At the same time Ganin is almost as shallow as another fictional salesman, Kurt Dreyer of *King, Queen, Knave*; the touch of artistic sensibility is wasted on him if he cannot appreciate the motives of Mary’s strained submission or the proud humility with which she (unlike Lyudmila) accepts their rupture. Like Dreyer, Ganin dreams of outlandish adventures because he is incapable of achieving a defamiliarizing perception of ordinary life. “Average reality” does, indeed, begin “to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture” (*SO*, 118). The divorce of average reality from the act of creation compliments Ganin’s solipsism. He leads a rich and intense inner life, but instead of letting this life irradiate upon the world given to perception, he leaves average reality to rot (like the cigarette butt in the mailbox) and replaces it with strictly internalized processes. He elevates memory to the status of art—not undeservedly—yet makes the mistake (to be repeated, in another way, by the protagonist of *The Defense*) of using art as a surrogate for life.

The blurred borderlines between the description of the Berlin scene and Ganin’s memories of recuperating after typhus suggest that the memories are not embedded in the present experience but rather take its place. The image of clean, ample clothes, which replaces the reader’s memory of Ganin’s dusty and sweaty ones of the previous morning, signals the point at which a full transition from the fictional present to the fictional past has taken place:

Wandering around Berlin on that Tuesday in spring, he recuperated all over again, felt what it was like to get out of bed for the first time, felt the weakness in his legs. He looked at himself in every mirror. His clothes seemed unusually clean, singularly ample, and slightly unfamiliar. He walked slowly down the wide avenue leading from the garden terrace into the depths of the park. Here and there the earth, empurpled by the shadows of leaves, broke into molehills that looked like heaps of black worms. He had put on white trousers and lilac socks, dreaming of meeting someone, not yet knowing who it would be. [*M*, 33-34]

Ganin’s error is indirectly commented on by Podtyagin, who regrets having put into poems what he should have put into life (*M*, 42). Podtyagin, however, is not a solipsist; and the spark of talent with which he is endowed redeems even his dependence on the quotidian, which he accepts with a somewhat Dostoevskian, self-flagellating hu-
mility. He can still probe the meaning of the émigré existence, and it is to him that Ganin and Klara turn in an attempt to make sense of their lives. But Podtyagin is too tired to receive confessions: symbolically, Russian emigration can no longer find support in the regional literature of the past. He is a dying man; the dignity of his condition is not sufficiently recognized by the people around him, but it reasserts itself in his ironic farewell to Ganin: “‘You see—without any passport’” (M, 109). In repeated reading, Podtyagin, with his ironic self-pity, is a more endearing character than the presumptuously earnest Ganin.

IV

The ambivalence of Ganin’s decision to avoid meeting Mary finds its parallel in the cautious touch of ambiguity concerning Mrs. Alfyorov herself. It is not quite clear whether this woman really is Ganin’s Mary. The photograph that Ganin sees is not described, nor is the impression that it produces on him. While Ganin is looking at the picture, we hear only Alfyorov’s comments: “And that’s Mary, my wife. Poor snapshot, but quite a good likeness all the same. And here’s another, taken in our garden. Mary’s the one sitting, in the white dress. I haven’t seen her for four years. But I don’t suppose she’s changed much. I really don’t know how I’ll survive till Saturday. Wait! Where are you going, Lev Glebovich? Do stay!” (M, 25).

It is significant that though the English version of Mary follows the Russian original with a fidelity matched only by that of Invitation to a Beheading, the dress of Alfyorov’s wife is described as “white,” whereas it is “light” (svetloe) in the Russian text (Ma, 42). The word “light” can suggest “flimsy,” which Nabokov might have wished to avoid, yet whatever considerations determined his choice, the epithet “white” brings to mind the white dress that Mary had worn for her intended bridal night with Ganin (see M, 72). Ganin may have merely projected familiar features onto the “poor snapshot,” subconsciously prompted by the white dress and the mention of a yellow-bearded

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10Nabokov may have encountered this technique in Dickens, with whose work he was made familiar in childhood. In Bleak House, for instance, it is only from Sir Leicester’s belated reaction that we learn about Lady Dedlock’s having fainted at the sight of a piece of writing.
admirer in Mary’s letter to him (M, 92)—Alfyorov sports a little yellow beard. In the first chapter of the novel Ganin narrowly escapes being shown Mrs. Alfyorov’s letter and thus loses his chance to recognize the handwriting.

Moreover, the concatenation of memories starts not with Mary herself but with Ganin’s convalescence after typhus; just before showing Ganin his wife’s picture, Alfyorov produces the picture of his sister who, he says, died of typhus. Typhus may therefore be the key to Pandora’s box of memories, and the four days that Ganin spends reliving his romance may have originated in a mnemonic trick. In retrospect, Mary thus appears to contain elements of the “sources” (Roots III) technique that Nabokov perfected in his later fiction.

The touch of ambiguity suggests that no matter who Alfyorov’s wife may turn out to be, she is not the Mary whom Ganin had loved. This could provide aesthetic justification for Ganin’s retreat at the end of the novel; therefore, Nabokov undermines the ambiguity by giving Ganin a few minutes to reexamine the photographs before Klara surprises him in Alfyorov’s room (see M, 35). Moreover, in The Defense, Mrs. Luzhin admires Alfyorov’s wife (see D, 203): there may, of course, be more than one nice woman by the name of Mashen’ka in “real life,” but fiction does not usually imitate “real life” to that extent.

By the time Nabokov wrote Mary he had already translated Alice in Wonderland into Russian, and it would not be surprising to find him basing the most appealing part of the protagonist’s experience on a mistake or a dream, as he would later do in “The Affair of Honor” (1927), The Waltz Invention (1938), and other works. Yet one must acknowledge the wisdom of his refraining from the use of this framework in Mary. Had the doubt about the identity of Alfyorov’s wife been given greater force, the aesthetic aptness of Ganin’s final choice would have eclipsed the ugliness of his decision to abandon the woman he had loved to the life of sordid compromise from which he himself escapes. The tentativeness of the ambiguity, especially when compared with the flourishing of this technique in Invitation to a Beheading, is indicative of the novelist’s attitude toward Ganin: faced with the ambivalence of Ganin’s conduct, Nabokov tips the scale in favor of criticism rather than justification.

V

Another Nabokovian technique, somewhat more clearly evident in Mary, is the ultimate cancelation of the protagonist by remind-
ing the reader of his fictionality. At the end of the novel Ganin goes to the southwest of Germany, whence he intends to continue to France and the sea—"without a single visa" (M, 114). That cryptic remark refers either to the fact that, unlike Podtyagin, Ganin has a forged Polish passport (a counterfeit identity?), which gives him greater freedom, or else to the fact that he does not care about the legality of his transits. If the latter possibility is read figuratively, however, the remark may also be understood to mean that Ganin does not need a visa for where he is going—back to the "involute abode" (PF, 63) whence he has emerged—any more than Podtyagin needs a passport or Mr. Silbermann of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight needs money. Ganin is dismissed after having served his purpose as a beneficiary of one of the most touching parts of his creator's past. On seeing the movie in which he himself appears as an extra,11 Ganin thinks that "the whole of life seem[s] like a piece of film-making where heedless extras [know] nothing of the picture in which they [are] taking part" (M, 22). The remark is more than a piece of homespun philosophy: at this point in the narrative Ganin does not yet know what the novelist (the "Assistant Producer"? See ND, 71) has in store for him, though only a short while later he will knock on Alfyorov's door and be shown some photographs. Nabokov is generous to Ganin; not only does he give him the love of Mary and four happy days of memories, but he also arranges the possibility that the lovers' paths will cross again. The rest, however, is left, as it were, for Ganin to decide. Nabokov does not seek out plausible accidents to prevent an aesthetically impossible reunion. Instead, he presents Ganin as the kind of person who would choose to renounce Mary—one whose choice is as much in character as Martha's decision to abort her husband's murder at the end of King, Queen, Knave.

Nabokov's last novel, Look at the Harlequins!, contains a significant allusion to Browning's "My Last Duchess," in which the Duke of Ferrara admires the beautiful portrait of his late wife much more than he had appreciated the original; he has, it is implied, deprived the lady of her young life and, so to say, turned her into the picture that he had commissioned. In Mary, Ganin prefers his beautiful internalized image of the woman he has loved to the woman herself. His decision not to

11By a "chance that mimics choice" (TD, 230), the English word "extra" for the Russian statist evokes an association with the notion of "superfluous person" (lishnii chelovek) that Russian criticism sometimes applies to those exiled romantic heroes: Pushkin's Onegin, Lermontov's Pechorin, Turgenev's Rudin.
see Mary at the end of the novel is motivated by his wish to separate his image of her from the real person that she may have become. This insistence on a strict partition is opposed to true creativity, which seeks to reduce the distance between the real and the ideal.

As Ganin is waiting for Mary’s train to arrive, the corresponding span of the representational time is filled with the description of the splendid morning; this description is discontinued as soon as he decides against meeting Mary. Before his final resolution is made, Ganin’s keen observation of the details of the scene is said to mean “a secret turning point for him, an awakening” (M, 113); yet in the last sentence, after he has boarded a Southbound train, he is shown falling into a doze, “his face buried in the folds of his mackintosh” (M, 114). Ganin’s awakening is canceled, together with the protagonist himself: the dawn and the “curiously calming effect” (M, 114) of the sight of workmen building a house stand for his author’s feelings upon completing the novel. In his introduction to Mary, Nabokov explains his use of autobiographical material as motivated by a writer’s “relief of getting rid of oneself, before going on to better things” (M, xi). His criticism of Ganin may to some extent have exorcised the irrational feeling of guilt that transpires through the ending of the “Tamara” segment (chapter 12) of Speak, Memory, with its thought of “Tamara’s” letters reaching the Crimea after the addressee has sailed away.

Be that as it may, though aesthetic appropriateness does not justify Ganin’s decision, it does justify the narrative choices of the author. If it is Nabokov’s imagination that balks at the penultimate moment and thus prevents the reunion, it does so in order to keep the carnivalistic element inherent in the theme of sympathy well under control. He is prepared to carry sympathy only to a certain point, and that point is the threshold beyond which sympathy denies detachment and contact threatens to become merger. The need for a balance between sympathy and detachment is the structural idea that governs the relationship between the themes and techniques of Mary.