Nabokov

Toker, Leona

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Glory: "Good Example of How Metaphysics Can Fool You"

Nabokov's Glory (Podvig, 1932), translated into English in 1971 (later than his other Russian novels), is probably the most underrated of his longer narratives. In the thirties, part of the émigré audience was antagonized by the book's refusal to keep what seemed to be its promise of a patriotic message; today, readers tend to show an interest mainly in its autobiographical element (images of the Cambridge life, of the Crimea, of visits to Switzerland) and to wonder at the relative straightforwardness of its narrative. In fact, however, Glory is as complex as any of the later works. It is the first novel to adumbrate Nabokov's cautious metaphysics, a novel that masks eschatological anxiety with apparent simplicity and a lyrical tone.

Glory presents a conflict between the protagonist's version of the Romantic quest and his commitments to other people. The quest is explored, and implicitly criticized, through a self-referential use of recurrent imagery intertwined with the technique of involution, the Möbius-strip-like relationship between the fictional world and the implied author's mind.

For Nabokov, as for his contemporary Jorge Luis Borges (see the latter's "Circular Ruins" and "A Game of Chess"), the relationship between the fictional world and its creator is a tentative model for the solution of "the mystery of the universe," the mystery of the relation-

1See, e.g., the hostile and troubled review of Podvig by V. Varshavskii in Tchisla, 7-8 (1933), 266-67.
2See, e.g., Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art, pp. 118, 123.
ship between the humanly cognizable and transcendent worlds. The "creator" in question is not so much the historical author as the creative consciousness, the "involute abode" (PF, 63) in which the characters and their worlds are conceived and to which they are ultimately supposed to return. The conventional "omniscience" of this creative consciousness suggests the idea of the "infinite consciousness" (BS, 192) that one wishes to attribute to transcendent reality.

In the The Defense this model takes the shape of an inchoate en abîme pattern; in Glory it takes the shape of involution.³ Involution is a tangling of hierarchies, the erosion of the border between the "inside" and the "outside," between the fictional world and the mind of its author. The Defense contains rudiments of this technique: Luzhin's madness is presented almost as a glimpse into the consciousness of his creator. Glory develops this hint into a structural principle yet, unlike Invitation to a Beheading and Bend Sinister, does not lay it bare. Rather, it camouflages involution and thereby deemphasizes its metaphysical probings. The reason for the mask is indirectly suggested in the foreword, in which Nabokov states the specific aim of this novel:

The book's—certainly very attractive—working title (later discarded in favor of the pithier Podvig, "gallant feat," "high deed") was Romantitcheskiy vek, "romantic times," which I had chosen partly because I had had enough of hearing Western journalists call our era "materialistic," "practical," "utilitarian," etc., but mainly because the purpose of my novel, my only one with a purpose, lay in stressing the thrill and the glamour that my young expatriate finds in the most ordinary pleasures as well as in the seemingly meaningless adventures of a lonely life. [Gl, x]

The central explicit concern of Glory is, indeed, "the thrill and the glamour" of the humanly cognizable: that is, the beauty of the mask, not the nature of what it conceals. Yet to paraphrase Nabokov's Bend Sinister, every mask contains slits for the eyes (see BS, 7). The protagonist, Martin Edelweiss, does not probe behind the mask any more than Luzhin does in The Defense, but his reason is not Luzhin's fear of the unknown. Martin is one of the Nabokovian characters who are irresistibly attracted to something "that would always remain incom-

³For en abîme, see Chapter 5, n. 9. The term "involution" derives from the adjective "involute," in its literal meaning most frequently used as a geometrical term; figuratively, it occurs in Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" and in John Shade's poem in Nabokov's Pale Fire. I have borrowed the word "involution" from Alfred Appel; however, he uses it in a broader sense, referring to signs of the author's control of the fictional universe (see "Nabokov's Puppet Show," pp. 87–93).
prehensible” (Gl, 11) but who mistake the nature of their quest. He lacks that intellectual intensity which the better-endowed Luzhin channels away from the surrounding world into surrogate harmonies. Unlike Luzhin, Martin Edelweiss deeply appreciates the world of experience but, finding the Wordsworthian “burthen of the mystery” beyond his endurance, develops a suicidal tendency and a lack of moral considerateness similar to those of Luzhin. Glory is in many ways a variation on the theme of The Defense, though in different colors and different “nuances of noise” (LATH, 118).

The formula that connects what Nabokov would call the “vessel and content” (PP, 158) of Glory enters into a chiasmic relationship with the structural principle of The Defense. Whereas in reading The Defense we reenact the error of Luzhin if we turn away from the novel’s human interest for the sake of complex chess patterns, in reading Glory we reenact the error of Martin Edelweiss if we fail to see the deceptiveness behind the apparent simplicity of the weirdly beautiful tale. Thus, like The Defense, Glory displays an element of the reader entrapment that will flourish in Nabokov’s Lolita.

I

What is Martin’s quest?

The “glory” of this character is, as Nabokov mentions in an interview, his triumph over fear (see SO, 88). The fear in question is not the fear of death but the fear of fear itself: “Martin noticed that on occasion he was so afraid of seeming unmanly, to become known as a coward, that he involuntarily reacted in just the way a coward would—the blood left his face, his legs trembled, and his heart pounded tightly in his chest. Admitting to himself that he was not possessed of genuine, innate sang-froid, he nevertheless firmly resolved to behave always as a fearless man would in his place” (Gl, 13). Accordingly, what Martin fears is not death but the test of conduct that death would entail:

No matter how poorly Martin might have slept, after bathing he would be permeated with a beneficent vigor. At such times the thought of death, the thought that sometime, maybe soon (who could know?), he would be compelled to surrender and go through what billions and trillions of humans had gone through before him—this thought of an inevitable death accessible to everyone troubled him but slightly. It gained strength
only toward evening, and with the coming of night would sometimes swell to monstrous dimensions. The custom of performing executions at dawn seemed charitable to Martin: may the Lord permit it to happen in the morning when a man has control over himself—clears his throat, smiles, then stands straight, spreading his arms. [Gl, 182]

Victory over fear is not, moreover, a goal in itself for Martin. This victory, demonstrated by his return to the cliff where he had once almost lost his life (see Gl, 169–70), is but a preparatory stage for his fatal ultimate exploit—his expedition to Russia. The purpose of the expedition is apolitical in intent if not in implication: Martin wishes to see the Russian autumn once more in his life. Indirect commentary on this compulsion is provided by the earlier of Nabokov's two poems called "Rasstrel" ("The Execution"), the one dated 1927 and included in a literal translation in his 1970 volume Poems and Problems. The lyrical hero imagines himself paying a hard penalty for the chance to revisit the racemosa in bloom:

On certain nights as soon as I lie down
my bed starts drifting into Russia,
and presently I'm led to a ravine,
to a ravine led to be killed.

I wake—and in the darkness, from a chair
where watch and matches lie,
into my eyes, like a gun's steadfast muzzle,
the glowing dial stares.

... ... ...

The watch's ticking comes in contact
with frozen consciousness;
the fortunate protection
of my exile I repossess.

But how you would have wished, my heart,
that thus it all had really been:
Russia, the stars, the night of execution
and full of racemosas the ravine!

[PP, 47]

It must be noted, however, that Martin's nostalgia is different from that expressed in the poem. The imaginary action of the poem is set in
spring, the season of the racemosa; Martin's expedition is supposed to take place in autumn. Spring, judging also by the 1920 poem "Not without Tears" ("Ya bez slez ne mogu": S, 36), would have been Nabokov's chosen season for an ecstatic reunion with his native land. Most important, however, the lyrical hero of the poem can renounce the racemosa because his longing for it is a natural longing for the unique elements of the ecological niche from which he has been exiled. The nostalgia of Martin Edelweiss is more than that; it leads him into self-sacrifice because it is endowed with a misplaced mysticism.

Indeed, like the characters of Joseph Heller's We Bombed in New Haven, Martin seems to have caught glimpses of the script. His early thoughts about death are the involute insight of a doomed "galley slave" (see SO, 95) into his creator's mind.

The subliminal awareness of mystery brings Martin's experience close to that of his author. The strong autobiographical element of Glory is obliquely commented on in the text: Nabokov seems to have indulged the "writer's covetousness (so akin to the fear of death), . . . that constant state of anxiety compelling one to fix indelibly this or that evanescent trifle" (Gl, 60). And yet Martin is not a fictional extension of Nabokov—if only because he is deliberately deprived of artistic talent (see Gl, xiii)—and granted an anticipation of death in its stead. Anticipation of death heightens one's perceptiveness, as though familiar objects were about to "break into tragic speech demanding attention before the impending separation" (Gl, 179). Martin's response to this demand qualifies him as an appreciative recipient of images from his author's past. It is in its consequences that a "writer's covetousness" is "so akin to the fear of death."

Martin becomes conscious of this almost morbidly keen sensitivity when the doubts concerning his safe return from a clandestine expedition to Russia become too strong to be repressed:

The late afternoon sky was a sunless cheerless blank. The sound of automobile horns now seemed muffled by the mist. An open van passed by drawn by a pair of scrawny horses; upon it enough furniture was heaped to furnish a house: a couch, a chest of drawers, a gilt-framed seascape, and a lot of other melancholy chattels. A woman in mourning crossed the damp-dappled asphalt; she was pushing a pram, and in it sat a blue-eyed attentive infant; on reaching the sidewalk she pushed down the handle forcing the pram to rear. A poodle ran past in pursuit of a black whippet;
the latter stopped and looked back in fear, raising one bent front paw and quivering. "What's the matter, for goodness' sake," thought Martin. "What's all this to me? I know I'm going to return. I must return." [Gl, 196]\(^4\)

Yet it is the same sensitivity, enhanced by frequent thoughts about death, that makes "everything in the world so strange, so thrillful" (Gl, 49) for him long before calling attention to itself. The "thrillfulness" of Martin's world is the aesthetic justification for the mass of descriptive details, objects of the "writer's covetousness," that set Glory slightly apart from Nabokov's other novels.

Like the word "romantic" in the discarded title of the novel, the word "thrillfulness" is an allusion to natural supernaturalism, the "thrill" experienced by a Romantic sensibility in the presence of seemingly trivial phenomena.\(^5\) The spirit of Wordsworth presides over the religious feeling that Martin's Anglophile mother wishes to transmit to her son: "She firmly believed in a certain power that bore the same resemblance to God as the house of a man one has never seen, his belongings, his greenhouse and beehives, his distant voice, heard by chance in an open field, bear to their owner. . . . This power had no connection with the Church, and neither absolved nor chastised any sins. It was just that she sometimes felt ashamed in the presence of a tree, of a cloud, of a dog, or of the air itself that bore an ill word just as religiously as a kind one" (Gl, 11).

Martin is less conscious of nature as an ethical entity and more capable of a loving attention to particulars, to natural phenomena as well as to man-made things. He appreciates vigorous athletic activities and the gifts of other people's fantasy: "Nothing was wasted on Martin—neither the crunchy English cookies, nor the adventures of King Arthur's knights" (Gl, 6). His best Cambridge friend, Darwin, shares this feature of Martin's character to the extent of writing a book of descriptions (of corkscrews and so on) modeled, one could surmise, not so much on Thoreau's Walden as on V. Sirin's "Guide to Berlin"

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\(^4\)This autumnal scene is reminiscent of the summer scene that creates a wave of unaccountable happiness in both the narrator and the protagonist of "Recruiting"—two characters who are destined to prompt cancellation by the author.

\(^5\)It is noteworthy that the idea of the defamiliarization of the familiar, which is a clue to Nabokov's texture and is generally attributed to Russian formalist criticism, should in fact be traced back at least to Wordsworth's "Preface to Lyrical Ballads."
Moreover, Martin shares Wordsworth’s, Nabokov’s, and perhaps the fictional Lev Ganin’s capacity for poetic memories, yet unlike Ganin he is also capable of finding beauty in the fictional present:

The splendid autumn he had just seen in Switzerland somehow kept lingering in the background of his first Cambridge impressions. In the morning a delicate haze would enshroud the Alps. A broken cluster of rowan berries lay in the middle of the road, whose ruts were filmed with micalike ice. Despite the absence of wind the bright-yellow birch leafage thinned out with every passing day, and the turquoise sky gazed through it with pensive gaiety. The luxuriant ferns grew reddish; iridescent shreds of spiderweb, which Uncle Henry called “the Virgin’s hair,” floated about. Martin would look up, thinking that he heard the remote blare of migrating cranes, but no cranes were to be seen. He used to wander around a great deal, as if searching for something; he rode the dilapidated bicycle belonging to one of the menials along the rustling paths, while his mother, seated on a bench beneath a maple, pensively pierced the damp crimson leaves on the brown ground with the point of her walking stick.

The fragile, evanescent quality of the imagery in this description of the Alpine autumn (“a delicate haze,” “filmed with micalike ice,” “iridescent shreds of spiderweb”) may be compared with Shelley’s attempts to arrest “the shadow of an awful power” through reference to indefinable qualities and elusive phenomena; the coloration of Glory is pervasively Romantic. Martin Edelweiss, who wanders around “as if searching for something,” is troubled by a sense of both the proximity and the elusiveness of the object of his quest: the forests near his uncle’s chalet resemble but do not reproduce the Russian landscapes of his childhood—flocks of migrating cranes, for instance, do not fly over the Alps in autumn. On a night after blue butterflies (signs of the involute presence of the author) flutter near his window, Martin seems to reach a conclusion about the cause of his restlessness: hearing the word “Russia” pronounced after one of his uncanny sensations connects the mysterious “beckoning” with thoughts of the lost birth-

6Cf. Mrs. Bolotov’s surprise in Pnin at finding southern plants and animals in the New England forest, the “birches and bilberries” of which deceive her “into placing mentally Lake Onkwedo, not on the parallel of, say, Lake Ohrida in the Balkans, where it belong[s], but on that of Lake Onega in northern Russia” (P, 120).

7One feels entitled to the surmise that these blue Alpine butterflies are related to Lycaenides samuelis Nabokov (see Chapter 2, n. 8).
place: “The warm, black night pressed in through window and door. Suddenly Martin raised his head and hearkened as if there were a vague beckoning in this harmony of night and candle flame. ‘The last time this patience came out was in Russia,’ said Sofia” (Gl, 48). Thus Martin mistakes the nature of his Holy Grail—not for a sexual union with an eidolon, as is the case with Albert Albinus and Humbert Humbert,8 but for the beauty of his native land.

Martin seeks this land not like Antaeus but like a knight-errant who must save it—from wasting behind the glass in the cupboard of his Cambridge professor Archibald Moon. This is why he postpones his expedition to Russia until autumn: in that season he can test Moon’s translation of Pushkin’s ode “Autumn” against the real landscape. The role of Archibald Moon as a stimulus for Martin’s suicide mission is made particularly clear in the English version of the novel. Evading the political discussions of his Cambridge friends, Martin reads them Pushkin’s ode, which he considers an expression of the quintessential Russian experience. In the Russian version of the novel he reads the poem in the original, supplying his own gloss and explanations. In the English version, however, it is the translation written by Nabokov for Archibald Moon9 that Martin offers to his friends:

O dismal period, visual enchantment!
Sweet is to me thy farewell loveliness!
I love the sumptuous withering of nature,
The woods arrayed in gold and purple dress.

[Gl, 57]

This translation, in which the denotational meanings and the prosody are preserved but the inappropriate connotations produce an effect different from that of Pushkin’s ode, is entirely in Archibald Moon’s character. Moon is engaged at a snail’s-pace in writing an English language history of Russia: “one plump volume,” an “obvious motto (‘A thing of beauty is a joy forever’), ultrathin paper, a soft Morocco binding” (Gl, 64). In Nabokov’s Look at the Harlequins! the line from Keats’s Endymion is translated into Russian in such a naughty way that upon retranslation into English it turns into “A pretty bauble always

9By the time the English version of Glory was prepared, Nabokov had already completed his literal translation of Eugene Onegin, pursuant to his disapproval of rhyming translations.
gladdens us" (LATH, 77). Since Moon’s Russia is just such a decorative bauble, the reader can sympathize with Martin’s ultimate rejection of Moon, or with his feeling that the “innermost, mysterious something” which, in terms of less esoteric creeds, is the spark of the divine within the human, binds together “the expedition, the love, and Pushkin’s ode to autumn” (Gl, 189). 

II

Yet though the expedition becomes for Martin exactly what Sonya Zilanov means by duty, “the kind of thing which has an inner importance” (Gl, 94); and though his role changes from that of “traveling playboy” (GI, 145; puteshstvuyushchii barchuk: Pd, 167) to that of knight-errant; and even though in the foreword Nabokov describes him as “the kindest, uprightest, and most touching” of his young men (Gl, xi), the novel does not request us to approve of Martin’s “high deed.” On the contrary, Martin’s pursuit of his “duty” is presented as egotistic. Like Ganin in Mary, Martin feels no responsibility 

10Martin Edelweiss can be read as Nabokov’s reply to Martin Decoud of Conrad’s Nostromo (several aspects of the relationship between Nabokov and Conrad are discussed in my article “A Nabokovian Character in Conrad’s Nostromo”), an expatriate who returns to his native land, risking his life to win the hand of the woman he loves. Both come from patrician families and both flee revolutions; the “Noble White” of Edelweiss’s botanical name calls to mind the Blanco party affiliations of Decoud. Conrad’s hero undertakes a daring expedition in order to escape a firing squad and shoots himself when he is unable to cope with solitude and silence; Edelweiss, whose expedition is tantamount to suicide, is rumored to have been shot as a spy on the Russian border (Gl, 100). In his last days Decoud is unable to think about the people who would be affected by his death—in his solitude he cannot even accept their existence; Edelweiss refuses to consider the misery to which his death would subject his mother. Neither is a genuine patriot like Don José Avellanos of Nostromo or Zilanov of Glory. Yet Edelweiss rejects a career in journalism, whereas Decoud achieves fame by his articles about Costaguana in the French press as well as by the demagoguery of his Costaguana gazette. It seems that had Decoud remained abroad, he would have been content with mummifying his country the way Nabokov’s Archibald Moon mummifies Russia. In a sense, the flirtatious, fickle, abrasive Sonya Zilanov, “the patriot’s daughter,” is Antonia Avellanos brought up in a laxer discipline and forced into exile. Sonya is one of Nabokov’s wasted women, ranging from Klara in Mary to the heroine of “A Russian Beauty.” She is a romantic dreamer, like Martin, but unlike Martin she remains staunchly (though not uncomplainingly) attached to her defeated family. It is noteworthy that in the English version Sonya’s image is painted in somewhat mellower colors than in the Russian original.
toward the people who surround him; his "duty," unlike Sonya's, is primarily to himself, to his private images of himself and of his native land. The glimpses that the novel gives us of his mother's anguish after he fails to return from Russia (see Gl, 74, 100) emphasize his callousness; the feeling of guilt that he bequeaths to Sonya and Darwin without having experienced it himself suggests the cruelty of a child who hurts himself in order to punish his nurse. Martin achieves his "glory" at the expense of human commitments, and we are at liberty to doubt whether the end justifies the means.

Martin's pursuit of an ideal undermines the morality of his decisions. The pursuit itself, moreover, is misdirected. The narrative suggests that he has responded to a call that he has overheard, a call not issued to him: "Thus something happy and languorous lured him from afar, but was not addressed to him" (Gl, 46). He keeps finding himself in the wrong places at the wrong times. Arriving at the white Alpine hotel that has mysteriously attracted him, Martin finds nothing of interest—"good example of how metaphysics can fool you" (Gl, 76). Leaving the train in pursuit of the mysterious lights that fascinate nocturnal travelers, he lands in a village that cannot be seen from the railroad. Indeed, Martin is not qualified for the quest of mystery; he does not fit into any of the three categories of Nabokovian characters—the lover, the poet, and the madman—who (in accordance with Shakespearean tradition) are granted an awareness of something beyond the ordinary human experience. Martin is untalented and sane, and even his love for Sonya creeps on him unawares, eliding the stage of Vlyublionnost' (the "being in love": LATH, 25-26) which, in

11Nabokov's 1935 short story "Breaking the News" shows the magnitude of the catastrophe that a son's death is for his mother. His 1925 poem "The Mother" (PP, 32-33) is devoted to Mary's anguish after Golgotha.

12Martin's conduct contrasts with the ostensibly cruel behavior of Kuznetsoff in Nabokov's early play The Man from the USSR (MUSSR, 32-122). Kuznetsoff is engaged in attempts to overthrow the Communist regime in Russia; he leaves his wife in Berlin and treats her with demonstrative callousness in order to make her stop loving him. Kuznetsoff thinks he is acting with moral courage; since he exposes himself to danger, it is unbearable for him to recognize that his wife is tormentingly worried about him. Instead, he prefers to blacken his image in her eyes—but even this he cannot quite bring himself to do and therefore departs with the knowledge that she is as much a casualty of his exploits as are the friends whom, in a diversionary maneuver, he had sent on to the firing squad. One is forced to wonder whether Kuznetsoff's actions are really motivated by the selfless wish to free Russia from the Bolshevik rule or by a self-emulating imitation of Napoleon's glory.

13See the epigraph to Chapter 4.
Nabokov’s novels, opens the door on the beyond (see Chapter 4, above). It is therefore not surprising that in addition to misinterpreting the origin of the obscure beckoning, Martin also mistakenly believes that the Russia he yearns for is recoverable otherwise than in memory and imagination.

What is that mysterious something which Martin mistakes for a call of his autumnal Russia?

III

The question must be answered in terms of the relationship between the fictional world and the mind of its creator as a model for the solution of the Mystery. Martin seems to share the “gnostical turpitude” (IB, 72) of Cincinnatus C., the vague gnostical self-knowledge that comes to him in his childhood and reaches a peak in adolescence, when he is standing at the edge of a Crimean precipice: “The crickets kept crepitating; from time to time there came a sweet whiff of burning juniper; and above the black alpestrine steppe, above the silken sea, the enormous, all-engulfing sky, dove-gray with stars, made one’s head spin, and suddenly Martin again experienced a feeling he had known on more than one occasion as a child: an unbearable intensification of all his senses, a magical and demanding impulse, the presence of something for which alone it was worth living” (GI, 20).

This is mystical experience that somehow misses its peak; and the “demanding impulse” that arises from the “unbearable intensification” of the senses is the impulse to merge with the “something for which alone it was worth living,” not just to feel its presence. Martin is attracted to the “involute abode” of which his soul is a part. Denied the possibility of reaching out to that abode through a leap of creative imagination, he can only merge with it through death, the irreversible sacrifice of identity.

In the fragment “Ultima Thule” (1939–40), the man who claims to have had the Mystery revealed to him maintains that however one may imagine the hereafter, it necessarily involves a dissolution of identities (see RB, 176–77). Nabokov’s earnest though tentative preoccupation with this idea is evident also in other texts, for example in Pnin, a novel that contains the often quoted reflections on life as discreteness (see Chapter 2). If death threatens the discreteness of the soul, then the death of a fictional character is a cancellation of his independent dis-
crete identity, his return to and dissolution in the "involute abode" of the novelist's mind. The "ghost" of the character who is shown dying in the beginning or the middle of the novel may still survive in this involute abode and hover over the remaining portion of the narrative in the guise of recurrent imagery, cross-reference, or even acrostic, as in the end of "The Vane Sisters" (1951). A character's leitmotif may take the place of his or her physical presence in the fictional world. This "haunting" (to extend the metaphor) is one of the techniques of involution used in *Glory* as well as in Nabokov's other works (*Bend Sinister* and *Transparent Things*, in particular). It expresses the author's reluctance to admit that death is annihilation, his reluctance to accept the "inanity of accumulating incalculable treasures of thought and sensation, and thought-behind-thought and sensation-behind-sensation, to lose them all at once and forever in a fit of black nausea followed by infinite nothingness" (*BS*, 99). How can one imagine that the world of man's consciousness can disappear without trace while gross matter is preserved by the law of conservation? Recollecting a speck of dust removed from his eye in childhood, the narrator of *Pnin* wonders where that speck could be after all the intervening years, and notes "the dull, mad fact . . . that it *does* exist somewhere" (*P*, 176).

In his novels Nabokov creates a universe in which the characters do not perish after death. Instead, they return to and become part of the involute abode—the mind of the author, the aesthetic realm, the library of Babel. It is this involute abode which issues the unwarranted call that Martin misinterprets and in which the spirit of his father survives. Martin was therefore not wholly mistaken when, held at gunpoint by a drunkard at the beginning of the novel, he "imagined that perhaps his father was expecting him that night, that perhaps he was making preparations of some kind for their meeting—and here Martin caught himself feeling a strange hostility toward his father, for which he reproached himself for a long time" (*GI*, 15).

Martin does not know that preparations are being made not by his father but by his author. It is the author who handles the motif of firearms in such a way that the gun collection in the apartment of Martin's father foreshadows both the unloaded gun with which the

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4The presence of "ghosts" in Nabokov's novels is the subject of W. W. Rowe, *Nabokov's Spectral Dimension* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1981). Rowe's study of recurrent imagery as it relates to Nabokov's characters is valuable, but his understanding of Nabokov's ghosts is too literal.
drunkard threatens Martin and also the “more modern” (GI, 2) and better equipped weapons ready to put an end to his life as he crosses the Russian border. However, we shall see that, contrary to dramatic precept, the gun that hangs on the wall in the “first act” does not fire in the third (nor does it turn into a cigarette lighter, as in King, Queen, Knave). The life of Nabokov’s images does not follow convention.

It is the author’s realism that resembles the “malevolent force obstinately trying to convince [Martin] that life [is] not at all the easy happy thing he [has] imagined” (GI, 102), the author’s intention that plays the role of the “inner sentinel” forbidding to Martin’s “vocal cords the sounds that [live] in his ears” (GI, 163), and the author’s handling of the recurrent imagery that foreshadows Martin’s end.

IV

The central element of this imagery is one of Martin’s two leitmotifs—the winding path that disappears into a forest. It first appears at the very beginning of the novel:

On the bright wall above the narrow crib . . . hung a watercolor depicting a dense forest with a winding path disappearing into its depths. Now in one of the English books that his mother used to read to him . . . there was a story about just such a picture with a path in the woods, right above the bed of a little boy, who, one fine night, just as he was, nightshirt and all, went from his bed into the picture, onto the path that disappeared into the woods. His mother, thought Martin anxiously, might notice the resemblance between the watercolor on the wall and the illustration in the book; she would then become alarmed and, according to his calculations, avert the nocturnal journey by removing the picture. Therefore every time he prayed in bed before going to sleep . . . Martin prayed God that she would not notice that tempting path right over his head. When, as a youth, he recalled the past, he would wonder if one night he had not actually hopped from bed to picture, and if this had not been the beginning of the journey, full of joy and anguish, into which his whole life had turned. [GI, 4–5]

Martin follows a forest path in his fantasies and dreams (see GI, 108, 156), and later the path materializes in the vicinity of his uncle’s chalet. Yet it is only at the end of the novel that Martin really “hops” into the dream picture that congeals into a reality: the expedition from which
he never returns is supposed to start at the border and continue along a forest path. Moreover, the novel ends with the image of Darwin walking along just such a winding path:

Darwin emerged from the brown depths of the melancholy garden... and started back along the path through the woods. There he paused to light his pipe. ... It was quiet in the woods, all one could hear was a faint gurgle: water was running somewhere under the wet gray snow. Darwin listened and for no perceptible reason shook his head. His pipe, which had gone out, emitted a helpless sucking sound. He said something under his breath, rubbed his cheek pensively, and walked on. The air was dingy, here and there tree roots traversed the trail, black fir needles now and then brushed against his shoulder, the dark path passed between the tree trunks in picturesque and mysterious windings.

[GL, 205]

The last lines seem to depict not only Darwin's experience but also Martin's after he crosses the Russian border. The Swiss forest in which Darwin is following a footpath—the author having arranged for his car to break down—is so similar to a Russian forest that earlier in the novel Martin has half expected the vegetation to open upon a Russian village instead of an Alpine slope (see Gl, 169). Both Martin and Darwin thus fulfill Martin's childhood dream of passing to a different dimension via a picture of a forest path.

This self-referential use of recurrent imagery forms a case of involution, a frame-breaking transition from the fictional world, through an inset, to the consciousness of the author. The technique is prominent at the end of Bend Sinister: the puddle that Krug has seen from a hospital window turns out to be the puddle that the authorial persona sees from the window of his room in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The...

15The image of the path links Martin with Isabel, the daughter of the protagonist of Look at the Harlequins!. Isabel too leaves the West for the Soviet Union. Her one-way journey, however, is a demonstrative change of allegiance, not so much from one political system to another as from her father to her husband, whose unstable course leads her away from her umnitsa tropka (LATH, 202), the “intelligent trail” (LATH, 171) of the poem written in her mismanaged childhood.

16See Chapter 1, n. 23.

17This is another case of Genette's metalepsis, a transgressional movement from one narrative level to another (see Chapter 2, n. 4). In Glory it takes place in a metaphorical sense: it is not the character but his image (a “ghost,” a leitmotif) that is transferred from one representation of a forest to another.
picture of the forest on the wall of Martin’s nursery, its frame having moved beyond the field of vision, becomes the setting of the novel’s last scene.

The sound of the water that Darwin hears in this forest scene is Martin’s second leitmotif. Martin is not prepared to give up his morning ablutions “in the sea, in a pond, in a shower, or in [the collapsible rubber] tub” (Gl, 182)—one cannot possibly imagine him trapped in the GULAG system. He leaves Russia by sea; he boats in the Cam; in Molignac his favorite job is to conduct the water from the reservoir in the yard to the nurseries; on the night when he is awaiting a sign from the spirit of Sonya Zilanov’s dead sister, “the level of silence [keeps] rising, and all at once [pours] over the brim” (Gl, 92), bringing Sonya to him as on a wave; and on the night when he awaits a sign from his dead father, he hears the “real” waves, the booming surf of the Black Sea (see Gl, 12). The faint gurgle of the water running under the snow in the last scene of the novel may thus suggest that Martin has merged with that involute sphere which is now beckoning to the reluctant Darwin.

V

Darwin does seem to merge with Martin in the same involute forest scene where his cancellation by the novelist becomes final. His ultimate unreality is foreshadowed in the novel, just as is Martin’s disappearance into the picture of the forest. In the foreword Nabokov notes that unlike Vadim and Teddy, Darwin is “totally invented” (Gl, xi); Sonya refuses to marry him on the grounds that “he isn’t a real person” (Gl, 113)—words that in the broader context acquire a meaning of which she is not aware. He goes to the ball dressed like an Englishman from a Continental novel and plays this part with gusto. In the end the reader is forced to accept Darwin as a fictional character, an Englishman from a Continental novel, whose identity has been canceled even before the last lines.

Martin likewise ascends to the involute abode through cancellation rather than through physical death. As in the case of Cincinnatus, his death is not recorded in the text. The “open ending” of Glory can be interpreted in the following way.

Just before setting out on his expedition, Martin visits a Russian bookstore in Berlin. The owner of the store is familiar to Nabokov’s readers from the novella The Eye, written just before Glory. Like all
the insane, or half-insane, characters in Nabokov's fiction, this man is
given a glimpse of his creator's mind: in *The Eye* he knows, for in-
stance, that a clandestine expedition is being prepared, though not that
it is to take place in another novel. The bookseller is on the constant
lookout for Soviet agents; Nabokov, as his short story "The Assistant
Producer" (1943) shows, knew that such fears were not ungrounded.
It is therefore not improbable that there should be a spy in the world of
*Glory*; one may in fact wonder whether Martin is not betrayed by
Gruzinov.

Unlike the other patriots Zilanov and Yogolevich, Gruzinov—
famous for his illegal shuttling across the Russian border—is securely
affluent and inscrutable. His manner to Martin suggests that of a KGB
agent who is somehow moved to warn his future victim. Martin
confides his plans to Gruzinov under the pretense of trying to help
a friend named Nicky (Kolya) and does not recognize his feeling of
déjà vu as the warning the author adds to that of Gruzinov:

> The two English girls wanted [Gruzinov] to come and have ice cream (he
> was popular with young ladies, for whose benefit he assumed the char-
> acter of an easygoing simpleton). "How they like to bother me," Gruz-
> inov said, "I never eat ice cream, anyway." It seemed to Martin for an
> instant that sometime somewhere the same words had been spoken (as in
> Blok's play *Incognita*), and that then as now he was perplexed by some-
> thing, was trying to explain something. "Now here's my advice," said
> Gruzinov, dexterously rolling up the map and handing it back to Martin.
> "Tell Nicky to stay at home and find something constructive to do. A
> nice fellow, I'm sure, and it would be a pity if he lost his way."
> 
> [Gl, 177–78]

Even the allusion to a play in which characters seem to be admitted
into the mind of their creator does not deter Martin from his suicide
mission. Nor does he recollect that he has indeed already heard the
words spoken by Gruzinov (whose name is derived from *gruzin*, the
Russian for "Georgian"): once, lying in bed and half expecting a sign
from his recently dead father's spirit, Martin had dreamed that he was
"sitting in a classroom with his homework not done, while Lida kept
idly scratching her shin as she told him that Georgians did not eat ice
cream: 'Gruziny ne edyat morozhenogo' (Gl, 12).

Martin, as Nabokov notes in the foreword, is one of those rare
people whose "dreams come true" (Gl, xii). Not only are many of his
wishes granted, but even the shifts in the novel's space and time are
often effected in such a way as to trace the transformation of a dream image into "reality" (see Gl, 38, 49, 75). What Martin does not know, however, is that such a fulfillment is a danger signal. According to the protagonist-narrator of The Eye, “it is frightening when real life suddenly turns out to be a dream, but how much more frightening when that which one had thought a dream—fluid and irresponsible—suddenly starts to congeal into reality” (E, 108). As the déjà vu in the Gruzinov episode suggests, Martin’s wish to “contact” his father is about to be granted.

Significantly, however, it is never definitely established that Gruzinov alerts the Soviet forces of Martin’s arrival; in fact, it is not Gruzinov but the author who cancels Martin—just as at the end of Transparent Things it is the author who “judiciously” spreads some mysterious combustible liquid over Hugh Person’s hotel (TT, 103); just as at the end of Gogol’s “Portrait” it is the author who “steals” the fateful painting. Martin melts into thin air (like the major characters of Blok’s Incognita) during his last meeting with Darwin. In a sudden fit of fatigue Darwin lies down and dismisses Martin with the exasperated reluctance of a character from a British (rather than a Continental) novel, a Stephen Guest losing Maggie in The Mill on the Floss, or Mr. Rochester losing Jane Eyre:

Darwin, who lay calmly on the couch, yawned and turned his face to the wall. “So long,” said Martin but Darwin did not respond. “So long,” Martin repeated. “Nonsense, it can’t be true,” thought Darwin. He yawned again, and closed his eyes. “He won’t leave,” thought Darwin and sleepily pulled up one leg. For some time there endured an amusing silence. At last Darwin smiled softly and turned his head. But there was nobody in the room. It seemed impossible that Martin could have left so noiselessly. Perhaps he was hiding behind the furniture. Darwin remained lying a few minutes longer, then glanced warily around the already dimming room, put down his legs and straightened up. “Enough of it, now. Come out,” he said as he heard a slight rustle from the baggage recess between the wardrobe and the door. Nobody came out. Darwin went over and glanced into the recess. Nobody. Only a sheet of wrapping paper left over from some purchase. Darwin turned on the light, stood frowning, then opened the door leading into the passage. The passage was long, well lighted, and empty. The evening breeze tried to shut the window. “To hell with him,” said Darwin—and was lost in thought again. But suddenly he shook himself up and very deliberately started to change for dinner. [Gl, 200–201]
Whether or not Darwin is supposed to have fallen asleep and missed Martin's exit, the latter's physical presence is dissolved in this scene. All that remains of him is the distorted voice on the telephone a page later, several postcards ("the still visible beams of an already extinguished star": RB, 38), and images without substance in the memory of the characters and the texture of the closing description. Nabokov spares Martin the final blast by canceling his character before the execution—a finale that can be compared with the ending of Invitation to a Beheading, in which it is the setting rather than the character that is canceled at the penultimate moment. It is also analogous to the ending of Mary: Lev Ganin's reunion with Mary never takes place because he has not rehearsed it imaginatively; likewise, in his imagination Martin never succeeded in going beyond the preliminaries of his expedition. It is only his dream of disappearing into the forest that, to quote The Eye, ultimately "congeals into reality." As at the end of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, when Darwin reenacts Martin's experience on the "intelligent trail" (LATH, 171), both seem to rejoin "someone" whom neither of them knows.

A physical death of the kind that the author spares Martin does take place outside this particular script: namely, in the second of Nabokov's two poems bearing the title "Rasstrel" ("The Execution") and dealing with the vision of a firing squad. This poem, dated 1928 (a year later than the one quoted above) is closer to Martin's logical fate. The last thing its lyrical hero sees is not the landscape of his dreams (and Martin's dreams, when fulfilled, are usually slightly yet frustratingly different from their initial form) but a dull fence, a tin in the grass, and the four muzzles of the firing squad. The eschatological alertness of this poem is tempered by a readiness to admit that death is followed by "ruthless darkness" (neustreluzhuyushaya t'ma: S, 209). This poem is not included in Poems and Problems—evidence, perhaps, that when the English version of Glory was published (within a year after Poems and Problems) Nabokov may have been more interested in the moral and aesthetic ramifications of Martin's desire for communion with the autumnal beauty of his birthplace than in a Hamlet-like preoccupation with death.

VI

This preoccupation, however, is the spring of the action, the hubris that determines Martin's destiny. Since Martin is sane, untal-
mented, and tricked out of Romeo’s shock, it is only the heightened awareness of impending death that can make him prophetically responsive to the summons of mystery. Anticipation of death grants him that uncanny metaphysical insight of which he would otherwise have been deprived; his attempts to overcome fear add sublimity to his character. Yet the fact that the anticipation of death and fear of himself, rather than “the secret stir of talent” (D, 25) or a self-effacing heroism, lie at the root of his metaphysical restlessness is frustrating to the reader. Though “fulfillment is the fugal theme of [Martin’s] destiny” (Gl, xii), the combination of the sublime and the futile creates the impression that Martin has failed to fulfill an early promise, and this impression is likely to irradiate on the novel itself. Even on close analysis, Martin’s character—denied talent and, by way of compensation, granted persistent thoughts of death—may appear to be a rather precarious “method of composition” (RLSK, 95), artificially constructed in order to demonstrate a point and artificially dismantled once his task has been completed.

The sense of futility, however, is a deliberate effect of Glory. In a great number of episodes—the soccer at Cambridge, the scenes with Sonya, and others—the alternation of self-confidence with embarrassment or fear endow Martin’s image with a flesh-and-blood solidity. Martin is never as human as when he makes minor mistakes, fights his confusion, or repeats such clichés as “One side is fighting for the ghost of the past and the other for the ghost of the future” (Gl, 67). Perhaps the most valuable aesthetic effect of the novel lies in the reader’s regret that this sensitive and pathetically attractive human being should perish—not in a futile Civil War but in a futile pursuit of the ghost of mystery, a ghost that, unlike Hamlet’s father, does not even address itself to him. Nabokov achieves the purpose to which he alludes in the foreword, for this regret is tantamount to a reassertion of the thrill and the glory of life, the natural supernaturalism that is no less sublime than the transcendental quest.