Dear Prof. [redacted],

This past weekend, after a few days of research, I set out to write my final project for [redacted]. I had already deviated somewhat from my initial intentions—I began an attempt to demonstrate that the basic conflict in Nabokov's work is between a retreat into the self—solipsism—on one hand, and transcendence or escape on the other. One is an abandonment of the world in the confines of the self, the other is the abandonment of the self by entering into unity with the world.

To this end, I first wrote a few pages of a creative meditation on the subject. Then, I proceeded at length in analysis of *Mary*, building on my first essay on that same novel. In the course of this analysis, I realized the nature of the game Nabokov plays with the reader—it's precisely what Shade describes in *Pale Fire*: he seeks to replicate the game of the gods and find joy in it as they do, to lay patterns (like a row of matches) in the same fashion as in Nature's playful deceit. The solution to this game, which is qualitatively something like a chess puzzle (muddling and deliberation followed by a flash of insight, then effortless execution) is a transcendence of the precise sort mentioned above—the reader finds the exit from Nabokov's show of shadow-puppets and identifies the line between the authorial self and the world, thereby closing the text (ending it, that is) and freeing some pivotal character. This is the magician's performance that I allude to in my essay below—which remains unfinished.

The flashes of light which begin and end *Mary* are even more crucial than I manage to explain—the text itself is an ossified fragment of memory, a film, a stage play, merely some shadow-puppets. The delimiting flashes are the first and last of a sequence of illuminated images that constitute the novel, and it is only with the reader's comprehension of this pattern that the sequence shrinks to a point—the puppets lose their illusory substance and the vision ends. This, for Ganin, is the same end as is later attained by an Aleksandr Ivanovich who is, at last, no longer an illusion. It is the same peace as for dead Dolores (not the taxidermied Lolita), and of course for Pnin. Hermann is uniquely confined, as Nabokov acknowledges—for him there is no escape. His solipsism persists unbroken. In the last textual moments he remains merely an actor on a screen, a puppet, a stage-magician's toy. Shade is, of course, a shade—but in Kinbote he achieves the sort of sublimation Hermann desires. For him the process of replacement succeeds, unlike Hermann whose attempt at transposition ends in pathetic disaster.

Nabokov wrote frequently of his own grasping attempts at anamnesis, and once of some great structure of higher worlds, joined by dark passages. In this labyrinth, our own mortal vision—bounded by birth and death—is merely one of countless branches through which the soul variously passes. His novels are similar corridors, picked out on either end by a brief flash of light, and my hope was that I could illuminate not only the pattern—the trick of his game—but its connection to our own puppeteered lives as well. However, probing beyond death, I foundered just as Shade did.

By Monday, I'd written all that I have now. The following two days were consumed by examinations, after which I'd hoped to complete the essay, but by Wednesday I'd become so ill—I'm lying in bed slick with cold sweat as I write this—that the looming mass of the project I'd set for myself was clearly unmanageable. As a consequence, what remains is some three pages of tonally and stylistically inappropriate introductory material, some six more pages of incomplete analysis, and nothing resembling a conclusion. The formatting is unsatisfactory and citations are absent.

I had hoped to reshape this into something minimally satisfactory by the end of today. My goal was to add a few pages of material, cut the preposterous introduction, introduce proper citations, and conclude narrowly on the matter of light, film, and memory in *Mary*. "No work will be accepted after May 9th," the syllabus states. May 9th has now passed and the barrier of exhaustion and disease has proved insurmountable, so my only recourse at this point is to beg for forgiveness. I naturally do not expect full marks and will hardly mind if I do somewhat poorly in the course—it's been a wonderful experience, and my circumstances afford me the luxury of being somewhat unconcerned about all the rest, up to a point. I am, however, distraught that at the end of this adventure I've come up short. For this I can only apologize.

Little of what I had planned is in evidence, and what I mention here does a poor job of conveying the rest. My only consolation is that the totality of this disaster—apologetic letter and unfinished paper—has to me a somewhat pleasing form.

Through the intervention of some small miracle, I've managed to write these few paragraphs despite my present state. Now, though, there's nothing left to say.

All the best,
[redacted].

The bird fights its way out of the egg. The egg is the world.
— Hermann Hesse, *Demian*

It is by virtue of conflict that there is something rather than nothing. Parceling out one from another, this from that, here from there. With possibilities reduced, the world narrows, and at the line of exclusion I obtain meaning and sense; light, color, and form all arise. This story always starts the same way: in the beginning.

Start at a singular point. Begin only once, right here; here is unlike anywhere else. Here is only the seed of a moment; here is a formless present with no past. Just ahead, the soft mold of a dead channel quivers with pale figures. Here, an unfinished portrait: *mirage of incomparable beauty, sunken in vague aquarelles*. Now, a photograph: *the author alone among strange machines, mouth half-open in the smile of a saint*. Here, in order to exist, I bring home a few positive predicates and keep them close. That is to say: I am because I am only this; I am because I am nothing else. I relinquish the rest. Here I begin uncaused; I am the root of emanation. I draw a line between now and then; I take all creation in hand and gather it away from here. I curl my

littlest finger and flick the first moment into motion. At the beginning, there is nothing. Then, in the far distance, the absolute collapses and first light rushes in.

Stand aside with me for a moment, in this place. Shivering, cold; let us watch together, the ceaseless ebb and flow of this white winter noise. For a small eternity, and then one more: sometimes, we hear a beating heart. Sometimes, a bright line flickers in that roiling froth of everything all at once. This is the desert of the limitless. These imaginary airwaves are every trackless waste of miracles, a place where someday every dream comes true. Someday, you will see your unborn lover's face in the dim light of the bowed glass. Playfully, she turns to the camera and smiles. She says your name with wings, you say her name; cool moss under your cheek one year, by the old creek bed after the flood. She is nothing, you are nowhere, you never were and never will be. She is beautiful, eternal, the only one. You have loved her without time, without space, and now I have cleaved you from nothing and separated you from nothing and you are alone.

Now you are here. Your story has begun.

§1

Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me
— Psalm 139:5

You are not ended, no; time rises and stretches vast, spanning now and then. Child, of you I demand only living beauty; I demand warmth and color and light. Know this: I am a helpless thing with a head of gold; a still-brighter star once dreamed of me and thus am I here, unwilling. I remember that light, with hand unseen, who called me to tithe from the dry earth under red stone, in a cold place. There I rested on the threshing floor; around me the land lay fallow. The sound of rainfall on a steel roof; dust rising from the mesa in a desert somewhere far away, the idea of wind before a storm. Long have I lain weary on this flat stone, Candle-Wick; so long, now you are here and my spirit is light. You are my consolation.

One man: this bisected spirit, first and ancient; you, the primordial innocent. I watch waves play over flawless skin in a pool of imagined moonlight. With my palm on your brow, cold and unfurrowed, I try to feel: the living sand shifting between clumsy toes; then, reaching, I pluck something small from the surf beneath your feet. Another transposed memory, this one is clotted with orange between frantic waving arms. Bring it to your lips; taste survival, taste hunger, taste desire, all just a moment, only a moment. Then, salt from your wide eyes mingles with sea spray, and the vision clears.

See the gaoler. Abstraction of knowing smile, arms raised; an icon holding pruning shears and a planter's trowel. Here, one garden path becomes an impassable thicket of wild roses; the arboretum, abandoned years ago, is now a shapeless mass of oaks punctuated only by a few sickly maples. Somewhere in this nest of thorns lies the old creek bed, yesterday, before the rain. Today I made preserves, and sweetbriar tea. Now I clear a space under an old hackberry and sit down to read. I have a sort of premonition that I've neglected something terribly important, but I can't recall what that might be. I really can't be bothered. After all, I often feel this way of late, and it's most often nothing at all, but really—I've become quite worryingly forgetful.

Now, you are in tatters; you are everything, you are this scintillating shattered everywhere. Pull yourself together: blind stone; a trail of mist shining unseen in the white heat of a pointless somewhere. Elsewhere, an annulus of cold dust tilting over bruised orange or dappled blue. A mote of ice circles a russet field once, once again, and again. Someday a boy lies on a flat stone beside the old creek bed, counting the stars. So, so many tiny points of light all joined together, little Candle-Wick. I hope you like this shining sky.

And you, patient Reader. First off, all these garden paths lead back to the house, so you'd better learn to like it there. Next, I couldn't tell you how long I've been groundskeeper

here—longer than I can remember, certainly—but I was here when we had a full complement of staff. I remember some of what it's like behind all the bramble and yeah, it's a real shame that it's all buried. There are incredible things here that nobody has seen in a long time, and I know a lot of you like to come out here and look for the things you've heard stories about, but it's no good climbing in the bushes. There's nothing but dirt and spiders in there, not to mention the thorns. No matter where you go in, you always come out right back on the path, so we'd all better just stay out. If you're not going to get anywhere, there's no point in getting scraped up. Now, finally, we're actually planting a new garden! It's going well, but we could use some help. Any of you want to pitch in, at least so long as you're stuck here? After all, what else are you going to do?

§2 The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.
— John 5:19

Lev Glebovich is born a name. His life begins:

> "Lev Glevo. Lev Glebovich? A name like that's enough to twist your tongue off, my dear fellow."

Lev is the protagonist of *Mary*, the first published novel by Vladimir Nabokov. Lev's journey begins with his name in someone else's mouth—and not too charitable or pleasant a mouth.

Lev Glebovich Ganin is annoyed by his present situation. It's quite dark wherever he is, and he can't make out who he's speaking to. He's annoyed by the absurdity of this situation, and he's annoyed that he is obligated to speak with the invisible stranger at all.

Now, there are two attitudes we can take as to our friend's predicament. Conventionally, we understand that we have begun *in media res*. If we wait a moment and extrapolate back we understand or assume, by virtue of object permanence, that even at the first moment we were stuck in a malfunctioning elevator along with one Aleksey Ivanovich Alfyorov. Alternatively, it's worth noting that there is only anything here at all, wherever it is that we have joined Ganin, to

the extent that the text tells us so. So, in the beginning there was no elevator. There was not even a name, merely a disembodied voice:

"Lev Glevo. Lev Glebovich?"

An uncertain, querying voice. Alfyorov is speaking, we decide by the time we've finished the page. He gets Ganin's name wrong, at first. However, as yet there is no elevator and no Ganin. Certainly no Alfyorov. And if there is no Ganin then certainly one cannot be right, or wrong, or any way at all about his name.

We have arrived at a sort of Cartesian reductionism. It is written, therefore it is—nothing more. *Mary* begins with a querying assertion. Someone is speaking, perhaps uncertainly, as though trying to recall the name of a stranger. Consider, instead, a pensive voice, contemplative but decisive. To the camera, or with pen on paper: "Lev Glevo." No question mark. No uncertainty; an assertive, declarative full stop. Somewhere, a shadowed figure pauses with pen in hand, or the director draws a stiff palm across his neck. Not quite right. A moment of deliberation and then we're rolling again, though a bit less certain: "Lev Glebovich? A name like that's enough to twist your tongue off, my dear fellow."

Nicely done. Now, roll the tape back, and play through. A worse-than-disembodied voice—a voiceless speaker, no more than words on a page—addresses one "Lev Glebovich." If we wish to be cooperative in an improvisational sort of way, it's best that we now bring this Lev into being. A still-unknown narrator speaks in a blank void, and suddenly Lev arrives in this world *ex nihilo*. Unexpected darkness indeed.

The basic material nature of the elevator situation becomes apparent fairly quickly. Alfyorov points out, eventually, that the floor is "horribly thin and there's nothing but a black well underneath it." Alfyorov thinks something about the nature of this meeting is symbolic. In

their eventual escape, the elevator rises of its own accord and they walk out, Alfyorov followed by a particularly irritable Ganin. “A miracle,” Alfyorov remarks again. Since there was no one there to press the elevator button.

Now, what’s the point here? Why the elevator? Why the darkness? Why Nabokov’s intimation of symbolic content, which probably makes an informed reader more suspicious than really interested? Well, what’s the matter with the dark? Aside from the obvious issues, Ganin is bothered that he can’t tell the time. When the light eventually comes on, Alfyorov blinks, “as though just waking up.” Alfyorov seems to know that pressing the elevator button from within is pointless. He’s “afraid it won’t do any good,” which is innocuous enough perhaps, but keep this all in mind for a moment, and let’s take a diversion.

The interesting thing about *Mary*, other than its leading chronological position in Nabokov’s oeuvre, is that it’s one of his more directly autobiographical works. However, Nabokov also wrote something akin to a conventional autobiography, which was assembled from components published serially as essays over the course of many years. This is the book *Speak, Memory*, and it begins in a way that should now be immediately striking.

> “The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.”

Hopefully this brings to mind our familiar elevator, equipped with its timeless eternity of blackness below and presumed eternity of blackness above. The precarious hanging over an abyss is there, as is the sense of first “waking up”, as in birth, when light finally arrives. To claim that the opening of *Mary* is an allegorical birth would be a mistake—rather, it is on one hand quite literally the birth of these literary characters, on the other hand it is only what the reader understands it to be, i.e. a conversation between two men trapped in an elevator. Either way, it is

the ascent of these two figures out of darkness, but in the first of these simultaneous readings that darkness is rather more pregnant with symbolism, let's say. The introduction of *Speak, Memory* prompts the question: how do we get here from nothing at all, and why do we return thereto? In *Mary*, things are a bit more straightforward. The identity of the higher power is clear. Nabokov performs the act of creation before the reader's eyes, with the dramatic flair of a stage magician. He is aided by Alfyorov, who is something like an audience plant—he points out the puzzle to the reader, winks and nudges a bit, and most importantly points out that the miracle is a miracle at all, thereby drawing our attention to the otherwise-obscure flourish of the hidden hand.

§3 He felt terribly lonely, he was alone, quite alone, he wanted to talk to himself but he was unable to, he hardly dared to breathe, the motion of his foot had sounded like thunder beneath him, he had had to sit down.
— Georg Büchner, *Lenz*

Continuing with *Mary*, a bit more explicit background is in order. It is one of Nabokov's semi-autobiographical novels. It follows Lev Glebovich Ganin, a Russian emigré living in a miserable boarding house in Berlin. He spends most of the text obsessing over memories of his childhood romance with a girl named Mary, who seems to have married the pathetic Alfyorov he meets in the elevator, but at the end of the book Ganin abruptly discards his fantasy of reconnecting with Mary and moves on, figuratively and literally, finally leaving Berlin behind. Many aspects of Ganin's childhood, especially the estate on which he was raised and the figure of Mary herself, have direct parallels in Nabokov's own life.

Now, this is all well and good, but we've already departed from the basic materiality in our reading of the first scene. From the very start, Alfyorov is puppeteered to draw the reader's attention to a bit of contrivance. It is abundantly clear, then, that Nabokov is not seeking to replicate the appearance of a basic reality. Returning to *Speak, Memory*, we find a clue as to Nabokov's real motivation:

> "I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception." (Ch. 6)

This is a stronger statement of purpose than vague gestures at the value of aesthetic pleasure in the abstract. What we find here is precisely a confirmation of the impression given by the opening of *Mary*—that of Nabokov the magician. We find a restatement of this sense of purpose in one of Nabokov's essays, entitled *Good Readers and Good Writers.* Here, he says:

> "To call a story a true story is an insult to both art and truth. Every great writer is a great deceiver, but so is that arch-cheat Nature. Nature always deceives. From the simple deception of propagation to the prodigiously sophisticated illusion of protective colors in butterflies or birds, there is in Nature a marvelous system of spells and wiles. The writer of fiction only follows Nature's lead."

Precisely the same observation—that nature is a deceiver, and that the authentic writer replicates the pattern of Nature's deceit in his own work. That he uses the word "spell" here is interesting too—Nabokov the magician is suggested once again.

Ganin begins the novel confined within a dark, enclosed space. The light comes on, the elevator rises, and he exits into the boarding house, into Berlin. The city of Berlin, though, appears to be a place of transitory confinement just the same. As soon as page 3 we discover that Ganin plans to leave Berlin. His actual departure occurs with the conclusion of the text, some 110 pages later. In Berlin, Ganin's greatest shame is "selling his shadow" (p. 9), i.e. acting as an extra in films, to be redistributed anonymously on reels throughout the world. He is kept in Berlin by a lingering attachment to a girl he hardly cares for, and by his obsession with Mary, who is due to arrive by train as the conclusion approaches.

Let's have a look at that conclusion. Ganin goes to the station to meet Mary, and as he arrives he watches some laborers building a house. One is atop the roof, "walking along the ridge-piece, as light and free as though he were about to fly away." The wood shines in the sun, like gold. The wood is "more alive than the most lifelike dream of the past," even. It is as he watches this process that he comes to understand that his pursuit of Mary is pointless. His few days with her in childhood ended, his infatuation passed, and his renewed obsession is merely a senseless fixation, an indulgence in nostalgia on merely its merits as such, limited as they are. Then, he understands: "the image of Mary, together with that of the old dying poet, now remained in the house of ghosts, which itself was already a memory."

Finally, he leaves on a train from a different station entirely. He buys a ticket to France and further on, somewhere overseas, and boards the train, pleased that he will "cross the frontier without a single visa." The concrete interpretation here is that Ganin stole the old poet Podtyagin's passport, which the latter loses earlier in the novel. However, I think it is clear that what Ganin undertakes here is a far more fundamental form of escape, for which no visa is necessary—the border he crosses is not national, but temporal. The *pension* itself, the boarding house in which Ganin stays, embeds an intrinsic fixation on the past. It is a makeshift, thoroughly unpleasant, bogus Russian cultural institution abroad—it is a distinctly *Russian* boarding house, but this does it absolutely no credit, and Ganin finds it thoroughly awful. This place, explicitly termed the "house of ghosts," is populated by archetypes of the nostalgia-ridden.

Podtyagin, the old poet, is quite explicit about the nature of his condition. "I put everything into my poetry that I should have put into my life," he says, and his desperate desire for escape from Berlin to a hoped-for Paris is never fulfilled. Ganin finds Podtyagin far more tolerable than the others, all of whom are more vacuously disordered in their relationship to the

past and to Russia, and takes to caring for him as he struggles with a heart condition. At the end of Chapter 8, there's a striking passage that injects significant clarity.

> "Everything seemed strange in the semidarkness: the noise of the first trains, the large, gray ghost in the armchair, the gleam of water spilled on the floor. And it was all much more mysterious and vague than the deathless reality in which Ganin was living."

The "deathless reality" is the false world of memory, an illusion, in the sense that a recollection is not the real substance of the thing recalled. Podtyagin, the "gray ghost", is one denizen of this false or shadow-world, and lives in the "house of ghosts" with Ganin. Just before this passage, Podtyagin asks Ganin to turn out the light. The real world, the world illuminated by the light of the present, is captured at the moment of a memory like the echo of a flashbulb on film, which fades as time passes. Podtyagin spends his time confined to memory, poring over faded images—his eyes cannot stand the direct illumination of the living present.

Throughout the novel, Ganin's memory is described in this exact fashion—a flash of illumination produces a succession of images. Note that light passes through a ghost—shadows, ghosts, are permeated and dissipated by light. The wisps of memory cannot stand the vigor of the present, and this is precisely what transpires at the conclusion of the novel—Ganin is liberated by a revelation of the present.

Crucially, this gives an explanation for the initially incomprehensible revulsion that Ganin feels when confronted with cinema and his own participation therein as a film extra. He describes the replica produced by a film camera of a person's likeness as a "shadow," and this is precisely the same phenomenon—the image captured by a film camera is merely an echo of a moment of illumination, rather than a living person. Nonetheless, it propagates—by distribution—and can in some sense replace the original. This functionally immortal replica or double is the same sort of

ghost that an individual gives rise to when enmired in nostalgia, only all the more horrible given its ability to reproduce and carry on a sort of false life of its own. In light of this observation, a reel of film seems a monstrous thing indeed—Ganin's horror becomes entirely comprehensible.