

“Phantom Reverberations”: *The Stadtbahn and Memory in Mary*

Frances Nan

Pomona College, Class of 2012

Throughout Vladimir Nabokov's *Mary*, the train is omnipresent. Though its tracks run along the periphery of the novel—underneath the *pension* where the characters live—the train plays a significant role in the novel's tapestry. Set in 1924 Germany, *Mary* revolves around a group of Russian émigrés who have left Russia following the Bolshevik Revolution. Though they eke out the semblance of new lives in Berlin, they persistently revisit memories of happier times. The municipal Berlin train, or *Stadtbahn* in German, embodies the émigrés' suspension—caught between their irretrievable pasts and the futures that they neglect—by serving two, paradoxical purposes. Since the train's presence is inconspicuous, Nabokov scholars have not written about the train as a recurring motif in *Mary*; however, the pattern of its appearances reveals that the train is anything but trivial. Its movements emphasize the characters' stagnation, and simultaneously the train is a vehicle for their movement backwards in time through memory. The *Stadtbahn* captures the poignancy and pain of émigré life, and the progression of Nabokov's character from being stuck in the past to becoming present in Berlin.

Mary is Vladimir Nabokov's first novel, originally published in Russian as *Mashen'ka* and translated into English 44 years later. Beginning on a Sunday morning, the plot centers on Lev Glebovich Ganin, who resides in a Berlin boarding house along with five other Russian émigrés. Early on Sunday morning, Ganin is stuck in an elevator with one of his neighbors, a boisterous and oafish man named Aleksey Ivanovich Alfyorov, who boasts that his wife will arrive the following Saturday. On Monday, Alfyorov shows Ganin a picture of his wife, Mary, at which point Ganin recognizes her as his first love, whom he knew long ago in pre-Revolutionary Russia. Over the next few days and chapters, Ganin reminisces on his encounters with Mary while combatting the lethargy of his present. He decides that, on the Saturday when Mary arrives by train, he will sabotage Alfyorov, meet Mary at the station in place of her husband, and convince her to run away with him. Instead, as he stands at the station before Mary arrives, he decides that the past is the past, and he leaves Berlin by himself.

Suspension and disconnect haunt the characters in *Mary*: the *Stadtbahn* both symbolizes these themes—which are the main problems of the novel—and indicates a solution. As émigrés, the characters are disconnected from both their old and new lives. They can neither return to the Russia of their memories, since it has been ravaged by the Bolsheviks, nor can they bring themselves to embrace their new lives in self-exile. Their suspension leads them to feel as if they are going nowhere. Klara complains that she works all day yet is alone at age 26 (*Mary* 54), while

Podtyagin the washed-up poet has been trying to obtain an exit visa “for six long months,” unable to escape Berlin to France (7). Meanwhile, young Ganin passes the time listlessly, stifled by “inertia stemmed partly from his jobless state” (8) and by the lover he can neither bear nor bear to leave. Their conflicts represent the pain of being émigrés: because they cannot set aside their memories of the past, they cannot commit to their present or future.

On the one hand, the train’s physical presence mimics the émigrés’ repeated, futile movements as they live out their monotonous day-to-day lives in Berlin. By definition, the *Stadtbahn* is a municipal transportation that runs only within Berlin. Every day, the train passes under one side of the building and exits past the other like clockwork, routinely arriving “every five minutes,” beginning with “a subdued rumble,” “a huge cloud of smoke” and at last disappearing into the distance (9). Similarly, the characters follow the same machinations each day, as they are stuck in their schedules of eat, clean, and work/ wait for a visa/wander the streets. Nabokov’s characters are running on an endless loop, just as the *Stadtbahn* is confined to its Berlin-centric routes. Moreover, the *pension* is situated along the tracks just prior to a series of points, where the tracks “fan [out into] the distance” in different directions. The *Stadtbahn* tracks literally suspend the characters at a crossroads: between past and future, between stasis and chrysalis. The émigrés are automatons running in place, waiting on a train: simultaneously still yet pummeled forward through time. Though they live and breathe in Berlin, their quotidian lives become machine-like because their hearts are elsewhere.

Nabokov’s descriptions of the train’s noises and movements create the impression that the characters are ghosts. As the train’s noises blend with the characters’ actions or voices, the latter find expression in the train: it is as if the characters need the train to express their humanity. For instance, when Alfyorov hums happily to himself, Nabokov writes that, “whenever a train rattled past, Alfyorov’s voice blended with the noise, only to surface again” (22). Just as Ganin feels that the “twilight [was] slowly penetrating his body, transforming his blood to fog” (18), the train’s noises seem to blend with the émigrés’, becoming their voice. When Podtyagin and Ganin sit in silence, after the old poet reminisces about his past and points to his bleak future, a train’s “wild, inconsolable scream” gives voice to their unspoken sadness. Without the trains to express their grief, the two characters’ presence would be superfluous. When the train stops running by 3:00am, the house also comes to a “standstill” (48)—likewise, when most of the émigrés are asleep, the trains “rumbl[e] sleepily through the house” (109). It is as if the characters are half-there and their presences haunt the train, tingeing its shakes and screams with their songs or thoughts, lulling it asleep when they sleep. By projecting his character’s states of mind—happy, sad, and sleepy—onto the *Stadtbahn*, Nabokov depicts how the trains embody the half-present émigrés, giving voice to their forms.

Moreover, at times, the train seems to move through the building as if the latter were a ghost. Nabokov describes the *Stadtbahn*’s journeys as passing “right through the house,” such that the house becomes “like a spectre you could put your hand through and wriggle your fingers” (95). Similarly, although they physically move and live, the characters in the *pension* are only shadows. The train is described as if it is moving past the very furniture of the *pension* itself

rather than underneath it: the *Stadtbahn* “jolt[s] its way across the old carpet, graze[s] a glass on the washstand, and finally disappear[s] out the window with a chilling clang” (10), passing “with the sound of huge cupboards full of quivering crockery” (99). Though the train gives movement to inanimate objects—the carpet, a glass, a window, and crockery—it is never described as physically unbalancing or moving characters. Nabokov implies that the objects are more solid and shakable than the émigrés. The poignancy of Nabokov’s suggestion is that an insentient thing has more to lose, more vulnerability to present events than any of his sentient characters. By describing the train moving *through* the house, Nabokov symbolizes how the émigrés are not entirely present in Berlin—and because they are not present in Berlin, they have little hope of moving forward or freeing themselves from their endless loops.

While the *Stadtbahn* highlights the characters’ strange limbo, its movements also serve as a portal for their reminiscences. As the train rumbles by every five minutes, and the *pension* becomes momentarily shaky and noisy, the characters must stop what they are doing—allowing them a moment to themselves, to remember the ghosts of their past. For instance, the smoke from the train momentarily obfuscates the present so that the characters can sink into a reverie. Every time the train passes, it envelops the building in “a cloud of smoke [like] an iron draft” (10) that billows by. At one point, as Klara falls asleep, “the noise of the trains [becomes] particularly audible [...] in her room” such that her bed “seem[s] to rise and sway” (37). Frau Dorn also experiences a dream as a train passes by (99). In both cases, the women are stationary and lying in bed: but the train’s noises and the “phantom reverberations” (5) of the *Stadtbahn* transport them into either memories or dreams.

The *Stadtbahn* also draws Ganin in and out of flashbacks. At one point in *Mary*, between chapters nine and ten, Nabokov uses the train as diegetic transition, using the smoke from two trains to return his protagonist from the past to the present. At the end of chapter nine, Ganin reminisces about himself in 1917 Russia, taking a train away from his homeland and from Mary forever. In 1917, Ganin notices the smoke from the train mimicking the movement of “curious thoughts pass[ing] through [Ganin’s] head, as though this had all happened at some time before” (75). At the start of the next chapter, Nabokov returns the narrative to the present, i.e., Berlin in 1924, by using the same “pale cloud [that] enveloped the window” as a *Stadtbahn* passes under Ganin’s window (76). The *Stadtbahn* both reminds Ganin of 1917 Russia and grounds him in 1924 Berlin by shaking him from his reveries. Remarkably, it is Ganin in 1917 who feels a sense of *déjà vu*—or, as Nabokov writes in “A Guide to Berlin,” a “future recollection” (“Guide” 160)—while he lies on the seat thinking of Mary, even though it is Berlin-Ganin who lies on his bed thinking of his past self thinking of Mary.

In both instances, the trains are empty shells, waiting to be inhabited by the ghosts of memory. The 1917 Russian train is described as an “empty, rattling coach” (*Mary* 75), which falls in line with the *Stadtbahn* that is never described as populated, only a faceless machine. While the train is a vehicle for characters to drift away from their lives in Berlin, at the same time, the train brings them back to Berlin, too. The train facilitates Ganin’s four-day affair with the memory of Mary, from the instant he sees Alfyorov’s picture of Mary; to Ganin’s

recollections of his childhood romance; to the moment Ganin decides not to reappear in her life as her ghost has reappeared in his. Just as a train can transport a character either away from or back to their loved one—in the cases of Ganin from Mary and Mary to Alfyorov, respectively—it also transports Ganin back and forth through memory. Nabokov signals that, no matter how much more powerful or realistic the characters' memory-lives become, they must focus on cultivating their present lives because they will always be drawn back to the here and now.

Though the train represents the émigrés' suspension, and facilitates their reminiscences, it also symbolizes Ganin's gradual transition away from his past. From the very beginning of the novel, Nabokov makes reference to the train as a possible form of catharsis. The first description of the relationship between the *Stadtbahn* and *pension* is that the trains create "the impression that the whole building was slowly on the move" (5). Nabokov gives hints of movement to foreshadow that the suspended émigrés may eventually change. Furthermore, Nabokov describes the successive movement of the train "passing" underneath the house as the train "emerg[ing] as though excreted by the house" (10). If the train is excreted, then the *pension* must be the body that does the excreting. The excretion implies a detoxification or release: when the train passes through the house, it foreshadows the émigrés passing through this dark patch in their lives. At another point in the novel, Nabokov writes that the smoke from the trains swept upward past the *pension* windows "with a movement like ghostly shoulders shaking off a load" (95). By personifying the smoke with a shrugging motion, in combination with an uplifting motion, Nabokov implies there is hope for the novel's ghostlike characters to shake off the shackles of their past. Perhaps, when the train runs through the *pension*, it cleanses the ghosts little by little. If there is hope that the émigrés can relegate the past to the past, then there is hope that they can focus more on their futures.

Ganin, Nabokov's protagonist, is the most significant recipient of such a catharsis, because Nabokov uses trains to signal Ganin's relinquishing of Mary, past and future. The larger story looming over Ganin's progression through time is Mary's impending arrival by train from St. Petersburg. Her path to Berlin via long-distance train travels along the same rails that transported Ganin to his present *Stadtbahn*-loop listlessness. When he waits at a train station for Mary, on "the same bench where such a short while ago he had remembered typhus, the country house, his presentiment of Mary" in a series of flashbacks, Ganin notices that the "yellow sheen of fresh timber was more alive than the most lifelike dream of the past" (114). Ganin finally realizes that, by believing more in his "lifelike" past than his "alive" present, he has neglected reality in favor of an imitation of reality. At the station, Ganin breaks free of his stationary life in order to transport himself wholeheartedly into his future. In the end, Ganin moves on from his ensnarement with the past by leaving the *Stadtbahn* behind and taking a long-distance train out of Berlin for "southwestern Germany" and then France (114). As Ganin travels out of Germany, his exodus moves in the opposite direction of Mary's arrival on the "express from the north"

(114).¹ The end of the novel solidifies the train's significance as Ganin departs Berlin by train, finally traveling on the fan of tracks he had heretofore seen only from his window.

While the *Stadtbahn* is never described except in passing—and even then only as an impersonal machine—it embodies the paradoxical stasis in the émigrés' lives. Its mechanical goings-on mimic and mock the characters, at once personifying their robotic repetitiveness from day-to-day as well as voicing their unspoken feelings of happiness or grief. At the same time, the train transports the characters into dreams or recollections by shaking the *pension*, which is unhinged by “phantom reverberations” of the *Stadtbahn* and by the émigrés' ghostly memories. Nevertheless, the *Stadtbahn* also serves as a grounding mechanism for the ghosts that haunt the *pension*, drawing the émigrés out of their reveries and into their inescapable present. For Ganin, the train is a symbol of his escape from the *pension*, because he leaves behind the *Stadtbahn*, other émigrés, and Mary. Describing the *Stadtbahn* as a minor character would be inappropriate—in fact, it is a vehicle that represents the émigrés' past, present, and future.

Works Cited

- Nabokov, Vladimir. “A Guide to Berlin.” In *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Vintage International, 1997.
- . *Mary*. Trans. by Michael Glenny in collaboration with the author. New York: Vintage International, 1970.

¹ I am inferring that the “express from the north” that Ganin waits for at the end of the novel is Mary's 8:00 a.m. train because the train comes from the general direction of St. Petersburg. Likewise, Ganin decides around 7:20 a.m. that he has fallen out of love with Mary, but his decision becomes a more symbolic gesture of renouncement if the “express from the north” is also Mary's 8:00 a.m. train, since that would mean that Ganin waits for the 8:00 a.m. train to arrive before leaving via another train, without looking for Mary.

