

Hanny Hindi

Jackson Hole, Wyoming

NOTES ON MARY'S VERSES

Early in *Mary*, Lev Ganin (the protagonist) refers to his beloved as “an amazingly cheerful girl” who “loved jingles, catchwords, puns and poems. A song would stick in her head for two or three days, then it would be forgotten and a new one would take possession.” (61)¹ He immediately proceeds to give an example of the sort of thing that she would repeat for a time:

Vanya’s arms and legs they tied Long in jail was he mortified.	Скрутили Ванечке руки и ноги, долго томили Ваню в остроге
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Though Mary would have forgotten this “song” within days, Nabokov held it in mind for years: it is the epigram to the poem “My poor heart, until the pale day” (Бедное сердце до бледного дня) in his very first publication: *Poems*, a collection that he wrote “to, for and about” Mary’s double, Tamara, a decade before his first novel was published (SM 283). (He describes it there as a “Soldier’s Song.”)

This is the only example that we hear of Mary’s pet verses until we come to chapter 13, which is largely taken up with the young lovers’ correspondence while Lev was serving the White Russian army in Crimea in the winter of 1917-18. In those letters, Mary quotes four sets of verses, and mentions one other poem without quoting it.

One of the poems that Mary quotes is attributed to Podtyagin, the “old Russian poet” (5) who lives in the same Berlin *pension* as Lev:

The full moon shines over forest and stream, Look at the ripples—how richly they gleam! (94)	Над опушкою полная блещет луна, Погляди, как речная сияет волна
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¹ Unless otherwise stated, all page references are to the first Vintage edition of *Mary*.

As Nabokov is extremely unlikely to have attributed “real” verses to an invented poet, these lines are almost certainly original. The situation is less clear with the first verses that Mary quotes:

<p>But today it is spring and mimosa [sic!] for sale At all corners is offered today. I am bringing you some; like a dream, it is frail— (94)</p>	<p>Но сегодня весна и сегодня мимозы Предлагают на каждом шагу. Я несу тебе их, они хрупки, как грезы...</p>
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After quoting these lines, Mary says, "Nice little poem, but I can't remember the beginning or the end and I forget who wrote it." This would seem to be a hint that we should certainly find the poem, take a careful look at the beginning and end, and note the author. I have not been able to do so. But, there is another possibility: is Mary telling a joke? Every search I've done for the first and third lines of these lines leads back to the novel, but the second – "At all corners is offered today. / Предлагают на каждом шагу." – occurs frequently, *in advertisements*. Might this be the "jingle" among the passages; not a "nice little poem," but an ad for a florist? There is no ambiguity about the remaining two verses that Mary quotes (one of which has not been identified before), nor with the poem that she mentions without quoting (which is reprinted here for the first time).

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Let me get rid of the shackles of love
 And let me try to stop thinking!
 Replenish, replenish the glasses with wine—
 Let me keep drinking and drinking! (94)

Сброшу с себя я оковы любви
 И постараюсь забыться,
 Налейте полнее бокалы вина,
 Дайте вином мне упиться.

This is the chorus of “Shackles of Love” by one Radomsky-Kolchak, otherwise unknown.

moderato

$A^7/C\sharp$ A^7 $B\flat$ Gm $B\flat$ C^7 F A^7/E

p За_ чем стра_ дать за_ чем жа_ леть Мне об_ тверг_ ну той люб_ ви. Ведь глу_ би_

5 Dm A^7/E Dm Gm Dm/A A^7 Dm C^7 F $/C$ Chorus: waltz tempo

ны Мо_ ей ду_ ши не по_ нял ты, не по_ нял ты. Сбро_ шу с се_ бя я О_

11 C^7/G C^7 $/G$ C^7 $Fm^{(b)}$ D A^7/E Dm

ко_ вы люб_ ви и по_ ста_ ра_ юсь за_ быть_ ся. На_ лей_ те пол_ не_ е мне

19 $A^7/C\sharp$ Dm Gm Dm/A A^7 Dm %

ча_ ру ви_ на. Дай_ те ви_ ном мне у_ пить_ ся. 2. Лю_ бя те_ // 3. И вот я //

Adapted from Павленко, Борис, Любимые романсы с нотами и аккордами. / Pavlenko, Boris, *Favorite Romances with Notes and Chords*. Issue 1, Littres, 2022, p. 64.

<p>1. Why must I suffer, why must I regret A love that you refuse to me? You never felt it my soul's deep net— you didn't see, you didn't see.</p> <p><i>Chorus (Waltz Tempo):</i> <i>Let me get rid of the shackles of love</i> <i>And let me try to stop thinking!</i> <i>Replenish, replenish the glasses with wine—</i> <i>Let me keep drinking and drinking!</i>²</p> <p>2. I loved you deeply, dreamt of wild delight Of love unchained, and fierce, and free.</p>	<p>1. Зачем страдать, зачем жалеть Мне об отвергнутой любви. Ведь глубины Моей души не понял ты, не понял ты.</p> <p><i>Привет (Темп вальса):</i> Сброшу с себя я оковы любви И постараюсь забыться. Налейте полнее мне чару вина, Дайте вином мне упиться!</p> <p>2. Любя тебя, мечтала я Безумным счастьем наслаждаться, Но в один миг мои мечты Разбил мне ты, разбил мне ты. (Привет)</p> <p>3. И вот я вновь опять с тобой Твоею лаской упиваюсь,</p>
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² The italicized passage is the one that occurs in the novel. All translations from Russian are otherwise my own, with help from Maria Petrova.

But in one moment, all my dreams took flight You shattered me, you shattered me. (<i>Chorus</i>)	Но это сон, лишь только сон. О! Дивный сон! Зачем мне он? (<i>Принев</i>)
3. And here I am, with you again, Your tender touch I drink like wine. But it's a dream that fades away Oh, wondrous dream! Why make it mine? (<i>Chorus</i>)	

Today, songs like this are known as "Old Russian Romances": sentimental songs for solo voice, written in the late-19th or early 20th-centuries. (The still older "romances" written by Russian songsters in the mid-to-late-19th century – like those by Nabokov's Uncle Ruka [*Speak, Memory*, 74-5] – were actually written in French.) At the time that *Mary* was published, however, Nabokov and his émigré audience would have known such songs (not yet “old”) as "Gypsy Romances," or "*tsyganskie romansy*." Notably, one such song formed the soundtrack to the moments immediately before Nabokov completed his first poem:

The family phonograph, which the advent of the evening set in action, was another musical machine I could hear through my verse. On the veranda where our relatives and friends assembled, it emitted from its brass mouthpiece the so-called *tsiganskie romansy* beloved of my generation. These were more or less anonymous imitations of gypsy songs—or imitations of such imitations. What constituted their gypsiness was a deep monotonous moan broken by a kind of hiccup, the audible cracking of a lovesick heart. At their best, they were responsible for the raucous note vibrating here and there in the works of true poets (I am thinking especially of Alexander Blok). At their worst, they could be likened to the apache stuff composed by mild men of letters and delivered by thickset ladies in Parisian night clubs. Their natural environment was characterized by nightingales in tears, lilacs in bloom and the alleys of whispering trees that graced the parks of the landed gentry. Those nightingales trilled, and in a pine grove the setting sun banded the trunks at different levels with fiery red. A tambourine, still throbbing, seemed

to lie on the darkening moss. For a spell, the last notes of the husky contralto pursued me through the dusk. When silence returned, my first poem was ready. (*Speak, Memory*, 224)

"Shackles of Love" was recorded in the early twentieth century by Mikhail Vavich (c. 1900), a noted operetta singer, and later by Anastasia Vyaltseva (1909) and Nina Dulkevich (1910), both famous singers of "Gypsy" and Russian folk songs. Dulkevich, in particular, was nearly as popular as Nadezhda Plevitskaya—the singer featured in "The Assistant Producer." Though obscure today, Nabokov's émigré audience would likely have caught the reference immediately.

Nina Dulkevich's version can be heard [here](#).

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"Just now I read a poem in an old magazine: 'My Little Pale Pearl' by Krapovitsky. I like it very much." (94)

The "old magazine" that Mary is referring to is *Niva*, one of the most popular magazines in pre-Revolutionary Russia. Much like *The Saturday Evening Post* (which it probably resembled most among American publications) *Niva* published literary, political and historical essays; articles on popular science; engravings, lithographs, and photographs; as well as poems and stories. By the end of its run (in September of 1918), it had reached an audience of a quarter million readers. Mary likely brought "an old bound volume" (40) of *Niva* with her to the Ukraine, and would have found Krapovitsky's poem in the "Literary Supplement" for April, 1916.³

<p>You are my small, pale pearl, A little woman with a sorrowful soul... Sleeping within you—a weary heart, undisturbed, A world of distant youth, quiet and vast...</p> <p>Within you sleep autumn leaves, belated—</p>	<p>Ты — моя маленькая, бѣдная жемчужина, Маленькая женщина съ грустною душой... Спать въ тебѣ усталое сердце, не разбужено, Мірѣ далѣкой юности тихій и большой...</p> <p>Спать въ тебѣ, какъ осенью листья запоздалые,</p>
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³ Many thanks to Stanislav Shvabrin for locating a copy of this issue.

<p>Tender, withered thoughts about the past... And your sad smile, your tired eyes Look with autumn's gaze upon your face...</p> <p>And with a deep tenderness, a hidden caress, One longs to embrace your sorrowful face, Like a forgotten child, to lull you with a tale, A magical tale to soothe all your sorrows...</p> <p>One longs – all that is sad, dull, useless – To blend, in one great, pensive chord— To waken, with pearly joy of spring, The little woman with the sorrowful soul...</p>	<p>Нѣжныя, завядшія мысли о быломъ... И улыбка грустная, и глаза усталые Смотрять по-осеннему на лицѣ твоёмъ...</p> <p>И съ глубокой нѣжностью, съ затаённой ласкою, Хочется печальное личико обнять, Какъ дитя забытое, убаюкать сказкою, Сказкою волшебною всю тоску унять...</p> <p>Хочется всё грустное, скучное, ненужное Слить въ одинъ аккордъ задумчиво-большой, Разбудить весеннюю радостью жемчужною Маленькую женщину съ грустною душой.</p>
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Collections of Mikhail Vasilyevich Krapovitsky's poems are extremely rare, so I have not been able to confirm whether this particular poem was ever reprinted. Given the poem's rarity, I've preserved the unmodernized spelling that was used in the original printing.

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Write to them that my little boy Lyov
 I kiss as much as I can,
 That an Austrian helmet from Lvov
 To bring for his birthday I plan
 But a separate note to my father— (93)

Расскажите, что мальчика Леву
 Я целую, как только могу,

Что австрийскую каску из Львова
Я в подарок ему берегу.
А отцу напишите отдельно...

As Irene Masing-Delic (2013) and others have noted, these are lines from “In the Field Hospital” by Sergey Alexandrovich Kopytkin.

In the Field Hospital	В полевом лазарете
The night will tear what aches apart. I doubt they’ll hold until the dawn. I ask one thing, dear sister — start And write three lines before I’m gone.	Ночь порвет наболевшие нити. Вряд ли их дотянуть до утра. Я прошу об одном, напишите, Напишите три строчки, сестра.
Here’s the address of my wife and dear: Please write her a word or two. I’m wounded in the arm, I fear. But I’m healing now—pulling through.	Вот вам адрес жены моей бедной. Напишите ей несколько слов, Что я в руку контужен безвредно, Поправляюсь и буду здоров.
<i>Write to them that my little boy Vova I kiss as much as I can, That an Austrian helmet from Lvov To bring for his birthday I plan.</i>	Напишите, что мальчика Вову Я целую, как только могу, Что австрийскую каску из Львова Я в подарок ему берегу.
<i>But a separate note to my father— Tell him our regiment won fame. They struck my chest — I’ll go no farther. I fell while answering war’s claim.</i>	А отцу напишите отдельно, Как прославлен наш доблестный полк И что в грудь я был ранен смертельно, Выполняя мой воинский долг.

Immediately before quoting these lines, Mary writes, “I love you. If you come back I’ll plague you with kisses.” She then asks Lev whether he remembers the poem before quoting the lines above. There’s a joke here that readers of the English *Mary* might miss. As Nabokov points out in his lectures on *Anna Karenina*, “Lyov” is an alternative spelling of “Lev”⁴

⁴ This is clearer in the Russian *Mary*, which has “Лев” consistently for the protagonist’s name and the little boy’s.

(LRL 216)—and “Lyova,” which Mary uses at the opening of her letters, is an endearment of Lyov/Lev. Which is to say that the letter essentially goes: “*Lev* ... I’ll plague you with kisses. Do you remember: ‘Write to them that my little boy *Lev* / I kiss as much as I can.’ ...”

Notably, Nabokov has modified these lines: where the original has “Напишите, что мальчика Вову” (“Write to them that my little boy Vova”), *Mary* has “Расскажите, что мальчика Леву” (“Tell them that my little boy Lyov”). Which is to say that in the original poem the little boy’s name isn’t “Lyov,” but “Vova,” which is an endearment of—Vladimir!

Did Valentina Shulgin – The Original of Mary/Tamara – include these verses in one of the letters that she wrote to Nabokov when he was in the Crimea in the winter of 1917-18? Nabokov seems to be telling us as much in *Speak, Memory*: “Happy is the novelist who manages to preserve an actual love letter that he received when he was young within a work of fiction, embedded in it like a clean bullet in flabby flesh and quite secure there, among spurious lives.” (SM, 249) If he wasn’t referring to *this* letter – and *this* poem – why else the odd metaphor about “a clean bullet in flabby flesh”? Moreover, the change that he made to the original verse would seem to provide conclusive evidence of an “original” letter from Shulgin: in both cases, the “little boy’s” name would match the recipient’s: “Lyov/Lev” in the novel; “Vova/Vladimir” in “real” life.

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In describing the more obscure sources in *The Eye*, D. Barton Johnson identified “two general categories of literary allusions: universal and local (topical). While the former may point to larger matters such as theme and the place of the work in the literary canon, the latter, more restricted type of allusion stamps the story with a certain immediacy.” He suggested two reasons that Nabokov used “local” allusions: “to type characters and settings, or ... to settle scores within the emigre literary community.” (Johnson 402) The verses we’ve reviewed certainly “characterize” Mary (about which more in a moment), but Nabokov does not appear to be settling scores quite yet in this novel. In fact, I would propose a third motivation for his inclusion of “topical” allusions: reconnecting with a lost home.

When Ganin starts packing his bags in preparation for his departure, he is careful to include (along with his clothes and other essentials) “all those trivial yet somehow precious things which become so familiar to our sight and touch, and whose only virtue is that they enable a person condemned to be always on the move to feel at home, however slightly, whenever he unpacks his fond, fragile, human rubbish for the hundredth

time" (88-9). The "topical" allusions in *Mary* produce the same feeling; the pop songs and ad jingles – along with the "Landrin's caramels" (61) the Bligken and Robinson's chocolates (76: as "Blighen"), a snack of *bubliki* (9: "Russian buns"), a game of *gorodki* (34: "Russian skittles"), or the familiar tune of "Stenka Razin" (34: "a Russian Volga song") – all of this "fond, fragile, human rubbish" (89) contributes to the *hominess* of Nabokov's first novel.

And what do the verses she cites tell us about Mary herself? Mary echoes Lermontov and Pushkin at the beginning of her first letter, but, as these passages are not in quotation marks, it's likely that she missed the coincidence: Nabokov has clearly woven these allusions into the *texture* of his novel, but the characters may not be aware of their presence in the *text*. The verses that Mary *was* aware of, and that best characterize her, are the passage from Podtyagin and the poem by Krapovitsky.

Neither of these verses could be aligned with the "mystagogues of émigré letters" that Nabokov deplored, like the Symbolist Dmitrii Merezhkovskij and his wife Zinaida Gippius (see Johnson 401, citing SM 287); nor do they "describe the sufferings of the Russian peasant in blunt manly measures" (VV 301). They are simply bits of light verse—characterizing Mary's taste as frivolous, perhaps, but inoffensive. Today, she would post Mary Oliver poems on Instagram.

The other verses that Mary cites have less to do with her taste or aesthetic values, and more to do with the private language that she shares with Ganin. There might be something sinister in quoting a song about throwing off "the shackles of love" immediately after meeting her future husband (and perhaps "betraying" Ganin with him), but the fact of teenagers quoting pop songs to one another feels dramatically true. And the citation from "In the Field Hospital," whatever other functions it has, is a glimpse into Mary and Ganin's pillow-talk: "I will shower *my* Lyov with kisses, just like that soldier showered *his* Lyov with kisses!" Nabokov appreciated the value of private languages like these; in *Speak, Memory*, he draws particular attention to the "homespun nonsense, comically garbled words, proposed imitations of supposed intonations, and all those private jokes ... [that] are the secret code of happy families." (SM, 191) And *Mary's* primary theme is – and its original title was – "Happiness."

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