"I too plan to explore a distant land". Travel between Reality and Imagination in Nabokov's *Podvig*

Nadia Cornettone

♢ eSamizdat 2016 (XI), pp. 7-14 ♢

Каждая книга, если это большая книга, это большое путешествие

Viktor Shklovsky[1]

IN 1931 Sovremennye zapiski [Contemporary annals][2] published Nabokov's *Podvig* [Glory], a short novel about the life of a young man, Martyn Edel'vejs[3], through his Russian childhood to his emigration and his youth spent far away from his own country, in Western Europe, from 1918 to 1924. Its working title was *Romanticheskiy vek* [Romantic times], its purpose being to stress the protagonist's thrill in apparently meaningless adventures. Having left Russia, Martyn roams through Europe, gradually developing a compelling desire to go back to his land. In the meantime, he travels through Crimea and Greece, studies at Cambridge University, makes friends with Darvin, an English fellow student, meets another Russian family, the Zilanovs, falls in love with their youngest daughter Sonja, lives between Berlin and Lausanne in his uncle's country house, moves to France, where he works as a peasant, and finally leaves to go to Russia. Whether Martyn manages to fulfil his wish is a question that remains open at the end of the novel: as Shklovsky said, "great Russian literature knows how not to create any ending"[4]. By choosing the title *Podvig* Nabokov manages to condense the essence of the narrative, alluding to both a brave act and a restless wandering (*stranstvie*)[5].

The novel is built upon a series of "back-and-forth switches, which produce an illusion of impetus"[6]. Travel in *Podvig* acts on three different levels:

- experiential (Martyn's physical movement in space);
- narrative (pre-existent travel narratives that inspire both Martyn and the author);
- semiotic (metaphors and symbols developed around spaces, objects and people, which give the novel that same epic quality as those narratives it has been inspired by).

[1] "Every book, if it is a great book, is a great journey", V. Shklovsky, *Energiya zabluzhdeniya. Kniga o sjuzhete*, Moskva 1981, p. 60. Passages from *Podvig* have been chosen from Nabokov's 1971 self-translation, V. Nabokov, *Glory*, London 2012. In any case, the respective Russian original passages have been quoted in the notes.

[2] Chapters I–IX, *Sovremennye zapiski*, 1931, 45, pp. 149-185; X–XXIII, Ibidem, 46, pp. 86-137; XXIV–XXXV, Ibidem, 47, pp. 86-134; XXXIV–L, Ibidem, 48, pp. 78-131. In 1932 *Podvig* was first published as a book for the same publisher, G. Utgof, "'Podvig' Nabokova-Sirina. Kommentariy k kommentariyu", *Letnyaya shkola po russkoy literature*, 2015 (XI), 3, p. 263.

[3] Though Nabokov often provides a transliteration, or even a translation, in the English version, it seems fair to use the names of places and people as they appear in the Russian original.

[4] "Великая русская литература умеет не создавать концы", V. Shklovsky, *Energija*, op. cit., p. 91. The poem *Rasstrel* [The execution, 1927] and the short story *Poseshchenie muzeya* [The visit to the museum, 1938] may be considered as a possible external ending. The recurrent Nabokovian theme of travelling back to Russia has been discussed by Tammi in the paragraph *The return to Russia* of his essay about *Glory*, where he also names the poems *Dlya stranstviya nochnogo mne ne nado* [For nighttime peregrination I do not need, 1929] and *K Kn. S.M. Kachurinu* [To Prince S.M. Kachurin, 1947] as well as the play *Chelovek iz Sssr* [The man from the Ussr, 1925-26], the short story *The assistant producer* (1943) and the novels *Pale fire* (1962) and *Look at the harlequins!* (1974) as further variations of the same motif, P. Tammi, "Glory", *The Garland companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, edited by V. Aleksandrov, New York-London 1995, pp. 169-178. I may add a reference to the English poem *The refrigerator awakes* (1942), where the corpse of an alpinist is found in a glacier with an edelweiss in his hands, V. Nabokov, *Poems and problems*, New York 1981, pp. 153-154.

[5] The meaning of *podvig* as movement is particularly evident when compared with the verbs *dvigat'(sya)*, *podvigat'(sya)* [move, advance] and the noun *dvizhenie* [movement], with which it shares the same etymological root.

[6] V. Nabokov, *Glory*, op. cit., p. XIII.

Martyn's journeys through Europe have much in common with Nabokov's[7]. The fact that many of Martyn's travels coincide with some of Nabokov's own experiences adds an important layer to the novel. Like Martyn, Nabokov emigrated from Russia due to the October revolution, studied at Cambridge University and also worked in a French village, just to name a few of the numerous correspondences. At the same time travel also serves as a general framework to Martyn's actions and thoughts. It is, first of all, a source of happiness and excitement, to the point that it acquires a taste in the character's mouth: "'Travel', said Martin softly, and he repeated this word for a long time, until he had squeezed all meaning out of it"[8]. Travel is also a filter through which Martyn observes the world. For instance, he considers university subjects in terms of travel and movement: calculation becomes essential to build a bridge over a precipice, history is associated with the pleasure of exploration and archaeology, mathematics allows him to read the secrets of the impenetrable sky, literature guides him through open clearings[9].

Confirming his fascination for long journeys, trains are described as Martyn's favourite means of transport. As a child he is hypnotised by their speed and describes their movement as a sort of magical trick: "The lights would hide and reappear, and then they came twinkling from a completely different direction, and abruptly vanished, as if somebody had covered them with a black kerchief"[10]. Martyn even ends up perceiving his whole life as a constantly moving train: "He reflected what a strange, strange life had fallen to his lot, it seemed as if he had never left a fast train, had merely wandered from car to car"[11].

Travel as such is an essential part of the narrative and it remains the most evident motif. Dolinin even pointed out that without it the novel would completely loose its coherence[12].

However, travel seeps through the weaving of the plot and also reaches a deeper level, serving not only as a real experience of dynamic movement, but also as a stimulus to Martyn's vivid imagination. Some of the most significant works of literature about travel and adventure are explicitly named in the novel, along with writers or famous explorers, such as Tristram, King Arthur's knights, Sinbad from the Persian *One thousand and one nights*, Robin Hood, Cristoforo Colombo, David Livingstone, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Homer's *Odyssey*[13]. Byron, Pushkin and Lermontov[14] often recur as the emblems of Romantic poets

[7] Nabokov often refuses to admit the presence of any autobiographical element in his literary works, strongly advocating against Freudianism. In this particular case he writes: "The author trusts that wise readers will refrain from avidly flipping through his autobiography *Speak, Memory* in quest of duplicate items or kindred scenery. The fun of *Glory* is elsewhere", Ibidem, p. XIII. As Buks has stated, *Podvig* is not strictly autobiographical: here Nabokov chooses to create a protagonist whose life becomes the projection not of his real self, but of the author, his *literaturnaya lichnost'* [literary personality], N. Buks, "Priobshchenie k tainstvu", *Eshafot v khrustal'nom dvortse. O russkikh romanakh Vladimira Nabokova*, Moskva 1998, p. 60.

[8] V. Nabokov, *Glory*, op. cit., p. 64; "'Путешествие', – вполголоса произнес Мартын и долго повторял это слово, пока из него не выжал всякий смысл", Idem, *Podvig*, op. cit., p. 57.

[9] Ibidem, pp. 70-72.

[10] Idem, *Glory*, op. cit., p. 29; "Огни то скрывались, то показывались опять, и потом заиграли совсем в другой стороне, и вдруг исчезли, словно их кто-то накрыл черным платком", Idem, *Podvig*, op. cit., p. 27.

[11] Idem, *Glory*, op. cit., p. 206; "Он подумал: какая странная, странная выдалась жизнь, – ему показалось, что он никогда не выходил из экспресса, а просто слонялся из одного вагона в другой", Idem, *Podvig*, op. cit., p. 170.

[12] Idem, *Sobranie sochineniy russkogo perioda: v 5 t.*, III, edited by A. Dolinin, G. Utgof, Sankt-Peterburg 2000, p. 716. Travel, though, has not always been considered a sufficiently strong motif in *Podvig*. Mikhail Osorgin, for instance, lamented the absence of a fundamental reason to Martyn's journeys: "There is no aim to this 'heroic deed', no sufficient reason, not even a personal one" [Цели в этом 'подвиге' нет, нет и достаточного мотива, даже личного], M. Osorgin, "Podvig", *Poslednie novosti*, 27 oktyabrya 1932, p. 3. For a broader consideration of how critics responded to *Podvig* see E.C. Haber, "Nabokov's *Glory* and the fairy tale", *Slavic and Eastern European Journal*, 1977 (XXI), 2, pp. 214-224 (rus. transl. E. Kheyber, "'Podvig' Nabokova i volshebnaya skazka", *Staroe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2001 (277), 1, pp. 57-61, link <http://magazines.russ.ru/slo/2001/1/hei.html> and *V.V. Nabokov: Pro et contra. Materialy i issledovaniya o tvorchestve V.V. Nabokova: antologiya*, II, edited by B. Averin, Sankt-Peterburg 2001, pp. 716-729).

[13] Buks has analysed how both Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid* might have been a possible source of inspiration for Nabokov, N. Buks, "Priobshchenie", op. cit., pp. 57-86.

[14] See Ibidem and I. Ronen, "Khrabrost' i trusost' v romane Nabokova 'Podvig'", *Zvezda*, 2010, 4, pp. 212-221, link <http://magazines.russ.ru/zvezda/2010/4/po21.html> for a comparison with Pushkin and Lermontov respectively. In particular, Buks argues that Pushkin and Nabokov were the same age when they finished writing *Evgeny Onegin*, in 1830, and

who write about their experience of travel and exile. The Italian writers Dante Alighieri and Giacomo Leopardi are also mentioned.

Travel also manifests itself as part of the onomastic component, in which both Russian and Western folklore and epic narrative are combined. Martyn's surname, Edel'vejs, refers to the Germanic roots of *edel* [noble] and *weiss* [white], suggesting the image of the extremely precious flower that grows on the Alps. The edelweiss has consequently become a symbol for courage and fearlessness, when brought back from a peak as the living testimony of a brave act[15]. The meaning has further been crystallised by Berthold Auerbach in his *Edelweiss: A story* [1869], where he writes: "The possession of one is a proof of unusual daring"[16]. By then Ralph Waldo Emerson had already established the symbolism behind the edelweiss in his eulogy for Thoreau:

> There is a flower known to botanists, one of the same genus with our summer plant called "Life-Everlasting", a *Gnaphalium* like that, which grows on the most inaccessible cliffs of the Tyrolese mountains [...]. It is called by botanists the *Gnaphalium leontopodium*, but by the Swiss *EDELWEISS*, which signifies *NOBLE PURITY*. Thoreau seemed to me living in the hope to gather this plant, which belonged to him of right[17].

While Martyn's surname might, thus, have been inspired by old Germanic traditions, his mother's maiden name, Indrikov, recalls the *indrik-zver'*, a mythological beast that belongs to the Slavic folklore and is considered to be the ancestor of all existing animals[18]. Also Sonja has a telling surname, Zilanov, which comes from *zilan*, the word for the white snake of Russian tales[19]. She is in fact closely associated with death: it is her father who gives Martyn's mother the bad news about her husband's death; Sonja's physicality also suggests her darker side: she has ink black hair, black eyes and white complexion.

In terms of direct connection with folklore, a correspondence between *Podvig* and the Russian tale *Volshebnoe kol'tso* [The magic ring] has been detected[20]: both protagonists are called Martyn and both their mothers are widows; in the fairy tale Martyn belongs to the traditional figure of *Ivan-durak* [Ivan the fool], whose naivety and lack of practical sense can be found in Nabokov's Martyn as well; in both cases the female protagonists are associated with the image of a snake and are both removed from their native country. Alternatively, a possible echo might also come from Pushkin's mock-medieval poem *Ruslan i Lyudmila* [1820][21]: in Pushkin's poem, for instance, Lyudmila is abducted by the sorcerer Chernomor, whose name recalls Nabokov's character of Chernosvitov, Alla's husband – Alla being the married woman Martyn falls in love with on the ship to Greece. After all Nabokov himself, while teaching in the United states, always started his first class at Cornell by claiming that "the truth is that great novels are great fairy tales"[22].

In doing so Nabokov positions his work inside the tradition of epic narratives and *skazki* [tales], while building his own contemporary one[23]. Apart

---

Podvig, exactly 100 years later, in 1930 respectively; both their protagonists lack any poetic talent; Pushkin was exiled in 1824, the same year when Onegin comes back to Saint Petersburg and 100 years before Martyn's expedition to Russia.

[15] E. Kheyber, "'Podvig'", *V.V. Nabokov: Pro et contra*, op. cit., pp. 721-722.

[16] B. Auerbach, *Edelweiss. A story*, Boston 1869, p. 77.

[17] R.W. Emerson, "Thoreau", *Atlantic Monthly*, 1862 (X), 58, p. 249.

[18] For a detailed reconstruction of its origins see O. Dmitrenko, "Put' indry. Voploshchenie mifa v romane Nabokova 'Podvig'", *Russkaya literatura*, 2006, 4, pp. 43-61. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Dmitrenko himself, though choosing names which are deeply rooted in Russian and Western folklore, Nabokov significantly undermines Martyn's ability to sustain such a burden: Martyn's constant uncertainty about whether he will be able to reach the top of the mountain, for instance, or his wish to prove his courage by a brave act make him into a modern hero, one who is not completely sure about his own abilities, Ibidem, pp. 44-45.

[19] E. Kheyber, "'Podvig'", op. cit., p. 726 and M. Shrayer, "The perfect glory of Nabokov's exploit", *Russian Studies in Literature*, 1999 (35), 4, p. 36 (rus. transl. M. Shraer, "O kontsovke nabokovskogo 'Podviga'", *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, 1999, 2, pp. 57-62 and *Staroe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2001 (277), 1, pp. 57-61, link <http://magazines.russ.ru/slo/2001/1/shaer.html>).

[20] E. Kheyber, "'Podvig'", op. cit., pp. 725-726.

[21] C. Nicol, "Why Darwin slid into the ditch: an embedded text in Glory", *The Nabokovian*, 1996, 37, pp. 48-53 and N. Buks, "Priobshchenie", op. cit., p. 79.

[22] V. Nabokov, *Lectures on literature*, New York 1980, p. 2.

[23] Nabokov develops his plot variations by combining ancient motives, to use Veselovsky's terms, A. Veselovsky, *Istoricheskaya poetika*, Leningrad 1940, p. 494. This is what Shklovsky has called *stranstvuyushchiy syuzhet* [traveling plot]: "Motives and situations travel from plot to plot, but first of all the circumstances of life travel from one era to the other" [Из сюжета в сюжет переходят мотивы, положения, но прежде всего из времени во время переходят жизненные обстоятельства], V. Shklovsky, *Energiya*,

from any direct correspondence, the reader is offered the pleasure of finding significant elements charged with metaphorical meaning, which give the novel the dreaming tone of fairy tales and the allegorical substance of epics.

Places in *Podvig* become "funktsional'nye polya" [functional areas], those relevant intersections of space and narrative conflict where the plot is driven forward[24]. Hanging over Martyn's bed as a child there is one of his grandmother's watercolours, depicting a dense forest with a winding path disappearing into its depths[25]. The image of the path remains central and constant throughout the whole novel. It comes back in Martyn's favourite children's book and as a real recurring image in his life as well[26]: in Switzerland the road that brings to uncle Henry's house bears a striking resemblance to the path itself. Paths and forests play a pivotal role in folkloric narratives, where they stand for the hero's initiation[27]. What is more, the Russia Martyn remembers acquires the characteristics of a fairy tale land, its snowy blanket covering (and hiding) the way it must have really looked like at the beginning of the XX century. Landscapes in *Podvig* are immersed in a magical atmosphere of rarefied and incorporeal essence[28], in a constant and perpetual becoming[29].

Martyn is thus presented by Nabokov as a "geroy otkrytogo prostranstva" [hero of the open space], who unlike the "geroy svoego mesta" [hero of his place] is neither geographically nor psychologically static. I would go so far as to saying that Martyn is a true "geroy puti" [hero of the road] since he moves according to a precise spatial and moral trajectory that is linear and evolutionary[30], he has his own destination[31].

Nevertheless, space is not always welcoming and often seems to act against Martyn, or at least to resist his presence. Indoor spaces are frequently described as contorted labyrinths:

> The large, ridiculous villa, with its many stairways, passages, and galleries (so amusingly constructed that sometimes you simply could not tell on what level you were, or having gone up a few steep steps you suddenly found yourself not on the expected mezzanine floor but on the garden terrace), was already shining through with yellow kerosene light, and the sound of voices and the clink of crockery came from the main veranda[32].

Or again: "The complex architectural structure of the ship, all those steps, mazy passages, swinging doors, soon yielded their secrets to him, and it became difficult to find a still unfamiliar corner"[33].

While living in his uncle's estate in Lausanne, Martyn's long walks often end up on a precipice, which evokes in him a strong sense of fear and dizziness[34]. The emblematic value of the precipice is underlined by a series of symbols: some flies cover Martyn's eyes and mouth like those of a corpse; with its body a lizard draws an incomplete figure eight, which recalls the mathematical symbol for the infinite, only interrupted; a black moth suggests grief and death[35]. Mountains and precipices have a

op. cit., p. 29.

[24] See Yu. Lotman, "Problema khudozhestvennogo prostranstva v proze Gogolya", *Trudy po russkoy i slavyanskoy filologii,* XI, *Literaturovedenie*, edited by B. Egorov, Yu. Lotman, V. Adams, Tartu 1968, pp. 7-8.

[25] V. Nabokov, *Podvig*, op. cit., p. 10.

[26] For a deeper understanding of how dream and reality coincide in Martyn's life see P. Tammi, "Glory", op. cit., pp. 169-178.

[27] In *skazki* forests are significantly more frequent than in *byliny* [Russian epics], where the same function is usually performed by open fields. S. Nekljudov, "Il sistema spaziale nell'intreccio della bylina russa", *Ricerche semiotiche. Nuove tendenze delle scienze umane nell'Urss*, edited by Ju. Lotman, B. Uspenskij, Torino 1973, p. 115.

[28] "The most important trait in magic space remains [...] its emptiness, its spaciousness" [Главным же признаком волшебного пространства остается [...] его незаполненность, просторность], Yu. Lotman, "Problema", op. cit., p. 18.

[29] "The normal state for the magic space becomes the continuity of its change: it builds itself, from its movable centre, and something always happens in it" [Нормальным состоянием волшебного пространства становится непрерывность его изменений: оно строится, исходя из подвижного центра, и в нем все время что-то совершается], Ibidem, p. 20.

[30] Ibidem, pp. 10-11.

[31] Ibidem, p. 48.

[32] V. Nabokov, *Glory*, op. cit., p. 25; "Большая нелепая дача со многими лесенками, переходами, галереями, так забавно построенная, что порой никак нельзя было установить, в каком этаже находишься, ибо, поднявшись по каким-нибудь крутым ступеням, ты вдруг оказывался не в мезонине, а на террасе сада, — уже была пронизана желтым керосиновым светом, и с главной веранды слышались голоса, звон посуды", Idem, *Podvig*, op. cit., pp. 24-25.

[33] Idem, *Glory*, op. cit., p. 37; "Сложность, архитектурность корабля, все эти ступени, и закоулки, и откидные дверцы, вскоре выдали ему свои тайны, и потом уже было трудно найти закоулок, еще незнакомый", Idem, *Podvig*, op. cit., p. 34.

[34] Ibidem, pp. 94-95.

[35] Ibidem, pp. 96-97.

powerful totemic meaning[36]. The mountain is usually interpreted as the centre of the world; it is also the point where the earth gets closer to the sky and therefore symbolises man overcoming human fears and limits. While the mountain top indicates the utmost proximity to the divine, the precipice stands for a sudden expansion of space towards an abyssal dimension, it is the annihilation of perspective, the world beyond what we know[37].

The imposing white hotel Martyn can see from the precipice, the Majestic[38], is built in classical style, which might allude to Nabokov's own Russian estate, Rozhdestveno, or even to a sort of inverted Olympus that stands not on the peak of a mountain but right at the bottom of a precipice: there lives Gruzinov, one of the very few people who have been able to go to Russia and come back again, a mythological figure, who nevertheless will not help the young protagonist find his way back to Russia.

Towards the end of the novel Martyn decides to go to a remote village in the south of France where as a child he had been mesmerised by some distant lights, which he had seen from the train[39]. When, as an adult, he finds himself on that same train and thinks he has found that faraway glint again, he decides to get off on a whim, only to find out that those are not the same lights[40]. Space has betrayed him: lights stand for a "distant and unattainable"[41] mirage, they indicate the impossibility of going back to the place of his memories, one that does not exist anymore if not in Martyn's mind.

In Russian traditional epos, *byliny* and *skazki*, space is rarely, if ever, an obstacle to the hero. Roads are usually straight and wide, fields are large and broad. Nature is on the protagonist's side and provides him with the instruments to satisfy his desires and needs[42]. On the contrary, the kinetic energies in Nabokov's *Podvig* seem to rebel against Martyn: spaces are often narrow and contorted, roads mislead him, lights betray his sight. Lotman's theories about space in traditional Russian narrative forms might again prove useful to look for a possible explanation: Martyn's character responds to the principle of "maksimal'naya podvizhnost'" [highest mobility], in which movement is not just a physical matter but also the ability to adapt one's own identity to a broader physical context[43]. Since his childhood Martyn does not fully belong to any place at all. His identity cannot be limited to a single geographical connotation and therefore has a liquid, malleable nature. Moreover, Martyn repeatedly falsifies his origins: in Russia he is of German birth, in England he says he comes from Russia, in Berlin he is an Englishman. As a child he had dreamt on the English books bought by his mother. Nevertheless, when he finally comes to Europe, he does not fit into that very same Western world, towards which he has always felt naturally attracted, but of which he is not a natural part. Sonja makes fun of him every time he uses a British idiomatic expression, such as "drizzle-drozzle"[44], while his classmates at Cambridge feel obliged to speak Russian in his presence. Though being rather at ease in this constantly shifting identity, Martyn can feel his displacement and lack of belonging.

[36] Dmitrenko is persuaded that Nabokov must have read Lévy-Bruhl's ethnological works *La mentalité primitive* [1923] and *Le surnaturel et la nature dans la mentalité primitive* [1931]. See O. Dmitrenko, "Put'", op. cit., p. 54.

[37] Yu. Lotman, "Problema", op. cit., pp. 38-39. Mountains are much more frequent in *skazki* than in *byliny*, where space has an inferior stereometric coefficient, S. Nekljudov, "Il sistema", op. cit., p. 111. The image of the precipice may also be an allusion to Lermontov's *Geroy nashego vremeni* [A hero of our time, 1840], where a duel is fought on the edge of a cliff. See I. Ronen, "Chrabrost'", op. cit., link <http://magazines.russ.ru/zvezda/2010/4/po21.html>.

[38] V. Nabokov, *Podvig*, op. cit., pp. 183-184.

[39] Ibidem, p. 28.

[40] The importance of lights and darkness in *Podvig* has been discussed by Yuichi Isahaya, whose essay can be read in Jeff Edmund's English translation. See Y. Isahaya, "Lights and darkness in Nabokov's *Glory*", link <https://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/isahaya.htm>.

[41] Ibidem.

[42] D. Lichačev, "Le proprietà dinamiche dell'ambiente nelle opere letterarie (per un'impostazione del problema)", *Ricerche semiotiche*, op. cit., pp. 30-31 and 34.

[43] "Максимальная подвижность этого мира проявляется не только в скорости движения, но и в его способности к внутренним изменениям", Yu. Lotman, "Problema", op. cit., p. 37.

[44] In the Russian version the verb *zabusit'* [drizzle] is used; the English translation partly varies the sense of the original, adding a sarcastic tone to Sonja's sentence, V. Nabokov, *Glory*, op. cit., p. 89; Idem, *Podvig*, op. cit., p. 77.

Before moving to France, Martyn conjures up the existence of a faraway land that goes by the name of Zoorlandiya[45]. Under the appearance of an innocent game, born out of the necessity that Martyn feels to create a secret code of communication with Sonja, Zoorlandiya ends up evolving into something more. In her description Zoorlandiya seems to allude to Soviet Russia:

> "Winters are cold there, and monster icicles hang from the eaves, a whole system of them, like organ pipes. Then they melt and everything gets very watery, and there are sootlike specks on the thawing snow. Oh, I can tell you everything about it. For instance, they've just passed a law that all inhabitants must shave their heads, so that now the most important, most influential people are the barbers". "Equality of heads," said Martin[46].

Or again:

> The region was rocky and windy, and the wind was recognized as a positive force since by championing equality in not tolerating towers and tall trees, it only subserved the public aspirations of atmospheric strata that kept diligent watch over the uniformity of the temperature. And, naturally, pure arts, pure science were outlawed, lest the honest dunces be hurt to see the scholar's brooding brow and offensively thick books. Shaven-headed, wearing brown cassocks, the happy Zoorlanders warmed themselves by bonfires as the strings of burning violins snapped with loud reports, and discussed plans to level the land by blowing up mountains that stuck up too presumptuously. Sometimes during the general conversation – at table, for instance – Sonia would suddenly turn to him and quickly whisper, "Have you heard, there's a new law forbidding caterpillars to pupate", or "I forgot to tell you, Savior-and-Mauler" (the sobriquet of one of the chieftains) "has ordered physicians to stop casting around and to treat all illnesses in exactly the same way"[47].

Coherently with structuralist studies on geographical representations in Russian medieval texts, Zoorlandiya is represented as the elsewhere, the barbaric country under the domain of inhuman beings and enemies[48]. It also has its own peculiar climate, flora and fauna. The rigid temperatures and the scarceness of its species recall the traditional Russian medieval representation of Hell[49].

The name "Zoorlandiya" has been interpreted in many different ways. It may result from the combination of the Russian preposition *za-* [beyond], the words *orle* [edge, in both English or French, from the Latin *orula*] and *land*, meaning a foreign land[50]. It might phonetically recall the Russian word for eagle, *orel*[51], and therefore stand for

---

[45] A reference to Zoorlandiya can be found in Nabokov's poem *Ul'daborg* [Uldaborg, 1930]. He also sets other short stories and novels in dystopic lands, such as in the case of *Priglashenie na kazn'* [Invitation to a beheading, 1936], *Istreblenie tiranov* [Tyrants destroyed, 1936], *Ultima Thule* [1939], *Solus rex* [1939], *Bend sinister* [1947], in which the principle of "ekwilism", a political doctrine that promotes conformism, deprives people of their freedom ("a remolding of human individuals in conformity with a well-balanced pattern", Idem, *Novels and memoirs 1941-1951*, New York 1996, p. 228).

[46] Idem, *Glory*, op. cit., pp. 193-194; "'Там холодные зимы и сосулищи с крыш, – целая система, как, что ли, органные трубы, – а потом все тает, и все очень водянисто, и на снегу – точки вроде копоти, вообще, знаешь, я все могу тебе рассказать, вот, например, вышел там закон, что всем жителям надо брить головы, и потому теперь самые важные, самые такие влиятельные люди – парикмахеры'. 'Равенство голов', – сказал Мартын", Idem, *Podvig*, op. cit., pp. 160-161.

[47] Idem, *Glory*, op. cit., pp. 194-195; "Страна была скалистая, ветреная, и ветер признан был благою силой, ибо, ратуя за равенство, не терпел башен и высоких деревьев, а сам был только выразителем социальных стремлений воздушных слоев, прилежно следящих, чтобы вот тут не было жарче, чем вот там. И конечно искусства и науки объявлены были вне закона, ибо слишком обидно и раздражительно для честных невежд видеть задумчивость грамотея и его слишком толстые книги. Бритоголовые, в бурых рясах, зоорландцы грелись у костров, в которых звучно лопались струны сжигаемых скрипок, а иные поговаривали о том, что пора пригладить гористую страну, взорвать горы, чтобы они не торчали так высокомерно. Иногда среди общей беседы, за столом, например, – Соня вдруг поворачивалась к нему и быстро шептала: 'Ты слышал, вышел закон, запретили гусеницам окукляться', – или: 'Я забыла тебе сказать, что Саваннарыло – (кличка одного из вождей) – приказал врачам лечить все болезни одним способом, а не разбрасываться'", Idem, *Podvig*, op. cit., pp. 161-162. In the Russian original the name *Savannarylo* creates an evocative assonance with the name of Savonarola, the Italian friar whose sermons made him a popular figure. On the other hand, the English translation "Saviour-and-Mauler", while preserving the assonance, might also allude to the man's strong personality.

[48] S. Nekljudov, "Il sistema", op. cit., p. 110.

[49] "The Russian medieval utopia presupposes the existence of a peculiar geography, a peculiar climate, a different fauna and flora. [...] In paradise climate is particularly appropriate, suitable to human life on earth, on the contrary hell stands as the opposite. In paradise the soil is fertile, everything grows spontaneously and in abundance, in hell climate is not compatible with life, there are ice and flames" [Средневековая русская утопия подразумевает существование особой географии, особого климата, другого животного и растительного мира. [...] Рай – это место с особенно благодатным, приспособленным для жизни человека в земном смысле климатом, а ад составляет ему в этом смысле противоположность. В раю благодатная почва, все растет само и в изобилии, в аду климат, невозможный для жизни – лед и огонь], Yu. Lotman, "O ponyatii geograficheskogo prostranstva v russkikh srednevekovykh tekstakh", *Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, II, edited by Yu. Lotman, Ch. Ryatsep, I. Kull' et al., Tartu 1965, p. 213.

[50] As contained in the notes curated by A. Dolinin and G. Utgof, V. Nabokov, *Sobranie*, op. cit., pp. 736-737.

[51] O. Dmitrenko, "Put'", op. cit., pp. 59-60.

strength and immortality, as well as moral virtue, when opposed to the image of a snake. We should also mention that the symbol of imperial Russia was a two-headed eagle. Furthermore, the toponym "Zoorlandiya" might refer to Shklovsky's novel *Zoo, ili pis'ma ne o lyubvi* [Zoo, letters not about love, 1923]. There, despite the prohibition already contained in the title itself, love becomes the main subject. Similarly, in *Podvig* Zoorlandiya grows out of Martyn's need to find a common ground for communication with Sonja, who does not reciprocate his feelings and prevents him from talking openly about love. Moreover, at the end of Shklovsky's novel, the protagonist asks permission to return to Soviet Russia on legal terms, like the author did himself in 1923. Therefore, Martyn's wish may be read as a criticism against such conduct, advocating against any compromise with the Soviet regime[52]. A Russian native speaker, however, might read the word "Zoorlandiya", both the "o" vowels being unstressed, as a combination of *za-* and *Orlandiya*, where the name Orlando is evoked[53]. If we take into account the epic subtext of *Podvig*, we might easily detect a connection to Orlando, who is in fact Charlemagne's nephew and the protagonist of a series of *chansons de geste* and epic poems, mainly Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*.

I would suggest that the name "Zoorlandiya" stands for two different things at the same time. On the one hand, if we assume that *Orlandiya* is Orlando's land, the idyllic realization of chivalric values, *Za-Orlandiya* is the place beyond Orlando's world of knights errant and heroic deeds, like Lewis Carroll's *zazerkal'e*[54], the world beyond the looking glass. It is the world of inverted values and fallen virtues. If Russia is thus Martyn's homeland as he remembers it, that is to say before the October revolution, Zoorlandiya is Soviet Russia. On the other hand, since it gradually overlaps with contemporary Russia, Zoorlandiya becomes the country where Martyn intends to perform his heroic deed: Soviet Russia is a place of which he wants to deny the existence by entering it without a visa, by proving that its law has no power over him and that he can still go back to the place he remembers.

This brings us back to Martyn's *podvig*. Although, as Nabokov declares in the foreword to the English version, the content of the novel has been meticulously translated[55], the novel itself bears a different title: *Glory* was preferred to other more literal options such as "exploit" and "fulfillment" or the rather pompous "high deed" and "gallant feat". Nevertheless, by choosing the title *Glory* Nabokov still manages to retain the diachronic implications of its narrative. Martyn's heroic deed and his wish to attain his own glorification have ancient roots and go back to that very same world of epos and folklore where Orlando, knights errant, heroes and *bogatyri* [Russian epic heroes] live. This is the reason why Martyn is so far removed from those around him. Nobody can come to terms with the disinterested nature of his quest: in a world where travel has become a way to conquer, trade and exploit, Martyn's lack of interest in profit has no value and contradicts any contemporary logic. His quest is a manifestation of the symbolic ritualization and de-materialisation that is typical of medieval society[56]. Moreover, among medieval values, glory has the most semiotic meaning: unlike honour, which mainly consists in material rewards, glory presupposes the absence of any physical manifestation[57].

[52] M. Shrayer, "The perfect glory", op. cit., pp. 33-34.

[53] Ibidem, pp. 35-36.

[54] In 1922 Nabokov had translated Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* in Russian for Gamajun, one of many Russian publishers in Berlin. See B. Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The Russian Years*, London 1990, p. 197.

[55] Isahaya has detected a certain lack of correspondence between the Russian words *svet* and *ogon'* and their English translation as "light" and "flames". See Y. Isahaya, "Lights", op. cit., link <https://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/isahaya.htm>.

[56] "Medieval society was highly symbolic: the distinction between the real essence of phenomena and their symbolic nature was at the core of its world view" [Средневековое общество было обществом высокой знаковости – отделение реальной сущности явлений от их знаковой сущности лежало в основе его миросозерцания], Yu. Lotman, "Ob oppozitsii 'chest'' – 'slava' v svetskikh tekstakh kievskogo perioda", *Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, III, edited by Yu. Lotman, L. Val't, Vjach. Ivanov et al., Tartu 1967, p. 102.

[57] "The notion of '*slava*' [glory] is a lot more semiotic. '*Chest*'' [honour] implies a material reward (or gift), a concrete sign of a certain relationship. '*Slava*' presupposes the *lack of any material sign*. It is immaterial and because of that, according to the ideals of feudal society, more precious, being it the attribute of those who do not need any material reward since they already have a higher status.

Like Igor' Svyatoslavich in *Slovo o polku Igoreve* [The song of Igor's campaign][58], Martyn's heroic deed is utterly unrealistic: the fact that the plan has been conceived without taking into account its practical feasibility is in itself the first step towards glory[59].

Podvig is ultimately intended to celebrate the glory of adventure and disinterested achievement. Martyn's journey thus becomes a contemporary epic in which travel imposes itself as the only way for the protagonist to reaffirm his own identity by proving his value through a brave act.

In 1932 Vladislav Khodasevich published an essay, also titled *Podvig*, where he lamented Russian *intelligenty*'s poor conditions in Europe. He wrote:

> Если лишенные не только приятного, но и самого необходимого, молодые писатели наши все еще трудятся, все еще ведут неприметную, но упорную борьбу за свое литературное существование, то иначе, как *подвигом*, я этого назвать не могу[60].

Martyn's quest ignores any contemporary logic and tells the drama of geographical and psychological displacement. Whether he will be able to go back to Russia and survive is not the point. If living in a world where nobody understands his desires, where space rejects him and time proves his anachronism, Martyn persists all the more and all the more he overcomes boundaries, breaking through spatial and temporal borders, then I do not know how else to call it but *podvig*.

www.esamizdat.it Nadia Cornettone, ""I too plan to explore a distant land". Travel between Reality and Imagination in Nabokov's *Podvig*", *eSamizdat*, 2016 (XI), pp. 7-14

This is the reason why '*slava*' can be bestowed by descendants, distant peoples and bought at the price of death, while '*chest*'' can be granted only by contemporaries" [Понятие 'славы' значительно большей мере семиотично. 'Честь' подразумевает материальную награду (или подарок), являющуюся знаком определенных отношений. 'Слава' подразумевает *отсутствие материального знака*. Она невещественна и поэтому – в идеях феодального общества – более ценна, являясь аттрибутом того, кто уже не нуждается в материальных знаках, так как стоит на высшей ступени. В частности, поэтому славу можно принять от потомков, далеких народов, купить ценой смерти, честь – лишь от современников], Ibidem, p. 105.

[58] Nabokov was particularly interested in the anonymous epic poem, which he translated into English in 1960.

[59] "The more the aim was unattainable, unrealistic in a practical sense, the more it was removed from its factual results, by being semiotic, the more glorious the attempt at its accomplishment would be. Its unattainability, its chimeric quality and, from a practical point of view, its unfeasibility increased the *glory* of the undertaking. [...] The fact itself that the plan has been conceived without taking into account its feasibility makes it attractive to the knight's eyes" [Чем более несбыточна, нереальна с точки зрения здравого практического смысла, чем более отделена от фактических результатов – семиотична – была цель, тем выше была слава попытки ее реализации. Несбыточность, химеричность, практически – нереализуемость, увеличивала славу предприятия. [...] Именно то, что план составлен без оглядки на практические возможности, составляет для рыцаря его привлекательность], Yu. Lotman, "Ob oppozitsii", op. cit., pp. 107-108 and 109.

[60] "If deprived not only of pleasure, but also of the essential, our young writers work all the more and all the more they conduct an imperceptible but persistent fight for literature to still be their means of subsistence, then I do not know how else to call it but *podvig*", V. Khodasevich, "Podvig", *Vozrozhdenie*, 5 maya 1932, p. 3, link <http://az.lib.ru/h/hodasewich_w_f/text_1060.shtml>.