MAXIM D. SHRAYER

The Perfect Glory of Nabokov’s Exploit

Like the protagonist Martin himself—a quintessential Russian to non-Russians, a Swiss to his Russian compatriots—the ending of Podvig (Glory; the Russian title literally means “exploit”) stands apart from Nabokov’s other Russian novels. In the foreword to the English version (1970), Nabokov spoke of a “temptation to perform [his] own little exploit.” In briefly considering the principal approaches to the ending of Glory, I aim to show that Nabokov’s exploit—his ending—corresponds most intimately to his conceptions of both the ideal act of reading, where “one cannot read a book: one can only reread it,” and of the perfect ending, where time is spatialized and forever vanquished.

The realist, historical interpretations of the novel treat the ending as a tragic fulfillment of Martin’s fantasy of return. This interpretation maintains that after crossing illegally into Russia, Martin was apprehended and executed, thus enacting the recurrent nightmarish vision of his lyrical predecessor in the poem “The Execution” (1927): “Russia, the stars, the night of execution / and full of racemosas the ravine!” Unlike the émigré characters of such works as “The Visit to the Museum” or Look at the Harlequins!, Martin does not come back to bear witness to his journey to Soviet Russia. His readers within the novel—the Zilanos and Darwin—are quick to assume his death. Sonia Zilano “beg[ins] to scream between

English text © 2000 Maxim D. Shrayber. All rights reserved. The essay originally appeared in Russian as “O kontsovke nabokovskogo Podviga.” Literaturnoe obozrenie 2 (1999): 57-62. Copyright © 1999 Maxim D. Shrayber. All rights reserved.
sobs, 'They'll kill him, oh God, they'll kill him.' " Mr. Zilanov states that "the matter is fairly hopeless, if he has really tried to steal across the border." Still, it should be noted that the fact of Martin's death is never established in the novel, and even from a realist perspective an open ending is thus warranted.

Several historical and political factors contribute to Martin's decision to undertake his expedition. His Cambridge years coincided with the culmination of the Russian Civil War, and for a while Martin's mother feared that he might join the White troops. When the caustic Sonia asks Martin if he plans to join General Ludenich's army, he replies aphoristically: "One side is fighting for the ghost of the past and the other for the ghost of the future." During his first autumn in England, he comes to the realization that he is an exile (izgnannik), forever bound to Russia's destiny. His choice of Russian history and literature as his field of study stems from a belief that "he was not free to choose, that there was one thing he must study." Martin's initial enchantment and subsequent disillusionment with Archibald Moon, the renowned professor of Russian civilization, contributes to his eventual decision to journey to Russia. The falling out between the Russian student and the English professor was surely not just a consequence of different sexual preferences: Moon's nocturnal urination, Martin's sunny heterosexuality. As the idea of an expedition to Russia germinates in Martin's mind, he finds it harder and harder to tolerate Moon's collector's fascination with Russia's past and his utter contempt for Russia's present: "Everything subsequent is blamaia muzyka (thieves' lingo)." Unlike Moon, Martin is unwilling to put a "museumist" closure on Russian history. He is surrounded by various living signs and symbols that link his own past, present, and future with Russia's. (Recall Sonia's cousin, the half-wit Irina, a victim of revolutionary violence, who greets Martin with barks of happiness.) Russia is to Martin an open-ended narrative, and the novel's ending refutes Moon's belief that one cannot stay in Babylon.

At the very end of the novel Martin shares his plan with his friend Darwin. Consider this bit of dialogue, where Darwin, as usual, knows more than his words can express:

"Only I do not quite see what's the purpose of it."
"Give a little thought, and you will."
"Some plot against the good old Soviets? Want to see someone?"

Deliver a secret message? I confess that as a boy I rather fancied those gloomy bearded chaps who threw bombs at the troika of the ruthless governor."

Although Martin "morosely" shakes his head, there can be little doubt that the ending of *Glory* is informed by the activities of émigré monarchist and especially socialist-revolutionary (SR) organizations, aimed at mounting anti-Bolshevik uprisings on the territory of Soviet Russia. By the end of the 1920s, when Nabokov was working on *Glory*, the NKVD (Soviet Commissariat for Internal Affairs) had successfully infiltrated or liquidated many of the émigré insurrectionist groups. One might consider, as part of the historical background for *Glory*, the arrest, trial, and death of Boris Savinkov following his return to Russia in August 1924. Given what we know about the activities of Zilanov, logolevich, and Gruzinov, arguably the three SRs in the novel, as well as the time when Martin's expedition takes place, I would speculate that in constructing the ending Nabokov makes a double-edged statement on the meaning of anti-Bolshevik terrorist activity. While giving full credit to Martin's heroism, Nabokov also hints at the gap between an individual activist's selfless heroism and the leaders' professional cynicism, if not betrayal, of their cause (recall Martin's disheartening conversation with Gruzinov about illegal border crossing). Be that as it may, Nabokov refers to Martin's "glory of a radiant martyr," alluding to the links between the name of his protagonist ("Martyn" in the Russian spelling) and several Christian saints and martyrs. It is hardly coincidental that Martin undertakes his exploit some time in November, the month of two St. Martins. (In the Western Church, the day of St. Martin of Tours falls on November 11, and the day of St. Martin I, Pope, falls on November 12).

Finally, one of the conspirators in the novel, logolevich, is said to have crossed the border in a shroud. The idea of Martin's entry into Russia as a descent into Hell finds a structural embodiment in the final image of an empty path that disappears into a dark forest. One is reminded of the opening of Dante's *Inferno*, where the poet comes to himself in a dark forest ("una selva oscura"), where the straight way ("la diritta via") was lost. (By the way, Dante is mentioned in chapter 34 of the original version of *Glory*; cf. chapter 33 in the English translation.) The Dante-esque signification of Nabokov's ending links its realist and historical interpretations with mythological and fantastical explanations.
More than halfway into the novel, Martin and Sonia create Zoorland, a space where the common sense laws of existence cease to be valid and where fictional imagination rules supreme. A whole range of interpretive possibilities opens up when one allows that, in the ending, Martin enters not the territory of historical Russia but that of fictional Zoorland. A tendency of Nabokov criticism has been to treat Zoorland as a dystopian Russia. Indeed, dystopian, and specifically Swiftian, overtones figure in the descriptions of Zoorland that Martin and Sonia coauthor: "They’ve just passed a law that all the inhabitants must shave their heads, so that now the most important, most influential people are the barbers." Sonia herself is partially to blame as she creates bridges between Zoorland’s fantastical reality and that of real Bolshevik Russia. Sonia also sandwiches poignant historical references between fictional details about Zoorland: "I forgot to tell you, Savan-na-rylo ['Savior-and-Mauler' in the English] has ordered physicians to stop casting around and to treat all illnesses in exactly the same way." The Russian here contains a transparent reference to both "savon," a shroud in which the conspirator Logylovec crossed into Russia, and to Savonarola, the brutal Italian reformer. Finally, Nabokov’s poem "Uldaborg," written in 1930 and subtitled "a translation from Zoorlandish," betrays that around the time he was working on Glory, Nabokov already had in mind Invitation to a Beheading. In the last stanza of "Uldaborg" the protagonist laughs as he ascends the scaffold, anticipating the plight of both Cincinnatus C. and the hero of "Tyrrants Destroyed."

In a more intriguing interpretation, Zoorland has been seen as a bestial land. In addition to his genealogical ties (via his Indrik grandmother) to indrik, the mother of all beasts in Russian mythology, Martin’s first and last name also connect him to a flower, a monkey (marmoset), and a bird (of the swallow tribe). Sonia’s last name links her to a snake; she is also identified with a little dog ("What fun to stare when a great big bear walks home arm in arm with a tiny bitch to lay her there"); other links between the characters of Glory and real and mythical animals may be identified. An animal kingdom Zoorland may be, but clearly the laws of Darwinian evolution have no place within its boundaries. It is rather poignant that after graduating from Cambridge, Darwin embarks on a journalistic career and goes to America, where he excels in the game of the survival of the fittest. Martin, in the meantime, idles around and then conjures up a Zoorland for Sonia and himself, a mythological space where instead of Darwinian selection and change there is an accumulation and concentration of one’s innate perfection. If Zoorland is indeed the domain of anti-Darwinism, the ending of the novel—with Darwin the character following Martin on a path that leads to Zoorland—must be making a strong Nabokovian statement about the limits of Darwinism.

An even more tempting possibility is to regard the ending of Glory as a text of Nabokov’s polemic with Viktor Shklovskii’s remarkable novel Zoo, Letters Not about Love, or the Third Héloïse, published in Berlin in 1923. The creation of Zoorland is brought about by the following chain of events. Martin arrives in Berlin to find Sonia in the midst of an émigré Russian cultural life. He socializes with émigré litterateurs and befriends Bubnov, the most talented of the younger Russian authors in Berlin. Because Martin only writes letters to his mother, he acquires the nickname “Madame de Sévigné,” after the famous Marquise who left a major mark on the epistolary genre. Walking Sonia home one night, Martin “forgot his usual reverie, his usual fear that Sonia would make fun of him, and, by some miracle, began to speak." Martin draws a picture of ancient Rome, of Horace strolling off to the Field of Mars. Sonia is so taken with Martin’s account that she offers to kiss him. The kiss that ensues differs from the brotherly kiss Martin once planted on Sonia’s pale cheek: “Little shivers shook her, her lips parted under his, but breaking the spell her hand pushed his face aside, and her teeth were chattering, and in a half-whisper she implored him to stop.” Martin obeys, sensing that “there had been a moment when he could have taken a firm hold of Sonia, but now she had slipped away.” The following day, after he sees Sonia with another man, Martin writes her a letter, presumably about his love. In her response that comes a week or so later Sonia ignores the subject of Martin’s confession. They do continue seeing each other, and a new tone of communications—nonsexual, albeit intimate in its own way—is set forth. More important, out of the new code of communication between Martin and Sonia, a code based on the same prohibition against love as in Shklovskii’s Zoo, grows the very text of Zoorland: “Something they discussed that day happened to lead to a series of quite special exchanges between them.” The conversations during which Martin and Sonia coauthor Zoorland, “a land where ordinary mortals were not admitted,” take place during their trips to the “piny outskirts” of Berlin and their walks in the city. On the eve of his
expedition to Zoorland/Russia, Martin recalls one such walk to the Berlin Zoo, and the recollection evokes an episode in Shklovskii’s novel. Like Shklovskii’s book, which becomes a novel about love despite the prohibition against it, Zoorland is a text driven to its completion by Martin’s unrequited love for Sonia. Martin coauthors the book of Zoorland with Sonia up to the point when she reveals its contents to Bubnov. I suggest that in publishing “Zoorland” Bubnov acts as an editor, if not a mere scribe of Martin’s fiction.8 Martin must write the ending of his tale alone. How then is the ending of Glory a response to the ending of Shklovskii’s novel?

At the end of Zoo, having failed to win the love of Alia, whose prototype was the Russian-born Elsa Triolet, Shklovskii writes a letter to VTsIK, the Central Executive Committee, asking permission to return to Soviet Russia. (Shklovskii was forced to flee Russia following the SR trial in June 1922.) “I cannot live in Berlin,” so opens letter twenty-nine of Zoo. “I am bound by my entire way of life, by all my habits, to the Russia of today. I am able to work only for her. It is not right that I should be living in Berlin. [. . .] I invented a woman and love in order to make a book about misunderstanding, about alien people, about an alien land. I want to go back to Russia.”9 Shklovskii’s request was granted, and he returned to Russia in the fall of 1923. The endings of both novels, Nabokov’s and Shklovskii’s, project opposite scenarios of the protagonists’ return. Shklovskii’s protagonist returns to Russia as a penitent; he is defeated and asks for clemency. Such a political stance would have been ethically unacceptable to Nabokov. Although Martin fails to win Sonia’s love, he returns as a hero. Hence the ultimate victory of his exploit—be it illegally crossing the border into Russia or disappearing into Zoorland.

Critics have also pointed out a number of references in the text of Glory to Russian and Western medieval folktales and romances (Edythe C. Haber wrote a pioneering essay on the subject.) As a child, Martin reads about the exploits of Tristram, “Ruslan’s occidental brother.” The adventures of Martin and his Cambridge friends Darwin, Vadim and Teddy mimic those of the knights of King Arthur’s Round Table.10 Moreover, the narrative of Martin’s quest for Sonia’s love and the meaning of exile has been identified with a well-known Russian fairy tale, “Volshebnoe kol’tso” (The magic ring). However, another series of prominent subtexts has not received much attention. To a native speaker of English, the name Zoorland both graphically and phonetically evokes the word “zoo” and its cognates (e.g., “zooology”). At the same time, because both “o” vowels in the Russian version are unstressed, a native speaker of Russian pronounces “Zoorlandia” as za-Orlandia (cf. the pronunciation of the Russian word zoo park = zoo). Thus a native speaker’s ear might interpret the Russian version of the word Zoorland as a combination of the preposition “za” (beyond) and “Orland.” (Typologically, this is akin to the Russian term for Lewis Carroll’s space beyond the looking glass, zerkal’ie). What does Orland signify and what lies beyond its literary territory?

“Orland” refers to a series of medieval and Renaissance texts that feature the celebrated figure of the paladin Orlando, historically the nephew of Charlemagne (also known as Roland, Rotolando, and as Rutlandus in the Latin chronicles of the Middle Ages).11 Those include, most notably, La Chanson de Roland, Boiard’s Orlando Innamorato (and its burlesque retelling by Berni), and Ariosto’s great work Orlando Furioso. Also relevant here are the variations on Orlando’s legendary exploits in Spenser’s The Faerie Queene and Shakespeare’s As You Like It. Glory certainly exhibits structural features of the famous chanson de geste as well as some elements of Shakespeare’s comedy (cf. the wrestling match between Orlando and Olivier, and between Martin and Darwin). Still, the shape of Nabokov’s narrative, the characters of Martin as a knight-errant and Sonia as his beloved, as well as the ending of Glory, suggest a most direct dialogue with Ariosto’s epic poem.

Although events depicted in Orlando Furioso are vertiginously numerous, and its epic plots explosively expansive, the story of count Orlando’s frenzied love for the oriental princess Angelica seems the likeliest unifying element of the poem’s structure. Set against the historical background of Charlemagne’s wars against the Saracens, the fantastical narrative of Orlando’s pursuit of the daughter of the Great Khan finds a number of subtle parallels in Martin’s pursuit of Sonia Zilanov at the time of the Russian Civil War. Sonia behaves like a Beautiful Lady of chivalric romances in a number of ways. She challenges her suitors—and those include not only Martin but also Darwin, Bubnov, and others—to acts of military and literary glory. She rewards them with bits of intimacy, never complete, always interrupted at her will. Aloof and mysterious, a tenuous beauty and a tease, she enjoys being the object of triangles of desire. In fact, Martin’s rivalry with Darwin, climaxing in a boxing match, serves the
same structural purpose as Orlando’s competition with his cousin Rinaldo over Angelica’s love—a love neither knight wins in the end. In Ariosto’s epic, Angelica is the daughter of the Khan of Cathay; the word Cathay literally refers to China but more likely stands for Tartary. Sonia’s last name and physique allude to her Turkic origins. She is described as having “black, somewhat coarse-looking hair” and “slanted eyes”; “the dimples of her pale cheeks went singularly with her dull-dark, slightly slanting eyes.” In addition, the name Zilanov derives from the word zilan, whose origins are linked with the Turkic word for “snake.” In folklore, zilan is a “white snake, the fairy-tale snake king.” Zilan is also a “patroness of khans,” who even makes her way onto the coat of arms of the city of Kazan. In his foreword, Nabokov speaks to the subject of Sonia’s origins: “Her father, judging by his name, had Cheremissian blood.” “Cheremis” is the old name of the Mari people, a Finno-Ugric ethnic group residing in the upper Volga basin. The word zilan is not of Mari but of Turkic origins, as is the word Cheremis itself. Most likely, Nabokov uses the word Cheremis both to avoid the negative cultural connotations of the word Tartar in the English language and to indicate the general geographical area from which Zilanov’s ancestors came.

Martin’s love for Sonia mirrors Orlando’s love for the infidel princess Angelica (one should not overlook the ecclesiastical connotations of both females’ names). After finding out that Angelica has given herself to the soldier Medoro, Orlando goes mad and wanders the world committing both acts of violence and heroic exploits. Martin, too, travels from Berlin to Provence, still unable to shake off Sonia’s spell. Upon his return to Berlin he does feel almost cured, although “the air of Berlin is saturated with memories of her.” Orlando is finally cured after Astolpho, an English paladin, brings his wits back from the moon. Darwin likewise tries to restore Martin’s wits—recall their last conversation in a Berlin hotel—but fails to keep Martin from going to Russia or Zoorland. Having led his reader across forty-six cantos with hundreds of characters and locations, Ariosto creates closure by concluding his epic with the wedding of Orlando’s cousin Bradamant and the Saracen convert Ruggiero. This union gives birth to the ducal house of Este, the rulers of Ferrara and Ariosto’s patrons whom he thus glorifies. In Nabokov’s Glory, the ending is flung open, as Martin the knight-errant hopes to prove to Sonia the Beautiful Lady that he is capable of the highest glory. That Sonia knows more than everybody else—or thinks she knows more—about the meaning of Martin’s last exploit becomes evident in the final chapter, where Zilanov questions his daughter. “Of course, I know all about it,” Sonia replies. “They’ll kill him,” she screams between her sobs. Which interpretation of the ending do Sonia’s words privilege? The fruitful ambiguity of Sonia’s remark suggests that Martin’s expedition blurs the elusive boundary between fantastical Zoorland and historical Russia—a distinction that may not even exist in Martin’s own mind. Lastly, one cannot help but wonder if the enticing grammatical alternative, contained in the English variant, Zoorland, does not highlight another dimension of the novel’s ending.

Zoorland? Orland? Zoo or land? Or something else, perhaps something that is not even a country, either real or imagined? Does Martin’s journey at the end of the novel lead the reader into the territory of pure art? Nabokov warns us that “among the many gifts [he] showered on Martin, [he] was careful not to include talent.” Charles Nicol has suggested that Martin serves as a Muse, stimulating the creative activities of the novel’s designated artists: Darwin, Bubnov and others. But there is more to Martin’s linkages with art. His own artistic potential is actualized most fully and directly when he coauthors the text of Zoorland with Sonia. Is it not consistent with the novel’s design that in the ending Martin as an embodiment of pure art—either a Muse or an “artist as a young man”—would disappear into his native element?

Let us summarize: An expedition to Soviet Russia represents a heroic descent, perhaps even an Orphic journey, into the underworld. A trip to Zoorland, on the other hand, embodies a transcendent ascent toward love and wisdom—recall the haunting repercussions of the cult of Sophia in the names and characters of Martin’s mother and his beloved. Martin’s disappearance into the space of a painting—where “the dark path passed between the tree trunks in picturesque and mysterious windings”—thus constitutes a lateral and literal move, a most organic way to put closure on the text of the novel or, rather, to throw this text open.

The ending of Glory literalizes and fulfills Martin’s childhood dream of leaping into a “watercolor depicting a dense forest with a winding path disappearing into its depth.” Merged in his memory, a watercolor by the fairy-tale Indrikov grandmother and an illustration in an English children’s story become one. Likewise, the numerous variations of the motif of the winding path, previously scattered through-
out and hidden in the text, are all unified by the ending. There is, however, one difference between the various shapes of the road motif and the picture that hangs in the bedroom of Martin's childhood and before the reader's eyes after closing the last page of the novel. All the intermediate versions of the path motif represent combinations of different forms of space and figurations of time: the echo of Lermontov's "Alone I walk on the road" in Martin's "Star. Mist. Velvet. Traveltvet"; the beating of Martin's frenzied heart on an Alpine ledge; the clattering sleeping car of Martin's childhood from which he imagines "a forest, a winding path—what huge trees!" and then spots "a necklace of lights, far away, among dark hills." In the novel's perfect ending, the element of time is removed from the picture. Nabokov undoes his characters but leaves a landscape, an art form that unravels in space, as the reader—the beholder, to be exact—no longer needs to imagine the pace of the traveler's steps on the winding path. This fondness for removing time from literary texts by means of inserting pictorial vistas is a constant feature of Nabokov's art from the earliest Russian poems and stories through the late English works. One is reminded of Nabokov's poem entitled "Ut Pictura Poesis," of the canvas's alluring otherspace in "La Veneziana," of the "motionless and perfect correlation of happiness" in "Cloud, Castle, Lake." Nabokov, who confessed that he did not believe in time, taught his students that "when we look at a painting we do not have to move our eyes in a special way even if, as in a book, the picture contains elements of depth and development. The element of time does not really enter in a first contact with a painting." Nabokov also expressed a wish that "at the close of [his book] the reader would experience a sensation of its world receding in the distance and stopping somewhere there, suspended afar like a picture in a picture." When looked at in those terms, the ending of Glory comes the closest to Nabokov's ideal ending, closer even than the black hole gaping in Luzhin's chessboard, or the "transparent sepulcher" of Vasily Shishkov's valedictory verses.

I first read Glory in Italy in the summer of 1987. I was then a recent émigré from Russia, and a seedy Tyrrhenian beach was my reading room. And here is a confession: I loved the book instantly, and my love for it has not diminished over the years. I have often wondered since that time what would happen if Martin were to survive his exploit and emigrate to America with his creator. Which of the American characters would he become? Perhaps Humbert Humbert—recall his Swiss uncle Gustave. Or maybe Van Veen, that itinerant innamorato? Of all the American characters, I believe, Pnin is the nearest incarnation of Martin. They share a great deal, including a favorite poem by Pushkin. This poem is evoked several times throughout Glory. "How shall I be dyeing myself?" Martin muses after meeting the conspirator Iogolevich. Pnin attempts to explain this poem, "Brozhu li ia v dol' ulits shumnykh" ("As I wander down noisy streets," 1829), to his American students, and he also mumbles it as he shuffles through the alleys of the Waindoll campus. The poem would make a perfect epigraph to Nabokov's Glory, and how miraculously its last three stanzas apply to the ending:

And where will fate send me death?
In battle, in my wanderings, among waves?
Or will the neighboring valley
Receive my cold dust?

And although it is all the same to the unfeeling body
Wherever it may rot,
Yet nearer to my dear haunts
I would like to rest.

And at the entrance to the grave
I want young life to be at play,
And let indifferent nature
Shine with everlasting beauty. 17

Notes

2. Nabokov, Glory, xiii; hereafter, all citations are from this edition.
5. The term museumist is used by Nabokov in the English version of his poem.
“To Prince S. M. Kachurin”: “and here I am / living for the third day / in a museumist setup”; see Nabokov. Poems and Problems, 134–35.
6. For background, see Spence, Boris Savinkov: Renegade on the Left, 317–72.
7. See Shklovskii, Zoo. Pis’ma ne o liubvi. Shklovskii arrived in Berlin in the summer of 1922 and left in the fall of 1923. On Shklovskii’s Berlin period and the background for Zoo, see Sheldon, Zoo or Letters Not about Love, xiii–xxiii.
8. Nabokov’s own publication of an excerpt called “Zoorlandia” in the Paris paper Rossiia i slavianstvo was a metafictional tour de force similar to the “Vasily Shishkov” controversy of 1939.
10. See O. Dark’s commentary in Nabokov, Sobranie sochinenii, 2:440–41.
11. I will not consider here Virginia Woolf’s Orlando (1928) as a possible subtext for Glory. The subject awaits its investigator. In 1933, Nabokov read Orlando and disliked it strongly; see “To Zinaida Shakhovskaya,” 25 July 1933, letter in Zinaida Shakhovskoy Collection. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
14. Throughout the novel, Sonia and the members of her family establish juncntures between the realist and fantastical readings of the novel. For instance, Mr. Zilkan often disappears to go to “Orel, Kostroma, Paris” (in the English version this becomes “Riga, Belgrade, Paris”—the major centers of Russian interwar emigration). In this connection, zaa-Orlandia could be interpreted as a territory geographically beyond the Russian city of Orel.
15. Nabokov, Lectures on Literature, 3.
17. My literal translation of Pushkin’s poem does not aspire to capture the original’s artistry.

Works Cited


———. “Zoorlandia.” Rossiia i slavianstvo, no. 149 (30 October 1931).