

## ON SOME CONTEXTS AND SUBTEXTS OF NABOKOV'S *PODVIG*

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Google conservat omnia. С его помощью я с немалым удивлением (неужели это было так давно!) узнал, что доклад о «Подвиге», положенный в основу предлагаемой ниже статьи, я сделал 10 сентября 1998 года на утреннем заседании весьма представительной набокховской конференции в Корнельском университете. Несколько месяцев спустя я начал переделывать этот доклад в статью, предназначавшуюся для сборника “Nabokov at Cornell”, благополучно вышедшего в свет в 2003 году. Однако в процессе подготовки рукописи к печати мне не понравилась манера редактора книги, и я, навсегда зарекившись иметь с ним дело, статью в сборник не послал. Некоторые соображения из нее были использованы в нашем с Г. М. Утгофом комментарии к «Подвигу» в третьем томе собрания сочинений Набокова, вышедшего в издательстве «Симпозиум» (см.: Набоков 2000: 714–742), в моем предисловии к тому же тому (Там же: 17–28) и в моей статье «Клио смеется последней: Набоков в споре с историзмом» (см.: Dolinin 1999: 197–215; Долинин 2004: 177–198; Долинин 2019: 231–259). Больше я к статье не возвращался, дискеты (floppy disks), на которых она хранилась, вероятно, выбросил за ненадобностью, все распечатки давно потерялись, и я был уверен, что она канула в специальную Лету для впустую написанных работ. Каково же было мое изумление, когда Г. М. Утгоф сообщил мне, что статья нашлась в его архиве, и предложил напечатать ее в „Slavica Revalensia”.

Перечитав статью 20 лет спустя как полу-незнакомый текст, я не без колебаний преодолел искушение все переписать заново и решил напечатать ее в первоизданном виде, без существенных изменений и дополнений. Поэтому читатель не найдет в ней ссылок на работы о «Подвиге», которые появились после 2000 года, но, к счастью для

меня, не перекрыли мои наблюдения. Я лишь исправил замеченные погрешности в английском языке и уточнил библиографию.

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## On Some Contexts and Subtexts of Nabokov's *Podvig*

*...i v nash zhestokii vek nam, pravo, ne pristalo  
skulit' i kuksit'sia. Poidem, kremnisti put'  
vse tak zhe svetel...*

Timur Kibirov

*Glory (Podvig)* has always been a somewhat neglected and undervalued novel, the black sheep of Nabokov's critical canon. Critics usually read the book as a piece of straightforward lyrical prose overlaid with nostalgic autobiographical details and, at best, reinforced by narrative patterning (limited mostly to the well-known winding path of Martin's picture and the finale of the novel) and dim metaphysical overtones.

Of course, there are a few exceptions, and first of all, I should give credit to Edythe Haber's pioneering article "Nabokov's *Glory* and the Fairy Tale" (see: Haber 1977: 214–24), as well as to insightful book chapters by Leona Toker, Pekka Tammi, and Nora Buhks (see: Toker 1989: 88–106; Tammi 1995: 169–78; Buhks 1998: 57–86). Taking the path established by them, I would argue that *Glory* needs reconsideration as neither its sources and contexts (other than autobiography) nor a large part of its subtexts, have ever been sufficiently studied.

First, let me briefly address the problem of the genre. In my view, *Podvig* incorporates some features of the so-called *roman à thèse* and should be reinterpreted in the context of contemporary debates concerning the meaning of the post-war period in European history. The core of the novel is Nabokov's double-edged critique (initially formulated in his essay "On Generalities") of the historicist belief that it is possible to give a definition to one's epoch from within and predict its outcome. As is often the case with Nabokov's early writings his polemic has two superimposed targets. These include, first, the contemporary Soviet literature with its central theme of self-sacrificial exploits for the sake of an historically-

justified common cause (Nabokov wrote about it in his essay of 1930, “The Triumph of Virtue”) and, second, the eschatological ideas foretelling the imminent catastrophic end of the Western culture popular with Russian émigrés in the 1920’s, especially Oswald Spengler’s concept of “the decline of the West,” Andrei Bely apocalyptic prophesies of the period (Nabokov ridiculed them in his programmatic early story “A Letter that Never Reached Russia”) and Nikolai Berdiaev’s theory of the approaching “new Middle Ages” (which Nabokov disputed in “On Generalities”).

Nabokov’s own concept of modernity as a new “Romantic Age” (the initial title of the novel) denies and defies the tenet of historical necessity underlying both historicist models; the Soviet optimistic one and its Western pessimistic counterpart. In order to discredit the “decline of the West” clichés, Nabokov puts them into the mouth of a laughable, discredited character, Martin’s Uncle Henry. It is this shallow Swiss bourgeois who

...spoke with horror and revulsion about the twilight of Europe,<sup>1</sup> about postwar fatigue, about our practical age, about the invasion of inanimate machines; in his imagination there existed some diabolical connection between the fox-trot and skyscrapers on one side and women’s fashions and cocktails on the other (Nabokov 1991: 127).

Contrary to his uncle, the hero of the novel has no qualms concerning the century in which he lives:

No other epoch had had such brilliance, such daring, such projects. Everything that had glimmered in previous ages – the passion for exploration of unknown lands, the audacious experiments, the glorious exploits of disinterested curiosity, the scientists who went blind or were blown to bits, the heroic conspiracies, the struggle of one against many – now emerged with unprecedented force. The cool suicide of a man after having lost millions on the stock market struck Martin’s imagination as much as, for instance, the death of a Roman general falling on his sword (Nabokov 1991: 126–27).

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<sup>1</sup> In the original Nabokov used here the Russian title of Spengler’s book *Zakat Evropy* (literally *The Sunset of Europe*).

It is significant that Nabokov alludes here to the death of Cato who committed suicide on learning that his cause was lost. As the legend goes, he spent his last night reading Plato's *Phaedo* on the immortality of the soul and the death of Socrates and then fell upon his own sword – the heroic suicide that became the symbol of the old Roman ideal of honor and integrity confronting death unflinchingly and inspired at least two Russian heroic suicides: Aleksandr Radishchev and Mikhail Sushkov (see: Lotman 1992: 263–68).<sup>2</sup> For Martin, the heroic potential of the contemporary “romantic age” involves the concept of heroic suicide as the ultimate test of courage for the sake of immortal glory, which foreshadows his suicidal expedition to Russia and connects it to its historical antecedents.

Nabokov's obstinate and, from the historical perspective, somewhat short-sighted apologia for the present echoes the ideas of Grigorii Landau, the émigré philosopher and aphorist whom Nabokov personally knew and held in high regard.<sup>3</sup> Disputing the popular deterministic theories of the dying European culture, Landau redefined modernity as the heroic epoch of intensive creativity and self-reliance. In his book *The Twilight of Europe* (*Sumerki Evropy*) he predicted that future generations would admire the

<sup>2</sup> For Radishchev, writes Lotman, “ideia gotovnosti k samoubiistvu–lish' variant temy podviga. A etot poslednii sviazyvaetsia s veroi v bessmertie dushi” (Lotman 1992: 265).

<sup>3</sup> In the early 1920s Grigorii Landau (1877–1941) worked together with Nabokov's father Vladimir Dmitrievich at the editorial board of the Berlin newspaper *Rul'*. After the assassination of his friend and colleague, he published a moving necrological essay in which he stated that the integrity and candor of V. D. Nabokov were akin to Pushkin's “simplicity” (*prostota*) defined as “the merging of culture and nature into the second nature.” In the Russian culture, argued Landau, Pushkin's legacy has been overshadowed by the “underground problematics” of Dostoevsky and Rozanov, the “subtle deformities of modernism,” Tolstoy's anarchic return to “simple life,” and the hollow simplism of Chernyshevsky and his disciples: “caught among the oversimplifications and simplisms, among the problematics and deformities, the light of Pushkin is dimming; and Nabokov's simplicity – personal and social, political and spiritual – might have been one of its rare last gleams” (Grigorii Landau, “Pokhoronnoe,” *Rul'*, no. 423, April 6, 1922). This characterization might have prompted to Nabokov the identification of Pushkin with Fyodor's father as two interrelated parental figures in *The Gift*. Landau's tribute to Nabokov's father as a source for *The Gift* gives additional support to Gabriel Shapiro's recent suggestion that he could be a prototype of two fictitious sages with similar names mentioned in the novel: Hermann Lande and Delalande (see: Shapiro 1996: 53–55). As late as 1957 Nabokov quoted an aphorism of Grigorii Landau, calling him a “subtle philosopher” (*tonkii filosof*) and mentioning his tragic death in the Soviet prison (see: Nabokov 1957: 45).

chronicles of our age representing the spiritual drive of the generation that dared to rely upon itself in the baseless environment – both spiritually and materially. The heroic epoch of the new self-assertion is not in negation or rebellion against God and truth, but in a constructive activity in which daring intentions create deeds and life rather than incorporeal images and thoughts (see: Landau 1923: 56). Landau sees the heroic essence of the modern age in its “passion for constructing, overcoming, and fulfillment” as embodied by discoveries in technology and science, setting records in sports, mountain climbing, polar expeditions and other free acts of “pure will.” Such modern exploits involving incredible effort and self-sacrifice are undertaken, in his view, not for the sake of gain or even glory, but out of a spiritual urge to self-realization and creativity. “It is a pure desire to prevail, a heroism of categorical imperative, of freely-set goals” (Landau 1923: 334–35, 354–61).

Following Landau, Nabokov regards the modern age, not as the kingdom of materialism, but as a well-set arena for demonstrating the moral and spiritual energies of an individual. The protagonist of *Glory* – a sportsman, a mountain climber, a traveller is moved by that heroic “craving for the faraway” (*alkanie dalei*) in which Landau saw the meaning of the epoch (see: Landau 1923: 336).<sup>4</sup> The “high deed” (*podvig*) of Martin is not only the “solitary and courageous expedition” across the Soviet border or the sacrificial journey to “the night of Zoorland” where “plump children are tortured in the dark, and a smell of burning and of putrefaction permeates the air” (Nabokov 1991: 150), but also his whole inner life, the pilgrimage of his soul towards the ultimate self-realization. Through the plot of *Glory*, Nabokov redefines the very notion of the “exploit,” resurrecting the original, antiquated meaning of the word “podvig” as “path,” “way,” “journey,” “movement” cited, as Nora Buhks has already indicated, in Dahl’s *Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language*. At the same time, he is playing upon the archaic expression “sovershit’ podvig” (to live one’s life)<sup>5</sup> and thereby places the three basic concepts of the

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Fyodor’s declaration in *The Gift*: “I keep straining for the faraway” (Nabokov 1991b: 329).

<sup>5</sup> Among the possible subtexts of *Glory* there are poems by Lermontov and Baratynsky (two poets mentioned in the novel) in which this expression is used. Lermontov’s early “Uzhasnaia

novel – *podvig* / *put'* / *zhizn'*—in relation to reciprocal referentiality to each other. As in Russian hagiography, *podvig* here means *put'* / *put'* means *life* / *life* means *podvig*. Throughout the novel he transforms the physical movements of the hero with all the variety of spatial imagery involved (linear path / winding path; border / passage; forward / backward; ascension / descent; enclosures / openings; locomotion / halt; and so forth) into interconnected subtle metaphors of his spiritual emergence. The key words of the text the Russian “*tropa*” and “*tropinka*,” or “*path*” (used more than fifteen times in the book with obvious resonance to the Greek *τρόπος* or turn, direction, way), indicate the device. The paths Martin takes are at the same time the tropes that reinterpret his short life. At a revelatory moment in Chapter 37, the hero redescribes his life in terms of a comfortable train voyage to a certain destination; a turning point from which he has to move on his own.

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 <...> “And then I’ll continue on foot, on foot,” muttered Martin excitedly—a forest, a winding path—what huge trees! (Nabokov 1991: 157)

Martin’s final departure for Russia (and presumably for martyrdom) represents the outwardly senseless act of “pure will” equivalent to an immortal poetic utterance and redeems his whole life, retrospectively investing it with order and meaning. According to Nabokov, the real “high deed” has nothing to do with either the historical determinism or with the Romantic / Symbolist theatricalization of one’s biography. Martin doesn’t need admiring spectators nor does he seek any outside justification for his solitary acts. He, like Baudelaire’s ideal voyager, “departs for the sake of

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sud’ba ottsa i syna...” (“The terrible fate of father and son,” 1831) laments the death of the poet’s father who, like the father of Martin, was separated from his son and finished his life (“...svershil svoi podvig...” – Lermontov 1958: 243) as an outcast. In Baratynsky’s elegiac “Otryvki iz poemy *Vospominanie*” (“The Recollection: Fragments of a Long Poem,” 1819) the lyrical persona dreams of a return to “the sweet sacred country” of his youth and foresees his death in obscurity at the end of the “unknown path” of his life (“Tak, pereshedshi zhizn’ neznaemoi **tropoiu**, / Svoi **podvig** sovershiv, ustaloiu glavoiu / Sklonius’ ia nakonets ko smertnomu odru...” – Baratynsky 1982: 316). Nabokov used the expression “sovershit’ podvig” in his sonnet that circles Fyodor’s biography of Chernyshevsky in *The Gift*.

departing”<sup>6</sup> but straining his will, moral spirit and aesthetic consciousness to the utmost. Heedless of individuality, he “embodies” the eternal creative force and thereby earns the immortal glory of the hero.

Historically invisible and unrecognized, Martin’s quest turns into a heroic “podvig” only on a meta-historical or trans-historical level when understood as an “artifice of eternity”; encoded through the complex system of intra-textual patterning on one hand, and concealed within inter-textual correspondences on the other. This point of my argument parallels the dichotomy of “biographical” versus “mythological” proposed by Nora Buhks in her stimulating reading of *Podvig* as a novel with two superimposed plots and systems of signification; a biography related to a set of underlying myths and hence acquiring double meaning. However, Professor Buhks’s idea that Nabokov constructed the text as a consistent projection of Vergilius’s *Aeneid* doesn’t seem convincing to me, if only for the reason that Nabokov would later list Virgil as an “overrated [author of] stale imitations” (Eugene Onegin 1975, 2: 322; cf. also a jibe on 2, 55: “insipid Virgil and his pale pederasts”). I think that Nabokov in contrast, for instance, to Joyce, T. S. Eliot or Faulkner, never pins his plots and characters to certain mythological or literary prototypes providing a single code (or a set of fixed codes) for interpreting “now and here” as avatars of “ever and everywhere.” His technique of inter-textual “cross-referring” that I would call *soft multiple encoding* is different. He plays upon several prototypes at once and upon clusters of subtexts, but neither of them is allowed a status of a clue (or clues), implying a tentative, open, ambiguous correspondence rather than a rigid one. In *Podvig* the numerous allusions to mythology, folklore and literature include, of course, some classical myths. Alongside the death of Cato I would also pay attention to Labors of Hercules as in Russian they are called “podvigi”; cf. in Chapter 45: “As he drove over the bridge Martin recognized Hercules’ stone lion...” – Nabokov 1991: 185); but would first and foremost refer to Martin’s Russian cultural background, revealing

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<sup>6</sup> Cf.: « Mais les vrai voyageurs sont ceux-là seuls qui partent / Pour partir; coeurs légers, semblables aux ballons, / De leur fatalité jamais ils ne s’écarternt, / Et, sans savoir pourquoi, disent toujours: Allons! » (Baudelaire 1964: 151).

his kinship with a carefully selected lineage of his multiple prototypes from the mythological Indrik the Beast, the Master of Water Springs, the fairy-tale soldier Martin, and Egorii the Brave, the son of Sofia the Wise (cf. the name of Martin's mother) who in religious folk verses sets on an expedition to Russia in order to liberate the country from the evil ruler, and to Pushkin's Ruslan or to the lyrical personae of Russian poets such as Pushkin, Lermontov, Baratynsky, Blok, and Gumilev.<sup>7</sup>

To illustrate my point, let me discuss just one of the most important subtexts of the novel; that of Lermontov's "Vykhozhu odin ia na dorogu," written in summer of 1841 (the last summer of Lermontov's short life) and, in Nabokov's definition, his "greatest lyrical poem" (Nabokov 1991: 163). Its first stanza is actually paraphrased in Chapter 39 (40) of *Podvig* when Martin suddenly recognizes Lermontov's lines in an obscure English poem signed A. Jameson (in Russian spelled "A. Dzhemson" which looks like a bilingual pun – a gem+son (dream) = a gem dream, or a dream gem).

Kak-to v Kembridzhe on nashel v nomere mestnogo zhurnala  
shestidesiatykh godov stikhotvorenii, khladnokrovno podpisannoe  
A. Dzhemson: "Ja idu po doroge odin, moi kamenisty put' prostiraetsia  
daleko, tikha noch' i kholoden kamen', i vedetsia razgovor mezhd  
u zvezdoi i zvezdoi" (Sirin 1932: 187).

In *Glory* the paraphrase translates:

I walk along the road alone  
My stony path spreads far  
Still is the night and cold the stone  
And star talks unto star.

(Nabokov 1991: 162–63)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Some of the Russian fairy tales and religious folk verses as important subtexts of *Glory* were indicated and discussed in Edythe C. Haber's insightful article "Nabokov's *Glory* and the Fairy Tale" (see: Haber 1977: 214–24). Yet many intertextual parallels significant for understanding the novel have never been identified.

<sup>8</sup> "Still is the night" in the third line of the paraphrase repeats the beginning of Heine's „Der Doppelgänger“ (cf. „Still ist die Nacht, es ruhen die Gassen...“ – Heine 1961: 115) that Nabokov translated into Russian in 1918 (see: Shvabrin 2013: 383).



The central image of the stanza that has had a tremendous impact upon Russian poetry; that of “kremnistyi put,” or literally a “flinty road / path” (the paraphrase of Jameson calls it a “stony road / path”), corresponds to the central theme of Nabokov’s novel, *podvig* as a spiritual path or journey (*put’*, *puteshestvie*), and gives a concise metaphoric definition of his life-path. What is most important is that the paraphrase of Lermontov’s poem is placed immediately after the climactic moment of the novel; that is, Martin’s revelation when he understands (and, as in the case of Lermontov, it is presumably the last summer of his short life) that his life has been a journey (“Moi put,” the formulation he uses in the conversation with a Frenchman). There are also several other, not so obvious, echoes of Lermontov’s “kremnistyi put” in the novel.

It is hardly a coincidence that in the ending of the most important Chapter 3, that introduces the Lermontov / Baratynsky theme of the dead father and contains the prophetic (*veshchii*) dream of the hero, Nabokov uses the combination “skvoz’ tuman” (“through the mist” – Sirin 1932: 18; Nabokov 1991: 11) repeating the beginning of Lermontov’s second line: “Skvoz’ tuman kremnistyi put’ blestit” (Lermontov 1958: 543).

Chapter 4 again anticipates the hero’s death when Martin meets a drunken stranger with a gun “noch’iu <...> na povorote uzkoj **kremnistoi** dorogi” (“at a turn of a flinty path” – Sirin 1932: 21; Nabokov 1991: 14). Martin’s favorite path in Switzerland is “kamenistaia stezhka” (Sirin 1932: 55) rendered in English as a “stony path” (Nabokov 1991: 44) exactly as in the paraphrase of the Lermontov’s poem.

When Martin is dreaming of future journeys, the very word “puteshestvie” immediately brings to his mind the Lermontovian images of “tuman” and “zvezda”:

“Puteshestvie”, – vpolgolosa proiznes Martyn i dolgo povtorial eto slovo, poka iz nego ne vyzhal vsiakii smysl, i togda on otlozhil dlinnuiu, pushistuiu slovesnuiu shkurku, i gliad’, – cherez minutu slovo bylo opiat’ zhivoe. “Zvezda. Tuman. Barkhat, bar-khat”, – otchetlivo proiznosil on i vse udivlialsia, kak neprochno smysl derzhitsia v slove (Sirin 1932: 59).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The simile comparing a starry sky and velvet echoes a Russian folklore riddle: “Napisana gramotka / Po sinemu barkhatu; / Ne prochest’ etoi gramotki / Ni popam, ni d’iakam, / Ni umnym muzhikam” (Afanas’ev 1865: 52).

“Travel,” said Martin softly, and he repeated this word for a long time, until he had squeezed all meaning out of it, upon which he set aside the long, silky skin it had shed – and next moment the word had returned to life. “Star. Mist. Velvet. Travelvet,” he would articulate carefully and marvel every time how tenuously the sense endures in the sound (Nabokov 1991: 48–49).

At last, the motive of “kremnistyi / kamenistyi put” resurfaces in the scene of Martin’s heroic rock climbing: when he took his dangerous path for the second time, by his free will and choice, “Martyn vskarabkalsia po **kamenistoi** krutizne” (“climbed up the stony steepness” – Sirin 1932: 194; Nabokov 1991: 169).<sup>10</sup>

These echoes of “Vykhozhu odin ia na dorogu” are supported by a number of allusions to other poems of Lermontov. For example, in the final chapter of the novel, when Darwin recognizes there is something new and extraordinary about Martin and, among other things, mentions his “strannye temnye rechi” (“the bizarre dark utterances” – Sirin 1932: 231; Nabokov 1991: 201), this hints at the first stanza of Lermontov’s poem:

Est’ rechi, znachen’e  
 Temno il’ nichtozhno,  
 No im bez volnen’ia  
 Vnimat’ nevozmozhno.

(Lermontov 1958: 474)

The very name of Gruzinov – Martin’s mythological tempter and mentor who presents him with a walking stick smelling of Russia (cf. Pushkin’s “Tam russkii dukh... tam Rus’iu pakhnet!” Pushkin 1962–1966, 4: 12), an important symbol of pilgrimage, and offers him “rumianye iablochki” that in Russian folklore can be life-giving fruit of immortality (with the same function as *zhivaia voda*) or magical poison like in Pushkin’s fairy tale “Sleeping Princess and Seven Knights” – is taken from Lermontov’s

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<sup>10</sup> “Krutizna” most probably comes from Mandelshtam’s poems. Cf. “V khristal’nom omute kakaia krutizna!” (Mandel’shtam 1997: 148) and especially a line of “Grifel’naia oda” (a poem that overtly alludes to “kremnistyi put”) – “Na izumlennoi krutizne” (Mandel’shtam 1997: 177).

poetry. There is a poem entitled “K Gruzinovu” and dedicated to a friend by that name. On the other hand, it is equally important that two English girls “called Gruzinov’s name with the first syllable accented instead of the second” (Nabokov 1991: 177), which hints at its semantic connection to the adjective “grúznyi” (hard, difficult, heavy) and refers us again to the path motif; since there is the Russian expression “gruznyi put” that is “a difficult, torturous path,” the very meaning that Lermontov’s “kremnisti put,” of course, implies.

However, “Vykhozhu odin ia na dorogu...” although the most obvious, is not the only subtext behind VN’s treatment of the “stony path” theme. On the one hand, one should not miss Pushkin’s aborted poem “Tazit” in which the hero – a dreamer, an outcast, an exile – like Martin loves “vnimat’ volnam, gliadet’ na zvezdy” (to listen to the waves, to look at the stars; Pushkin 1962–1966, 4: 319) and “...po krutym skalam / Skol’zit’, polzti tropoi kremnistoi...” (to climb up the steep rocks, sliding and crawling along the flinty path; Pushkin 1962–1966, 4: 316). On the other hand, VN couldn’t but take into account a long poetic tradition of capitalizing upon Lermontov’s “stony / flinty path” theme, including the tradition that runs through Mandelshtam (“Grifel’naia oda”) and Georgy Ivanov (“I Lermontov odin vykhodit na dorogu, / Serebrianyimi shporami zvenia” – Ivanov 1994: 377), right up to the contemporary poets (Gorbanevskaja, Kibirov). The theme culminated in Alexander Blok’s poetry centered on the road or path.<sup>11</sup> According to Blok, the very paradigmatic biography of the modern poet is “the road to the high deed (*put’ k podvigu*) required by our devotion” (Blok 1960–1963, 5: 436). Following Pushkin and probably actualizing the meaning of Greek “πόρος κρημνός” (see: Levinton 1975: 72–73), in his early poem “Vykhozhu naverkh tropoi kremnistoi...” or “I climb up a flinty path...”), Blok encodes “kremnisti put” as a path in the steep rocks above the “alluring abyss” and the “white waterfall” (“Vniz vlechet s bezliudnykh skal...” – Blok 1960–1963, 1: 389; cf. in *Podvig* “[Martin], vowing to himself that he would pay no attention to the invitation of the abyss” and the “white

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<sup>11</sup> On the subject see: Maksimov 1972: 87–92.

hotel” in the valley below; see Nabokov 1991: 86) rather than Lermontov’s journey in a desert.

In his long poem “Solov’inyi sad” (“The Nightingale Garden”) the theme of “kremnistyi put’” – the path of toil and self-sacrifice – once more combines with the image of rocks. Moreover, “The Nightingale Garden”, like *Podvig*, synonymizes Lermontov’s adjective “kremnistyi” (flinty) and semantically close “kamenistyi” (stony). The path of the lyrical persona is first characterized as a “stony” one:

I znakomyi, pustoi, kamenistyi,  
No segodnia – tainstvennyi put’...  
(Blok 1960–1963, 3: 242)

and again

Ia zabyl o puti kamenistom...  
(Blok 1960–1963, 3: 243)

But, in the final chapter, directly refers to the Lermontovian prototype:

Put’ znakomyi i prezhdne nedlinnyi  
V eto utro kremnist i tiazhel...  
(Blok 1960–1963, 3: 244)

In a similar way, Blok substitutes “kamennyi” (stony) for “kremnistyi” (flinty) in his poem “Osenniaia volia” (both “The Freedom of Autumn” or “The Will of Autumn”) overtly modelled upon Lermontov’s “Vykhozhu odin ia na dorogu” (cf. its first line: “Vykhozhu ia v put’, otkrytyi vzoram...”):

Kto vzmanil menia na put’ znakomyi,  
Usmekhnulsia mne v okno tiur’m’y?  
Ili – kamennym putem vlekomyi  
Nishchii, raspevaiushchii psalmy.  
(Blok 1960–1963, 2: 75)

The pilgrim of this poem takes a “stony path” that leads him to a re-discovery of his love for Russia and, at the same time, threatens imminent death.

Mnogo nas – svobodnykh, iunykh, statnykh –  
 Umiraet, ne liubia...  
 Priiuti ty v daliakh neob'iatnykh!  
 Kak i zhit' i plakat' bez tebia!

(Blok 1960–1963, 2: 76)

Studying the motive of “kremnystyi put” in connection to Blok and Mandel'shtam's “Grifel'naia oda,” Georgii Levinton argued that in the final analysis “kremnystyi put” refers to “ternystyi put” or the thorny path (see: Levinton 1975: 72–73). Omri Ronen, who disputed this reading, suggested that the expression might hint at “krestnyi put” – the Road to Calvary – anagrammed within it (see: Ronen 1983: 219–20). At any rate, it is clear that “kremnystyi put” entails suffering, death, and resurrection and can be associated with the last journey of Christ bearing the cross to Golgotha. Mandel'shtam's allusion to St. John (20:25–27) – equating Lermontov's flinty path with the wounds on the crucified body of Christ (“I ia khochu vlozhit' persty / V kremnystyi put' iz staroi pesni...” – Mandel'shtam 1997: 178) – brings this implied association into the open. Because of that, Nabokov's encoding Martin's life as a “kremnystyi put” automatically evokes certain parallels to the sacred prototype. I don't mean to say that the hero of *Podvig* should be regarded as a modernist mock *imitatio Christi*. What Nabokov's “soft encoding” hints at is that Martin's life and final exit are not as senseless as they seem on a historical level and that they conceal some inner meaning relating them to the paradigmatic path of the Russian poet-cum-martyr and, by implication, to the ascent to Calvary. And if we look at it more closely, Martin's self-sacrificial “podvig” (exploit) does bear fruit. After all, it wakes up Sonia, the Sleeping Beauty of the novel, and pushes Darwin off his “smoothly paved road” (Nabokov 1991: 201), sending him to “the dark path” with its “picturesque and mysterious windings” (Nabokov 1991: 205). That is why in the final paragraph of the novel Martin is granted resurrection – when, to quote Nabokov's foreword to *Glory*, “nothing much happens at the very end – just a bird perching on a wicker in the grayness of a wet day” (Nabokov 1991: xiv).

This is the only scene in the novel that has no viewer but the omniscient author. He knows, of course, why the wicker<sup>12</sup> – a gate in the wall separating two worlds of *Glory* – would not close, and from where the bird comes. It is a titmouse (*sinita* from Pushkin<sup>13</sup> and Russian folklore<sup>14</sup>) and it utters something. I don't think I have to translate what it sings. Let me just quote Socrates before his heroic death, quoted by Plato in *Phaedo* and read by Cato before his suicide to which Nabokov alludes:

“No bird sings when it is hungry or cold or feels any sort of pain” (Plato 1955: 95).

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<sup>12</sup> A possible subtext of this image is Blok's essay “Devushka rozovoi kalitki i murav'inyi tsar'”, in which a tiny wicker (*kroshechnaia kalitochka*) is a symbolic entrance (*kalitka raspakhnulas'*) into a “new country” of European lore, legend and dreams contrasted to the linear historical temporality (see: Blok 1960–1963, 5: 83–94).

<sup>13</sup> In the very beginning of the novel Martin's mother makes fun of Pushkin's “famous nanny,” saying that “the poet himself had invented her, together with her fairy tales, knitting needles, and heartache” (Nabokov 1991: 4). Moreover, she excludes “the Russian knight-errant Ruslan” (Ibid.) from Martin's reading list. The appearance of “sinita” near her house in Switzerland is a subtle reproof of this dismissive treatment of Pushkin as the bird is mentioned in the two works she rejected: “Zimnii vecher” (“Spoi mne pesniu, kak sinita / Tikhо za morem zhila...” – Pushkin 1962–1966, 2: 288) and *Ruslan i Liudmila* (“Polet sinity, ropot vod / Ego brosalі v zhar i pot” – Pushkin 1962–1966, 4: 33). The irony is that after Martin's disappearance his mother finds herself in the position of Pushkin's famous nanny. Cf. his “Niane”: “Gliadish' v zabytye voroty / Na chernyi otdalennyi put'; / Toska, predchuvstviia, zaboty / Tesniat tvoiu vsechasno grud'. To chuditsia tebe....” (Pushkin 1962–1966, 2: 352).

<sup>14</sup> Among numerous Russian proverbs and beliefs concerning a titmouse, the most important ones, like the song of Pushkin's nanny, connect it to a realm situated over the sea that symbolises the other world, Hades invisible to mortals (cf.: “Za morem i sinita ptitsa”). According to a recent interpretation of the titmouse motif in folklore, the bird flies over the ocean, to the kingdom of the dead, for the keys to unlock spring and let it from the underground (see: Nadel'-Chervinskaia, Chervinski 1996, 1: 382). In Russian “sinita” derives from the adjective “sinii” (*blue*), the color that, to quote *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, traditionally “evokes the idea of eternity, calm, lofty, superhuman, inhuman even” (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1996: 103); literally it is a “blue bird” – a symbol of the flight of the liberated soul towards God and immortality. The importance of *sinita* is enhanced in the English translation of *Podvig* as Nabokov added the sounds of the bird's song: “*tsi-tsi-tsi* and *incha-inchu*” (Nabokov 1991: 205) which anagram the Russian name of a titmouse (*si-ni-ts-a*), its color (*si-nia-ia*) and point at its small size (cf. *inch* and *inching*).

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