

In discussing the idea of two worlds, or ‘dvoemirie’ in Nabokov’s work, one is likely to consider *Podvig* as a text straddling numerous metaphysical, fictional, and geographic borders. However, the presence of ‘dvoemirie’ is best exemplified in the protagonist Martin’s near constant attempts to access what Nabokov interprets variously throughout *Podvig* as “удаленный” (ch. 9), “та область, где - его душа пустит корни”, (ch. 5) and eventually “Что-нибудь северное- Зоорландия” (ch 35). From childhood Martin’s present is defined by knowledge of an “elsewhere”, whether that be his anxiety regarding the picture above his crib, his preoccupation with death, or simply his absent homeland. Martin’s inertia and lack of talent render him firmly exterior to such an “область”, and he would remain so if not for his encounters with the elusive object of his affections, Sonia. Sonia’s elusivity and lack of interior characterization allow her to remain “other”, thus rendering her the perfect “gatekeeper to the realm of the unknown and the unknowable¹”. She is not only an émigré in the same sense as Martin, but a physical and spiritual refugee operating between the main text and Martin’s fantasies. Thus throughout *Podvig*, Sonia disrupts the fictional continuum by initiating Martin’s fantasies and ultimately allowing him passage to the “radiant beyond” for which he has yearned.

Though Sonia is primarily presented through the prism of Martin’s desire, her character can in fact be read as a covert narrative force revealing the very real existence of another world. This is first evident in her apparent ability to communicate with her dead sister, Nelly. As Martin attempts to sleep in Nelly’s old room, he wonders if she is watching him and awaits a sign from her. Martin fails to realize that the beginnings of this sign have already been issued several lines before, in the “Что-то мелко застучало в теневой части комнаты, - и у Мартына екнуло в

¹ (Rakhimova-Sommers, 2017)

груди. Но это просто закапала на линолеум вода, пролитая на доску умывальника,” (ch.23). Martin’s anxiety intensifies to the point of obsession, as does the omnipresence of water imagery: “Беспокойство становилось нестерпимым. Тишина лилась, лилась - и вдруг перелилась через край: кто-то на цыпочках босиком шел по коридору,” (ch.23). It is Sonia arriving at the door, just as she did when she wished to speak with Nelly. The conjunction of Sonia and such words as “лилась, перелилась, закапала” in relation to Martin’s fixation on Nelly’s presence, here, in her old room, make it appear that Sonia was delivered by the spirit of her dead sister. This idea that Sonia was sent by a wave spilling over from another world is reiterated several chapters later as Martin remembers that night when, “ее, дрожащую, босую, вынесла волна тишины и бережно положила к нему на одеяло,” (ch 26). While such a transgression violates the ordinary rules of fiction, Sonia’s mobility appears to surpass such bounds: she is the very proof of Martin’s questioning that indeed souls *can* move after death (or at least send their sisters to). Her arrival via Nelly is also Martin’s first instance of connection with the spiritual realm (Martin’s previous attempts to contact his father’s ghost have all resulted in failure) and thus works to serve as an otherworldly initiation.

Sonia’s ability to cross fictional borders is again evident in her fulfillment of Martin’s childhood dream. We are told that, “в одной из своих пророческих грез, петербургский отрок Мартын снился себе самому изгнанником, и подступали слезы, когда, на воображаемом дебаркадере, освещенном причудливо тускло, он невзначай знакомился - с кем?... - с земляком, сидящим на сундуке, в ночь озноба и запозданий, и какие были дивные разговоры!” (ch 32). While one understands that Martin’s dream is prophetic in its telling of him as an émigré, its true significance is only later revealed by Sonia. Ten years after this dream, and

fifteen chapters after it is recounted, Martin meets Sonia for the last time. It is during this encounter that Sonia attempts to telephone Darwin: “Вполголоса скороговоркой повторяя номер, чтобы его не забыть, она села на сундук и сняла трубку” (ch 47). Here Sonia is mirroring if not passing into the very “земляк” seated “на сундук” that Martin first glimpsed in his childhood vision. As Nabokov informs the reader in the foreword to the English translation Martin is “that rarity—a person whose dreams come true²”, Sonia can clearly be seen as fulfilling his prophecy. This is deepened by the description of Martin’s tears and Sonia’s dialing “со старательной ясностью”, as though both instances, separated by sleep and many years, are in possession of the same lucidity. Given that it is she who initiates the call (which remains unanswered), one could read Sonia as dialing into Martin’s consciousness and the dream the consequence of her spiritual interference. Thus Martin’s dream of the compatriot seated on the trunk is but a “reverse memory”, the remembrance of which jolts him from his extended “ночь озноба и запозданий” and into the sudden action of the final chapters.

Sonia’s knowledge of the “elsewhere” which Martin so desperately seeks reveals itself most obviously in the form of Zoorland. While Sonia’s communications of such a knowledge have thus far remained covert, her immediate familiarity with Martin’s imagined land takes both him and reader by surprise. It is not until chapter 35 that Sonia admits that “она тоже об этом часто думает: вот есть на свете страна, куда вход простым смертным воспрещен”, prompting Martin to name this vision of the beyond “Zoorland”. If it were not for Sonia’s cooperation, or rather, her inspiration, Martin would have never have been called upon to name this “elsewhere” and it would have remained forevermore in the unreachable expanse of fantasy.

² (Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, 2017)

Sonia's response, "Ну, конечно - Зоорландия", make it seem that, like London or Berlin, Sonia has known Zoorland before. Her recognition of Zoorland suggests the accessibility of the remote, which she has in turn eroticized with her presence and willingness to "играть в Зоорланд". This not only grants Martin a preview to an otherworldly domain, but provides him with a tangible mission: to penetrate Zoorland. While he does ultimately succeed in his mission, it is only through death that he reaches the land "куда вход простым смертным воспрещен" which Sonia speaks of. Sonia's hidden function as the narrative force behind Martin's actions is further exposed in her penultimate line of dialogue in response to the shocking news of his departure and probable death: "Конечно, я все знаю," (ch. 50). Indeed, of course she knows all about it- it is she who initiates Martin into the unknown and leads him imperceptibly beyond the brink.

Sonia's interactions with Martin remain sparse; she is primarily glimpsed running out the hallway of her family home or rejecting Martin's ill-advised advances. Though she is desired, her meaning and structural significance are exposed only after she has fulfilled Martin's understanding of his own fantasies within the main narrative. Until Sonia ushers in such developments as the dream of the "земляк на сундук" and the naming of Zoorland, Martin remains exterior to his awareness of the "sublime elsewhere" which torments him from childhood; it is through these instances of brief connection that he is at last shown passageway. In this sense, Sonia satisfies her role as a "ruthless flirt"³ flitting between two worlds: that of the text (we see her in London, Cambridge, and Berlin) and that of which is beyond the text (Nelly, Zoorland, the realm of dreams). Sonia's nomadic nature is furthered by the recurrent image of her as a sleepwalker, caught between the waking and the unconscious- she is twice described as

³ Nabokov's introduction to the English translation.

“босую” in the bedroom scene, prompting Martin to question her lack of slippers, and after the attempt to call Darwin she “оскользнула с сундука, надела, шаркая, свалившуюся туфлю и пошла в столову,” (ch 47). Even Martin worries that by engaging with her in the play of Zoorland he will travel too far and awake a “босого лунатика” (ch 50). His premonitions once more prove correct as he eventually will attempt to cross the Russian boarder and pass beyond not just his sanity, but his life. However, Martin’s feat, or rather, his “glory”, can be viewed not as the action of a mad man, but as the rational consequence of his relationship with Sonia: it is only through death that he can fully submit to her “туманы” (ch 36) and satisfy his unrelenting desire of the “other”.

Bibliography:

- 1) <http://nabokov-lit.ru/nabokov/proza/podvig/podvig-45.htm>
- 2) Vladimir Nabokov (2017). *Glory*. London: Penguin.
- 3) Rakhimova-Sommers, E. (2017). *Nabokov’s Women: The Silent Sisterhood of Textual Nomads*. London: Lexington Books.

