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“TRANSFORMING DEFEAT INTO VICTORY”:
JACK LONDON AND VLADIMIR NABOKOV’S *GLORY*

Midway through Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pnin* (1957), the eponymous protagonist enters a college-town bookstore in fictional Waindell, U.S.A. and asks for a copy of Jack London’s 1909 novel *Martin Eden*, which he intends to give as a gift to his stepson Viktor. The bookstore attendant, initially thinking that her customer might have a British statesman in mind, fails to recognize both the name of the novel and the name of the novel’s author. Soon enough, however, the bookstore owner comes to the attendant’s rescue, unearthing an old edition of *The Son of the Wolf* (1900), a less celebrated work by London. Ever surprised by 1950s America and its cultural as well as linguistic divergence from his pre-revolutionary Russian homeland, Timofey Pnin marvels at London’s unexpected obscurity:

“Strange!” said Pnin. “The vicissitudes of celebrity! In Russia, I remember, everybody—little children, full-grown people, doctors, advocates—everybody read and reread him. This is not his best book, but O.K., O.K., I will take it.”¹

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 100.

As both Nabokov and his protagonist Pnin suggest, Jack London enjoyed unprecedented popularity in early twentieth-century Russia and elsewhere around the world. Yet by the 1950s London's celebrity had significantly waned (except, somewhat ironically, in the Soviet Union, where he remained extremely popular, revered for his socially minded fiction and socialist orientation).² Similarly, scholarly attention to London's work has reflected these same vicissitudes of fame, for he is rarely recognized for his pervasive presence in early twentieth-century culture, be it in Russia or in America, or for his impact on various literary trends of his day.³

In what follows I would therefore like to focus on the considerable role that Jack London played in early twentieth-century Russian literary culture and, in particular, the work of Nabokov. London, who fostered an unabashedly masculine literary persona, wrote prolifically about adventure, courage, wilderness, and athletics, all of which appealed to a young Nabokov, who came of age when the scope of Russia's literary culture expanded to include such adventurous subject matter and when London enjoyed enormous popularity among Russia's reading public, particularly its younger readers. London's unprecedented, albeit fleeting popularity as a writer of fiction and journalistic pieces insured that he helped shape the development of Russian literature in meaningful, conspicuous ways, both democratizing it and providing a vigorous, "manly" burst of energy for literature that a more mature Nabokov drew upon once in exile in Western Europe. In Nabokov's 1932 novel *Glory (Podvig)*, which will constitute the main focus of this article, the

² A *Russian Review* article from 1954 on foreign literature reading habits of Soviet citizens cites a survey taken at the time exploring which Western writers were popular in the Soviet Union prior to World War II; in this survey, London came in as the most widely read foreign writer: "The most popular foreign author (and one of the most widely read authors in general, ranking not far behind Pushkin and Leo Tolstoy) was Jack London. His works, always full of thrills, sensations, and exoticism, were read by old and young, laborers and intellectuals, those who read much and those who read nothing besides London; *Martin Eden* and *Iron Heel* were most frequently mentioned." Maurice Friedberg, "Foreign Authors and Soviet Readers," *Russian Review* 13/4 (Oct., 1954): 270.

³ A variety of scholars have made note of this scene from *Pnin* but all have refrained from analyzing the London-Nabokov connection in any detail. See, for instance, Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 273, and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, "'By Some Sleight of Land': How Nabokov Rewrote America," in Julian W. Connolly, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 76, as well as (from a London perspective) James Camp, "In a Boat of his Own Making," *London Review of Books*, vol. 36, no. 18 (25 September 2014): 30. And as if to demonstrate first-hand Jack London's modern-day obscurity, Gennady Barabtarlo gets several things wrong about the American writer in his *Phantom of Fact: A Guide to Nabokov's Pnin*. In this generally excellent guide to Nabokov's 1957 novel, Barabtarlo erroneously calls *Martin Eden* a "novella" (*Martin Eden* is over four-hundred pages long), and in calling "Son of the Wolf" a short story, he ignores the fact that *Son of the Wolf* was also the name of the collection of London short stories that included the story "Son of the Wolf." See Gennady Barabtarlo, *Phantom of Fact: A Guide to Nabokov's Pnin* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1989), 175-76.

romantic sway of London and, in particular, his 1909 novel *Martin Eden* can be most notably discerned. As I will contend, it is no mere trifle on Nabokov's part that Timofey Pnin sought out a copy of London's *Martin Eden*, for this once celebrated London novel can be seen as providing an important, polemical subtext for *Glory*, the novel that most clearly reflects Nabokov's youthful nod to the American novelist and to his adolescent brand of adventurism and masculine daring. While Nabokov never emulated London's style per se nor shared his views on art and politics, so much of *Glory* can be interpreted through the retrospective prism of Jack London and his long forgotten *Martin Eden*.

JACK LONDON REVISITED

Jack London portrayed life as vivid and intense, continually blurring the line between life and art by fictionalizing his experiences as a young man eager to live, work, travel, fight, and compete. In a wide range of novels, short stories, and journalistic pieces, London explored by entertaining, sometimes noteworthy means his own irrepressible verve and, more broadly, the increasing vigor on display in turn-of-the century American culture. Adventure, wilderness, strenuous manual labor, social justice, and spirited competition in the athletic arena constitute just a few of London's broad array of themes. "No other American writer has given us fiction on such a variety of subjects," Earle Labor, Robert Leitz, and Milo Shepard argue.⁴ Coming into his own as a writer in an age when "manliness" was in vogue, a quality first extolled by Robert Louis Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling (and promulgated by "manly" public figures like Theodore Roosevelt), London struck a chord with the reading public that catapulted him to fame and made his fiction so popular at the time.

Above all, London introduced his American readers—and then, soon thereafter, readers around the world—to a new brand of literature that broke from prevailing Victorian-era realism for the sake of primordial naturalism, romantic adventurism and a slew of captivating plots, many of which transpired in the rugged north where courageous explorers, hunters, and those

⁴ Earle Labor, Robert C. Leitz, III, and I. Milo Shepard, "Introduction," in Jack London, *The Complete Short Stories of Jack London*, eds. Labor, Leitz, and Shepard, vol. 1 (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1993), xiii.

seeking their fortune in the gold rush could take center stage. As Labor and Jeanne Campbell Reesman argue, “A reading public that had dieted on propriety and pap for more than a generation and whose appetite for strenuous action had been whetted by the colorful melodramas of Kipling and by the melodramatics of Theodore Roosevelt was hungry for the meaty fare of Jack London’s Northland.”⁵ *Call of the Wild* (1903), *The Sea Wolf* (1904), and *White Fang* (1906), three of the fictional works that solidified London’s place as the foremost writer of adventure novels at the start of the twentieth century, quickly gained in popularity in places as far afield as Russia, particularly among young readers like Nabokov. And then came *Iron Heel* (1908) and *Martin Eden*, among other later works by London, which helped establish the American novelist as a relatively serious writer who grappled head-on with topical issues such as dystopia, socialism, class, poverty, Nietzschean philosophy, and Social Darwinism.

In *Martin Eden*, a novel that many critics at the time—as well as London himself (and Pnin)—considered one of his strongest works, the eponymous protagonist’s ability to fight and demonstrate both his physical and intellectual prowess constitutes a creative rendering of one man’s intense struggle for professional and personal attainment.⁶ In fact, this long novel commences with the twenty-one year-old Martin having just saved a young man, Arthur Morse, in a violent fight with a gang of drunken waterfront hoodlums, a daring act that affords the physically impressive yet uneducated Martin the opportunity to meet Arthur’s sister Ruth, who will subsequently transform Martin’s life and identity. A quasi-autobiographical work that London originally titled *Success*, *Martin Eden* proceeds to track the development of its protagonist in ways that mirrored the trajectory of London’s own life, save the suicide of Eden at the end of the novel. Over the course of *Martin Eden*, London recounts—in the tradition of the *bildungsroman* or coming-of-age novel (and, more specifically, the *künstlerroman*, given that the novel documents an artist’s rapid rise)—the maturation of his eponymous hero from rough, working-class seaman to wildly successful writer. The brawny, pugnacious Eden embarks on a strict regime of self-education and then strives to prove his worth as a writer, much of it in an effort to impress the upper middle-class Ruth, a cultured, albeit sheltered young woman from high West Coast society and the object of Martin’s increasingly amorous affections. Yet as Eden

⁵ Labor and Jeanne Campbell Reesman, *Jack London* (New York: Twayne, 1994), 24.

⁶ Labor and Reisman write: “Critics have variously considered [*Martin Eden*] to be his best book or his worst book.” See Labor and Reisman, *Jack London*, 76.

matures and stridently adopts the radical views of a Nietzschean Social Darwinist (a philosophy that stems from his avid reading of the then-popular Herbert Spencer), Martin begins to perceive Ruth's bourgeois worldview as narrow. Simultaneously, Ruth is pressured by her family to reject Martin for his strident political views and for his initial lack of literary success. The sole person to acknowledge Eden's latent talent as a writer is his wealthy, decadent friend and poet Russ Brissenden, yet it is only after Brissenden's suicide that Martin suddenly succeeds in selling his stories to various journals. This success, however, comes too late. Disenchanted with modern society—and with the repentant, suddenly ingratiating Ruth—once he has achieved his overnight fame as an author and also wealth, the withdrawn, depressed Eden commits suicide by leaping from a steamer into the sea.

In a manner that surely piqued Nabokov (if not his interest), London blurs the line between life and fiction in *Martin Eden* by roughly describing both his own maturation as an autodidactic writer and his gradual disenchantment with modern society and unexpected literary success. Given that London grew up an illegitimate child in a destitute California family and subsisted primarily on manual labor as a young man before becoming a writer, Eden's rough background and artistic metamorphosis clearly resonates as semi-autobiographical, thus lending the novel a layered complexity that London would not achieve in his other fiction. "Works such as *Martin Eden*," writes Joseph McElrath Jr., "take one beyond merely witnessing spectacle to a different order of experience, daring the reader to understand its hero whose traits are not rendered in simple, explicit terms for a very good reason: the fictional person focused upon is as complex as a real-life counterpart would prove to an observer, and more than a single series of observations is necessary for understanding."⁷ London, however, claimed in an oft-quoted letter from 1909 that critics and readers were misinterpreting his novel by erroneously perceiving Eden as a victim and in a positive light, whereas London insisted that the novel offered a vigorous critique of Nietzschean individualism, given that Eden "was unaware of the needs of others. He worked for himself, for fame, for love, for all self-satisfactions. When these illusions vanished, there was nothing to live for."⁸ Socialism, London maintained in this same letter, is where Martin

⁷ Joseph R. McElrath Jr., "Jack London's *Martin Eden*: The Multiple Dimensions of a Literary Masterpiece," in *Jack London: One Hundred Years a Writer*, ed. Sara S. Hodson and Reesman (San Marino, Cal.: Huntington Library, 2002), 97.

⁸ London, *The Letters of Jack London*, ed. Labor, Leitz, and Shepard (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988) vol. 2, 847. Also cited in McElrath Jr., 93.

“would have found that there were a few million others to live and fight for.”⁹ Irrespective of these rather narrow claims by London, the protagonist of *Martin Eden* ultimately proves to be a multifaceted, arguably compelling individual whose plight would for a time fascinate many in Russia and elsewhere.

LONDON IN RUSSIA

London’s energetic, democratic prose appealed to a wide range of Russian readers—“everybody,” as Pnin put it—at the start of the twentieth century, but the question remains whether this widespread popularity informed the development of Russian literature in any consequential fashion. In reminiscences on Anton Chekhov from 1904 (and some five years before the publication of *Martin Eden*), Maxim Gorky remarked:

The Russian admires energy but doesn’t much believe in it. A writer with an active temperament—Jack London, for example—would be impossible in Russia. Though his books are eagerly read in Russia, I don’t see them doing much to incline Russians toward any activity; they merely stir the imagination of their Russian readers. But Chekhov is not very Russian in that respect.¹⁰

While Chekhov, as Gorky suggests in a slightly roundabout fashion, went some ways in answering London’s call for an energetic approach to life and literature, the American’s fiction generally proved quite foreign to Russian sensibilities.¹¹ Like Gorky, Russian critics at the time saw American literature and London’s work in particular as providing a sharp contrast to literary trends in Russia. Consider, for instance, the 1914 article “Two Approaches to the World” (“Dva priiatiiia mira”), in which the Russian critic S. Vol’skii contended that London’s worldview significantly diverged from that of Russian writers: “In [London’s] novels one almost never encounters a description of mental states and internal struggle. The struggle always occurs in the

⁹ Ibid., 847.

¹⁰ Maxim Gorky, *Gorky’s Tolstoy & Other Reminiscences*, ed. and trans. Donald Fanger (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 100.

¹¹ Chekhov’s younger brother Mikhail Pavlovich, in fact, translated various works by Jack London into Russian during the 1920s.

arena, in front of spectators, in the snowy wastelands of Alaska, in the forests and wilds of the Rocky Mountains, in the waters of the Pacific Ocean, in the skyscrapers of Chicago and New York.”¹² While *Martin Eden* would be one of the few London works that defied Vol’skii’s perspective on the American writer, both Gorky and Vol’skii offer useful evidence of how unusual London’s “active” approach to life and fiction proved in pre-Revolutionary Russia and within the literary milieu in which Nabokov came of age.

It would, in fact, take a new generation of writers to glean anything significant from London’s active orientation toward the world and the word. Despite the supposed incompatibility of London to Russian psychologizing and such, the American’s sway can be felt in the work of various pre-Revolutionary Russian writers. Gorky, Aleksandr Kuprin, Leonid Andreev, Aleksandr Grin, and even Vladimir Mayakovsky would be the initial ones to grapple in any meaningful way with elements of the London model.¹³ Kuprin, a popular prose writer who fostered a masculine persona and tone somewhat similar to that of the American’s, embraced a variety of London-inspired themes, including the plight of the modern-day athlete (a wrestler in “At the Circus,” 1902), life in the army (*The Duel*, 1905), and love in the face of glaring social discrepancies (“The Garnet Bracelet” from 1911). Kuprin would also go on to pen several essays in honor of the American writer. In one short piece from 1911 he praised “this original and extremely talented writer” for his “simplicity, clarity <...> his masculine beauty of expression and the special, highly personal attractiveness of his narrative.”¹⁴ And in a somewhat later essay written on the occasion of London’s premature death in 1916, Kuprin briefly discussed *Martin Eden* (and a variety of London’s short stories, such as “The White Silence,” “The Law of Life,” etc.), remarking that “Russia’s priestly critics first turned their unwieldy and condescending attention toward Jack London after the appearance of his novel *Martin Eden*.”¹⁵ In offering both

¹² S. Vol’skii, “Dva priiatiiia mira,” *Zavety otd.* II, No. 4: 70. Even more caustic are the views of the pre-Revolutionary critic A. Derman, who lambasted London in 1912: “In Russia no one has written about love with such sweet frills, with such rose water, with such saccharine tears since the time of Karamzin.” Quoted in R. Orlova, “*Martin Iden*” *Dzheka Londona* (Moscow: “Khudozhestvennaia literatura,” 1967), 43.

¹³ In a 1925 article titled “Three Americans,” the early Soviet critic V. Friche contended that “if O’Henry can be called ‘the American Chekhov,’ then Jack London, without a doubt, can be called in certain respects ‘the American Gorky.’” V. Friche, “Tri Amerikantsa,” *Novyi mir*, 1925, No. 25: 126. And Leonid Andreev, who according to Kornei Chukovsky considered London one of “his favorite authors” (along with Kipling and H.G. Wells), was particularly drawn to the American’s active adventurism. See Frederick H. White, *Memoirs and Madness: Leonid Andreev through the Prism of the Literary Portrait* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 65, 270.

¹⁴ Kuprin, “Zametka o Dzheke Londone,” *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh*, vol. 9, 128.

¹⁵ Kuprin, “Dzhek London,” *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh*, vol. 9, 153.

praise and criticism of *Martin Eden*, the Russian translation of which first appeared in 1913 (as part of a “Universal Library” [*Universal’naia biblioteka*] series), Kuprin suggested that the initial manifestation of the novel’s eponymous protagonist—the “sailor in a rough shirt saturated with the smell of the sea”—proves “bolder, smarter, and more interesting” than the “highly educated and acclaimed yet soulless” Eden who drowns himself at the end of the novel, a critique of London’s novel implicitly corroborated by Nabokov’s *Glory*.¹⁶

Meanwhile, two of the era’s most prominent Russian poets, Osip Mandel’shtam and Mayakovsky, offered quite divergent attitudes toward London’s fiction. In a review of a 1912 collection of translated London works (that did not include *Martin Eden*), Mandel’shtam (who, like Nabokov, studied at the Teneshev School in St. Petersburg) scathingly remarked:

London’s harmless fun and moral clarity make him an indispensable writer for young people. One can only welcome adult readers’ naïve enthusiasm for London: it shows how superficial the reading public’s former passions were and that if real art has enjoyed success, then it has penetrated minds as contraband under the banner of afterthoughts.¹⁷

Highly critical of London’s adolescent adventure plots that he believed fell well short of “real art,” Mandel’shtam went on in his 1913 review to compare the American’s fiction to popular cinematic offerings of the day; London, the Acmeist poet argued, “projects an endless film of the monotone northern landscape that is lurid like a panorama shot and flickering like a living picture, and thus he mesmerizes the reader through his willingness to show thousands of meters of film.”¹⁸ The “endless” action in London’s fiction, Mandel’shtam argued, proved more cinematic than literary, possessing a superficiality that did indeed suit the era’s burgeoning film industry.

Sure enough, a cinematic appropriation of *Martin Eden* would soon arrive from the pen of the futurist Mayakovsky, who based his screenplay for the 1918 film *Creation Can’t Be*

¹⁶ Ibid., 153-54. E. Simenova was the translator for the first Russian edition of *Martin Eden* in 1913. Sergei Zaiatskii later translated the novel in the 1920s.

¹⁷ Osip Mandel’shtam, *Sobranie sochinenii v 4 tomakh*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Art-Biznes-Tsentr, 1993), 190. This collection of London works, translated by a K.N. Kudratseva, featured a foreword by Leonid Andreev, whom Mandel’shtam disparaged in his review. In his foreword to this 1912 collection of London works, Andreev exclaimed, “You read [London] and it as if you exit some sort of cramped nook onto the wide bosom of the sea, you breath in the salt air and you feel your muscles strengthening along with innocent life’s powerful call to work and battle.” See Orlova, 114.

¹⁸ Ibid, 189.

Bought (*Ne dlia deneg rodivshisia*) on London's novel.¹⁹ Having made direct mention of London (“Dzhek London, / den'gi, / liubov', / strast'”) [“Jack London, / money, / love, / passion”]) in his famous 1915 long poem *A Cloud in Trousers* (*Oblako v shtanakh*), Mayakovsky not only wrote the screenplay for Nikandr Turkin's *Creation Can't Be Bought*, but also performed the lead role of poet Ivan Nov, the film's Eden-inspired hero.²⁰ A hastily produced vehicle for the cubo-futurists (whom Nabokov would later parody in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*), *Creation Can't Be Bought* also featured several of Mayakovsky's fellow cubo-futurist poets (e.g., David Burliuk and Vasily Kamensky) in supporting roles. No print remains of *Creation Can't Be Bought*, but the production does indicate the far-reaching appeal of *Martin Eden* in Russia throughout 1910s. And while Nabokov undoubtedly shared Mandel'shtam's skepticism toward the artistic merits of London's work, like Mayakovsky he found in the American writer's fiction fodder for his own creative work.

LONDON AND NABOKOV

For Nabokov, one can confidently surmise that Jack London proved too left leaning in his politics, given the American's vocal advocacy of socialism, but there can be little doubt that as a boy Nabokov read London's work enthusiastically. Although Nabokov does not directly mention London in any published interviews, he did state in 1963, “Between the ages of ten and fifteen in St. Petersburg, I must have read more fiction and poetry—English, Russian, and French—than in any other five-year period of my life. ... I was a perfectly normal trilingual child in a family with a large library.”²¹ An avid, “trilingual” reader in his youth, Nabokov tapped into the energetic, adventurist spirit and masculine, athletic ethos that London both embodied and documented in

¹⁹ The Russian-Soviet filmmaker Vladimir Gardin would make a film adaptation of London's *Iron Heel* (*Zheleznaia piata*) in 1919, while London's short story “The Unexpected” (1907) would provide the basis for the well-known silent Soviet film *By the Law* (*Po zakonu*, 1926), directed by Lev Kuleshov using V. Shklovsky's screenplay. And London's 1911 short story “The Mexican” was adapted for the stage by a young Sergei Eisenstein in 1921, when the filmmaker-to-be began working for the Moscow Proletkult Central Theater.

²⁰ For more on Mayakovsky's debt to Jack London and his work on *Creation Can't Be Bought*, see G.S. Cheremin, “Maiakovskii i roman Dzheka Londona *Martin Iden*,” *Russkaia literatura*, No. 1, 1970: 121-135.

²¹ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 42-43. In this same 1963 interview, Nabokov refers only to protagonists of Emmuska Orczy, Jules Verne, and Arthur Conan Doyle as his “heroes” when a youngster.

his fiction and journalism.²² Nabokov's autobiographical *Speak, Memory*, for instance, details a youthful devotion to not only adventure novels (particularly those of Captain Thomas Mayne Reid), but also boxing, tennis, and soccer, which subsequently found their way into so much of his writing, be it early poems devoted to sports or a wide range of novels that featured athletic competition, foremost among them *Invitation to a Beheading*.²³ It was through an imaginative sense of adventure and a love of competitive sports, particularly boxing, that Nabokov would be drawn to Jack London.

As attested to by *Pnin*, various references and allusions to the fiction of Jack London crop up now and again in Nabokov's writing. In the 1925 essay "Breitensträter – Paolino," an effusive account of a heavyweight boxing match Nabokov attended at Berlin's Sports Palace (Sportpalast) between the German Hans Breitensträter and the Basque Paolino Uzcudun, he finds Londonesque inspiration in "the beauty of the very art of boxing, in the absolute precision of lunges, sidesteps, bobbing, and the most diverse punches: hooks, jabs, uppercuts – and, secondly, in that wonderful manly emotion that this art form arouses."²⁴ Delighting in the "manly emotion" of boxing and presenting it as an "art form" capable of evoking a wide, powerful range of sensations, Nabokov evokes London when he equates the "absolute precision" of the "most diverse punches" with his own emerging skills as a young émigré writer living in Berlin. And in this same essay Nabokov also recounts at some length the famous Jack Johnson-James Jeffries bout of 1910, a racially loaded fight between "The Great White Hope" Jeffries and the African-American Johnson that London famously reported on at the time.²⁵ And most significantly,

²² For more on Nabokov's embrace of physical culture, see Catriona Kelly, "The Education of the Will: Advice, Literature, Zakal, and Manliness in Early Twentieth-Century Russia," *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, ed. Barbara Evans Clements, Rebecca Friedman and Dan Healey (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 143-44.

²³ For more on the inclusion of sports in Nabokov's work, see Thomas Karshan, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Tim Harte, "Athletic Inspiration: Nabokov and the Art of Sports," *Nabokov Studies*, vol. 12 (2009/11): 147-66; and Gavriel Shapiro, *The Tender Friendship and Charm of Perfect Accord: Nabokov and His Father* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 187-222.

²⁴ Nabokov, "Braitenshtreter – Paolino," in Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg: "Simposium," 2000), 750. In December 1925 Nabokov delivered this essay, which he initially titled "Play" ("Igra"), to a small literary circle in Berlin organized by Raisa Tatarinov and Iulii Aikhenval'd. A version of the talk, which was devoted mostly to boxing, appeared in a December issue of *BoxSport* (Berlin) and in the Latvian journal *Slovo*. See Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 257.

²⁵ Jack Johnson and James Jeffries fought on July 4th, 1910 in Reno, Nevada. At this "Fight of the Century," as it was dubbed, Johnson defeated "the Great White Hope" Jeffries with a technical knockout in the 15th round. London's and Nabokov's accounts of this fight differ somewhat: London (who made various racially insensitive remarks in his reportage) commented that, "It was not a great battle, after all, save in its setting and its significance," while Nabokov noted that "after the long, wonderful fight, the huge black man whalloped his opponent so hard that

Nabokov goes on to emphasize in “Braitenshtreter – Paolino” that London—along with Bernard Shaw, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Kuprin—had drawn upon the romance and beauty of boxing in his fiction.²⁶ Nabokov himself, besides including sports as a frequent theme in his own work (see, for instance, descriptions of goalkeeping in *Speak, Memory* or the extensive passages devoted to tennis playing in *Lolita*), used his later lectures on Russian literature at Cornell to dwell at length on Tolstoy’s attention to skating and tennis in *Anna Karenina*.²⁷ Or consider *Pnin*, in which Nabokov’s poor protagonist, in addition to enduring a long linguistic ordeal when purchasing a soccer ball (that is to be given, along with the London volume, to young Viktor), delivers a lengthy monologue on sports and Russian literature (and later plays a mean game of croquet). Although one cannot directly link Nabokov’s preoccupation with athletics in fiction to London, it seems clear that the young Russian writer at the very least embraced the athletic energy and unabashed virility that London fostered in his work and aggressively inserted into modern fiction.

Jack London is also mentioned in passing and somewhat out of the blue in the translation of Nabokov’s 1927 short story “Zvonok,” which appeared in 1974 as “The Doorbell.” In the original story, which recounts the unexpected visit a Russian middle-age man pays to his émigré mother in Berlin, Nabokov describes the youthful vigor and restless adventurism this man once possessed as “Sploshnoi Main-Rid,” or “Pure Mayne Reid,” while in the story’s otherwise quite literal translation accredited to Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author, this mention of Reid has been changed to “It was pure Jack London.”²⁸ The mid-nineteenth-century Anglo-American novelist Thomas Mayne Reid, who wrote *The Headless Horseman* (1865) and other adventure novels, proved early on to be a favorite of the young Nabokov, as is evident in various

Jeffries flew out of the ring on his back, through the ropes, and, as they say, ‘went to sleep’.” See London, “Jeffries-Johnson Fight,” *Jack London Reports*, 294 and Nabokov, “Braitenshtreter – Paolino,” 750. For a brief discussion of Nabokov’s views on boxing and their place within the vast body of cultural material devoted to the sport, see Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 251, 425.

²⁶ Nabokov, “Braitenshtreter – Paolino,” 750.

²⁷ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Bruccoli Clark, 1981), 234. “Court-tennis,” Nabokov remarks in his discussion of *Anna Karenina*, “is mentioned both by Shakespeare and Cervantes. Ancient kings played it, stamping and panting in resounding halls. But this [lawn tennis], I repeat, is our modern game.”

²⁸ Nabokov, “Zvonok,” *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Izd. “Pravda,” 1990), 297; and Nabokov, “The Doorbell,” in Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 190. The draft of Dmitri’s “Doorbell” translation in the New York Public Library shows that Nabokov has crossed out “Mayne Reid” and replaced it with “Jack London.” This switch from Mayne Reid to London is noted in passing in Marina Naumann, *Blue Evenings in Berlin: Nabokov’s Short Stories of the 1920s* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 212

passages from Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, for instance at the start of the memoir's tenth chapter, which commences with a nod to the "Wild West fiction of Captain Mayne Reid" and a juvenile Nabokov's heartfelt reading of *The Headless Horseman*.²⁹ And the hero and heroine of this same Mayne Reid novel also find their way into *Glory*, mentioned in passing by Nabokov's third-person narrator. Yet the older Nabokov and his son Dmitri opted for Jack London in their translation of "The Doorbell," most likely because they assumed London—who followed in the Mayne Reid tradition—would be more familiar to Western audiences than Mayne Reid (whose fame and stature vanished even faster than London's in the twentieth century). Or one could even contend that the change from Mayne Reid to London occurred due to the fact that the father-and-son team worked on "The Doorbell" translation soon after they had completed their 1970 English translation of Nabokov's Russian novel *Podvig*—or *Glory*—with its clear Jack London subtext.

MARTIN EDEN AND GLORY

The bookstore scene from *Pnin*, seemingly inconsequential, hints at an important polemic existing between Nabokov and London, particularly within the purview of *Martin Eden*. Nabokov's Pninian interest in *Martin Eden* indeed looms significant once one turns to *Glory*, which, curiously enough, features a central protagonist whose name just happens to be Martin (*Martyn* in the Russian original) Edelweiss. The common first name and somewhat similar surnames obviously do not prove much, but by probing *Glory* and comparing the trajectory of Nabokov's novel to that of *Martin Eden*, we can uncover a number of salient intersections between these two works of fiction. Even if Nabokov ultimately rejects the disillusioned nihilism with which *Martin Eden* concludes, the two novels contain a number of revealing, albeit contrastive parallels that help explicate various ambiguous components of *Glory* while underscoring an important polemic at play in Nabokov's 1932 novel.

Glory, a novel that boasts a London-esque emphasis on not only sports, but also work, bravery, and adventure, recounts the growth, education, and ultimate demise of a young Russian

²⁹ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 195.

émigré with a Swiss father (and surname) whose life as an upper-class Russian fleeing the Bolsheviks in post-Revolutionary Crimea, as a student (and goalkeeper) at Cambridge University, and as a temporary farm hand in France mirrors Nabokov's own experiences in various biographical respects. Like *Martin Eden*, *Glory* adheres to the bildungsroman model as it charts the development of Martin Edelweiss from innocent adolescent into courageous adventurer and hero.³⁰ To impress Sonya Zilanov, a young Russian woman who resists Martin's amorous advances, Nabokov's protagonist embarks at the end of the novel on a daredevil, tacitly suicidal journey into the Soviet Union where he can at last achieve romantic, heroic glory, even if this journey proves fatal. Nabokov, in fact, originally planned to call his 1932 novel *Romantic Times* (*Romanticheskii vek*), yet another indication that he envisioned *Glory* as not only replicating the romantic adventurism so prominent in the fiction of Jack London, but also implicitly critiquing the manifestation of this adventurism within *Martin Eden*.³¹

Martin Eden and Martin Edelweiss may be from different classes and backgrounds (and countries, of course), yet they have more in common than simply the same first name and surnames that begin with the same three letters. The two protagonists of *Martin Eden* and *Glory*—novels that boast similar third-person narrative voices (and, perhaps by coincidence, are comprised of, respectively, forty-six and forty-eight chapters)—happen to be young men in their early twenties: Eden is “almost twenty-one” at the very start of London's novel, while Edelweiss turns twenty-one (Nabokov makes specific mention of his twenty-first birthday) just as he begins planning his clandestine journey into Soviet Russia.³² And both happen to be young, energetic heroes determined to prove themselves and their worth. In discussion of Nabokov's place in post-1918 fiction, Martin Green argues, “In relation to friendship, games, women, and sexuality, the Nabokov hero is most often (take Martin Edelweiss in *Glory*) fit to be the hero of a pre-1914 novel.”³³ As Green suggests, the blueprint for Nabokov's Martin—as well as for his romantic life and his love of athletic games—comes from late nineteenth-century, early twentieth-century literature, and although Green does not directly refer to London, no other author captured the

³⁰ Initial reviews of *Podvig* in the Russian émigré press focused on the bildungsroman aspect of Nabokov's novel. See, for instance, M. Tsetlin's review in *Sovremennye zapiski* 51 (1933): 458-59.

³¹ See Nabokov's 1971 foreword to *Glory*. Nabokov, *Glory*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author (New York: Vintage International, 1991), x. Subsequent quotations from *Glory* will be given in parentheses within the text.

³² London, *Martin Eden* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1922), 24. Subsequent quotations from *Martin Eden* will be given in parentheses within the text.

³³ Martin Green, *Children of the Sun* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 194.

spirit of his era's heroics like the American writer.³⁴ Nabokov thus seems to have transported London's adventurous hero, specifically Martin Eden, into the very particular milieu of Russian émigré life in Western Europe.

Both Martins, however, feel out of place in the everyday worlds they inhabit. The self-educated Eden comes across as an uncouth, ungainly outsider to the Morses yet an over-educated intellectual among his working class friends, while Edelweiss senses that he is a Swiss foreigner among his Russian friends but a Russian among the British and Swiss (and Germans, after he moves to Berlin). When London introduces his protagonist on the very first page of *Martin Eden*, the hero's foreignness immediately comes to the fore: Martin "wore rough clothes that smacked of the sea, and he was manifestly out of place in the spacious hall in which he found himself" (*Martin Eden*, 1). In *Glory*, when Martin arrives in London (the city, not the author) to stay with the Zilanovs, he bristles when Sonia makes fun of his accented English, while "at Cambridge he felt still more foreign" (*Glory*, 54). And when Edelweiss impertinently kisses Sonia, much to her chagrin, the young woman dismisses his amorous action, saying, "I forgive you, because you are Swiss" (*Glory*, 95). Both Martins, in fact, will be unable to achieve the romantic love they so yearn for, in large part due to their inherent remove from society and from the families of their respective romantic interests.

Nevertheless, both Martins overcome their alienated states by means of physical, often brute force. Throughout *Martin Eden*, London emphasizes Martin Eden's unusual brawn as well as his ability to fight, while in *Glory*, pugnaciousness and athleticism similarly prove crucial to Martin Edelweiss's education, maturation, and heroism. Accordingly, Nabokov's young hero seeks out the opportunity to develop his strength and courage in ways that will culminate with his risky, clandestine, and suicidal journey into Soviet Russia. Hence, London's Eden, an experienced seaman and fighter, provides a useful model for Edelweiss, who even undergoes a London-esque initiation of sorts early on in *Glory* when he leaves Russia for the West by boat. Martin makes friends with the captain of the ship and learns a valuable lesson at sea: "Thus was

³⁴ In a Sept. 12, 1930 letter to Gleb Struve, Nabokov refers to *Glory*'s appropriation of late nineteenth-century adventure novels à la Jules Verne (and the hero of Verne's 1868 novel *Les Enfants du capitaine Grant*) by joking that the peripatetic hero of his new novel is "a child not of Captain Grant but of Emmy Grant (I have nothing against a pun when it is good)." See E. Belodubrovskii and A. Dolinin, "Pis'ma V. V. Nabokova k G. P. Struve. 1925-1930," *Zvezda* 11 (2003). Also cited in Dolinin, *Istinnaia zhizn' pisatel'ia Sirina* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2004), 80.

Martin initiated into seamen's life. 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" (*Glory*, 27). As Martin Edelweiss gains maturity, he also gains important insights—i.e., "secrets"—into the manly world out of which Martin Eden originated in London's novel. But whereas Eden's story begins with him as an experienced seaman and brawler yearning for education, Edelweiss begins as a well-educated, well-to-do Russian yearning for a seaman's fortitude and a fighter's resolve.

Nabokov has therefore, I would argue, inverted the process of maturation found in *Martin Eden*: while Eden progresses from action toward education, Edelweiss progresses from education toward action. Simultaneously, young, alluring women (Ruth and Sonia), both slightly out of reach when they exert their influence on their respective suitors, facilitate this progression, as Ruth compels Eden to educate himself and write, while Sonia compels Edelweiss to compete and seek out adventure. And although both Martins ultimately end things with suicidal action, their journeys become almost mirror images of one another, thus allowing their respective suicides to resonate in very different ways. While Eden's suicide proves nihilistic and even misanthropic, Edelweiss's self-sacrifice comes across as paradoxically life affirming and, as the title of the book suggests, an impressive feat and assertion of heroic glory. Thus it is this positive assertion of bravery that constitutes the main thrust of Nabokov's polemic with London, for rather than becoming the critique of heroic individualism found in *Martin Eden*, Nabokov's novel represents a celebration of just such a brand of personal heroism.

The contrastive transformations of the two Martins can be discerned, moreover, through the manner in which their actual skin color changes over the course of the two novels. London's protagonist, who early on in *Martin Eden* is described as tan and close to black, initially looks at himself in a mirror and startles at what he sees: "The brown sunburn of his face surprised him. He had not dreamed he was so black" (*Martin Eden*, 35). Yet romantic disillusionment and depression seem to change Eden, for he goes from his sturdy, dark-complexioned self to a white, lifeless figure. Although Eden long maintains his physical health, psychological exhaustion saps his energy. "You're sick <...> It ain't your body. It's your head" (*Martin Eden*, 388), Martin's

female friend Lizzie Connolly tells him.³⁵ And by the very end of *Martin Eden*, in fact, the suicidal protagonist has become deathly white: he throws his “white body” into the “milky froth of water” whereby he sinks like “a white statue” (*Martin Eden*, 410) into the sea. Compare this to Edelweiss, who goes from an innocent pale to a robust hue. At the start of the novel his complexion reflects an underlying, unwelcome cowardice: “Martin noticed that on occasion he was so afraid of seeming unmanly, to become known as a coward, that he involuntarily reacted in just the way a coward would—the blood left his face, his legs trembled, and his heart pounded tightly in his chest” (*Glory*, 13). This cowardice and at times bloodless complexion, however, dissipates when Martin turns to sports and labor, for instance when he takes a job in Berlin as a tennis instructor. As Nabokov explains, “Martin worked almost daily from early morning to sunset holding five balls in his left hand. <...> At first Martin would get so tired, his right shoulder would ache and his feet burn so badly, that as soon as he had earned his five or six dollars he would go to bed. His hair grew lighter and his skin darker from the sun, so that he seemed a negative of himself” (*Glory*, 137). Through sports and work (granted, a rather upper-crust form of labor), Edelweiss loses his fair complexion, a process that continues in France when he trades in his tennis racket for a hoe to work as a day laborer on a farm: “Naked to the waist, his back already the hue of terra cotta, Martin, to humor the young maize, loosened and heaped up the soil, grubbed out with the sharp corner of his hoe the wily and stubborn speargrass, or for hours on end stood bending over the shoots of infant trees, apple and pear, clicking his pruning shears” (*Glory*, 165). Whereas Eden gradually loses his rugged earthiness, Edelweiss takes on the color of the earth in which he toils.

Correspondingly, the two women—Ruth and Sonia—at the heart of *Martin Eden* and *Glory* both loom as pale figures attempting to lure their respective heroes away from the rough world of labor, sports, and heroism (even if Sonia unintentionally inspires Martin’s heroics). For instance, the pale, white Ruth (London introduces her thusly: “She was a pale, ethereal creature, with wide, spiritual blue eyes” [*Martin Eden*, 4]) gazes with amazement and some fear at an Eden in the process of transforming himself into a socially respectable man: “She was startled. The raw, stumbling lout was gone. The ill-fitting clothes, battered hands, and sunburned face remained; but these seemed the prison-bars through which she saw a great soul looking forth”

³⁵ Just as Eden takes a passing interest in the working-class Lizzy Connolly, Edelweiss develops a brief romance with the working-class Rose in London.

(*Martin Eden*, 23). Ruth—in cahoots with cultured society—will gradually remove these “prison bars” of dark skin from Martin. And in *Glory*, Sonia, whose “pale complexion” (*Glory*, 105) is noted by Martin, perceives Edelweiss in much the same way Ruth initially perceives Eden. For instance, Sonia’s watchful eye makes Edelweiss feel insufficient and bulky: “Martin had the impression, under Sonia’s impenetrable gaze, that he was dressed shabbily, that his hair was badly brushed, that he had shoulders like a furniture mover’s, and that the roundness of his face was the shape of stupidity. No less repulsive were his big knuckles, which had reddened and grown swollen of late, what with his goalkeeping and his boxing lessons” (*Glory*, 80). Sonia has no appreciation for Edelweiss’s athleticism, and she often looks down on the energetic, uncouth Martin. When Nabokov’s protagonist kisses Sonia as they walk toward a park and then takes her arm, she resists: “‘Remove your arm,’ she remarked, ‘I can’t walk like that—you behave like a Sunday shop clerk’” (*Glory*, 145). The two socially refined women of *Martin Eden* and *Glory* are also directly linked to Shakespeare’s Desdemona, which suggests even greater significance for their fair complexion and refinement vis-à-vis the Moorish, Othello-like Martins.³⁶ In London’s novel Ruth is compared to Desdemona when she listens to Eden tell of his past adventures in a leper colony on one of the Hawaiian Islands (“‘What did you do?’ Ruth demanded breathlessly, listening, like any Desdemona, appalled and fascinated” [*Martin Eden*, 228]), while in *Glory*, Nabokov writes of Edelweiss’s plans to “arrive in Berlin, look up Sonia, and, like Othello, begin to tell a story of hair-breadth escapes, of most disastrous chances” (*Glory*, 119). Ruth Morse and Sonia Zilanov, both of whom belong to respectable, upper-middle class families, attempt to draw their respective Martins—their Othellos—away from the world of labor, sports, and adventure, and while Ruth succeeds at this, Sonia does not, for by rejecting Edelweiss, she prompts ever increasing heroics from the young man.

In *Glory*, athletics may hold no interest for Sonia, yet they conspicuously contribute to Edelweiss’s own *bildungsroman*, enabling him to realize the powerful potential of both his body and his creative consciousness. Thus Nabokov inverts the *bildungsroman* of *Martin Eden*. Edelweiss—like his creator, a goalkeeper on a Cambridge University soccer team as well as a competitive tennis player and avid boxer—boasts an active body and an equally active imagination, yet, unlike Nabokov (and London’s own Martin, for that matter), he remains

³⁶ For more on the racial subtext of boxing in 1920s Germany and its derivation from American notions of the boxer, see David Bathrick, “Max Schmeling on the Canvas,” *New German Critique* 51 (Fall 1990): 126-27.

incapable of expressing his fantasies in words, as a writer might. He therefore opts for physical, often athletic expression of his nascent, creative sense of self, as competition and the urge for athletic success increasingly prompt his vivid imagination and romantic dreams of heroism. As John Updike wrote in his 1972 review of *Glory*, “By denying Martin any artistic or political passion while not denying him his own full complement of senses, Nabokov has released a rare genie in fiction—a robust sense of physical well-being.”³⁷ Tennis, soccer and boxing all boost Martin’s active efforts to turn his dreams into reality and his grand ideas into adventure and resolute action. Following an unsuccessful tennis match with a French tennis pro, for example, Martin conjures up in his mind a much more positive result: “On the way home [Martin] mentally replayed every shot, transforming defeat into victory, then shaking his head: how very, very hard it was to capture happiness!” (*Glory*, 47-48). And even when actual athletic success ensues, this success, in turn, leads immediately to imaginative thoughts of more impressive forms of heroism: “His second summer in Switzerland was marked by his beating one of the best Swiss tennis players—but what did Sonia care about his triumphs in tennis, boxing, or soccer? Sometimes Martin visualized in a picturesque daydream how he would return to Sonia from fighting in the Crimea, and the word ‘cavalry’ thundered by, the wind whistled” (*Glory*, 99). Sonia may not value Martin’s successful sports endeavors, but she cannot contain his ever-active imagination and desire to prove his mettle, be it on the athletic field or the battlefield.

Martin’s pattern of inspired athletic musings continues to expand in *Glory*, for the subsequent physical actualization of his pre-match visions of victory on the soccer field leads him to believe that his heroic daydreams will likewise come true: “This seemed to him a guarantee that the new series of reveries he had recently evolved—about an illegal, clandestine expedition—would also grow solid and be filled with life, as his dreams about soccer matches had grown solid and incarnate” (*Glory*, 109).³⁸ The emphasis here on “solid” dreams underscores Leona Toker’s contention that the athletic activity of *Glory* lend Martin “flesh-and-blood

³⁷ John Updike, “The Crunch of Happiness,” in *Picked-Up Pieces* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 197. This review of *Glory* originally appeared in the Feb. 26, 1972 edition of *The New Yorker*.

³⁸ Arguably indicative of further ties between London and Nabokov, the international adventurism at the heart of *Glory* and the novel’s subplot involving the illusive Russian émigré and anti-Bolshevist Yuri Gruzinov, who in part inspires Martin’s final feat, reflects a fascination with international intrigue similar in spirit to that found in Jack London’s unfinished *The Assassination Bureau, Ltd.* The plot of this thriller novel, which was eventually completed and published by Robert Fish in 1963, involves a secret organization headed by a Russian émigré (Ivan Dragomiloff) in New York City who, in typical London fashion, swiftly evolves from Nietzschean individualist to resolute social reformer.

solidity,” for sports enable him to develop his individuality, physical vitality, and even creative potential.³⁹ Martin’s athletic play, in fact, soon gives way to overtly imaginative play. Toward the end of *Glory*, Martin begins to partake in a playful, inventive game with Sonia, whereby they imagine themselves making their way into Zoorland, an imaginary dystopian land ruled by tyrants (“They studied Zoorlandian customs and laws <...> 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” [*Glory*, 148]). Although Sonia betrays Martin by giving these creative notions of Zoorland to the émigré writer Bubnov, her implied lover, Martin will eventually realize his own creative glory at the end of novel by entering this imagined Zoorland, i.e., crossing the border into the USSR. An imaginative extension of his athletics and desire for adventure, this fatal journey will ultimately make Edelweiss one of Nabokov’s “victors in the long run” and one of his “favorite creatures, my resplendent characters,” as the author put it in a 1971 interview, for this fictional victor triumphs through sports, imagination, and then daring, adventure.⁴⁰ Overcoming his deep-seated fear of defeat and his own mortality in a very un-Eden-like manner, for London’s hero emphatically transforms victory into defeat, Edelweiss will make his heroic return to Soviet Russia and thus succeed in producing a most immediate, tangible form of creative expression.⁴¹

In polemicizing with London through Martin’s athleticism and thirst for heroic victory, Nabokov uses Edelweiss’s eagerness to engage in fisticuffs as a further means of contrasting his novel with *Martin Eden*. At one late stage in *Glory*, for instance, Martin challenges his Cambridge University friend Darwin to a “duel” (*Glory*, 124), i.e., a fight, on account of their mutual interest in Sonia. Darwin (whose name just might allude to the Social Darwinism of

³⁹ Leona Toker, *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 106. Instead of pointing to *Martin Eden* as an important antecedent to *Glory*, Toker suggests in a footnote to her chapter on *Glory* that it is Joseph Conrad’s 1904 novel *Nostromo* and its important yet secondary character of Martin Decoud that serve as the basis for the daring action and sense of adventure in *Glory*. *Glory*, Toker argues, is Nabokov’s reply to Conrad, but the parallels between Nabokov and London prove far more pronounced than they do between Nabokov and Conrad, whom the Russian writer often criticized. See Toker, 96.

⁴⁰ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 193.

⁴¹ In analysis of Nabokov’s early novel and its metaphysical elements, Vladimir Alexandrov has suggested that “the heroic spirit of [the poet Nikolai] Gumilev permeates *Glory*,” pointing to the fact that Gumilev’s execution at the hands of the Bolsheviks in 1921 mirrors to some extent the execution Edelweiss envisions for himself in his heroic fantasies. Vladimir Alexandrov, *Nabokov’s Otherworld* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 224. While Gumilev’s Acmeist verse and heroic persona undoubtedly informed Nabokov’s work, particularly verse he wrote in the 1920s, I would argue that the basis of the heroism derives as much from London as it does from Gumilev. The spirit of Gumilev surely pervades *Glory*, yet a more telling link can be made between Nabokov and London.

Herbert Spencer so explicitly at play in *Martin Eden*) provides yet more opportunity in *Glory* for Martin to prove himself, as Nabokov writes:

Fists clenched, legs flexed, the two started dancing around one another. Martin still could not imagine himself hitting Darwin in the face, in that large, clean-shaven face with the soft wrinkles around the mouth; however, when Darwin's left shot out and caught Martin on the jaw, everything changed: all anxiety vanished, he felt relaxed and radiant inside, and the ringing in his head, from the jolt it had received, sang of Sonia, over whom, in a sense, they were fighting this duel. (*Glory*, 123-24)

The radiance within Martin and the ringing within his head prove transformative, whereby Nabokov's protagonist suddenly relishes the opportunity to fight with his fists and demonstrate his mettle. Edelweiss experiences a "jolt" that eliminates all fear and only increases his vitality. So while Martin Eden increasingly represses the physical side of himself in London's novel, Nabokov's Martin finds inspiration in physical valor.

We might also compare the Martin-Darwin fight scene from *Glory* with a very early description of hand-to-hand combat in *Martin Eden*, which London's protagonist recalls when Ruth notices a scar on Martin's neck and asks whether it was the result of some adventure. Explaining that the scar came from a knife fight he once had with a Mexican, Eden reimagines this fight:

Baldly as he had stated it, in his eyes was a rich vision of that hot, starry night at Salina Cruz, the white strip of beach, the lights of the sugar steamers in the harbor, the voices of the drunken sailors in the distance, the jostling stevedores, the flaming passion in the Mexican's face, the glint of the beast-eyes in the starlight, the sting of the steel in his neck, and the rush of blood, the crowd and the cries, the two bodies, his and the Mexican's, locked together, rolling over and over and tearing up the sand, and from away off somewhere the mellow tinkling of a guitar. Such was the picture, and he thrilled to the memory of it, wondering if the man could paint it who had painted the pilot-schooner on the wall. (*Martin Eden*, 7)

Several things stand out in this early passage from London's novel. First of all, Martin Eden explicitly conveys a desire to transform the physicality of his past into art, as he envisions his

violent fight with the Mexican as a painted scene. And by emphasizing the sounds, sights, and tangible heat of the contest, London advocates for an aesthetic rendering of athletic physicality that surely caught Nabokov's attention. In particular, the "mellow tinkling of a guitar" experienced by Eden anticipates the ringing and proverbial song of Sonia that Edelweiss hears in *Glory*.

Furthermore, London refers in the passage above to a painting of a schooner that Eden had noticed at the very start of the novel.⁴² Sitting in a spacious hall, Eden marveled at this seascape hanging on the wall just prior to the description of his fight with the Mexican: "An oil painting caught and held him. A heavy surf thundered and burst over an outjutting rock; lowering storm-clouds covered the sky; and, outside the line of surf, a pilot-schooner, close hauled, heeled over till every detail of her deck was visible, was surging along against a stormy sunset sky. There was beauty, and it drew him irresistibly" (*Martin Eden*, 3). The painted seascape beckons to Eden from the outset, and in the novel's conclusion, in fact, he seemingly enters this very scene by tossing himself from a steamer's porthole into the sea.⁴³ Indeed, it is at the end of London's novel that Eden commits suicide by jumping out a porthole: "Then he let himself go and sank without movement, a white statue, into the sea. He breathed in the water deeply, deliberately, after the manner of a man taking an anesthetic" (*Martin Eden*, 410). As this concluding passage of *Martin Eden* underscores, the novel begins and ends with the maritime motif, whereby London's central protagonist arises out of the sea at the outset of the novel before returning to the sea on the novel's last pages.

The urge to walk into a painting similarly figures in *Glory*. As Nabokov explains early on in his novel, above Edelweiss's childhood bed hangs a "watercolor depicting a dense forest with a winding path disappearing into its depths" (*Glory*, 4) and as a child he reads a book in which a boy magically enters a similar painting.⁴⁴ In the end, Edelweiss is able to physically enter this painting by returning through a dense forest into Soviet Russia (a process repeated by Darwin on

⁴² Incidentally, Nabokov twice refers in *Glory* to a popular painting by Arnold Böcklin with its somewhat tawdry depiction of sea gods amidst waves that hangs in Martin's Berlin apartment as well as in the drawing room of the Zilanov's Berlin apartment: "...while on the green wall above the couch, like a constant, benevolent reminder, the same naked old chap armed with a trident rose out of his Böcklinian waves as he did—although in a plainer frame—on the wall of the Zilanovs' parlor" (*Glory*, 138).

⁴³ One might note that Eden's suicide is quite similar to that of Nabokov's eponymous protagonist in *The Luzhin Defense* (*Zashchita Luzhina*, 1929), a novel Nabokov wrote several years prior to *Glory*.

⁴⁴ For more on the fairy tale components of *Glory*, see E. C. Haber, "Nabokov's *Glory* and the Fairy Tale," *SE EJ* (1977, vol. 21, no. 2): 214-224.

the last pages of the novel when he arrives to inform Mrs. Edelweiss of Martin's demise). And while Edelweiss does not exactly emerge out of the forest at the beginning of Nabokov's novel like Eden initially emerges out of the sea, he does in essence replicate the pattern of *Martin Eden* by venturing out of Russia at the beginning of the novel and then venturing back into Soviet Russia at the very end. For both Martin Edelweiss and Martin Eden, therefore, the artistic world of paintings, writing (in Eden's case), and Zoorland (in Edelweiss's case) lures them away, toward death. But while Eden has striven to adapt to a rarified intellectual world that has no place for his physicality, Edelweiss has adapted to a world of adventure, athleticism, and bravery, thus making his return to the Soviet Union an imaginative, timeless act and a courageous leap into a higher aesthetic—and physical—dimension rather than something akin to Eden's nihilistic jump into oblivion.

Martin's glorious, albeit fatal adventure back to Soviet Russia underscores, along with his name (or rather the rarer Russian variation of "Martyn" that Nabokov originally used), another related subtext for *Glory* found in Vladimir Bakhmet'ev's Soviet novel *The Crime of Martin* (*Prestuplenie Martyna*, 1928). In an article on various ties between Nabokov and Viktor Shklovsky in Berlin during the late 1920s, Omry Ronen was the first to suggest that through *Glory* Nabokov had polemicized with Bakhmet'ev's proletarian novel, its unabashed transposition of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* into a Soviet context, and the Soviet concept of the feat—the *podvig* (Nabokov's Russian title for his novel)—at the heart of *The Crime of Martin* (which the Berlin-based Shklovsky had negatively assessed in 1929, when Nabokov was writing *Glory*).⁴⁵ This polemic with Bakhmet'ev's novel has received further attention in Nabokov scholarship by Aleksandr Dolinin and Marina Grishakova. Most notably, Dolinin argues that in *Glory* Nabokov takes aim at Bakhmet'ev's communist critique of his own eponymous protagonist, given that, according to Dolinin, "the reason for Martin's failure [in Bakhmet'ev's *The Crime of Martin*] is his ineradicable individualism, his persistent dream about personal glory

⁴⁵ Omry Ronen, "Puti Shklovskogo v 'Putevoditele po Berlinu'," *Zvezda* 4 (1999): 172. Ronen, who originally made the Nabokov-Bakhmet'ev connection, based his finding on this Shklovsky's review: В. Шкловский. Преступление эпитона ("Преступление Мартына". Роман Бахметьева. Изд. ЗИФ). The relevant passage from Shklovsky's text is as follows: "Бахметьев просто написал чужой роман. Его человек – Мартын – просто не человек, а цитата: цитата вообще из английского романа. Его ситуация – банальна, и трагедия – романна. На этом пути, на пути создания больших полотен и живого человека, такие поражения – полуплагииаты и переизобретения – будут попадаться все время <...> Мартын – не живой человек. Он из папье-маше. Он взят напрокат из кладовых старой литературы" (Литература факта. Первый сборник материалов работников ЛЕФа. Под ред. Н. Ф. Чужака. М.: Изд-во Федерация, 1929. Репринт: М.: Захаров, 2000. С. 139-140).

and self-realization, which deprives him of the ability to submit to the ‘iron necessity’ of class warfare.”⁴⁶ In fact, Bakhmet’ev’s implicit disapproval of his protagonist in *The Crime of Martin* echoes London’s own ex post facto critique of Eden from 1909 and, more broadly, the rejection of individualism found in *Martin Eden* and elsewhere in London’s fiction. Thus Nabokov, it seems clear, has in effect responded to both London and Bakhmet’ev through Martin Edelweiss, who defies both of his fictional namesakes as he joyfully pursues individual glory.⁴⁷

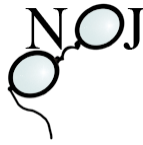
Given the abundant evidence, there can be little doubt that *Martin Eden* offered Nabokov an important blueprint for his 1932 *Glory* and his fundamental rejection of London’s socially minded fiction. From the names and ages of the protagonists to their robust, athletic personas and fatal paths in life, more than mere coincidence links these two works of fiction. Ultimately, however, Nabokov turns Eden’s life trajectory inside out, as he celebrates Martin Edelweiss’s daring, heroic feat and triumphant transformation of defeat into victory. But to conclude, we might pick up where we left off with Timofey Pnin in the Waindell bookstore, for after having had to settle for London’s *The Son of the Wolf*, rather than *Martin Eden*, Nabokov’s hero returns home to await his stepson’s arrival. Soon enough, Pnin will give *The Son of the Wolf* to Viktor, who initially thinks that the book is a translation of Russian fiction (Viktor recalls meeting a Russian, Dr. Yakov London, at his parents’ psychotherapeutic institute); about to retire for the evening, Viktor opens the London collection to a passage that vividly captures the limits of the American’s prose: ““Her great black eyes were fixed upon her tribesmen in fear and in defiance. So extreme the tension, she had forgotten to breathe... .””⁴⁸ Viktor, a burgeoning painter with more sophisticated tastes than Pnin had anticipated, will have no need for such adolescent fare and nor would Nabokov. Much like Viktor, the young Nabokov quickly developed a discerning view of literature and art that propelled him well beyond Jack London. Thanks to the “Son of the Wolf” passage embedded in *Pnin*, it becomes easy to understand why London’s popular prose and romantic adventurism so quickly waned in influence (at least in the West) and why

⁴⁶ Dolinin, 189. Also see Marina Grishakova, “Dve zametki o V. Nabokove,” *Trudy po russkoi i slavanskoi filologii. Literaturavedenii*, IV (Tartu, 2001), 247-259.

⁴⁷ While there is no denying the relevance of Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim* as a model for *The Crime of Martin*, it seems perfectly plausible that Bakhmet’ev also had in mind Jack London’s *Martin Eden* when writing his novel, given the heightened prominence of London’s anti-individualist, pro-socialist work in Soviet Russia throughout the 1920s and the common first name of Bakhmet’ev’s and London’s respective protagonists.

⁴⁸ Nabokov, *Pnin*, 108-09. The quotation is from London, “The Son of the Wolf,” in *Son of the Wolf* (New York: Garret Press, 1968), 43.

Nabokov's regard for the famous American writer remained at the level of polemic and parody.⁴⁹ Yet these are not reasons to discount the relevance of London's fiction for Nabokov. The various themes of bravery and physical prowess connecting *Martin Eden* with *Glory* indeed point to important intersections between the two writers that help us better understand Nabokov's elusive, underappreciated novel and, more broadly, help us better understand the artistic roots of a young, adventurous émigré writer whose fiction would quickly eclipse that of one of his boyhood favorites.



⁴⁹ To complete this circle between *Martin Eden*, *Pnin*, and *Glory*, one might point to Maxim Shrayer's 1999 article on *Glory*, where Shrayer concludes his analysis with playful contemplation about which of Nabokov's American characters the protagonist Martin Edelweiss would have become had he lived and been able "to emigrate to America with his creator." As Shrayer contends, "Of all the American characters, I believe, Pnin is the nearest incarnation of Martin." See Maxim Shrayer, "The Perfect Glory of Nabokov's Exploit," *Russian Studies in Literature* 35.4 (Fall 1999): 39.