

Vladimir Nabokov and the Fictions of Memory



edited by
Irena Księżopolska and Mikołaj Wiśniewski

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Irena Księżopolska, Mikołaj Wiśniewski	
INTRODUCTION	7
Leona Toker	
NABOKOV'S FACTOGRAPHY	21
Stephen H. Blackwell	
NABOKOV'S CRYPTIC TRIPTYCH: GRIEF	
AND JOY IN "SOUNDS," "THE CIRCLE,"	
AND "LANTERN SLIDES"	51
Péter Tamás	
VISION AND MEMORY IN NABOKOV'S	
"A FORGOTTEN POET"	82
Dana Dragunoiu	
TIME, MEMORY, THE GENERAL, AND THE	
SPECIFIC IN <i>LOLITA</i> AND <i>À LA RECHERCHE</i>	
<i>DU TEMPS PERDU</i>	100
David Potter	
PARAMNESIA, ANTICIPATORY	
MEMORY, AND FUTURE RECOLLECTION	
IN <i>ADA</i>	123
Adam Lipszyc	
MEMORY, IMAGE, AND COMPASSION: NABOKOV	
AND BENJAMIN ON CHILDHOOD	156

Gerard de Vries	
MEMORY AND FICTION IN NABOKOV'S <i>SPEAK,</i> <i>MEMORY</i>	173
Mikołaj Wiśniewski	
MEMORY'S INVISIBLE MANAGERS: THE CASE OF LUZHIN	184
Andrzej Księżopolski	
TIME, HISTORY, AND OTHER PHANTOMS IN <i>THE REAL LIFE OF SEBASTIAN KNIGHT</i>	203
Irena Księżopolska	
BIOGRAPHER AS IMPOSTOR: BANVILLE AND NABOKOV	226
Akiko Nakata	
MEMORIES TRICK – MEMORIES MIX: <i>TRANSPARENT THINGS</i>	254
Carlo Comanducci	
TRANSPARENT THINGS, VISIBLE SUBJECTS	274
Vyatcheslav Bart	
VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S ONTOLOGICAL AESTHETICISM FROM THE RENAISSANCE TO TRANSHUMANISM	294
Olga Dmitrienko	
REMINISCENCE AND SUBCONSCIOUS SACRALISATION OF THE KIN IN <i>THE GIFT</i>	318
Tatiana Ponomareva	
Epilogue: THE REALITY OF FICTION IN THE VLADIMIR NABOKOV MUSEUM	330
About the Authors	344

Irena Księżopolska, Mikołaj Wiśniewski

INTRODUCTION

In February 2015 the editors of this volume were on their way to a certain conference in Zurich. They decided to take a detour and first visit Montreux, and in particular – the sumptuous Montreux Palace Hotel where Nabokov lived for the last two decades of his life and where he wrote many of his late works. Having arrived at their destination very early in the morning, they ate breakfast at the lakeside, shared some of their canned sardines with a local cat, all the while contemplating the ghastly statue of Nabokov: quite unlike himself, in baggy knickerbockers and with fragments of a pince-nez, which must have been broken off by some over-ardent fan, still attached to his nose. The travelers then directed their steps into the hotel lobby and were greeted by the concierge who graciously invited them to explore the hotel, specifying that Nabokov used to live on the sixth floor.

The sixth floor looked absolutely characterless: gray walls, gray carpets and narrow corridors, with no pictures, no plaque, no sign whatsoever of Nabokov. After walking in circles for a while, they did find a plaque, but dedicated to the memory of Freddie Mercury, which seemed to sadly signal the oblivion that is the fate

of writers as opposed to rock stars. Then they stopped and took a moment to reflect on how Nabokov had walked here imagining flying carpets and hotel fires, and Tolstoy who “risked his health by chasing chambermaids down these endless halls.”¹ The hallway seemed to light up just a touch and then – the sound of someone’s approaching steps was heard, only partially muffled by the distance of years and the thick carpets. Alas, instead of Nabokov’s graceful ghost, it was one of the chambermaids, pushing along a trolley with cleaning utensils. As she turned the corner, she almost bumped into the pensive scholars who stood there contemplating the mysteries of time texturing. “May I help you?” she asked, somewhat surprised. “Oh, we are just Nabokov fans, he used to live here...” “No he didn’t,” she replied immediately and added, “he lived in another wing.”

At first the scholars felt cheated, but in the next move they reflected that this was exactly the moment when Nabokov revealed himself, somewhat mischievously, after his fashion, for he turned them into characters of his novels. They stood where Sebastian Knight waited for the ghost of his mother in the wrong Roquebrune, and where Martin Edelweiss watched the passing trains from Molignac, confident of having captured his dream.

They did manage to get to the right place and see all the appropriate memorabilia, and admire the closed door of the “Nabokov suite.” But the previous experience somehow invalidated the claims of the place. Quite to the contrary, the place made the connection with the past impossible, or merely offered a weak cliché of it. A much stronger link was forged through displacement – through being included in a fictional pattern which distorted reality, producing recognition.

¹ A. Appel, Jr., “Nabokov: A Portrait” in J. E. Rivers and Charles Nicol, eds., *Nabokov’s Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Others on His Life’s Work* (Austin: University of Texas, 1982), 3.

Memory in Nabokov's works is never what the reader expects it to be. The above anecdote shows Nabokov mocking the sentimental travelers who wish to indulge their nostalgia – just touching the past for one brief moment. As Marek Zaleski writes in *Forms of Memory*, “the primary quality of artistic nostalgic sensibility is an illusion and a promise that the past may return as an aesthetic echo and as an aura of itself.”² Nabokov makes his readers recognize the illusory substance of that promise, granting the aesthetic pleasure not through repetition, but through longing itself. And of course, there is no other writer as obsessed with memory as Nabokov. From his very early poems and his first novel *Mary* to the unfinished manuscript of *The Original of Laura*, Nabokov's writings abound in characters haunted by their past. This preoccupation is not simply a feature of loss and nostalgia characteristic of emigrant experience in general, but an attempt to examine the mechanisms which control the functions of human consciousness. And this is the first meaning of “the fictions of memory”: exploration of the writings which are fueled by the energy of reminiscence, and which are themselves an exploration of the furtive processes of remembering. But there is also a second meaning: the fictions that memory writes. Mnemosyne may be a “very careless girl”³ or a very clever artist. And while Nabokov explores his own remembrances, transferring his experiences to the characters of his fictions, it is never entirely clear how much of what is being recalled is in fact a construct of the imagination.

Memory becomes an obsession for many of Nabokov's heroes, who may often be described as mnemonic deviants, their crimes resulting from a falsified perception of reality which they constantly filter through the lenses of the past. Conversely, there are characters ennobled by their devotion to every fleeting

² M. Zaleski, *Formy pamięci* (Gdańsk: Słowo/obraz terytoria, 2004), 12.

³ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 6.

detail of their existence, whether past or present. All are trapped by memory – which may not even be their own. In retrospect, they are conditioned to perceive reality in terms of an unfolding pattern, which turns their own lives into fictions. This is only to be expected, since they are literary heroes. But what can we make of Nabokov's own insistence that "the following of such thematic designs through one's life should be (...) the true purpose of autobiography"?⁴

The ostensible pattern that he displays before the reader in his memoir and the Forewords to the English translations of his Russian novels is the following: upon leaving Russia the writer tried to find relief from the burden of his memories, retained in pathological clarity, by giving them away to his fictional characters, whereupon these precise, almost tangible images immediately faded and were replaced by the memory of the fictional situations and surroundings. This produced relief, but also unease, a sense of betrayal, perhaps because the essence of one's identity is construed precisely out of memories:

After I had bestowed on the characters in my novels some treasured item of my past, it would pine away in the artificial world where I had so abruptly placed it. Although it lingered on in my mind, its personal warmth, its retrospective appeal had gone and, presently, it became more closely identified with my novel than with my former self, where it had seemed to be so safe from the intrusion of the artist. Houses have crumbled in my memory as soundlessly as they did in the mute films of yore, and the portrait of my old French governess, whom I once lent to a boy in one of my books, is fading fast, now that it is engulfed

⁴ Ibid., 16. This sentence reappears in five of the following essays.

in the description of a childhood entirely unrelated to my own.⁵

It is not just that the memories bracketed within the fictionalized walls – “somewhere, in the apartment house of a chapter, in the hired room of a paragraph”⁶ – fade, but their inhabitants “pine away,” are forced into exile and displacement in the invented realm. And thus, the mislaid identity of the writer and the reality of the past had to be reclaimed from the creatures of imagination, thereby proving that the real belonged to a higher order of being than those spurious, fictional selves. The autobiography was written in an effort to fulfil this imperative. It had to be revised repeatedly, factual errors tracked down and eliminated, images becoming more sharply focused, the translucent sheet of gauze paper removed⁷ to reveal the fine grain of the cherished picture of the past. Memory was disciplined, and trained to produce a well-structured narrative with exquisitely plotted thematic lines. The quest for the veritable truth produced the finest fiction. And it remains in constant tension with those other fictions of memory, in which objects, people and places are “most artistically caged.”

What is the function of memory in Nabokov’s texts? Is Nabokov really interested in objectively recalling the past or would it be more apt to say that he artfully constructs remembrance in order to deal with trauma, loss and disappointment? To what extent is the past reshaped through literary models and intertextual props? Does the past control us, as in Freud’s theories, detested and summarily dismissed by Nabokov, or is it possible to control the workings of memory and manipulate them in literary discourse?

⁵ Ibid., 70.

⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁷ Cf. V. Nabokov, *Glory* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 36.

The authors of the essays collected in this volume investigate these questions in diverse ways – both in terms of interpretation and approach. Many concern themselves with Nabokov’s memoirs, while others choose to study the workings of memory in short stories and novels. Some characters reappear in many essays: General Kuropatkin with his match trick makes a claim to the position of the main protagonist (appearing in nearly every essay), Nabokov’s favorite tutor stalks his pupil under the cover of his pseudonym, with suspicious scholars at his heels, Collette’s fox terrier Floss exuberantly leaps from one essay to another, trying to recover her name, Proust with his memory-obsessed narrator holds hands with Lolita and Ada, Borges’s memorable Funes with his pathological inability to forget wanders through two texts. The theme of authentic biography as opposed to pseudo-biography is addressed by several authors who seem at times to fundamentally disagree with each other. The very possibility of factual biography is questioned in essays that deal with *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. The theme of translucent lantern slides, stills, painted postcards, souvenirs and other props of memory is treated in the essays on *Transparent Things*, short stories and *Speak, Memory*. The theme of impostors seems to be another recurrent motif of the essays, and one that clearly fascinated Nabokov. Memory is both unreliable and unimpeachable – it plays tricks, but also enables compassion; it torments but also holds the keys to the “unreal estate” kept quite safe from all the outrages of time and history.

Leona Toker’s essay in which she makes a strong and compelling case in favor of treating Nabokov’s autobiographical writings as seriously researched documents opens the collection. Toker opposes the convention of “perfect memory” to Nabokov’s own scrupulously factographic techniques, contrasting them with the myth of childhood that exists in the Russian literary tradition and insisting that although Nabokov selects material for his biography, he deliberately resists the fictionalizing impulse.

She explores the tension between the general and the private in the memoir, elucidating Nabokov's unique approach to allow the reader privileged access to realms of experience – from synaesthesia to the joys of a naturalist – which may be shared with the author, and yet which are in no way associated with any kind of social purpose (as was conventional in Russian pseudo-autobiography).

Stephen Blackwell delves into the narrative intricacies in two short stories, "Sounds" and "The Circle," detecting and unravelling their factual echoes in *Speak, Memory*. The "magic lantern" device used in *Speak, Memory*, Blackwell suggests, is both a model of the self-referential involuted structure of Nabokov's "memoiristic creativity," whether in his autobiography or in his fictions, through which he attempts to unhook the time's arrow, and at the same time – a deception, which conceals the real heroes and their personal grief at the (hidden) heart of each story. For Nabokov, unidirectional time is a prison with transparent walls, and his heroes find a way of escaping it by reversing the temporal flow precisely through the workings of memory. Nabokov's novels also interconnect, remembering each other – often out of the order in which they were written (just as the chapters in the memoir) – and only by looking at these texts taken together are the readers allowed to solve some of the mysteries in them. Reading and collating episodes, themes and images is another activity which violates the linearity of time which, as Nabokov hints again and again, is but a flaw of thought.

Péter Tamás continues the examination of the short stories, investigating the rarely discussed "A Forgotten Poet," in which he studies the peculiar tension between the personal and the public forms of memory. What happens when the cherished poet, thought to be long dead, reappears in the form of an odious old man? What is one to do when memory clashes with what claims to be reality? Tamás considers the levels of unreliability, related to the

fields of vision and ways of seeing in the story, and advances several solutions to the riddle of the central figure's identity. He views the story as a triple frame: an account of the event and the interpretation of that account by the narrator, to which the reader adds the fourth frame of his or her interpretation.

Dana Dragunoiu investigates *Speak, Memory* as the most Proustian of Nabokov's texts and proceeds to read *Lolita* through the same lens. She also underscores the key difference between Proust's and Nabokov's view of memory: for the first writer, involuntary recollection is the source of insight into the past; for the second, it is artistic volition that shapes memory into a work of art and allows one to grasp the evanescence of time. Dragunoiu analyses Proust's narrator's search for a substitute or a crutch of memory, setting it against the obsessive unceasing remembering of Humbert Humbert (and Nabokov's other narrators). Thus, Proust's "privileging the general over the specific" is reversed by Nabokov's characters, yet without granting them the reprieve from the grief of loss or the release from the pain of guilt. The act of writing, seen in such a context, is a struggle with Time, but also an atonement for the narrator's sins against Time and Memory, of which Humbert's crimes against Dolores Haze are but an emblem.

David Potter takes the discussion of memory into a region in which it becomes merged with forgetting, by carefully investigating the phenomenon of paramnesia in *Ada*. He begins with a close reading of a particularly mysterious passage in the novel, in which the narrator's life seems to pass into death and back with suspiciously seamless flow, making the very act of remembrance appear as a ghostly activity, with false memories uncannily mimicking the real past. He continues to read *Ada* "clinically," finding other scenes marked by a paramnesiac "tang," and proposing his interpretation of the novel based on Van's propensity for this condition. Potter's examination of the forms of memory (paramnesia, anticipatory memory, future recollection)

in *Ada* and Nabokov's other texts makes clear the complexity of the issue and offers insights into Nabokovian games with time.

Adam Lipszyc begins with a discussion of Freud's no less clinical views of memory, to contrast them with Nabokov's and Walter Benjamin's proddings into the nature of the phenomenon, studying "links, tensions, similarities and differences" – often radical – between the Nabokov and Benjamin. Examining the memoirs of two political exiles who are looking back on their irrecoverable past which they yet hope to retrieve through creativity, Lipszyc finds the impulse for compassion to be the living kernel of both works, animating their spectral substance. Nabokov's attempt to freeze time through a perfectly preserved image is rooted in his desperate desire to defend from death and oblivion the disappearing loved ones. Benjamin's event-obscuring melancholy narratives, while seeming to be the perfect dialectical opposites to Nabokov's, are shown to operate in a similar manner, motivated by the same mechanism – to set the love and grief one feels about loss against the menacing and numbing power of time. And both seem to also share the same sense of heart-breaking futility of the effort.

Gerard de Vries places *Speak, Memory* in the context of literary tradition, both Russian (Aksakov and Herzen) and European (Wordsworth, Hazlitt and Proust), and attempts the difficult task of distinguishing between the roles of memory and imagination. Like Adam Lipszyc, he too studies the image-making characteristic of the memoirist's art, and is intrigued by the "perfect picture" quality that the past seems to invariably acquire in memories.

Mikołaj Wiśniewski points out thematic parallels between *The Defense* and Nabokov's autobiography. He argues that the story of the mad chess genius can be seen as a dark caricaturization of Nabokov's own childhood, artistic career, family life, as if the author's intention was to prepare (in photographic terms)

a negative for the brilliant scenes of *Speak, Memory*. Wiśniewski does not believe that Nabokov's third novel can be treated simply as a study of madness, or more precisely – as some critics insist – of the difference between the chimeras of the lunatic's mind and artistic imagination. Rather than seeing *The Defense* as a portrait of the “bad” artist/memoirist, Wiśniewski suggests that it is primarily an exploration of every artist's nightmare: of “the terror – as Eric Naiman puts it – that comes from finding oneself in someone else's text.” The horrific suspicion that one's life is merely the invisible manager's fantasy, haunts Nabokov's heroes – and Luzhin in particular. Yet, it cannot be reduced to an external threat – that is, to the danger of having one's work rewritten by a Kinbotean deranged critic. It must be seen as an integral part of Nabokov's plots, which introduces “a permanent ambiguity,” constantly destabilizing any interpretation.

Andrzej Książopolski studies the methods and techniques of the “blundering biographer” in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, whose tactics of pursuing the truth seem to include destruction of source documents, unverifiable guess work and using fiction as the pattern to which reality must conform. The theme of a biographer as an impostor is continued by Irena Książopolska in her comparative analysis of the same novel with John Banville's *Newton's Letter*, where the biographer's inability to distinguish the fictions of human relationships from the facts functions merely to deflect attention from his own identity, which due to its very non-transparency swells and expands dramatically, blotting out all other characters. Thus, the genre of biography comes under scrutiny, and questions are raised about the credibility of any attempt to story-tell a life.

Akiko Nakata, examining *Transparent Things*, shows that revisiting the space associated with one's memories is always a vain attempt to capture an illusion, and yet, that objects and places do possess an ability to hoard their own memories which they

may impose on the reality of the present, sometimes in a clearly sinister fashion. The trickster memories evolve through texts, building a texture of associations and echoes, and finally detaching from their origin and becoming elusive and fugitive figments, anonymous mixers. Carlo Comanducci's essay responds to Akiko Nakata's multifarious constructs of memory by elucidating the different "regimes of truth" used by fiction and remembrance in the same text. He explores the trope of transparency as a metaphor of memory and of perception, focusing on their metamorphoses in Nabokov's prose and insisting that the spectral narrators in *Transparent Things* are but a metaphor to explain textuality, while characters and objects transcend themselves, ironically, by gaining greater materiality. As the author suggests, Nabokov's transcendence "transforms a world into a diegesis and a life into a text." Memories, collected in the spectral form of autobiography, are a texture through which the reader must navigate at his/her own risk, taking care not to drown like a novice in the transcendent flow.

Vyacheslav Bart addresses the problem of "Nabokov's vision of memory as the art of *creating* the past" to examine the peculiar Nabokovian version of transhumanism, which can be related to, but is not identical with, technological transhumanism. For Nabokov, the author of the essay argues, creative memory as an artistic form is a way to oppose "the cult of the technologically-generated future." His essay elegantly reproduces the cycle pattern of Nabokov's *The Gift*, and at the heart of the circle Bart examines in detail the short story that may be (somewhat oddly perhaps) classified as Nabokov's science fiction, "Time and Ebb," demonstrating how perfectly it fits within Nabokov's oeuvre, and at the same time placing it within the context of philosophical debates, both in the Renaissance, and 19th and 20th century discourse.

Olga Dmitrienko's essay throws light on the peculiar way memory and creativity are linked in Nabokov's fictions and non-fictional treatments of biography: the artist's life must be treated

in a different way than the lives of ordinary mortals or fictive creatures. It refuses to be “subjected to artistic reconstruction” because it contains a mysterious element known only to the artist himself. Thus, a different kind of artistic reworking takes place: the biography of the artist – who is also a beloved father – becomes a sacred writ, which makes the image of its subject attain iconographic clarity. *The Gift*, with its nested narratives and reinventions of biography – which remains deliberately unfinished – is particularly helpful for the examination of this approach to biography as a genre.

The last essay of the collection by Tatiana Ponomareva, the director of the Nabokov Museum in St. Petersburg, examines various items in Nabokov’s biography, contrasting them with factual data, recovered through rigorous research. This brings us back to the question of the role of space in memory. Perhaps, after all, there is a special potency to a specific and unique place where something extraordinary happened; there is an aura of memory around the objects touched by significant past – why else would we be perpetually drawn to such locations as Bol’shaya Morskaya, Rozhestveno or Montreux Palace? And ghosts do walk, even if only to gently mock the living.

Speak, Memory is prefaced by a map of the lands Nabokov’s family owned in Russia before the Revolution. Nabokov drew the map in 1965, over 40 years after he had to leave his homeland. It features the gracefully winding river Oredezh, the criss-cross of straight lines (the railway, highway and a smaller road), a small white rectangle of the station, unevenly distributed dots, indicating wooded areas, and – in the corner – a small circuitous route mysteriously labelled “Chemin du Pendu,” the path of the hanged man, leading, it seems, nowhere in particular. Crowning the drawing, there is a very large butterfly. This rather plain-looking creature should not be mistaken for a decorative vignette

or a digressive drawing of a cabbage white. This is a scientifically exact representation of the Parnassius Mnemosyne butterfly, drawn with the expertise of a lepidopterist. The butterfly thus hovers in place of the title to the drawing of Nabokov's lost homeland which may be read as follows: "the land of art and memory."

We may presume that this is the image of the territory as seen by the butterfly soaring above it. Memory, growing wings of nostalgia, soars over the lands of imagination, once inhabited by the writer. The butterfly, together with fabulous Russian names of the estates and villages (Vyra, Rozhestveno, Batovo), introduces a touch of the fairy tale, while the bold straight lines and information about the scale of the drawing declare its aspirations to a documentary status. Finally, pouring over the map, we may notice its most tantalizing aspect: North is at the bottom of the page, while South is at the top. This may be read as a veiled warning. The map of the past is reversed, held upside down.

The butterfly on the map may, in part, be Nabokov's way of paying homage to the literary magazine that considerably improved his material conditions in America by publishing his stories, as well as almost all the chapters of the future *Speak, Memory*. In *Pale Fire*, *The New Yorker* is renamed as *The Beau and the Butterfly*, referencing the cover design of the magazine, reappearing with each February edition: "top-hatted beau, Eustace Tilley, peering through a lorgnette at a butterfly."⁸ Combining the various layers into a single picture we would see the following: *The New Yorker*'s Beau is looking through his monocle at the butterfly, which is looking at the lands of the past. The fact that the Beau is examining the butterfly, rather than what that butterfly is hovering over, is quite appropriate in the context: Nabokov is also looking at his memory as an artistic object, rather than at the

⁸ B. Boyd, *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1999), 107.

past for its own sake. The authors of the essays in this volume are interested both in the Beau and the Butterfly – they study the intricate configurations of fictive memories, the unverifiable and unfalsifiable patterns of authorial memory, and the way both of these fictions may be read.

Leona Toker

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NABOKOV'S FACTOGRAPHY

In the third section of chapter 1 of *Speak, Memory* Vladimir Nabokov recollects the day in Abbazia in 1904, when, clambering and crawling over wet black rocks at the seaside, he kept repeating, in “zestful, copious, and deeply gratifying incantation, the English word ‘childhood,’ which sounds mysterious and new, and becomes stranger and stranger as it gets mixed up (...) with Robin Hood and Little Red Riding Hood, and the brown hoods of old hunchback fairies.”¹ Not every childhood scene needs to be selected for an autobiography, and it stands to reason that this particular episode not merely points to a possibly formative event in the child’s past, a kind of Wordsworthian “spot of time,” but also has a performative function in the author-reader communication.

This performative function is emphasis on the *English* word for childhood. It amounts to a bid to distance the book from

¹ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Putnam, 1966), 26. All further in-text references are to this edition.

a specifically *Russian* literary tradition: the book should not be read as one of Russian gentry pseudo-autobiographies, with their myth of the perfect childhood as the golden age. That tradition was launched by Tolstoy's *Childhood*, continued in Aksakov's *The Childhood Years of Bagrov's Grandson*, modified in Bely's *Kotik Letaev*, and resumed in Bunin's *The Life of Arseniev*. According to Andrew Wachtel's study *The Battle for Childhood*, it also provided a pattern for sundry factographic works by gentry memoirists, a pattern which Gorky deliberately countered in his own *Childhood*. Nabokov would eventually parody this genre in the opening chapters of *Look at the Harlequins*!²

NOT A PSEUDO-AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The need to dissociate the book from the gentry pseudo-autobiography was all the greater since the materials of Nabokov's early life largely resonated with that genre's myth of childhood. Most of the ingredients were there: the country estate, the ideal mother, a slightly detached father, the nanny and the tutors, the happy peasants, good relationships with servants, and communion with nature. Moreover, at least four of the morphological features of the childhood chapters of *Speak, Memory* are inescapably akin to those of the gentry pseudo-autobiography. These are (1) nostalgia, which Nabokov feels obliged to explain, or explain away; (2) the complex relationship between the voice of the adult narrator and the focus of the child – staging a tension between the wish to recapture the past and the sense of its pastness³; (3) hints at the concern with the birth of *artistic* consciousness; and (4)

² See A. B. Wachtel, *The Battle for Childhood: Creation of a Russian Myth* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 36.

³ *Ibid.*, 156.

more surprisingly in view of Nabokov's famous individualism, a recurrent attempt to combine the singular with the generally pertinent.

The ways in which *Speak, Memory* distances itself from the specifically Russian myth of childhood include structuring the material on the spiraling thematic principle rather than the predominantly chronological one,⁴ emphasis on the role of Western European literary and material culture in the book, recurrent representation of foreign travel, and certain individual departures in the handling of traditional detail. For example, Nabokov's perfect mother, a warm sheltering presence that stabilizes the emotional life of the children and influences their spiritual development, is not like the mothers in precursor works. The traditional lady of the estate tended to be a sober manager of the families' financial and land resources and a balance to the spendthrift father. Elena Ivanovna, by contrast, is represented as living a rich inner life which is totally detached from such mundane concerns; she is also oblivious of what happens in the estate office or in the kitchen. Nor is the father presented as in any way irresponsible; he is a generous man of honor. The motif of the nanny is subversively combined with that of the perfect relationship with the servants: Elena Ivanovna's own nanny continues living in the Vyra mansion as the nominal housekeeper, though systematically and secretly bypassed by the real administration of the household. No nanny appears in the childhood of Nabokov himself: her role is redistributed between governesses and tutors. The reduction of the role of the Russian folklore in Nabokov's self-portrait of an artist as a young man may be associated with that departure from the pattern.

Mainly, however, *Speak, Memory* is distinguished from the tradition of pseudo-autobiography by its implicitly self-reflective

⁴ See J. B. Foster, *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 189-202.

emphasis on the *factographic*, non-fictional mode of writing. This is one of the functions of Nabokov's explanation of the origin of his name as well as that of the information about his ancestors – in pseudo-autobiography, by contrast, the protagonist does not bear the author's name: he is Nikolai Irtenev rather than Lev Tolstoy, Bagrov rather than Aksakov, Letaev rather than Bugaev, Vadim Vadimich rather than Vladimir Vladimirovich. The identity of the name of the first person protagonist-narrator and that of the book's author is one of the major features of what Philippe Lejeune has called "the autobiographical pact."⁵ Unlike his precursors, Nabokov faithfully, emphatically, and self-consciously observes this pact, just as he would also observe the factographic pact in his essay "Abram Gannibal," one of the two appendices to his translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. The present paper focuses on the ways of his disclaiming any fictionalizing moves in his life-writing. Nabokov *selects* the data for this autobiography but implicitly denies *fictionalization* of its narrative.

VALIDATION PROCEDURES IN THE THREE DOMAINS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Wolfgang Iser views fictionalization as constituted by selection and recombination of material under the aegis of the "as if" convention.⁶ Practically every work of memory selects, every narration recombines (on the level of the *fabula* in fiction, on the level of the *sjuzhet* in factography), but in *Speak, Memory* and in "Abram Gannibal" Nabokov carefully disables the "as if" convention: the events represented happened and the people

⁵ P. Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1989), 13-15.

⁶ W. Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 4-21.

mentioned lived, actually rather than “as if.” “Have I really salvaged her from fiction?” (117), he asks towards the end of the chapter on Mademoiselle, his Swiss governess, referring to his method of “giving” his characters parts of his own experience and at the same time emphasizing that in the current text he makes every effort to resist the pressures of fictionalization. In respect to *Speak, Memory* we may be asked to suspend disbelief in the author’s evaluations of what he represents, but there is no need for such requests pertaining to the actual data, apart from the usual margin of error in the workings of Mnemosyne. In the 1948 prospectus of *Conclusive Evidence*, as the first version of Nabokov’s autobiography was titled, Nabokov speaks about his “blending of perfect personal truth with strict artistic selection.”⁷ The adjectives “perfect” and “personal” are somewhat contradictory, but the statement implies, among other things, that creative selection does not activate the “as if” mode of telling.

In works of fiction, the “as if” convention is signaled by a number of distinctive narrative features. Nabokov avoids such “signposts of fictionality”⁸; yet this is not enough, since internal evidence seldom suffices for accepting any narrative as “conclusive evidence.” One needs, as the scriptures have it, the evidence of two, of at least two. Still, even corroboration by the memory of others (a theme problematized in Nabokov’s short story “The Admiralty Spire” as well as in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Pnin*) does not cancel the need of intra-textual validation procedures. These procedures are different for the three main constituents of the repertoire of autobiographical writing, namely, (1) the public domain, historical, social, and cultural, of which the protagonist was a witness, (2) the private domain, one about which the author’s

⁷ V. Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940-1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (San Diego and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 88.

⁸ D. Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 109-32.

word is the only evidence, conclusive or otherwise, and (3) what I have called “the domain of privileged access” – what is available only to a relatively small number of potential witnesses.⁹

The public domain contains the largest number of verification landmarks: dates, names, toponyms, events such as the Russo-Japanese war, the revolution of 1905, and the October Revolution. Precisely by virtue of being very broad, this part of the public domain is most easily feigned – witness the relatively recent debacles about fake Holocaust memoirs of Binjamin Wilkomirski and Helen Demidenko. Nabokov’s public domain is not merely a matter of history and politics; it is also that of verifiable specialized vocabularies, fields of learning, such as phonetics, heraldry, botanics, and lepidoptery: specialized knowledge and observation, such as the account of the luxurious Nord Express, as well as specialized literary corpora. Precise nomenclature is as important as image: the child is disappointed when his drawing master’s pencil conjures up a locomotive minus the tender; by analogy, even before he became a lepidopterist, he must have been frustrated when his first teacher of Russian letters responded to an ornithological query by saying “just a small bird, no special name” (97).

The public domain is often reflected in *Speak, Memory* not in what is said but in the way what is not said (yet presumably shared with a common-platform audience) leaves an imprint on the choice of words, as when hemophilia which a servant’s child shared with Tzarevich Aleksey is referred to as a “tragic disease” (163), or in the ironic reference to “Gagarin Street (presumably renamed in the twenties by the shortsighted Soviets)” (173).

The private domain is, by definition, not amenable to public verification. When the memoirist deals with his or her feelings

⁹ See L. Toker, “Towards a Poetics of Documentary Prose – from the Perspective of Gulag Testimonies,” *Poetics Today* 18, no 2 (1997): 193-207.

or other inner responses, it is not always clear whether these are, indeed, memories of the responses or projections of the attitudes at the time of the composition: the voices of the protagonist and the narrator may merge. Usually, the question here is whether the reader believes in the memoirist's sincerity. In chapter 19 of *Boyhood* Tolstoy writes that "incongruity between a person's position and his moral activity is the most reliable sign of the truth."¹⁰ By moral activity Tolstoy means mainly the life of emotion, the ethics of feeling. In chapter 23 of *Boyhood* he reinforces the point: "I repeat, lack of verisimilitude in the matter of feeling is the surest sign of the truth."¹¹ These remarks pertain, retroactively, to, for instance, the account of Nikolen'ka Irteniev's mixed emotional response to his mother's death, a response in which pure grief, exhibited by some of the others, seems to occupy the smallest place, though the other shifting thoughts and affects may well be a matter of emotional self-defense.

Written in 1959, between the publications of Nabokov's *Conclusive Evidence* and *Speak, Memory*, Jerome David Salinger's "Seymour, an Introduction," where the protagonist-narrator is writing about his dead brother, makes the following statement about exposure of one's shame in writing: "a confessional passage has probably never been written that didn't stink a little bit of the writer's pride in having given up his pride. The thing to listen for, every time, with a public confessor, is what he's not confessing to. At a certain period of his life (usually, grievous to say, a successful period), a man may suddenly feel it Within His Power to confess that he cheated on his final exams at college, he may even choose

¹⁰ "[Н]есообразность между положением человека и его моральной деятельностью есть вернейший признак истины." Лев Николаевич Толстой, *Отрочество*. Серия «Детство. Отрочество. Юность», книга 2, с. 45 http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=171707

¹¹ "Опять повторяю, что неправдоподобность в деле чувства есть вернейший признак истины," *ibid*, 52.

to reveal that between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-four he was sexually impotent, but these gallant confessions in themselves are no guarantee that we'll find out whether he once got piqued at his pet hamster and stepped on its head."¹² Salinger thus turns Tolstoy's principle upside down, as if in a shame-vs.-pride gesture to Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* or to Rousseau's *Confessions*. The closed circle of pride at having given up one's pride is a perpetual nemesis of a self-flagellating autobiographer. Yet Nabokov's memoir is neither self-serving nor excessively contrite. Its remorse is genuine but restrained. It is a way of implementing Tolstoy's insight – in search not of verisimilitude but of the truth.

Nabokov notes that he remembers himself "with interest, with amusement, seldom with admiration or disgust" (33). He does mention the causes of the occasional disgust, in elliptical accounts of the acts (rather than, as in Tolstoy, the feelings) of which he might later have been ashamed. Most of the episodes in question involve his relationships with his brother Sergey: the two examine their Christmas presents prematurely (despite the promise to their mother not to do so) and then make an inept show of first impressions in her presence; they escape from a governess in Wiesbaden, and then again from Mademoiselle on their estate in winter; later, the protagonist thoughtlessly shows Sergey's diary to a tutor (this is how, it seems, Sergey's homosexuality is discovered). In the first of these misdeeds the victim is a third party, but Sergey is present and may have to bear a disproportionate burden of his mischievous older brother's guilt. The arrangement of these events into a understated recurrent pattern may be understood retroactively, when we come to Nabokov's admission that he escaped from Paris on the eve of the German onslaught

¹² J. D. Salinger, "Seymour: An Introduction," in *Raise High the Room Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* (New York: Bantam, 1965), 167–68.

without taking leave of his brother,¹³ who may have felt lost on attempting to visit the family after their departure, and who eventually perished in a Nazi concentration camp. Nabokov does not wallow in his guilt and does not take pride in confessing it; nor does he seek out extenuating circumstances. The bare facts, and the recurrence of the motifs of incongruousness and inconsiderateness in their representation enhance the sense of the memoir's including nothing but the truth, though there remain truths untold.

The private-domain element in these events is associated not with a mixture of conflicting emotions, as in Tolstoy, but by an absolute sway of one particular affect: curiosity, anger, resentment, or bewilderment, as the case may be. Significantly, the issue of the dominant emotion is elided in the account of the Nabokov's retreat from Paris in 1940; there the state of the memoirist's soul was too complex for continuing the erstwhile narrative techniques. It must have involved an awareness that unless he carried his family away from the German onslaught, his wife and son might not survive. Nabokov's switching to the second person address, to Vera, in the final chapter of *Speak, Memory* can be read in this light. Incidentally, the apostrophe begins already in chapter 6, where Nabokov mentions a Swiss hiker ("with Camus in his rucksack") oblivious of the swarms of butterflies in which "you and I" (129) had just been delighting. Camus here is, apparently, a subversive metaphor for *littérature engagée*: it is not likely that the book could have been observed sticking out of the stranger's backpack.

The recurrent motif which links this event with the account of the pranks and offences of the child Nabokov is obliviousness of the feelings of someone who matters, in those cases his brother.

¹³ Brian Boyd notes that Sergey was out of town at the time of the family's retreat from Paris; see B. Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 522.

In the early episode, when the boy keeps climbing the rocks in Abbazia with the word “childhood” as incantation, “Miss Norcott, a languid and melancholy governess,” has not noticed his absence; she “thinks I am following her” and “strolls away along the curved beach with Sergey” (25). One may imagine her fright on not seeing him by their side. It is in Abbazia that Miss Norcott is summarily fired, causing young Nabokov floods of tears, but we are not given the reason of her dismissal.

The tense relationship between the ruling passion, which soon emerges as a passion for morning butterfly hunts, and relationships with other people is enhanced in the episode that Nabokov explicitly tags as colored by self-disgust: his escape, through the window, to his daily hunt when visited by a recently orphaned schoolfellow, who had come 25 miles by bicycle to spend a few days with him. When in Nabokov’s novel *The Gift* the protagonist’s beloved says to him that she knows she will sometimes be terribly unhappy with him, she is probably foreseeing the artist’s unavailability to active personal relationships when in the flow of work.

The private domain is the one in which writers compete with one another in rendering non-verbal experience in words, a feat that is particularly important in Andrey Bely’s pseudo-autobiographical works and the works which they influenced, such as Pasternak’s *The Childhood of Lyuvers*. One of the novelties introduced by *Speak, Memory* into the literary treasury of intersubjective inner life is the evocation of the experience of “flow”: the subject’s full absorption in or, as Nabokov puts it, “concentrated enjoyment” of (126) an overwhelming interest or pursuit – it is in this sense that the concept “flow” will eventually be developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.¹⁴ In the Abbazia beach episode, the boy’s trance-

¹⁴ See M. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990) and *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and*

like research of the puddles among the rocks is an early instance of flow, the *paideia* eventually to be replaced by lepidoptery, then supplemented by poetry composition, then by first love. The tense relationship between the experience of flow, in work or play, with awareness of the feelings of other people is one of the issues implicitly raised and left open both in *Speak, Memory* and in much of Nabokov's fiction.

In Nabokov's account of the birth of self-consciousness following his understanding of time, the private domain of childhood memories is presented as a model of the common human phenomenon. "All this is as it should be according to the theory of recapitulation; the beginning of reflexive consciousness in the brain of our remotest ancestor must surely have coincided with the dawning of the sense of time" (21). In the Russian version, the "theory of recapitulation" is deciphered: "All this corresponds to the theory of the ontogenetic recapitulation of the past. Phylogenetically, in the first human being the consciousness of the self could not but coincide with the engendering of the sense of time."¹⁵ Ontogenesis, however, swerves away from phylogenesis with the gradual enrichment of an individual child's consciousness.

It is the domain of privileged access that, in *Speak, Memory*, stages the tension between the unique and the generalizable. Whereas the pseudo-autobiographical convention of the name change signals sundry fictionalizing changes in the plot and the characters, whether out of the pragmatic need to protect the privacy of living people or in the service of artistic designs, it also serves the generalizing drive. It broadens the scope of the attesting: these materials are represented as true not only of a single individual

Invention (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996).

¹⁵ "Все это соответствует теории онтогенического повторения пройденного. Филогенически же, в первом человеке осознание себя не могло не совпасть с зарождением чувства времени." В. Набоков, *Другие берега*, in *Terra Incognita* (Moscow: DEM, 1990), 7.

experience but of human experience in general or at least of the experience of people belonging to a certain cultural enclave. Nabokov claims such generality *without* the name change, with two significant exceptions geared up to the protection of the people's privacy: his favorite tutor appears under the alias Lenski (referring not only to Pushkin's "lyrical duelist" but also, symbolically, to the issue of vision, optics, perspective,¹⁶ and his first lover bears the alias "Tamara." One of the prominent effects of emphasis on the domain of privileged access in Nabokov's autobiography is that to a large extent the privilege seems to be extended to the reader, giving each of us also a sense of belonging to Nabokov's own "small and sometimes defenseless minority."¹⁷

THE PRIVATE VS. THE REPRESENTATIVE: PRIVILEGED ACCESS

Though the autobiography is devoted to that which is uniquely the author's own, what he likens to "a certain intricate watermark" with a "unique design" (25), the text is punctuated by statements that claim a representative character of different parts of his experience. Indeed, the word "common" is used in the very first sentence, albeit negatively, in "common sense," whose dictate the author rejects: "common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness" (19); it recurs three pages later, positively, in "time's common flow" (21), shared by the author and his loved ones. The scope of generality eventually narrows down when Nabokov explains the richly detailed volume of his childhood memories, as well as his

¹⁶ See D. B. Johnson, *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), 11.

¹⁷ D. Draganoiu, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 225.

transitory childhood talents, as common to his cohorts: “in regard to the power of hoarding up impressions, Russian children of my generation passed through a period of genius, as if destiny were loyally trying what it could for them by giving them more than their share, in view of the cataclysm that was to remove completely the world they had known” (25).¹⁸

The *commonness* of the experience is both radically reduced and vaguely expanded when Nabokov talks about his gift of colored hearing. It is reduced to the conclave of two people prone to synesthesia: the author and his mother. It is expanded to admit unknown secret sharers: the point about “those who are protected from such leakings and drafts” (35) implies awareness of, and perhaps even a reaching out to, those others who are not thus protected.¹⁹

The domain of privileged access is also referred to in terms of “The kind of Russian family to which I belonged – a kind now extinct” (79), a phrase omitted from the Russian translation, *Drugie berega*, probably because of a greater likelihood of there being more of the survivors among the readers of that version.²⁰ That work, however, compensates for the omission by the metaphor of “on the private margin or the general history,”²¹ rendered less concisely in *Speak, Memory*, as “my private footpath which runs parallel to the road of that troubled decade” (29). The domain of

¹⁸ In functional terms divorced from the judgment of history, this cataclysm, the Bolshevik revolution, was a tragic reprise of the change that led to the sense of nostalgia in 19th-century gentry pseudo-autobiographies, the 1861 emancipation of the serfs. Nabokov’s mother seemed to be consciously expecting a change that would make the cherishing of memories, “the beauty of intangible property” (40), particularly important; see also Dragunoiv, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism*, 79-80.

¹⁹ See also Johnson, *Worlds in Regression*, 10-27.

²⁰ On the differences between the English and Russian versions of Nabokov’s autobiography, see J. Grayson, *Nabokov Translated: A Comparison of Nabokov’s Russian and English Prose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 139-64; and G. Nivat, “*Speak, Memory*,” in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 680-81.

²¹ “[П]о личной обочине общей истории,” *Другие берега*, 13.

privileged access can be redefined as the facet of the public sphere that has been turned to the observer and his likes. Conscious life, which in *Drugie berega* is described as a smiling “mirage taken for a landscape,”²² is not given to every traveler in the same spot; nor is it a totally private hallucination.²³

Another method of both creating and expanding the domain of privileged access is Gogolian pleonasm used to render the kinds of emotional experience that are a *novum* in literary representation – such as the response to the escape (through a symbol-making hole in the net) of the long-desired rare Hairstreak butterfly:

You have heard champion tennis players moan after muffing an easy shot. You may have seen the face of the world-famous grandmaster Wilhelm Edmundson when, during a simultaneous display in a Minsk café, he lost his rook, by an absurd oversight, to the local amateur and pediatrician, Dr. Schach, who eventually won. But that day nobody (except my older self) could see me shake out a piece of twig from an otherwise empty net and stare at a hole in the tarlatan. (133)

The emotional experience narrows down from the less to the more specifically limited. Though many of Nabokov’s readers have watched tennis matches, few witnessed the specific chess séance in Minsk. The “You” here, may be read as a synonym of the generalizing “one,” as another apostrophe to Vera, or as an

²² “[М]ираж, принимаемый (...) за ландшафт” (ibid., 6).

²³ For a more detailed discussion of the privileged-access domain and its contexts in *Speak, Memory*, see L. Toker, “Личное и частное в автобиографии Владимира Набокова: мираж, принимаемый за ландшафт,” *Révue des Études Slaves* 72, no 3–4 (2000): 415–21.

address to the reader.²⁴ The pulsation, expansion and contraction, of the domain of privileged access bring the reader closer to what is particularly beautiful in Nabokov's life, including splendid failures. As to the shadier aspects of his experience, the few moments which might have given him retrospective self-disgust are exclusively Nabokov's own, with no responsibility transferred to another.

Whereas in Nabokov's autobiography the precise entomological and botanical reference is part of the public-domain material, the lepidopterist's experience on encountering a swarm of rare butterflies in their natural habitat belongs to the domain of privileged access. In the Russian version, Nabokov notes: "I think that this sharp and pleasantly exciting sense of the ecological unity, so well known to contemporary naturalists, is the new, or at least newly realized feeling, – and that only here, along this line, there emerges, paradoxically, the possibility to synthesize the idea of the private with the idea of the general."²⁵ The synthesis in question is the goal of the genre of Russian pseudo-autobiography; Nabokov's appropriation of it for the privileged-access domain of the naturalists's experience amounts to the rejection of the social concerns of his precursors. In *Speak, Memory* this sentence is omitted, probably as irrelevant; but its trace remains in that the "general" is reformulated as mystical "oneness" – "A sense of oneness with sun and stone" (139).²⁶

²⁴ The latter view is Foster's in *Nabokov's Art of Memory*, 181.

²⁵ "Мне кажется, что это острое и чем-то приятно волнующее ощущение экологического единства, столь хорошо знакомое современным натуралистам, есть новое, или по крайней мере по-новому осознанное чувство, – и что только тут, по этой линии, парадоксально намечается возможность связать в синтез идею личности и идею общности" (*Другие берега*, 85; my translation).

²⁶ "I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness – in a landscape selected at random – is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into

SOUND-BITES

The dialectics of the private domain and, with apologies for the oxymoron, the slightly more common privileged-access domain finds an expression in Nabokov's handling of direct speech in *Speak, Memory*. This is where autobiographies tread on thin ice: readers of prose texts love dialogue, and first-person retrospective fictional narratives, including pseudo-autobiographies of childhood, usually oblige by presenting prolonged dialogues and scenically evoked episodes on the basis of the "perfect-memory" convention. This is one of the forms of the "what if" convention, a signpost of fictionalization. Indeed, autobiographies and memoirs that claim to adhere to the factographic mode but give us long conversations quoted, as it were, from the memory in direct speech tend to lose their credibility²⁷: one's brain cannot really have preserved all the details of a long conversation – the perfect-memory convention is only fully operative in fictional first-person narratives. In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov avoids giving us Tolstoy-like dialogues or discussions; the direct-speech utterances of the people portrayed are limited to sound-bites of the kind that would have become legendary in the family or get carved into the autobiographer's

which rushes all I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern – to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humming a lucky mortal" (139). In the Russian version "I do not believe in time" is "не верю в мимолетность времени" (*Другие берега*, 86): what the speaker does not believe in is not time itself but its transitory character. Moreover, the statement resonates with Nabokov's subversion of the linear pattern of pseudo-autobiographies in *Speak, Memory*, and with his denial, as Irena Książopolska puts it, of "the power of time over the individual creativity" (I. Książopolska, *The Web of Sense: Patterns of Involution in Selected Works of Virginia Woolf and Vladimir Nabokov* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012), 54; see also *ibid.*, 73).

²⁷ Lev Kopelev's *To Be Preserved Forever* may be one of the exceptions to this regularity, since the long utterances of its "characters" are almost self-consciously presented not as statements made on particular occasions but as montages representing specific idiolects and moral attitudes.

memory. To render the exact flavor of those memories, the sound-bites are often given in the language of the utterance. Some are in French, as in Mlle Gollay's comment on the peasants' tossing up and catching the boy's father in gratitude for his liberality, "*Un jour ils vont le laisser tomber*" (31)²⁸ – a prophetic/symbolic statement is brought into higher relief with the help of quotation marks and italics. The sound-bite can also be made an object of irony, as in Mademoiselle's reminiscent "*comme on s'aimait*" (enhanced even further by the added translation, "didn't we love each other!" 107). It can also evoke modulated feelings of guilt, as in the transcription of the one word that Mademoiselle knew in Russian, the wailing "where" – "Giddy-eh? Giddy-eh?" (98) – that connotes giddiness and panic. An English sound-bite evokes the petering-out memory of the drawing master Cummings, the one who forgets the tender in his drawing of the locomotive.

Some of the most important Russian sound-bites, strictly private domain, are associated with the image of the mother: the programmatic "*Vot zapomni* [now remember]," as she points out places in Vyra to her child; the caring "*Ne budet-li, ti ved' ustal* [Haven't you had enough, aren't you tired?]" (143) when they are playing cards on the train. The domain of privileged access is limited to three people in the episode where all the three languages are heard²⁹: the father's English-language remark on bodily effects of the erotic imagination ("another of nature's absurd combinations"), his French-language message about Tolstoy's death, and the mother's Russian response, ending in "*Pora domoy* [Time to go home]" (207–208). A skeptic would say that this is a totally literary arrangement of events, motifs, and utterances, but life does often imitate art.

²⁸ For a discussion of Nabokov's deployment of motifs that lead up to the father's death in a way that restrains the sense of its randomness, see J. Gezari "Chess Problems and Narrative Time in *Speak, Memory*," *Biography* 10, no 2 (1987): 151–62.

²⁹ See also J. Grayson, *Vladimir Nabokov* (London: Penguin, 2001), 20–21.

PATTERNING OF MOTIFS

Nabokov's mother is his informant in respect to the dying words of her aunt, Praskovia Tarnovski: "That's interesting. Now I understand. Everything is water, *vsyo – voda*" (68). This utterance belongs to the literary tradition of the last words of the dying, which energizes but is subverted in the ending of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Here too it seems to represent a somewhat garbled metaphysical insight³⁰: one may surmise that *vsyo – voda* is a dim metaphysical corroboration of Heraclitus's "*ὅσα μένεται*," *panta rhei*, everything flows: one is inserted in a common flow. This aquatic vocabulary, extending to the name of Van Veen's aunt Aqua in *Ada* (she is obsessed with flowing water), is used by Nabokov to represent the birth of his consciousness of self on first understanding the implications of the difference between his parents' ages and his own:

I felt myself plunged abruptly into a radiant and mobile medium that was no other than the pure element of time. One shared it – just as excited bathers share shining seawater – with creatures that were not oneself but that were joined to one by time's common flow, an environment quite different from the spatial world. (21)

This sense of time is indirectly commented on by Henri Bergson, whom Nabokov would read in his youth. For Bergson, the reality out there, beyond subjective consciousness, is pure time, that is, time as mobility, change, heterogeneity, purified of

³⁰ Praskovia Tarnovski (born Kozlov) did not necessarily have a way with words; she "was a doctor, the author of works on psychiatry, anthropology and social welfare" (67).

the spatial dimension. Bergson rejected the view of time as a static environment in which one moves; such a picture of reality would be contaminated with space: we may recollect how in *Ada Van Veen* playfully refers to Space as “the comedy villain, returning by the back door with the pendulum he peddles, while I grope for the meaning of Time.”³¹ Bergson’s more earnest formula is that “intellectualized time is space,”³² whereas *pure* time is time that is lived, a *mobile* medium, in which one inserts the mobility of one’s own inner life.³³ Nabokov’s metaphor of “the flow” of time (“time’s common flow”) is also frequently resorted to by Bergson; the word “flow” here is used symbolically rather than as a metaphor for “concentrated enjoyment”: neither Bergson nor Nabokov allow the sense of duration to gel into a concept.

The birth of the awareness of the self, “*осознание себя*,”³⁴ is presented as the child’s “second baptism,” the acquisition of a name “on more divine lines” (21) than the literal first baptism. This is not yet the birth of creative consciousness: the latter spirals to a meta-level: not just being aware of being, but “[b]eing aware of being aware of being.”³⁵ The relationship between these levels of consciousness also means that the stage before “the second baptism” was experience of the world unaccompanied by

³¹ V. Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 538.

³² H. Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), 34.

³³ In discussing Nabokov’s first childhood memory, Brian Boyd singles out the spatial image of the path that the parents and the child are treading; see *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 44–45. The path will, indeed, become one of Nabokov’s most frequently recurring metaphysically tinged motifs.

³⁴ Nabokov, *Друзья берега*, 7.

³⁵ V. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 142. Cf. Michael Wood’s remark that Nabokov’s writings are “not about philosophy” but “are philosophy,” *The Magician’s Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (London: Pimlico, 1990), 7. Cf. also L. Toker, “Nabokov and Bergson on Duration and Reflexivity,” in *Nabokov’s World*, ed. J. Grayson, A. McMillin, and P. Meyer (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) I: 132–40.

an awareness of being. Can the pattern continue into the “two eternities of darkness” (19) on both sides of existence? It does, in the philosophy of Adam Krug in *Bend Sinister*, yet by way of expansion rather than subtraction. The blank before the first memory is finite unreflexive consciousness. Perhaps, then, the abyss before the rocking cradle is that of an unreflexive consciousness which is not finite but “infinite,” of the kind dreamt up by Adam Krug. And if so, perhaps the other abyss, after death, likewise entails the fulfillment of “the attempt of a point in space and time to identify itself with every other point.”³⁶ The unstated idea implied by this progression, that absence of finite consciousness means a consciousness without a personal subject, one in which different states interpenetrate in the continuous process of creation, is a much more pleasing alternative than that of the “absolute nothingness, *nichto*,”³⁷ and for that very reason it partakes of the essence of delusion. And yet, both like and unlike Andrei Bely in the pseudo-autobiographical *Kotik Letaev*,³⁸ Nabokov seems to make some attempts to probe the darkness before his birth: the motifs that cluster around his genealogy seem to foreshadow his own experience, to create the very possibility of his coming into existence (according to Bergson, it is the real that creates the possible, rather than vice versa³⁹). When in a self-reflexive comment on the recurrence of patterns of motifs Nabokov notes that following “thematic designs” through one’s life is “the true purpose of autobiography” (27), the autobiography emerges as an exploration of what has created the writer’s self and what has made him a writer. It is a renewed attack on what Nabokov calls

³⁶ V. Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 192.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

³⁸ On Nabokov’s attitude to Bely’s *Kotik Letaev*, see V. Alexandrov, “Nabokov and Bely,” in *The Garland Companion*, 358–66, and G. Nivat, “*Speak, Memory*,” *ibid.*, 683–84.

³⁹ Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, 123.

“the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from the free world of timelessness” (20). Genealogy, in particular the tracing of recurrent motifs in family traditions, is one way of probing the pre-natal darkness which covers the dice of fate handling the transmission of genes.

Nabokov’s other major work of factography, the essay “Abram Gannibal,” does something similar with the mystery of Pushkin’s genius. The essay is, to a large extent, an exercise in the critique of the sources. It is critical of its subject: Gannibal, it says, “was a sour, groveling, crotchety, timid, ambitious, and cruel person; a good military engineer, perhaps, but humanistically a nonentity; differing in nothing from a typical career-minded, superficially educated, coarse, wife-flogging Russian of his day, in a brutal and dull world of political intrigue, favoritism, Germanic regimentation, old-fashioned Russian misery, and fat-breasted empresses on despicable thrones.”⁴⁰ And yet between the competing theories of Gannibal’s birth, Nabokov opts for the unconfirmed one of his descent from Abyssinian nobility. What Nabokov credits him with is the transmission of “the gene that participated in the making of Pushkin.”⁴¹ The “gene” has little to do with “African passions” or any such myth. It has probably more to do with the name Lahann that a German fictionalizing biography gives Gannibal’s sister. In a footnote Nabokov mentions that in Arabic *lahan* means, among other things, “melody” (like the Hebrew *lakhan*). Before concluding his essay, Nabokov turns to the travels of Charles Poncet, who, in the summer of 1700 was entertained by two governors in the capital of Tigré at a memorial service. Poncet makes the following remark: “the officers and persons of note, both men and women, rang’d

⁴⁰ V. Nabokov, “Abram Gannibal.” *Notes on Prosody and Abram Gannibal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 158.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

themselves round the hall. Certain women with tabors [tambours de basque]... began to sing [commencerent des récit en forme de chansons]... in so doleful a tone that I could not hinder being seized with grief" (...). "One's marginal imagination conjures up here many a pleasing possibility," comments Nabokov. By way of a conjurer's diversionary patter, he then refers to the Abyssinian maid singing of "Mount Abora" in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," as well as to additional geographical and historical items. Finally, there comes the playful surmise that crowns the essay's web of motifs: "We may further imagine that Coleridge's and Poncet's doleful singer was none other than Pushkin's great-great-grandmother; that her lord, either of Poncet's two hosts, was Pushkin's great-great-grandfather; and that the latter was a son of Cella Christos, Dr. Johnson's Rasselas. There is nothing in the annals of Russian Pushkinology to restrain one from the elaboration of such fancies."⁴² Nabokov's self-consciously playful surmise – in Gannibal the talent for song, *lahan*, may not have come to the surface but ran underneath, like the waters of the river Mareb in the dry season – competes in the quality of imagination with the surmises mistaken for facts in the older sources. In *Speak, Memory* poetic surmises of the origin of talent are not articulated, but the chapter on the family antecedents seems to be motivated by this kind of exploration.

Nabokov never saw the river Mareb, but his imagination was stimulated by its line on the map. Through personification, image-bearing verbs, and dreamy cadences he conjures the river of life up from cartographic notations: the Mareb, he says, "is a tiny rivulet with a narrow bed below Debarwa; then it swells, sweeps south, turns west, and, collecting numerous other streams from the northern mountains, flows west toward the Sudan frontier, to disappear in the soil near Kassala, though in very wet weather an

⁴² Ibid., 161.

ultimate trickle reaches Atbara.”⁴³ In *Speak, Memory*, another river rises from the map, Nabokov’s River in Nova Zembla (named after an ancestor), “that very blue, almost indigo blue, even indignantly blue, little river winding between wet rocks” (52) – indignant, one might surmise, at the unholy uses to which Nova Zembla was put in Soviet times. But to return to the Mareb in Ethiopia: one of its tributaries is the Belessa, described as “following the example of the Mareb by disappearing under the sands during the dry season, when, however, a little digging provides one with plenty of water.”⁴⁴ One can imagine Nabokov doing “a little digging” in the Harvard and Cornell libraries during a relatively dry season; the abundance of water (*voyo* – *voda*) means reentering the flow of concentrated creative enjoyment. If in the work of historical factography, the creative flow is associated with the accumulation and arrangement of data, in the work of autobiography it also lightens the overwhelming pressure of memory. In reference to the amassing of sensations in his childhood Nabokov says: “I did not know then (as I know perfectly well now) what to do with such things – how to get rid of them, how to transform them into something that can be turned over to the reader in printed characters to have *him* cope with the blessed shiver – and this inability enhanced my oppression” (212).

Speak, Memory deals not only with the past but also with the workings of memory in the present. The episodes representing the flow of dreamy activity or other spots of time seem to be a product of spontaneous recollection, of the kind that Bergson considered “genuine memory” as opposed to memory as a bodily habit; the surface loss of the latter kind of data can be as oppressive as the overabundance of the unprocessed former. Though the gifts of memory are whimsical, they can be coaxed out: the drive behind

⁴³ Ibid., 121. For a detailed discussion of Nabokov’s essay, see L. Toker, “Fact and Fiction in Nabokov’s Biography of Abram Gannibal,” *Mosaic* 22, no 3 (1989): 43-56.

⁴⁴ Nabokov, “Abram Gannibal,” 121.

Nabokov's story of his boyish love for charming little Collette in Biarritz seems to be geared up to recollecting the name of her dog, "a female fox terrier with bells on her collar," who "[f]rom sheer exuberance" would "lap up salt water out of Collette's toy pail." The cluster of images is incomplete: the auditory part is missing: "I remember the sail, the sunset and the lighthouse pictured on that pail, but I cannot recall the dog's name, and this bothers me" (150). The name is brought back after Nabokov visualizes a penholder purchased in Biarritz: "And now a delightful thing happens. The process of re-creating that penholder and the microcosm in its eyelet stimulates my memory to a last effort. I try again to recall the name of Colette's dog – and, triumphantly, along those remote beaches, over the glossy evening sands of the past, where each footprint slowly fills up with sunset water, here it comes, here it comes, echoing and vibrating: Floss, Floss, Floss!" (151-52). The repetition of the dog's name suggests a blend of Nabokov's current joy at the return of memory, the memory of Collette calling her dog, "Floss, Floss, Floss!" and perhaps also the dog's gleeful barking as she runs to her mistress.

INSPIRATION AS "RECAPTURE"

I have started by arguing that the factographic art of *Speak, Memory* dissociates this work from the tradition of Russian pseudo-autobiography, with which it cannot, however, sever every link. In approaching the conclusion I wish to address the Western European modernism with which Nabokov's fiction and factography are often associated (in particular in Foster⁴⁵), a modernism that owes much

⁴⁵ See also P. Tammi, "Reading in Three Dimensions. Remarks on *Poligenetichnost*' in Nabokov's Prose," in *Russian Subtexts in Nabokov's Fiction: Four Essays* (Tampere: University of Tampere Press, 1999), 34-64.

to the philosophy of Bergson.⁴⁶ The idea of laying one's faculties open to the eventuality of reabsorbing the content of memory into the creative thrust is the cornerstone of Bergsonian psychology of creativity and one of the points on which his and Nabokov's minds (and the mind of James Joyce, for that matter) may have met.⁴⁷ Genuine artistic creativity combines gifts of the subliminal with a conscious intellectual effort, the joy of the epiphany with that of implementation or, in Nabokov's overlapping terms, of *восторг* (rapture) and *вдохновение* (inspiration), "which can be paraphrased as 'rapture' and 'recapture.'"⁴⁸

In an essay entitled "Intellectual effort" Bergson presents his theory of creative invention:

to create imaginatively is to solve a problem. Now, what other way is there of solving a problem than by supposing it already solved? We (...) present to our mind a certain effect as already obtained, and then we seek to discover by what composition of elements we can obtain it. We pass at a bound to the complete result, to the end we want to realize, and the whole effort of invention is then an attempt to fill up the gap over which we have leapt, and to reach anew that same end by following, this time, the continuous thread of the means which will realize it. But how is it possible to know the end without the means, the whole without the parts? We cannot know this end or whole under the form of an image, because an image which would

⁴⁶ See, in particular, P. Ardoin, S. E. Gontarski, and Laci Mattison, eds. *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

⁴⁷ This is the subject of L. Toker's "Minds Meeting: Bergson, Joyce, Nabokov, and the Aesthetics of the Subliminal" in the above collection, 194-212.

⁴⁸ V. Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1980), 378.

make us see the effect being brought about would show us, within the image itself, the means by which the effect is obtained. It must necessarily be assumed, then, that the whole is presented as a scheme, and that invention consists precisely in converting the scheme into image.⁴⁹

A very similar process is described by Nabokov in a famous interview with Alfred Appel:

I am afraid to get mixed up with Plato, whom I do not care for, but I do think that in my case it is true that the entire book, before it is written, seems to be ready ideally in some other, now transparent, now dimming, dimension, and my job is to take down as much of it as I can make out and as precisely as I am humanly able to.⁵⁰

What is true of fiction is even more true of autobiography. The memory that Nabokov's autobiography attempts to recapture seems to exist somewhere, in "now transparent, now dimming, dimension." What the brain, which Bergson tends to compare to a sieve rather than a container, keeps dim at one moment can often be accessed by a roundabout path, get illuminated, and made conductive of a visual image or a sound: "Floss, Floss, Floss!" Each in his own way, Bergson, Joyce, and Nabokov entertain a thought that the dim content of memory is lodged not so much in an individual brain as in a sort of communal memory, which Joyce referred to in *Ulysses* as "Akasic records" (2000: 182;

⁴⁹ H. Bergson, *Mind-Energy*. Trans. H. Wildon Carr. Ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and Michael Kolkman. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, (2007), 170.

⁵⁰ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 69.

cf. Mackey 1999: 139).⁵¹ The recapture of those butterfly memories in a work of art, whether fictional or factographic, brings them out of the domain of privileged access to the public domain, where they become the property of the reader, both private property and one that is inter-subjectively shared.

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⁵¹ J. Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), 182. Cf. P. F. Mackey, *Chaos Theory and James Joyce's Everyman* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 139.

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**NABOKOV'S CRYPTIC TRIPTYCH:
GRIEF AND JOY IN "SOUNDS,"
"THE CIRCLE," AND "LANTERN
SLIDES"**

This essay takes three of Nabokov's works – two fiction, one autobiographical – and reimagines them as a deliberate triptych extended across more than four decades of creative activity. These narratives form a foundation for exploring Nabokov's practice of transforming the pain of loss, via memory and heightened consciousness, into joy and art. For someone who lost so much, on so many occasions, Nabokov remained a surprisingly consistent optimist in his apparent outlook on life (and he even called himself "indecently optimistic" in a letter to Gleb Struve).¹ Having lost property, homeland, a young father, his language, and finally,

¹ Letter to G. Struve, "Pis'ma V. V. Nabokova k G. P. Struve. 1925–1931." Letter no. 12 [Late Feb, 1930], *Zvezda* 11 (2003): 115–50, 130–31.

his younger brother to a Nazi death camp, Nabokov appears to complain very little in his public comments. Exploring the two stories “Sounds” and “The Circle” in conjunction with the memoir chapter “Lantern Slides” (*Speak, Memory*’s Chapter 8 title as it was when published in the *New Yorker*) offers a moving glimpse into the mechanism that allowed or required Nabokov to maintain a real living sense of joy throughout his life and his art, even in the face of unbearable loss.

MEMORY, MEMOIR, AND FORM

I want to begin this exploration with a discussion of the genre of *Speak, Memory*, and even more specifically – certain idiosyncrasies of its preface, which was added for the 1966 revised and expanded version. This new preface constitutes something of a memoir of a memoir, setting before us the distinction between chronology, on the one hand, and, on the other, imaginative construction from time itself. The preface describes, very briefly, the chronological process of creating a non-chronological narrative, one that moves from theme to theme rather than from age to age in the author’s life. In this way, the preface encapsulates one of the key problems laid out in chapter one: that time is a prison, one that Nabokov is determined either to escape or to rebuild according to his own whims and inspirations.

One of the first things he tells us about the book is that its composition began not at the beginning (which itself mimics a biographical beginning, by invoking a cradle), but somewhere in the middle (originally “Mademoiselle O,” first written in French). As he describes, “The present work is a systematically correlated assemblage of personal recollections ranging geographically from St. Petersburg to St. Nazaire, and covering thirty-seven years, from August 1903 to May 1940, with only a few sallies into later

space-time. The essay that initiated the series corresponds to what is now Chapter Five" (*SM* 9). This tension between time's alleged arrow and memory's meanderings might constitute the *real* plot of *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov continues with his detailed description of the creative process, as if to prove that somewhere, in some way, he is in fact subject to the vagaries of temporal succession. His story of how his chapters appeared is technical and factual, as if readers of autobiography were truly interested in bibliography, and as if bibliography itself were worthy of Kinbotean narration:

My association with *The New Yorker* had begun (through Edmund Wilson) with a short poem in April 1942, followed by other fugitive pieces; but my first prose composition appeared there only on January 3, 1948: this was "Portrait of My Uncle" (Chapter Three of the complete work), written in June 1947 at Columbine Lodge, Estes Park, Colo., where my wife, child, and I could not have stayed much longer had not Harold Ross hit it off so well with the ghost of my past. The same magazine also published Chapter Four ("My English Education," March 27, 1948), Chapter Six ("Butterflies," June 12, 1948)... (*SM* 9-10)²

This passage opens a lengthy, page-plus publication history of all the chapters, followed by a page on the composition process, the title selection, and translations published to date. All this is certainly valuable information for any book made up of previously published material, but it might more naturally appear somewhere other than a preface, possibly in an "Acknowledgments" section. Readers next learn about the evolution of the memoir since its first appearance: Nabokov gives a note on changes in the current

² V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Vintage International, 1989).

edition, and a description of the process of translating to Russian and bringing new items from the Russian edition into English. He concludes the preface with two pages on calendar-based errors and other errata discovered in the process of revision, and finally, rather deviously, instructs readers who want to know more about his life in Berlin and Paris to refer to his *novels* written while he lived in Europe.

When we are finished reading the preface, we have enough information to establish a chronological compositional order, an “erratic sequence” very distinct from the chapters’ order in the book. Here is the chronology underlying the memoir’s creative becoming:

5, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 2, 11, 12, 8, 1, 15, {13, 14}

Notice that the longest stretches of direct, linear creation span two chapters, and this happens at most four times, the last two chapters’ publication dates being too close to determine which was written first (a look at the manuscripts of submission letters might settle the matter). Nabokov describes the relationship between composition, chronology, and artistic structure, hinting at both creative causality and real clairvoyance:

Although I had been composing these chapters in the erratic sequence reflected by the dates of first publication given above, they had been neatly filling numbered gaps in my mind which followed the present order of chapters. That order had been established in 1936, at the placing of the cornerstone which already held in its hidden hollow various maps, timetables, a collection of matchboxes, a chip of ruby glass, and even – as I now realize – the view from my balcony of Geneva lake, of its ripples and glades of light,

black-dotted today, at teatime, with coots and tufted ducks. (*SM* 10-11)

That is, Nabokov suggests, chapter five's composition (the cornerstone) *established the order* of the final assemblage, even while giving a time-rendering glimpse a quarter-century into Nabokov's own future, the "view from my balcony of Geneva lake," as he puts it. The fact that his memoir's inception included hints of his own far-off destination (Switzerland) must have been especially satisfying to him, considering that he had been recently studying his own and Véra's dreams for prophetic elements.³

Although chapter five is *Speak, Memory*'s "cornerstone," it is chapter eight ("Lantern Slides") that sits at the fulcrum of this fifteen-chapter work, and this central location corresponds with its hidden importance. In structuring his memoir's middle chapter around the theme of the magic lantern and its slides, Nabokov shifts into a newly mediated metaphor for the preservation and recollection of the past. The chapter revisits and performs an episode from his childhood, the scene of sitting with a group of children and looking at projected images; and the "images" or "slides" he offers his readers, now also viewers of a sort, are pictures from his past, and, specifically, his past embodied in a sequence of his tutors. The fact that one of those tutors (Lenski) is the source of the "magic lantern" device adds an intriguingly circular or self-referential quality to the chapter, and as we examine the chapter's affinities with the two stories, "The Circle" and "Sounds," we begin to see how this recursive structure guided Nabokov's memoiristic creativity.

The three texts are united by a variety of features, details that only came to light gradually, as their writing and publication

³ V. Nabokov, "Textures of Time," introduction by Gennady Barabtarlo, *Times Literary Supplement*, October 29, 2014.

spanned more than seven decades, with the first to be written (“Sounds,” [“Звуки,”] 1923) also the last to be published (1995 in English, 2012 in Russian). The long suppression of the earliest of them only adds to their intriguing relationship. Like the autobiographical chapter, the two stories are also memoiristic, focused on preservation or recollection of the past, and, in the case of “Sounds,” the transformation of loss into something joyful. The most obvious features that link the texts are: the presence of a schoolmaster and his apartment in a village schoolhouse; this schoolmaster’s wart or mole; and, hanging in the schoolhouse, a typographical portrait of Tolstoy made up of text from his fiction (a different text in each case). A second tier of common imagery includes spinning objects, photographs, and paperweights. A third tier, less particular to these narratives, includes trees, shadows, and a festive table (in two of the three instances).

CIRCLING FORWARD: FICTION INTO BIOGRAPHY

Although “Sounds” was published last, it is helpful to begin briefly with this early story and then circle back to it later, for it is here that we see a young Nabokov deploying some of his major memory-transformative devices for the first time; these devices will develop complexity and nuance in the two echo-texts, “The Circle” and “Lantern Slides.” But only the last of these provides us with enough information to solve, or at least make a good guess at, a key mystery in “Sounds.” One of the uncanny features uniting these narratives is how they all metamorphose even as they undergo a reader’s scrutiny. We are familiar with this structuring method in Nabokov’s later works, but it is unexpected as early as 1923, and also perhaps in his autobiography (less so in “The Circle,” given its connection to *The Gift*).

“Sounds” was one of the first short stories Nabokov wrote – his fourth, according to the chronology established by Andrei Babikoff. The reminiscing structure of “Sounds” is invoked when the narrator announces that “many years have sailed by” since the events described (*Stories* 19), which casts the past-tense narration in a new light, bringing the action’s “future” into view as the perspective from which we view the scene. We learn also of dreams the narrator has had over the intervening years, reaching from that future back into the narrated “present.”

It is surprising, perhaps, that such an early story by such a young writer should focus on memory; it is less surprising when we consider that at that point, Nabokov had already lost his home and his father, and so at that particular moment, the act of deliberately *creating* memory may have seemed especially urgent. And that is just what we see in “Sounds,” although the process comes to light only gradually, and not through the involuntary memory of Proustian fame, but rather as an individual’s concerted effort to preserve the past and shape it as a vessel to be carried into the future. The story is more Tolstoyan than Proustian (though surely Nabokov had read some Proust by the time he wrote it), an allegiance marked openly by the presence of the portrait, and tacitly by extensive use of Tolstoyan devices and imagery. The story’s emphasis on memory emerges in many particulars: photograph albums, a souvenir paperweight, the Tolstoy portrait, and, beginning the fifth paragraph, the phrase “I recall...” (*Stories* 15). As noted above, we learn later in the story that “many years” have passed from the time of the action to that of its recollection and narration (its crafting into narrative, image, and memorial). If we take the story’s narration as contemporary with its actual composition, the time span would be nine years. The action shows a “happy day” that brought about an epiphany for the narrator; it is also the day he ends his affair with his married lover, “you” – the first day of a life-episode’s permanent departure into memory. As the story

proceeds, it becomes apparent that the narrator/protagonist is actively creating a memorial structure to contain both this “you” and his friend Pal Palych, as well as the momentous change he underwent that day. That much is on the surface. On a hidden level, other things, and other memories, are being manipulated, and much of the story’s power resides in this unspoken message.

Among the unspoken things lurks the fact that the act of narrating takes place after the October Revolution, whereas the story’s events take place at the very outset of World War I (without which, presumably, the Revolution would not have succeeded).⁴ That the story, written in Berlin, spanning such a momentous historical and personal chasm, remains silent about it, provides a crucial key to the relationship between the spoken and the unspoken, the “sounds” and the “silence” at the heart of an individual’s experience. The story’s insistent tendency toward joy in the face of this unspoken loss appears to represent a deliberate strategy or choice on the narrator’s part, in his role as representative of a Russian (writer) in exile. The losses implied by the Revolution are silently echoed by a hidden loss within the story’s own events, seen only in the unexplained tears of Pal Palych (*Stories* 21). “Sounds” has little plot action, but it is centered on the narrator/protagonist’s sense of epiphany, which leads to his decision to end his affair with “you” and convert her, solipsistically, into the artistic memory of that day. His spurned

⁴ Both English editions of the story (*New Yorker*, Penguin) give the wrong month for the action: the Russian has “July,” while the translation mistakenly shows “June.” Another mistake in the translation: the English states that “You counted on your husband’s not returning in September,” which makes little sense; the Russian has “until September,” which is clearly correct. The manuscript (in Elena Ivanovna Nabokov’s hand, from her notebook copies of Nabokov’s works) is unambiguous on both these points. I am grateful to Andrei Babikov for allowing me to see his copy of the manuscript. See his “Primechaniia redaktora,” in V. Nabokov, *Polnoe sobranie rasskazov*, 3rd (revised) ed., St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 2015, 712-744: 716. Most likely the errors crept in via a copyist who made a Russian typescript for Dmitri Nabokov, which he used for his translation (as told to Andrei Babikov, personal communication).

lover's pain is fleetingly noted ("it must have been torture for you" [24]), while his own joy and responsiveness to the universe is foregrounded. It is unclear whether the narrator views this ending as a loss; since "you" has just offered to leave her husband for him, one suspects that *she* does. That sense of possible loss re-forms towards the story's close, when the protagonist sees Pal Palych (24): the schoolmaster's tears are no longer visible, but surely the reader has not forgotten them. The narrator rides on, imbibing and projecting joyfulness. Curiously, "Sounds" offers no clear perspective from which to evaluate Pal Palych's tears, but the two later texts in this cycle provide grounds for strong speculation. We will return to the problem of the tears after an overview of "The Circle"'s place in the triptych.

"Sounds" leaves us with a feeling of mysterious harmony underlain by unspoken grief. "The Circle," written about eleven years after "Sounds," leans more heavily toward direct communication of grief due to loss, though hidden grief is here as well. This story was the first piece of narrative that Nabokov wrote in connection with *The Gift*'s fictional world. He later called it a "satellite" of the larger text, suggesting that it may have been intended originally as part of the novel project.⁵ While sharing many key memoiristic features of "Sounds," "The Circle" is much more clearly Proustian in its impulses, even while preserving the Tolstoyan element (both stories foreground the practice of *ostranenie*, for example). Within the story, the act of reminiscence and narration occurs twenty years after the events described in the narrative's core (and contemporaneously with Nabokov's act

⁵ V. Nabokov, *The Collected Stories* (London: Penguin, 1997 [1995]) 653. In the late 1930s or early 1940s, Nabokov intended to publish it as an appendix to the novel, but the project was dropped probably because of the war, or because of the Nabokovs' flight to the United States. See Yu. Leving, *Keys to The Gift: A Guide to Vladimir Nabokov's Novel* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 40. An alternative chronology is advanced by Andrei Babikov: "'Dar' za chertoi stranitsy," *Zvezda* 2015.4, <http://magazines.russ.ru/zvezda/2015/4/7bab.html>

of writing). The story is Proustian because rather than focusing on the creative act of memorializing, it explores the process of involuntary recollection, sparked, as we eventually learn, by a chance meeting in émigré Paris in 1934. The “circle” is the circle of memory, whereby the protagonist is launched into his own past and reviews a detailed series of events associated with the person (Tanya Godunov-Cherdyntsev via her mother) who caused the recollection. The contents of these stories’ recollections overlap significantly: here too we have a village schoolmaster, but now the narrator is the schoolmaster’s son; “The Circle”’s schoolmaster Bychkov, like Pal Palych, also sports a protuberant growth on his face; he too keeps a typographical portrait of Tolstoy on his wall; and his house is characterized by his (deceased) wife’s photograph. This photograph takes the place of the photo albums from “Sounds,” and it develops a hidden theme those albums introduced: they (in “Sounds”) are described as “coffins,” and in “The Circle” the photograph presents a deceased loved one (this fact too is concealed in the English translation). The schoolmaster himself is deceased at the time of “The Circle”’s narration, and Innokentiy apparently sees him “rise from the grave” (or at least imagines him – the latter phrase may be the narrator’s flamboyance). A minor but significant theme is the teacher’s ardent admiration of Konstantin Godunov-Cherdyntsev, the lepidopterist-father also featured in *The Gift* (*Stories* 376). One distinctive addition to the mix of events in this story is a birthday party, which will be revisited in “Lantern Slides”; Godunov-Cherdyntsev is found presiding significantly at the head of this festive table (381). A souvenir paperweight also migrates from “Sounds” to “The Circle,” (showing now the Crimea instead of St. Isaac’s), and in the later story even the remembered reality takes on features of the world inside a glass memento: speaking of Innokentiy’s recollection, the narrator exclaims, “To what a depth one has plunged, good God! In a melting crystalline mist, as if

it were all taking place under water (...) and everything around seemed moist, too, a luminous, squeaking, quivering haze, which was all one could distinguish” (376). The conclusion Innokentiy reaches by the story’s end is that “nothing is lost, nothing whatever, memory accumulates treasures, stored-up secrets grow in darkness and dust, and one day a transient visitor at a lending library wants a book that has not once been asked for in [twenty] years” (384).⁶ But of course the memories do not bring the deceased father and mother back (the mother, indeed, may not even exist in Innokentiy’s memory, except as a photograph – she could have died in childbirth, for all the reader knows; his recollections do not evoke her living form); and they bring about a sense of pained longing for youth, as well, which can be revisited in this way, but not made real and fully alive. While this story echoes several of the *themes* of “Sounds,” it departs from that story’s deliberate, creative response to remembered life, emphasizing instead the power of the impersonal organ of memory, its apparent accuracy and its tendency to yank us right out of the present moment. The story’s structure and title also emphasize the circle of rereading, and the expansions of perception offered by that multiple return, becoming like a spiral, with deepening allusiveness and the thematization of one’s past, which is perhaps analogous to the act of reminiscence.

It was only with *Speak, Memory*’s eighth chapter, eleventh in compositional sequence, that many of these stories’ shared fictional elements revealed their autobiographical sources. “Lantern Slides” embeds the schoolmaster theme within a larger narrative about childhood education, in the form of tutors.⁷ Ostensibly, the chapter

⁶ Nabokov’s English version has “twenty-two,” but this number is based on his mistaken memory of when he had written the story (he thought it was 1936, whereas it was early 1934). The Russian has “twenty.”

⁷ In this essay, to harmonize with the stories, I refer to the chapter as “Lantern Slides,” and where important draw attention to the differences between its three versions. In the memoir, however, it is called simply “Chapter 8.”

is about this sequence of tutors, extended to include this early teacher who first brought Russian letters (quite *literally*) into Nabokov's life when he was seven (*SM* 28). But in an almost Gogolian spirit, the chapter is full of digressions, and it is these that covertly if unsurprisingly carry the real treasures and do the real hidden work of the memoir's structural center.

"Lantern Slides" explicitly carries forward the theme of the photograph that we saw in the two earlier stories – more specifically, it transforms it into the diapositive slide, presenting the chapter as a series of such images preserved and projected for the audience's enjoyment. "Lantern slides" has its embracing theme of aesthetic projections of photographed (or painted) scenery; notably, in "Sounds" and "The Circle" the photographic theme is presented as ominous. Both earlier stories have an undercurrent of silent grief: "The Circle"'s photograph contains a subdued marker of mourning, portraying the schoolmaster's deceased wife (presumably Innokentiy's mother, though she is not identified this way): curiously, in the Russian she is *покойная*, "dear departed,"/ "late," but in the translation this detail is elided (*Rasskazy*, 384; *Stories* 379). The story also hints at Innokentiy's unuttered grief about his father and his surprise at the invisibility of Lizaveta Pavlovna's grief over the loss of her husband, Konstantin Kirillovich, who perished while exploring Central Asia during the Revolution and Civil War. In "Sounds," as we saw above, the photograph albums are "like velvet coffins," (*Stories* 14); Pal Palych echoes the theme when he drops an album while serving tea to the narrator's lover, "you," and the funereal omen appears to be secretly fulfilled through the storm of tears he apparently sheds between the lovers' departure and the narrator's return for the forgotten cigarette holder (21). This grief remains concealed, private, leaving the narrator (with the reader) to speculate, even though he has "bathed in another's grief," an activity that "felt good."

With our readings of “Sounds” and “The Circle” in mind, we might already detect the tension between representation and loss that the “lantern slides” embody, like the “coffin” photo albums and the portrait of a dead wife. In general, however, the tone of the chapter is celebratory in its revisitation of the components that made up Nabokov’s education, and, indeed, it concludes with a time-lapse cinematographic image of a festive table in the midst of a sequence of celebrations. This scene is the nearly Platonic original of Tanya’s birthday party table, described in “The Circle,” with one crucial difference, discussed below. Grief appears to be missing from “Lantern Slides,” despite the photographic motif, but viewed in conjunction with the stories, the missing element from the concluding festive scene allows one to discern the depths of unbearable loss concealed within an insistently joyful chapter.

To get at the hidden sadness in “Lantern Slides,” we need first to return to “Sounds” and study carefully its grief-stricken (yet joyful) schoolmaster. What is this grief doing in this story? (The narrator seems otherwise more or less ecstatic, even in the process of breaking up with his mistress). After we witness Pal Palych’s tears, we can trace this grief backwards in “Sounds,” as we reread and reconsider the sequence of imagery connected with the man. There is the dropped spoon when “you” mentions the “indecent” newspaper story: “Pal Palych grew flustered, flushed a brownish shade of red, and dropped his spoon” (*Stories* 18). He also shows some tension while serving “you” tea: “with a trembling hand, he carefully gave you the steaming glass in its silver stand.” He dislodges an album (in Russian a notebook, “tetrad”) while seating “you”: “Rubbing his hands together, our host seated you. As he did so, he knocked an album off the table with the flap of his jacket” (18). This album deliberately recalls the earlier “albums that lay on the table like velvet coffins” (14): these coffin-like albums conceal and hold memories of the dead, and the

association is brought directly to Pal Palych by the proximity of “you.”⁸ The cluster of images and disturbances suggest that “you” reminds him of a deceased loved one, perhaps his wife of long ago, whom he never mentions and about whom the narrator has never heard.⁹ This closely-guarded tragedy Pal Palych washes with tears after “you”’s departure: “I noticed right away that his eyes were red (...) Pal Palych was trumpeting into his handkerchief” (22). This poignant, powerful, yet utterly unmotivated grief (so far as the surface narrative is concerned), disconnected from the rest of the story, poses a mystery, anticipating the suppressed grief in “The Circle” (the hardly-mentioned dead mother, whose “покойная” status is even more hidden in the English translation; the deceased schoolmaster; Konstantin Krillovich), and it sends us back yet again to “Lantern Slides” to look for clues.

Even more than “Sounds,” “Lantern Slides” resists associations of grief, especially in the first four subsections of the chapter. But the muted grief in the two thematically linked stories forces us to look again, and once we do, it is not hard to figure out the cause. As noted above, the village schoolmaster is the key link between the three texts. We should take a look at how, exactly, that teacher makes his appearance in the autobiographical narrative:

The admirable and unforgettable village schoolmaster who in the summer of 1905 taught us Russian spelling used to come for only a few hours a day and thus does not really belong to the present series. He helps, however, to join its beginning and its end, since my

⁸ The change of this word from “notebook” to “album” in the translation may be another error in the Russian typescript made for Dmitri Nabokov, or it could indicate the existence of another draft his typist had access to, which has not been identified.

⁹ Although one might suspect that Pal Palych’s interest is in “you” herself, this possibility is seriously undermined by the fact that he has forgotten that she was supposed to be visiting that afternoon.

final recollection of him refers to the Easter vacation in 1915, which my brother and I spent with my father and one Volgin – the last, and worst tutor – skiing in the snow-smothered country around our estate under an intense, almost violet sky. (*SM* 154)

The structural, circle-creating role Nabokov places on this schoolmaster is striking. But even more significant, the memoir's visit to the schoolmaster's house, which completes a circle of education by linking the last tutor with the first instructor of the Russian alphabet, is a visit *largely* devoted to Nabokov's father, the description of his response to the proffered victuals, and Vladimir Dmitrievich's reaction to his mother's thoughtless delivery of foodstuffs into the midst of someone else's repast. While they all ate a generous lunch provided by the schoolmaster, a footman arrived with

a huge luncheon basket packed with viands and wines that my tactless grandmother (who was wintering at Batovo) had thought necessary to send us, in the case the schoolmaster's fare proved insufficient. Before our host had time to feel hurt, my father sent the untouched hamper back, with a brief note that probably puzzled the well-meaning old lady as most of his actions puzzled her. (154-5)

We should remember here that it was Nabokov's father who initiated schoolmaster Zhernosekov's visits when Nabokov was a young child, and this episode reinforces the metonymic relationship between the schoolmaster motif and that of the nurturing father:

During one of his short stays with us in the country that summer, he ascertained, with patriotic dismay, that

my brother and I could read and write English but not Russian (except *kakao* and *mama*). It was decided that the village schoolmaster should come every afternoon to give us lessons and take us for walks. (28)

Nabokov's father's presence at the beginning and end of this cycle of tutors, alongside the schoolmaster, cements this circle as a memory of deepest significance for Nabokov, while also swerving into a digressive demonstration of the contrast between Vladimir Dmitrievich's profound compassion and Nabokov's grandmother's disregard for others' feelings. This section-closing episode provides one of the most important lessons that Nabokov received from his father, a demonstrative kindness and empathy that were indifferent to their logical consequences, which were, as Nabokov notes, eventual impoverishment (155). Grief itself is not mentioned in "Lantern Slides," and Vladimir Dmitrievich's tragic death not even hinted at, though in fact, for the author, the events in the chapter are all so directly connected with Nabokov's father's deliberate choices that in many ways the chapter is as much about *him* as it is about tutors or magic lanterns.

I mentioned earlier that something important is missing from the concluding, celebratory scene in "Lantern Slides": that something is precisely the figure of Nabokov's father, so crucial (as we are told) to the creation of the chapter's manifest theme (education in Russian letters, tutors). It's not that he was never there at that table – he certainly was – but that his image is erased from the recollection, both through understatement of his significance for the chapter's action, and through the fact that at the time of writing, Nabokov had been mourning his father's murder for twenty-five years. Reading "Lantern Slides" in the glow of "The Circle," we are reminded of that father's presence, because the birthday scene in the 1934 story *does* include the father, Konstantin Godunov-Cherdyntsev, and of course it is

natural that the parents should be participating in these joyous occasions. But in 1949 Nabokov cannot write of those events without also encoding Vladimir Dmitrievich's subsequent absence from his life, beginning in March 1922. It may not be coincidental that even as "Sounds" begins with noise and concludes in silence, the final tableau of "Lantern Slides" starts in silence (as if a silent film) and then suddenly bursts out into a cacophony of joyful sounds. Once again, grief has been masked and overlaid with joy, Nabokov's father present only invisibly, by implication or through the power of grieving memory. Vladimir Dmitrievich's absence at the time of writing looms heavily as the author's private grief; readers can imagine what tears Nabokov may have shed while composing the chapter.

CIRCLING BACK: BIOGRAPHY INTO FICTION

Returning to the stories with this insight, we bring an extra sensitivity to their undercurrent of grief, to the tension between loss and recollection standing behind that grief. Recollection is a main surface theme in both stories, along with preservation, but loss is there in the open too – the ecstasy of loss in "Sounds," the acknowledgment of two deceased fathers in "The Circle," and the loss of a homeland; but the presence of secret grief deepens the sense of connection to the past, creating a hidden layer of unfathomed weight and import *beneath* the visible action. These hidden griefs are memories held by characters in the story – in "The Circle," memories of a character already dead by the time the story is told (since Ilya Ilyich has "risen from the grave" to present himself to Innokentiy's memory), and this character's long-deceased wife evoked by her oval-framed portrait. In "Sounds," the privately grieving reminiscer, Pal Palych, and the connection to his secret past, are brought forward by the actions

of (and reactions to) the story's female protagonist, and by the coffin-like photo albums. In "Lantern Slides," the simultaneous presence and absence of Nabokov's father parallels the encodings of hidden grief in the earlier stories, and once it is made more visible with the lens provided by "The Circle," it helps make the pain in "Sounds" more apparent.

These passageways to the past are reinforced by one more set of images, likewise linking the stories to the memoir, but which in this case create something like a temporal inversion, almost on the level of prophecy. I'm talking about a literal *souvenir* that keeps stubbornly appearing and mutating in this trilogy: a paperweight depicting some significant place or object, bought or bestowed as a memento of time and place. All three of these narratives devote attention to one or more of these objects, and this commonality reinforces the inherent connection between them. The narrator of "Sounds," sitting in Pal Palych's room, reports "examining, for the hundredth time, a massive glass paperweight. The glass contained pinkish azure and St. Isaac's Cathedral specked with golden sandy grains" (*Stories* 18). Although the matter is not addressed in the story, this paperweight, too, must relate to some secret memory of Pal Palych's, and it too may bear traces of his lost loved one: did she give it to him? And although the narrator "identifies" or merges with this paperweight in his early performance of "cosmic synchronization" (19), it remains an object to him (just as Pal Palych's grief also remains impenetrable). Nevertheless, though obscure to the protagonist/narrator and to the reader, the paperweight is memory made tangible, physical, and as the narrator holds the object, remembering the ninety-nine previous times he held or contemplated it, this remembering is itself a remembered moment (a remembered remembering of a memory-laden object), for he is already looking back on this day from a separation of several years. The object's hardness may embody the impenetrability of others' memories and woes, their inaccessibility to those outside

them, which makes for an interesting contrast with the in-the-moment accuracy of soul-perception, at least when the narrator imagines the thoughts of “you,” predicting her exact comment an instant before she makes it (though as we have seen, his pretended merging with Pal Palych’s soul did not grant him particular insight into the schoolmaster’s feelings).

In “The Circle,” a parallel recollected souvenir-paperweight arises as part of Innokentiy’s intense reminiscing, described with some distance by the ambiguous narrator:

Schoolmaster Bychkov’s room: motes of dust in a slanting sunbeam; lit by that beam, a small table he had made with his own hands, varnishing the top and adorning it with a pyrographic design; on the table, a photograph of his wife in a velvet [плюшевой] frame – so young, in such a nice dress, with a little pelerine and a corset-belt, charmingly oval-faced (that ovality coincided with the idea of feminine beauty in the 1890s); next to the photograph a crystal paperweight with a mother-of-pearl Crimean view inside, and a cockerel of cloth for wiping pens; and on the wall above, between two casement windows, a portrait of Leo Tolstoy, entirely composed of the text of one of his stories [“Kholstomer”] printed in microscopic type. (*Stories* 379)

This paperweight, also transparent, apparently recalls a trip to the Crimea by the schoolmaster – his honeymoon, perhaps – sitting right next to the portrait of his late wife; but its history is opaque to the narrator, and perhaps also to Innokentiy’s own recollecting mind: it represents *someone else’s memory*. The paperweight receives no further attention in the story, as the narrator carries on following along the more pertinent course

of Innokentiy's reminiscences, focused upon his summer 1914 acquaintance and fleeting romance with Tanya Godunov-Cherdyntsev, Fyodor's older sister.

In "Lantern Slides," the paperweight motif is intimately associated with Lenski, and this association deserves very close attention, for it changes the way we read this section of the memoir and deepens our understanding of the other texts as well. As we have seen, the chapter is devoted to the sequence of tutors, and the structure of this sequence serves as a subtle yet momentous reinforcement of Lenski's role in the sequence and in the structure of the whole of "Lantern Slides." It's worth reviewing how the chapter is put together: section one describes the schoolmaster, who taught the alphabet to Nabokov and his brother, establishing the Easter gathering in the schoolmaster's room as the event that links "beginning to end" of the series. Section two spends about two-and-a-half pages on a series of four named and nameless tutors, followed by two-and-a-half pages on the favorite tutor, Lenski. Section three continues with Lenski, describing in just over five pages the "magic lantern" shows that Lenski arranged, and that Nabokov calls the "main theme of this chapter" – though why they are the main theme is at first unclear, since the showings were a horrible failure (*SM* 162-166), even as the tangible slides themselves entranced young Nabokov as "translucent miniatures, pocket wonderlands, neat little worlds of hushed luminous hues," leading him to postulate "a point, arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones, that is intrinsically artistic" (167) – and thus giving the otherwise dismal affairs a subsidiary charm and value for a budding artist. Section four continues to describe Lenski's time with the family for about a page, breaks to describe the last ("insane") tutor, "Volgin," in a little under a page, before *returning* to Lenski, of whom Nabokov did "not quite lose track" as a young man. There follows a page-and-a-half summary of Lenski's further adventures after leaving the family in

1914, including his offer, after the revolution, to help the uprooted Nabokovs financially, and a closing tribute, delivering one iconic quotation from his “bracing *diktanti*,” which Nabokov recalls “with joy”: “kolokololiteyshchiki perekolotili vīkarabkavshihsyā vīhuholey” (“the church-bell casters slaughtered the desmans that had scrambled out,” Nabokov’s personal transliteration and translation) (170).

It is helpful at this point to contemplate the chapter’s contents visually:

- Sec. 1 – Intro, Tutor (3/4 page), father/grandmother, 1 page
- Sec. 2 – 2.5 pages for four tutors (Ordo, Ukrainian, Lett, Max)
2.5 pages for Lenski
- Sec. 3 5 pages, Lenski, “Main theme”=Magic-Lantern
- Sec. 4. 1+ page for Lenski,
under a page for Volgin,
1.5 pages for Lenski
- Sec. 5 1.3 pages, embracing “party” image

In the following diagram of the entire chapter’s themes, the black shaded areas represent material devoted to Lenski:



The result is remarkable: “Lantern Slides” contains just over three pages describing five other tutors combined (not counting the two pages devoted to the “admirable and unforgettable” village schoolmaster in section one), and almost *eleven* pages devoted to Lenski. Clearly, the main theme of the chapter is not the “magic lantern” – that was misdirection – but Lenski himself.

Nabokov is attempting to partially camouflage Lenski behind the lantern show, amidst the parade of other tutors, and that effort at concealment, that reticence, should make us pause and sit up erect in our chairs.

THE CONCEALMENT OF PAINFUL MEMORIES

Why is this chapter really about Lenski, and why is this fact semi-obsured? Answering these questions requires a careful examination of Lenski's presence, especially as it evolves across the memoir's three versions. In an enticing echo of the schoolmaster's structural role in Nabokov's formation, and of the story "The Circle," it turns out that Lenski's adult life, as known and reported by Nabokov, itself had a circular form, and that circle relates to those crucial facilitators of reminiscence, souvenir paperweights. Lenski, we are told, "liked to recall that between graduating from the *Gymnasium* of his native town, on the Black Sea, and being admitted to the university of St. Petersburg he had supported himself by ornamenting stones from the shingled shore with bright seascapes and selling them as paperweights" (*SM* 159). This scene constructs another triple-nested memory: Nabokov, remembering Lenski, remembering the creation of souvenirs, themselves memory-stones ("souvenirs") for sale to others, as anchor-points for their own memories. Following his own financial boom and bust before and after the October Revolution, Lenski went to France, and the last news Nabokov had of him was "in the twenties, when he was said to be earning a precarious living on the Riviera by painting pictures on seashells and stones" (170). The end is joined to the beginning, creating the circle of memory – a Lenski circle looping out from the schoolmaster circle. The circle from souvenir to souvenir stood without comment or supplement in the original 1950/1951 version, in the *New Yorker* and *Conclusive*

Evidence, but in each subsequent edition, it expanded in important and moving ways.

Here is the added text, with 1954 additions in italics, and 1966 expansions in bold:

I do not know – and would rather not imagine – what happened to him [later] during the Nazi invasion of France. Notwithstanding some of his oddities, he was, really, a very pure, very decent human being, whose private principles were as strict as his grammar, and whose bracing “diktanti” I recall [to this day] with joy: kolokololiteyshchiki perekolotili vykarabkavshihsy viuholey.” (DB 259; SM 170; bracketed 1954 portions omitted in SM)¹⁰

The chapter’s original version concludes section 4 with the painted shells and stones on the Riviera, but in the Russian translation and revision, 1954, Nabokov added the comment about (Jewish) Lenski’s unknown fate, further darkening that reflection in 1966 by evoking the Nazis and declining to imagine what happened. He follows up that somber reflection with an epitaph honoring the man, calling Lenski “very pure, very decent human being,” adding in 1966 “whose private principles were as strict as his grammar.” This endorsement leads (again back in 1954) to the recollection of *diktanti*, which themselves become sources of *joy* (1966) for the reminiscing Nabokov, who playfully reproduces

¹⁰ In the Russian (1954) edition, it reads more simply: “Не знаю, что с ним было дальше,” suppressing the ominous note introduced in 1966. “Несмотря на некоторые свои странности, это был в сущности очень чистый, порядочный человек, тяжеловесные ‘диктанты’ которого я до сих пор помню: ‘Что за ложь, что в театре нет лже! Колокололитейщики переколотили выкарабкавшихся выухoley’.” V. Nabokov, *Drugie berega*, in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*, (St. Petersburg: Symposium 2000) 5:141-335. Compare *Conclusive Evidence* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), 121.

his favorite one (*kolokololiteyshchiki* etc.). This ecstatic final insertion spawns its own Gogolian digression in *Speak, Memory* (1966), about a zoologist's response to the *diktant* (dictation) with an incredulous question about scrambling Muscovite muskrats (the desmans):

Many years later, at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, I happened to quote that tongue twister to a zoologist who had asked me if Russian was as difficult as commonly supposed. We met again several months later and he said: "You know, I've been thinking a lot about those Muscovite muskrats: *why* were they said to have scrambled out? Had they been hibernating or hiding, or what?" (*SM* 170)

All this attention to Lenski, and the repeated expansions of his treatment and especially the conclusion of that treatment in *Speak, Memory*, belies the chapter's nominal focus on "lantern slides" and "tutors." Lenski had disappeared by the time Nabokov started writing this chapter, and through the three editions, his likely fate becomes more and more heartrending. But Nabokov had brought him, concealed in his tongue twister, to New York. This expanded role of Lenski in the final version of the chapter completes a pattern in this narrative triptych of secret grief and private commemoration: like the schoolmaster's invisibly lost loved one in "Sounds," and like the schoolmaster's wife in "The Circle," Lenski is believed to be no more (and, in his case, to have suffered an unspeakable end). The grief-laden paperweights in the stories turn out to be prophetic, in the sense that when he wrote the two stories (1923 and 1934), Nabokov had no idea that Lenski's life would likely end so horribly; he would have known or believed that he was alive at those moments, and he just might have still had a sliver of hope when he wrote the

first version of “Lantern Slides” in 1949. If the early fictitious paperweights were indeed inspired by memories of Lenski’s handiwork, a notion suggested by the Crimean scenes in “The Circle”’s paperweight, Nabokov’s association of them with lost loved ones circles back once again to the much later memoir chapter, where they form the clasp of memory honoring the loss of this one particularly cherished tutor. Because the chapter also draws attention to Lenski’s Jewish origins, and to Nabokov’s and his father’s struggles against anti-Semitism, and because the closing description and tribute grows longer with each new version, the chapter – the central chapter in *Speak, Memory* – may also stand as a metonymic memorial to the Jews who perished in the Holocaust, along with Nabokov’s brother Sergei, embodied in the particular, vibrant, memory-saturated life of the Jewish person who meant the most to Nabokov as he was growing up.

However, Nabokov refuses to leave this most solemn tribute on a somber note. The chapter’s closing section describes the celebratory table in the garden first as a silent still life, and then bursting with joy, energy and sound:

In the place where my current tutor sits, there is a changeful image, a succession of fade-ins and fade-outs; the pulsation of my thought mingles with that of the leaf shadows and turns Ordo into Max and Max into Lenski and Lenski into the schoolmaster, and the whole array of trembling transformations is repeated. And then, suddenly, just when the colors and outlines settle at last to their various duties – smiling, frivolous duties – some knob is touched and a torrent of sounds comes to life: voices speaking all together, a walnut cracked, the click of a nutcracker carelessly passed, thirty human hearts drowning mine with their regular beats; the sough and sigh of a thousand trees,

the local concord of loud summer birds, and, beyond the river, behind the rhythmic trees, the confused and enthusiastic hullabaloo of bathing young villagers, like a background of wild applause. (*SM* 171-2)

The scene otherwise reassuringly stable, the pulsating and metamorphosing forms of the various tutors indicate the magic carpet's journey through memory and time. The passage also evokes the analogous scene in "The Circle," which reminds us that a key presence at the table is Nabokov's father (because of the father-figure's prominence at that transfigured table: there, we read, "At the nobility's end Godunov-Cherdyntsev raised his voice, speaking across the table to a very old lady in a lacy gown and as he spoke encircled with one arm the graceful waist of his daughter who stood near and kept tossing up a rubber ball on her palm" [*Stories* 381]). Reminded of Nabokov's father, who was also the active force behind this part of Nabokov's education – his first decade of education in Russian, from the alphabet up to his departure for the Tenishev school – we recognize to what a great extent this chapter is an offering of gratitude and appreciation to his father, as much as it is a tribute to Lenski.

Once we refocus our perception of the chapter this way, a new meaning emerges for lantern-slides as main theme: Lenski's failed magic lantern show is transformed into the successful, main structuring trope of the entire chapter, the central one in the memoir, traversing Nabokov's introduction to Russian letters and literature through the guidance of Lenski and, behind him, his father. Vladimir Dmitrievich's invisible presence at the closing table echoes the device of unspoken loss in "Sounds" and in "The Circle," and this prominent silence – this hesitation or anticipatory pause – is fulfilled in the very next chapter of the autobiography, where Nabokov makes his father the main and explicit theme.

GRIEF, MEMORY, AND THE ALCHEMY OF JOY

Considered as a triptych, “Sounds,” “The Circle,” and “Lantern Slides” combine to explore how imagination and memory intertwine to enrich a life, to allow full appreciation of life’s beauty, and to make pain and loss bearable. In writing “Sounds” – the third story he wrote after his father’s murder by monarchist assassins – Nabokov appears to have been deliberately exploring the conversion of loss and grief into the potential for new joy. In addition to being a reminiscence, related nine years after the story’s events, a recollection of a former love and an old friend’s secret grief, it is also a story of personal epiphany and transcendence, and the narrator communicates the tale as if it were the first time he achieved such heights of consciousness:

On that happy day when the rain was lashing and you played so unexpectedly well came the resolution of the nebulous something that had imperceptibly arisen between us after our first weeks of love. I realized that you had no power over me, that it was not you alone who were my lover but the entire earth. It was as if my soul had extended countless sensitive feelers, and I lived within everything, perceiving simultaneously Niagara Falls thundering far beyond the ocean and the long golden drops rustling and pattering in the lane. I glanced at a birch tree’s shiny bark and suddenly felt that, in place of arms, I possessed inclined branches covered with little wet leaves and, instead of legs, a thousand slender roots, twining into the earth, imbibing it. I wanted to transfuse myself thus into all of nature, to experience what it was like to be an old boletus mushroom with its spongy yellow underside,

or a dragonfly, or the solar sphere. I felt so happy that I suddenly burst out laughing, and kissed you on the clavicle and nape. I would even have recited a poem to you, but you detested poetry. (*Stories* 15-16)

Later, he communes mentally (or so he thinks) with his lover, the schoolmaster and his wart, the paperweight, a cigarette holder, and a dead bumblebee. In the story's conclusion, we see the same expansive tone, signaled once again by the narrator's laughter:

Laughing aloud, I pushed away from the handrail. I passed the isbas in one soundless sweep along the firmly packed path. Mooing sounds floated past through the lusterless air; some skittles flew up with a clatter. Then, farther along, on the highway, in the vastness of the sunset, amid the faintly vaporous fields, there was silence. (*Stories* 24)

We have no idea who this narrator is – he appears to be a poet, and may perhaps be a Nabokovian “serial self” sent back nine years to live as a twenty-four-year-old in 1914, at the very moment of WWI's outbreak, an event which precipitated not only the revolution but also his father's demise. The narrator seems interested not in the actual fate of the other protagonists, but rather in their role in an episode that allowed him first access to an experience more powerful than the pain of loss.

In “The Circle,” a very different kind of narrator is focused on a reminiscing protagonist, one with memories obliquely related to those in “Sounds.” Here, the emphasis is not on transcendence, but rather on the power of memory to preserve the past. The involuntary, Proustian nature of Innokentiy's flood of recollections and his response to them are very different from what we see in “Sounds”: it is apparently the first time he has experienced such

a mental flood, or perhaps even thought about the lost past at all. *His* story, his memories are shaped by his narrator into a circle, which is really more like a spiral in the reading process, as each return deepens and refines the picture. The “wonderful fact” of memory’s retentive power, a revelation so late in coming (he is about thirty-nine years old at the time of the story’s action in 1934), also offers him a way to deal with his own grief, something he has lacked up to this point – a lack suggested by the “awful sobs that he, a stranger, kept fighting back” (383) during his conversation with Tanya and her mother.

If we think of “Sounds” and “The Circle” as components of Nabokov’s own transformation of personal grief into art, and if we are surprised especially by the joyous tone of the earlier story, we may find hints of an explanation in his 1937 speech on Pushkin, whose death was commemorated that year. Speaking of the inevitable falsity of any reader’s efforts to create images of Pushkin based on his literary works or even the documentary traces that remain, Nabokov poses this challenge: “If I inject into them a bit of the same love that I feel when reading his poems, is not what I am doing with this imaginary life somehow akin to the poet’s work, if not to the poet himself?”¹¹ When the “Sounds” narrator realizes that not just his female partner but the “whole earth” is his lover, even extending out to the “solar sphere,” his epiphany intimates a universalization of love, even a redefinition of life with this kind of universal love at its center. It is disconcerting that Nabokov’s story proposes such a revelation in parallel with the end of a romance, but it turns out that this is just the point: contrary to Nabokov’s usual mode, here the particular makes way for the general, or, to be more precise, it makes way for an inclusive universe of particulars, even

¹¹ “Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible,” *The New York Review of Books*, March 31, 1988: 38-42; accessed online June 10, 2017, at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1988/03/31/pushkin-or-the-real-and-the-plausible/>.

down to warts and dead bumble bees. The specific relationship is on the one hand lost – the lovers part – but on the other hand, the embrace of the “all” through its particulars creates a perspective that allows one to continue living. Shifting our focus from the woman back to the schoolmaster and the cleansing bath of grief he provided the narrator, recollecting the *biographical* role of this figure in Nabokov’s life and his close association with Vladimir Dmitrievich, we see a character who metonymically figures intense personal loss, and whose presence assists and participates in the narrator’s translation to a higher plane of consciousness.

In “Sounds” and “The Circle,” Nabokov defocalizes grief and loss artistically; in “Lantern Slides,” he does the same thing memoiristically, serially expanding the oblique commemorative method to encompass not only his father, but his cherished tutor as well. When Nabokov asks, about Pushkin, “is not what I am doing with this imaginary life somehow akin to the poet’s work, if not to the poet himself?”, he suggests that works devoted to preserving a connection with those who are lost, if made on a foundation of love, are as close to “truth” as one can get. This is what Nabokov subsequently calls “the sole truth I can find down here – the truth of art.” The path through grief to joy, through individual loss to universal connectedness, as in the concluding scene of “Lantern Slides,” leads both to art and to personal survival.

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**VISION AND MEMORY IN NABOKOV'S
“A FORGOTTEN POET”**

Even though “A Forgotten Poet” has received relatively little critical attention until now, it should not be left out of a discussion of Nabokov’s portrayal of “the fictions of memory.” It is unmistakable that this short story explores the fictional side of (communal) remembrance. After all, the narrator relates an event where he was not present – he re-enacts the scene based on oral and written accounts of the witnesses, comparing them in the manner of a literary historian.

The recounted event is a commemorative meeting in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of Konstantin Perov’s supposed death (a fictional poet invented by Nabokov). An old man shows up at the celebration, claims to be Perov, and asks for the money that had been collected for the erection of a Perov monument. The situation escalates into a scandalous scene in front of the audience. Much to the dismay of Perov’s radical and liberal admirers, the old man downgrades his own poems and positions himself as a supporter

of the monarchy: "Our empire and the throne of our father the Tsar still stand as they stood, akin to frozen thunder in their invulnerable might, and the misguided youth who scribbled rebellious verse half a century ago is now a law-abiding old man respected by honest citizens."¹ He is ejected from the stage by two policemen. Later, a reactionary journal prints interviews with him, where he attacks the organizers and threatens to obtain the money by law. He is eventually bribed into removing himself from public view. General interest in Perov's literary output soon ebbs, but then the October Revolution brings a new flow of radical readers. After they arrange a small Perov museum, the old man is employed as its janitor until his death.

"IMPOSTER OR TRUE POET"

Whether or not the old man was indeed an elderly Perov is not revealed explicitly in the story (albeit the narrator peremptorily calls him an impostor). The scholar L. L. Lee maintains that this ambiguity is essential to the story: "Imposter or true poet, there is no answer."² However, the improbably high number of similarities between the poet and the old man strongly suggests that they are the same person. The story retains some degree of uncertainty, but the possibility of the old man being a sham is quite suspicious in light of the narrator's biased presentation of those similarities.

Critics have not yet detected this bias in the narrator's storytelling; they have considered him unreliable only with regards to the tale's fictional status (more on that later) and have otherwise taken him at face value. No wonder, since the narrator echoes many

¹ V. Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage International, 1997), 575. All further in-text references refer to this edition.

² L. L. Lee, "Duplexity in V. Nabokov's Short Stories," *Studies in Short Fiction* II, no 4 (1965): 312.

Nabokovian “strong opinions.” The most obvious is the one Lee pointed out, the conviction that “no great art work has a didactic function.”³ Furthermore, Walter Brian explained how Nabokov conveyed his personal evaluation “of recent Russian and Soviet history” to an American audience through this story.⁴ Yet, the narrator, despite sharing Nabokov’s views on these topics, might not be as reliable as he appears to be. For one thing, he presents the most important cue to the old man’s identity, his physical resemblance to the portrait of a young Perov, in a manipulative way. When the audience of the commemorative meeting notice the likeness of the two, the narrator states that the attendees “toyed with the idea” of the unexpected visitor being the poet – as if it were simply a playful thought experiment:

Whisperings rippled all over the audience, for people were naturally curious to know who the old fellow was. Firmly bespectacled, with his hands on his knees, he peered sideways at the portrait, then turned away from it and inspected the front row. Answering glances could not help shuttling between the shiny dome of his head and the curly head of the portrait, for during the chairman’s long speech the details of the intrusion spread, and the imagination of some started to toy with the idea that a poet belonging to an almost legendary period, snugly relegated to it by textbooks, an anachronistic creature, a live fossil in the nets of

³ Ibidem. Lee does not cite passages where Nabokov elaborates on this aesthetic doctrine; see, for instance, V. Nabokov “Good Readers and Good Writers,” in *Lectures on Literature*, ed. F. Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 1-6.

⁴ B. Walter, “‘A Forgotten Poet’: Nabokov’s Dostoyevskian Row” in *Torpid Smoke: The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, edited by S. G. Kellman and I. Malin (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000), 205. Of course, the fact that Nabokov had “indirectly political intentions for the story” (ibidem) somewhat modifies the author’s self-declared avoidance of the “didactic function.”

an ignorant fisherman, a kind of Rip van Winkle, was actually attending in his drab dotage the reunion dedicated to the glory of his youth. (573)

Notice that the narrator highlights the contrast between the old man's loss of hair and the young poet's curly head instead of the similarity of their facial features. The notion of their identity is further trivialized by the reference to Washington Irving's well-known "Rip Van Winkle," a short story that emphasizes its fictional status in several ways.⁵ Only a few pages later does Nabokov's narrator admit that the old man takes after Perov, and even then he relegates the acknowledgment into a parenthesis and links it to a dubious source: "A drunken scholar attached to the Gromov household pointed out the (unfortunately rather striking) similarity between the old man's features and those of the portrait" (576).

While the narrator downplays but at least admits the facial similarity of the two, he fails to point out another suggestive coincidence – that the unexpected visitor's physique is not unlike Perov's. One of the few written accounts on the poet describes Perov as a "‘clumsy and fierce’ young man ‘with the eyes of a child and the shoulders of a furniture mover’" (570). Such fierceness and physical fitness is also demonstrated by the old man, who, albeit aged seventy-four, is not afraid to get into a scuffle. First, he refuses to let go of a chair that another man is trying to take away from him. Then he showcases unexpected endurance during the first attempt to expel him from the meeting: "In spite of having to cope with three men the ‘*starik*’ managed to retain a remarkable dignity of demeanor" (574). This is quite impressive

⁵ For an analysis of the metafictional strategies Irving uses in "Rip van Winkle," see J. Wolter, "'Novels are ... the most dangerous kind of reading': Metafictional Discourse in Early American Literature," *Connotations* IV, no 1-2 (1994/95): 76-78.

for his age even if those three men are reported to be proceeding half-heartedly. Eventually he has to be removed from the stage by “two enormous policemen” (576).

Consider also that he seems to improvise a poetic image during his speech: the Russian empire and the Tsar’s throne stand “akin to frozen thunder in their invulnerable might” (575). A final telling coincidence comes in the story when experts compare a letter written by Perov with the old man’s handwriting, but the Society for the Advancement of Russian Literature, since it hopes to dissociate the old man from the poet, keeps their findings in secret (577).

It should also be mentioned that identifying the old man as Perov enriches the story with additional ironic tension and invites us to inspect “the differences between public perceptions of an artist and the person himself.”⁶ According to Alexandra Smith, this contrast serves as Nabokov’s authorial indictment of audiences that try to appropriate artists:

In an ironic manner Nabokov depicts readers who refuse to accept that their favorite poet might have changed. Nabokov protests against the desire of such readers to feel free upon the poet’s death to become the true authors of his texts, and against their right to mold the image of their icon as they like.⁷

⁶ R. Johnson, *Nabokov Tutorials*, “A Forgotten Poet” (Roy Johnson, 2009), <http://www.mantex.co.uk/2009/09/26/a-forgotten-poet/>.

⁷ A. Smith, “Vladimir Nabokov,” in *American Short-Story Writers Since World War II: Fourth Series*, ed. P. Meanor and J. McNicholas, vol. 244 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit: Gale, 2001), 264. Unfortunately, the article is marred by at least one factual mistake: it claims that in the short story “Lance” the eponymous character is informed by his parents that “his girlfriend, Chilla, is pregnant with his child” (Ibid., 268). Chin and Chilla are clearly established earlier in the story as Lance’s pets, and Lance “hopes they will breed in the fall” (*Stories of Nabokov*, 635).

However, most readings of the work focus not so much on the identity of the old man as on the way an authorial figure is inscribed into the story in the last two paragraphs, where the narrator reveals that he himself is also a poet. This allows the story to be read as the narrator's playful fabrication, especially since he compares Russia's forgetting Perov to an illusion performed by a frivolous writer: "And as if some great hand with a great rasping sound had torn out a great bunch of pages from a number of books, or as if some frivolous story writer had bottled an imp of fiction in the vessel of truth, or as if..." (579; ellipsis in original). Moreover, this metafictional gesture encourages drawing a parallel between the narrator and his creator, Nabokov.⁸ While such an interpretation is justifiable, it ignores the most dominant motif of the text, the conspicuously frequent references to eyes and vision. When taken into consideration, this motif (or, in Nabokovian terminology, the vision theme) may even lead us to a new interpretation of the connection between the narrative layers of the story. The web of allusions to vision suggests that Perov is not the narrator's invention but a separate character whose significance for the construction of the narrator's text is quite different.

THE VISION THEME

What makes these allusions especially interesting is that they can be found on two planes of fiction. First, the narrator's recounting of the story relies heavily on them. Second, vision also plays an important part in one of Perov's poems (quoted by the narrator):

⁸ For an overview of this interpretative line, see Walter, "Nabokov's Dostoyevskian Row," 203-205.

When the last snow hides in the shade of the cemetery
wall
and the coat of my neighbor's black horse
shows a swift blue sheen in the swift April sun,
and the puddles are as many heavens cupped in the
Negro-hands of the Earth,
then my heart goes out in its tattered cloak
to visit the poor, the blind, the foolish,
the round backs slaving for the round bellies,
all those whose eyes dulled by care or lust do not see
the holes in the snow, the blue horse, the miraculous
puddle. (573)

In the first four lines, the speaker of the poem describes phenomena marked by a contrast in light: white snow in the shade of the cemetery wall, the glistening of a black horse's blue coat (the "blue sheen" possibly alluding to the so-called blue dun or grullo coat color) and the puddles on the dark ("Negro-hand[ed]") Earth. Then, he commiserates with those who cannot see these phenomena because their vision is impaired either literally (they are blind) or symbolically (their eyes are "dulled by care or lust").

Although the narrator never realizes it, he inherits the speaker's tendency to observe phenomena related to seeing. It seeps into his text again and again, in two forms. The first type of visual references can be found in the middle section of the story, where the narrator draws attention to how the various characters have different fields of vision. Since the plot is set in motion by the attempts to keep the old man from causing a scandal before the audience, there is a marked emphasis on what can or cannot be seen. While the narrator does not abandon his external point of view to enter his characters' points of view and shift between them, he nevertheless records every movement, object or person

concealed from or entering a participant's field of vision. This is nowhere as conspicuous as in the following section:

The chairman, being mainly intent upon avoiding a scuffle in full view of the audience, did his best to make him [the old man] desist. Under the public disguise of a polite smile he whispered to the patriarch that he would have him ejected from the hall if he did not let go the back of the chair which Slavsky, with a nonchalant air but with a grip of iron, was covertly wrestling from under the old man's gnarled hand. The old man refused but lost his hold and was left without a seat. He glanced around, noticed the piano stool in the wings, and coolly pulled it onto the stage just a fraction of a second before the hands of a screened attendant tried to snatch it back. He seated himself at some distance from the table and immediately became exhibit number one.

Here the committee made the fatal mistake of again dismissing his presence from their minds: they were, let it be repeated, particularly anxious to avoid a scene; and moreover, the blue hydrangea next to the picture stand half concealed the obnoxious party from their physical vision. Unfortunately, the old gentleman was most conspicuous to the audience, as he sat there on his unseemly pedestal (...), opening his spectacle case and breathing fishlike upon his glasses. (572-573)

In the course of only a few lines, the narrator contrasts three fields of vision – that of the committee, that of the old man, and that of the audience. The reader's attention is first drawn to an action unseen by the audience (Slavsky covertly wrestles the chair from the old man), then to the old man's scouting the area and noticing

the piano stool before the attendant, and then to the position of the old man with respect to the committee and to the audience. In accordance with this emphasis on the spatial positioning of the characters, the scene has a three-dimensional quality to it.⁹ A foreground-background effect is created by the following coordinates: the piano stool is “in the wings,” Perov seats himself “at some distance from the table” and is “half concealed” by the hydrangea that is located “next to the picture stand.” Such careful orientation amplifies the visual nature of the scene, which is further underlined by a reference to Perov’s glasses and the metaphor of the *unseemly* pedestal. It is also worth pointing out that the narrator distinguishes between physical vision and the mind’s eye: Perov is concealed both from the committee’s “physical vision” and “from their minds.” Such a distinction suggests that seeing Perov merely by the eye is not enough in itself, which could be interpreted in at least two ways. On the one hand, it could be read as part of the narrator’s endeavors to discredit the old man: despite his physical presence, he has to be constructed by the imagination. On the other hand, it could also be read as an echo of Nabokov’s credo that reality is a result of creative perception:

Incidentally, I tend more and more to regard the objective existence of *all* events as a form of impure imagination – hence my inverted commas around “reality.” Whatever the mind grasps, it does so with the assistance of creative fancy, that drop of water

⁹ For a discussion of how Nabokov lends a three-dimensional quality to his Russian short stories, see M. D. Shrayner, *The World of Nabokov’s Stories* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999), 71-86. Shrayner contrasts Nabokov’s tendency to depict “narrative space in great detail” to Dostoyevski’s (and other writers’) prose, where “narrative space functions at best as minimalist theatrical sets” (Ibid., 86). In Nabokov, “narrative space, and not only the humans inhabiting it, becomes the subject of his art” and often signals the presence of an otherworld (ibidem).

on a glass slide which gives distinctness and relief
to the observed organism.¹⁰

Opposing fields of vision are also in the focus in the paragraph describing the audience's growing suspicion that the old man and Perov are the same person. First, the narrator follows the old man's eye movements: "Firmly bespectacled (...), he peered sideways at the portrait, then turned away from it and inspected the front row" (573). Then the narrator switches to the audience's gaze: "Answering glances could not help shuttling between the shiny dome of his head and the curly head of the portrait" (573). Apart from these scrupulous mappings of eye movements, the story also contains scattered references to vision. The narrator recounts that the chairman gave an order to have the old man ejected "without even looking up" (571). The reader is also told that secret agents are sitting in the audience "in inconspicuous spots of the hall" (572) and, later, that two of them are "cautiously exchanging glances from two different points of the house" (574).

The second type of references to eyes shows the eye as a source of knowledge. As if echoing the saying that eyes are windows to the soul, when the narrator mentions the eyes of a character (and not their eye movements or fields of vision), it usually serves as a shorthand for personality traits or emotions. The narrator emphasizes Perov's childlike naivety by quoting an account which states that he had "the eyes of a child" (570). The old man's age is reflected in his having "faded brown eyes" (571) and his charisma illustrated by "that gravity and that seriousness in his eyes" (576). The granddaughter of Perov's sister also makes an appearance in the story. She is "being treated for melancholia in a home for mental patients" and her suffering is signaled by her being "pop-eyed" (574). When Yermakov, the actor that

¹⁰ V. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 154.

recites Perov's poems on stage, gets startled by the sound the old man makes blowing his nose, the reader is informed about the actor's reaction solely by a reference to his eyes – the narrator mentions that the sound “sent Yermakov's heavily adumbrated, diamond-bright eye squinting like that of a timorous steed” (575). Lastly, the narrator compares the crowd backing the old man to hoodlums through a description of their gaze. He says that on an old photograph “their little white faces stare into the camera with that special navel-eyed, self-complacent expression peculiar to old pictures of lynching parties” (577).

Vision is also shown to be a privileged medium of knowledge when the narrator states that the intelligentsia considered the possible consequences of the old man's being Perov by means of “visualizing” them: “the intelligentsia could hardly bear to visualize the disaster of identifying the pure, ardent, revolutionary-minded Perov as represented by his poems with a vulgar old man wallowing in a painted pigsty” (577). However, there are at least two instances in the text when vision is revealed to be an unreliable source of knowledge. First, when the old man arrives at the commemorative event, he chooses to address “the mildest-looking person” with his claim for the money collected for the statue. That person's looks are quite deceiving. He turns out to be “Slavsky, a translator of Longfellow, Heine, and Sully-Prudhomme (and later a member of the terrorist group)” (571) – hardly an innocent figure. Second, when the old man is still “behind the stage,” the audience is said to be “hypnotiz[ed]” by a table. The image of an object hypnotizing the spectators suggests that the visually captivating stage merely diverts the attention from the person who should be in the focus, the old man:

They [the committee] dismissed him [the old man] from their consciousness and flocked out onto the severely lighted platform where another committee table, draped

in red cloth, with the necessary number of chairs behind it, had been hypnotizing the audience for some time with the glint of its traditional decanter. (572-573)

It is tempting to link this questioning of the validity of visual knowledge to the level of the implied author. Hypnotizing is a favorite metaphor of Nabokov, an authorial hallmark that signals the presence of the text's creator to readers familiar with his works. Moreover, Nabokov commented on the limitations of sight in one of his interviews. Reacting to Alfred Appel's observations on the prevalence of optical metaphors in his oeuvre, Nabokov remarked: "even with the best of visions one must touch things to be *quite* sure of 'reality.'" As Rebecca Freeh-Maciorowski explains, this could be understood as Nabokov's objection to "ocularcentrism" (the privileging of seeing over the other senses).¹¹ The inclusion of references to the shortcomings of ocularcentrism in "A Forgotten Poet," then, might be a clue that there is more to the story than meets the eye.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO THE RIDDLE

The narrator and Perov's shared focus on seeing and their recurrent visual allusions create a link between them, but the exact nature of that link is not clear. What is happening in the background that could explain why the narrator uses allusions reminiscent of Perov's text? Two theories emerge as possible solutions to this riddle.

The simplest solution would be that the narrator *is* the old Perov, that the old man did not die in his own museum and is writing his own story in disguise. What makes this theory tempting

¹¹ R. Freeh-Maciorowski "Against Ocularcentrism: *Lolita* Re-envisioned" in *Lolita: Critical Insights*, edited by Rachel Stauffer (Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2016), 157.

is that the poet had already faked his death, which arouses the suspicion that any news about his passing is false. Also, there are other works of Nabokov in which the narrator is revealed to be the same person as one of his characters, most notably the novella whose very title is a reference to vision, *The Eye*.

Is it possible that Perov is still alive at the time the story is told? How old would he be? We know that his staged death happened in 1849 and that he was twenty-four years old then (569). The narrative present seems to be more or less aligned with the year Nabokov published the short story, 1944: the narrator mentions that the Perov museum opened at the beginning of the 1920s and then “in the next twenty years or so, Russia lost all contact with Perov’s poetry” (579), anchoring the time of narration in the 1940s. This means that Perov should be 119 years old to narrate the story. Biologically speaking, it is possible to live that long; the record for oldest age is held by Jeanne Calment, who died at 122. More importantly, Nabokov has played with the idea of reaching an improbably old age in some of his other works. In his second novel, *Franz*, the lover of an adulteress, discourages himself from hoping that the husband would die early: “Why, there was something in the papers about a Turk who was a hundred and fifty years old, and still produced children, the filthy bastard.”¹² Here, the thought emerges in a sordid context, but it also appears in Nabokov’s memoir. In Chapter Twelve, the narrator muses whether his family’s old servant, Ustin, would answer the phone if he called the number he has just remembered: “There exist, after all, well-publicized Slavs and Kurds who are well over one hundred and fifty.”¹³ As Brian Boyd has pointed out, “A Forgotten Poet” also recalls an essay in which Nabokov contrasted Lermontov’s early

¹² V. Nabokov, *King, Queen, Knave* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 138.

¹³ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 235.

decease to rumors about the long life of a Russian peasant¹⁴: “There is an old peasant in southeastern Russia who is said to be 127 years old today, which happens to be exactly the age Lermontov would have been, had abnormal longevity coincided with genius.”¹⁵ Since Nabokov uses extremely old characters in a variety of genres, we should not rule out the possibility of Perov’s being the narrator just because that would make him 119 years old.

However, there are two additional problems with this theory. First, it cannot account for the narrator’s bias against the old man – why would he present himself as an impostor? Second, the narrator describes the granddaughter of Perov’s sister unsympathetically, even though she is clearly suffering:

Then the granddaughter of Perov’s sister appeared for a moment on stage. The organizers had had some trouble with this item of the program since the person in question, a fat, pop-eyed, wax-pale young woman, was being treated for melancholia in a home for mental patients. With twisted mouth and all dressed up in pathetic pink, she was shown to the audience for a moment and then whisked away back into the firm hands of a buxom woman delegated by the home. (574)

To be fair, Perov most probably does not know his sister’s offspring and cannot be expected to see her as family. Still, the casual, maybe even callous portrayal of an unfortunate person is rather incongruent with both the young Perov’s poetic credo (“my heart goes out in its tattered cloak / to visit the poor, the blind, the foolish”) and the old Perov’s turn to religion (he is said to have staged his death “in order to lead a Christian life” [576]).

¹⁴ B. Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 70.

¹⁵ V. Nabokov, “The Lermontov Mirage,” *The Russian Review* I, no 1 (1941): 39.

This seemingly small detail grows in significance if we know that fleeting glimpses into a character's suffering are usually key passages in Nabokov's fiction.¹⁶

For these reasons, it seems that the narrator and Perov are not the same person and the latter is indeed dead by the time the narrator writes the story. This leads us to the other potential explanation – maybe Perov's motif seeps into the narrator's text from beyond the grave as the influence of the poet's ghost. A very similar phenomenon happens in "The Vane Sisters," a short story Nabokov wrote a few years after "A Forgotten Poet." The narrator of "The Vane Sisters," after observing a beautiful icicle on a Sunday stroll, learns that Cynthia Vane is dead. As Nabokov explained in one of his letters, the narrator talks about the dead Cynthia Vane "in terms of skin, hair, manners etc. The only nice thing he deigns to see about her is his condescending reference to a favorite picture of his that she painted – frost, sun, glass."¹⁷ He is particularly condescending about Cynthia's belief that the dead can influence the lives of the living. However, he fails to realize that the first letters of the words in the last paragraph of his own text form an acrostic, a coded message from Cynthia. The acrostic reveals that the narrator's finding the icicle was not a coincidence but a gift from Cynthia – she gave the narrator "something akin to the picture he had liked, to the only small thing he had liked about her," as Nabokov put it.¹⁸

"The Vane Sisters" could be used as a model for reading "A Forgotten Poet." The narrator of "A Forgotten Poet" is also preoccupied with appearances – in spite of the examples of visual deceit that occur in the text. Moreover, he speaks condescendingly

¹⁶ For a discussion of such a moment in *Lolita*, see R. Rorty, "The Barber of Kasbeam: Nabokov on Cruelty" in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 162-164.

¹⁷ V. Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940-1977*, edited by D. Nabokov and M. Bruccoli (San Diego and New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 116.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

of Perov's interest in metaphysical planes of existence: "he had got hold of some German philosopher or other, and several of those pieces are distressing because of the grotesque attempt at combining an authentic lyrical spasm with a metaphysical explanation of the universe" (569). When the old man sheds tears hearing his old poem about the soul's survival after death, the narrator claims this is only a "performance" (575).

What the narrator does not realize is that all the samples from Perov's poetry he includes in the text concern themselves with mysterious, supernatural forms of communication. In one of the excerpts, which describes a button the speaker lost on his seventh birthday, the mysterious communication takes the form of a sign confirming that everyone's soul will somehow survive after death: "Find me that button and my soul will know / that every soul is saved and stored and treasured" (575). Another poem makes a political allusion (to the insurrection of 1825, as the narrator points out) through a personification of communicating larches: "the gloomy sough of Siberian larches communicates with the underground ore" (572). In the poem discussed earlier, the speaker tries to communicate the wonders he has experienced to those who could not see them, or at least to symbolically "visit" them: "then my heart goes out in its tattered cloak / to visit the poor, the blind, the foolish" (573). As in the poem on the lost button, the speaker again reads mundane phenomena as transcendent signs – he describes puddles as "miraculous" and as "heavens cupped in the Negro-hands of the Earth" (573). The narrator even claims that "certain passages" in yet another poem (from which he does not quote any lines) "rip the veil of its traditional Oriental setting to produce that heavenly draft" (569), which happens to echo Perov's artistic project of seeking the transcendent in the trivial (or, in this case, in the "traditional").

The narrator, despite the recurrent references to mysterious signs in these verses, is unresponsive to the poet's search for other

states of being. Thus, Perov's ghost tries to communicate his presence to the narrator through their shared obsession with seeing (visual metaphors being what the narrator is more responsive to, the equivalent of Cynthia's painting in "The Vane Sisters"). The word choices the narrator makes are affected by the deceased poet, so much so that the narrator inadvertently echoes Perov's artistic project by calling the effect of the poems a "heavenly draft."

Perov's remembrance, therefore, is kept up in a peculiar way. He is present even while being suppressed and treated as unimportant. The narrator wraps up his narrative by stating that "what future historians will make of the old man and his extraordinary contention (...) is a matter of secondary importance" (579). Of course, this statement is contradicted by its emphatic role as the concluding sentence of the short story and the sheer length at which the old man's "extraordinary contention" is recounted. Perov's story, then, has to survive in the account of an unresponsive storyteller – and waits for the "good readers" to notice the details that the narrator failed to see.¹⁹

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¹⁹ The present essay was completed during a grant period at Fordham University provided by the Rosztoczy Foundation.

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**TIME, MEMORY, THE GENERAL,
AND THE SPECIFIC IN *LOLITA*
AND *À LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU***

The kinds of things are more important than the
Individual thing, though the specific is supremely
Interesting. Right?
John Ashbery, “The Serious Doll”

The last volume of Proust’s novel ends with the Narrator being introduced by Gilberte to her daughter, “a girl of about sixteen, whose tall figure was a measure of that distance which I had been reluctant to see” [*“une jeune fille d’environ seize ans, dont la taille élevée mesurait cette distance que je n’avais pas voulu voir”*].¹

¹ For English-language citations, I have used the six-volume edition of *In Search of Lost Time* translated by C.K.S. Moncrieff, T. Kilmartin, A. Mayor, and revised by D.J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 6.506. The French citations refer to the second Pléiade edition of Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* published in

The Narrator intimates that he will marry the much younger Mlle de Saint-Loup, thereby returning the family begun by Swann and Odette to a social obscurity “below even the level from which it had started its ascent” (6.501) [*“plus bas que le niveau d’où elle était partie”* (4.606; 8.2.234)]. As Nabokov tells his students at Cornell in his lectures on Proust, the Narrator’s introduction to Mlle de Saint-Loup plays the determining role in his decision to begin without delay what will become his million-and-a-half-word reconstruction of the past.²

This meeting between the Narrator and Mlle de Saint-Loup makes it tempting to read *Speak, Memory* as a sister text of Proust’s novel. This claim is in keeping with Robert Alter’s observation that *Speak, Memory* is the most Proustian of Nabokov’s Proustian works.³ As a retelling of the past to an unnamed beloved (the anonymous “you” addressed in the memoir’s final pages), *Speak, Memory* is also a study of the intricate paths that lead its narrator

four volumes under the direction of Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Gallimard, 1987-9), 4.608. In-text references to these editions identify citations by volume and page number. References to the French text are further cross-referenced with the *Nouvelle Revue Française* edition that Nabokov read before the publication in 1954 of the revised three-volume Pléiade edition edited by Pierre Clarac and André Ferré. The in-text references to the NRF volumes are identified by NRF’s classification system as it appears on the flyleaf of its volumes:

<i>Du côté de chez Swann</i>	Tome I, 2 volumes
<i>À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs</i>	Tome II, 3 volumes
<i>Le côté de Guermantes I</i>	Tome III, 1 volume
<i>Le côté de Guermantes II, Sodome et Gomorrhe I</i>	Tome IV, 1 volume
<i>Sodome et Gomorrhe II</i>	Tome V, 3 volumes
<i>La Prisonnière</i>	Tome VI, 2 volumes
<i>Albertine disparue</i>	Tome VII, 2 volumes
<i>Le Temps retrouvé</i>	Tome VIII, 2 volumes

References to the NRF editions come immediately *after* the references to the 1987-9 Pléiade edition and are identified by three numbers in the following order: tome, volume, page. Thus, the first citation describing the Narrator’s meeting of Gilberte’s daughter is cited as follows: 8.2.238 (Tome VIII, volume 2, page 238).

² V. Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. F. Bowers (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 207, 210.

³ R. Alter, “Nabokov and Memory,” *Partisan Review* 58 (1991): 627.

to his beloved. But if *Speak, Memory* is a straight retelling of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, *Lolita* bends the trajectory of these two works towards the sinister. Though also an attempt to recover lost time, Humbert's violence against Dolly is a violation of the laws of temporality commemorated in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* and Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Indeed, it is possible to say that *Lolita* begins where *Speak, Memory* and *À la recherche du temps perdu* end, or that *Lolita* speaks that which must remain – for reasons of privacy and piety – unspoken in Nabokov's memoir and Proust's autobiographical novel. The unnamed beloved addressed in the final pages of *Speak, Memory* and figured by Proust's narrator as the physical embodiment of his future work is not only named in *Lolita*'s famous opening lines, but named obsessively: "She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita."⁴

The scholars who have analyzed Nabokov's relationship to Proust tend to agree that no other twentieth-century writer is more intimately aligned with Nabokov's aims and sensibility: both writers see their artistic projects as efforts to recover the sensuous fullness of the past even as they conceptualize the mechanism of this recovery in opposing ways.⁵ What divides them, Robert Alter, John Burt Foster, and J. E. Rivers have argued, concerns

⁴ V. Nabokov, *Lolita in Novels 1955-1962*, ed. B. Boyd (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 7. All in-text references refer to this edition.

⁵ In an interview with Robert Hughes from 1965, Nabokov identified the "greatest masterpieces of twentieth-century prose" in the following order: "Joyce's *Ulysses*; Kafka's *Transformation*; Biely's *Petersburg*; and the first half of Proust's fairy tale *In Search of Lost Time*." V. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 57. According to J. E. Rivers who interviewed Nabokov on the subject of Proust, Nabokov singled out for praise only the first half of *À la recherche* because Proust did not live to revise and see through publication his novel's second half. J. E. Rivers, "Proust, Nabokov, and *Ada*," in *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. P.A. Roth (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1984), 137, 155 n.18.

their understanding of the relationship between memory and personal agency: Nabokov rejects Proust's central claim that only *involuntary* memory can provide an authentic recovery of the past in favor of a *volitional* view of memory.⁶

These observations can be radicalized by arguing that Nabokov created Humbert as a lampoon and an exorcism of his own obsessive efforts to bring the past under the will's dominion. The fact that Nabokov was working concurrently on *Lolita* and *Speak, Memory* supports this claim. This reading makes *Lolita*'s relationship to *Speak, Memory* analogous to *Pale Fire*'s relationship to Nabokov's work on *Eugene Onegin*. Just as *Pale Fire* caricatures Nabokov's unconventional approach to Pushkin's text, *Lolita* takes the project that animates *Speak, Memory* to an extreme conclusion. "I confess I do not believe in time," Nabokov asserts in *Speak, Memory* and goes on to describe time as his personal magic carpet that he can unfold, roll up, and manipulate as he sees fit.⁷ *Speak, Memory* thus stands as a testament to the artist's total authority over the temporal domain, just as Nabokov's monumental *Eugene Onegin* will stand as a testament to his total authority over Pushkin's greatest work. And just as Kinbote will reimagine this desire for mastery over a literary text as a form of insanity, Humbert tips his own desire for mastery over time into a pathological derangement.

My argument proceeds from a number of claims arising from insights pioneered by others. The first of these is that *Lolita*'s engagement with Proust is every bit as sustained and deliberate as

⁶ Alter, "Nabokov and Memory," 620; J.B. Foster, "Nabokov and Proust," in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. V.E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 478. Rivers notes that, unlike Proust, Nabokov sets involuntary memory and willed memory "on equal footing and draws upon them simultaneously in his attempt to recapture the past in art" ("Proust, Nabokov, and *Ada*," 148).

⁷ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, in *Novels and Memoirs 1941-1951*, ed. B. Boyd (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 479. All in-text references refer to this edition.

those of *Speak*, *Memory* and *Ada*. The second claim has to do with the idea that Humbert's nympholepsy is a function of his perverse relationship to temporality. This argument can be understood as a gloss on Julian Moynahan's early (but unelaborated) observation that "[t]he core element of Humbert's sexual perversity, arch-romanticism and derangement is an attitude toward time."⁸ Finally, from Proust himself, I borrow on *Lolita*'s behalf the idea that time lends itself most readily to concrete illustration as youth and old age. Following this binary, I see Annabel Leigh, Dolly Haze, and the novel's other "nymphets" as metaphorical stand-ins for ideal time – time as youth, time as beauty, time as plenitude. Standing against this, the aging female body that repels Humbert is the stand-in for real time – time as loss and forgetting, time as aging and death.

PROUST'S NARRATOR, HUMBERT, AND THE WILL

Like Nabokov's *The Gift*, Proust's novel is structured as a paradox or a Möbius strip⁹: each is at once a work yet to be written and a work that has already been written. Ill health, self-doubt, social distractions, and laziness are some of the many obstacles that prevent Proust's narrator from writing the work that we are now reading. But the most powerful obstacle that he must overcome is the crippling effect of his lack of will. In the last pages of the novel, he traces this moral weakness to an episode that took place in his early childhood at Combray. Not wanting to fall asleep without his mother's ceremonial nightly kiss, the young narrator waits for his

⁸ J. Moynahan, *Vladimir Nabokov* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 35.

⁹ I borrow the image of the Möbius strip from Leona Toker who uses it to illustrate the structure of *The Gift* in her *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 158-61.

mother until she retires for bed. Though he expects to be punished, he is rewarded when his father takes pity on him and suggests to his wife that she sleep in their son's room. But the Narrator feels no joy at this unexpected good fortune because he realizes that his victory is a Pyrrhic one. Until that evening, he tells us, his mother and grandmother had "loved me enough to be unwilling to spare me that suffering, which they hoped to teach me to overcome, so as to reduce my nervous sensibility and to strengthen my will" (1.50) [*"mais elles m'aimaient assez pour ne pas consentir à m'épargner de la souffrance, elles voulaient m'apprendre à la dominer afin de diminuer ma sensibilité nerveuse et fortifier ma volonté"*] (1.37; 1.1.39-40). This evening becomes "a black date in the calendar" because his mother is forced to acknowledge that no amount of severity will make her son strong-willed. During this night at Combray, she "had to confess herself beaten" (1.50-1) [*"que pour la première fois elle, si courageuse, s'avouait vaincue"*] (1.38; 1.1.40)] and recognize that her son's nervous condition was "an involuntary ailment [*un mal involontaire*]" and not "a punishable offence" (1.50-1) [*"un état nerveux dont je n'étais pas responsable"*] (1.37; 1.1.40).

Proust's work contains many such episodes in which what appear to be assertions of agency end up as admissions of defeat. In an analogous episode in the final volume of the novel, the Duke de Guermantes behaves by Odette's fireside as if he were "a wild beast" roaming "free in the deserts of Africa" [*"comme ces fauves enchaînés qui se figurent un instant être encore libres dans les déserts de l'Afrique"*] only to recollect "that he was not free" but "in Mme de Forcheville's domain, in his cage in the Zoological Gardens" (6.486-7) [*"le vieux fauve dompté se rappelant qu'il était, non pas libre (...) mais chez Mme de Forcheville dans la cage du Jardin des plantes"*] [4.596-7; 8.2.221-2]. The Duke's realization that he is no untamed lion but a *merè cavalier serviente* establishes a startling link with the strange story Nabokov will

invoke as having inspired *Lolita*. Proust's caged lion that dreams of freedom in the Jardin de Plantes, and Nabokov's ape in the very same zoological gardens that draws its own prison bars, remind us that both *À la recherche* and *Lolita* are novels about imprisonment.

A HEGELIAN SOLUTION

Proust's narrator feels keenly the prison-like tyranny of love, desire, illness, and mortality. He is granted a reprieve from this existential condition only during special moments of being, those *moments bienheureux* of which the tea-soaked madeleine is only the earliest and most famous example. The three most important of these involuntary memories take place in quick succession at the end of the novel shortly before the Narrator is introduced to Mlle de Saint-Loup. This triptych of involuntary memories fill him with joy and leave him determined to begin his great work because they seem to liberate him from the prison of time: though the events that these memories recall took place in the deep past, their memory has survived into the present. Their continued existence tells him that he has "an extra-temporal being" [*"un être extra-temporel"*] that resides "outside time" (6.262) [*"en dehors du temps"* (4.450; 8.2.14)].

And yet these moments of plenitude that serve as proof of the self's temporal continuity turn out to be insufficiently powerful to launch the Narrator's project. The elation that he feels in their wake dissolves completely during the famous "*Bal de têtes*," that portrait gallery of friends and acquaintances whom the Narrator meets at the Guermantes' party and each of whom he finds aged beyond recognition. This most spectacular assertion of time's authority makes him fear for his project; he sees it as "the gravest of all objections" (6.336) [*"la plus grave des objections"* (4.499; 8.2.83)] against his literary enterprise. Surrounded by men and

women whom he once knew intimately but whom time has changed so utterly,¹⁰ the Narrator describes his predicament in a way that recalls the ill-fated assertion of his will as a young boy at Combray: “I had made the discovery of this destructive action of Time at the very moment when I had conceived the ambition to make visible, to intellectualise in a work of art, realities that were outside Time” (6.351) [*“je découvrais cette action destructrice du Temps au moment même où je voulais entreprendre de rendre claires, d’intellectualiser dans une oeuvre d’art, des réalités extra-temporelles”* (4.508-9; 8.2.98)].

The Narrator overcomes this setback by way of a Hegelian solution – that is, by forging a synthesis between the past and the present, and chronicling the distance that separates them. To retrieve elements buried in the past, he determines to find their counterparts in the present. Thus, he rejects the idea of tracking down the survivors of the band of girls at Balbec because they would have been transformed into “women too sadly different from what I remembered” [*“des femmes trop différentes de ce que je me rappelais”*]. Instead, he decides to recover the love he once felt for each of these girls by “seeking it in a person of the same age, by seeking it, that is to say, in a different person” [*“qu’en le cherchant dans un être du même âge, c’est-à-dire dans un autre être”*]. He is unperturbed by the objection that love admits no substitutes because, as he remarks, he has “had occasion to suspect that what seems to be unique in a person whom we desire does

¹⁰ Time “had brought about a change so complete, a metamorphosis so entire that I could have dined opposite them in a restaurant a hundred times without suspecting that I had known them in the past any more than I would have guessed the royal identity of a sovereign travelling incognito or the hidden vice of a stranger” (6.351) [*“un changement si complet, une si entière métamorphose que j’aurais pu dîner cent fois en face d’eux dans un restaurant sans me douter plus que je les avais connus autrefois que je n’aurais pu deviner la royauté d’un souverain incognito ou le vice d’un inconnu”* (4.509; 8.2.98)]. Worse still, the Narrator discovers the loss of his own youth and the inescapable fact that he, too, is now an old man (6.354-5; 4.509-10; 8.2.99-100).

not in fact belong to her” (6.438) [*“comme j’avais pu souvent le soupçonner, ce qui semble unique dans une personne qu’on désire ne lui appartient pas”* (4.565; 8.2.178)]. This suspicion acquires the force of a conviction a few moments later when he adds: “And of this truth the passage of time was now giving me a more complete proof, since after twenty years, spontaneously, my impulse was to seek, not the girls whom I had known in the past, but those who now possessed the youthfulness which the others had then had” (6.439) [*“Mais le temps écoulé m’en donnait une preuve plus complète, puisque, après vingt ans, spontanément, je voulais chercher, au lieu des filles que j’avais connues, celles qui possédaient maintenant cette jeunesse que les autres avaient alors”* (4.565; 8.2.178-9)].

There is nothing figurative or self-consciously ironic about the Narrator’s conclusion that the only remedy for an aging man’s troubles might be the company of a young girl, and he feels no pangs of conscience when he reflects that he has no desire to spend more time with the now stout, middle-aged Gilberte. Tacitly refusing Gilberte’s offer to host small intellectual evenings for his pleasure, he makes a different request:

I should always enjoy being invited to meet young girls, poor girls if possible, to whom I could give pleasure by quite small gifts, without expecting anything of them in return except that they should serve to renew within me the dreams and the sadnesses of my youth and perhaps, one improbable day, a single chaste kiss. (6.439)

je lui dis qu’elle me ferait toujours plaisir en m’invitant avec de très jeunes filles, pauvres s’il était possible, pour qu’avec de petits cadeaux je puisse leur faire plaisir, sans leur rien demander d’ailleurs que de faire renaître en moi les rêveries, les tristesses

*d'autrefois, peut-être, un jour improbable, un chaste
baiser.* (4.566; 8.2.179)

After giving his request careful consideration, Gilberte introduces the Narrator to her daughter, Mlle de Saint-Loup.

As a metaphor for Bergsonian duration, Mlle de Saint-Loup's height of sixteen years is figured as the bridge between what the Narrator calls "the mutability of people and the fixity of memory" (6.438) [*"l'altération des êtres et la fixité du souvenir"* (4.565; 8.2.178)]. His decision to dedicate the rest of his remaining life to mapping that temporal distance embodied by Mlle de Saint-Loup is fuelled by his desire to memorialize that which risks being forgotten. His request to Gilberte to be introduced to young girls is not guided primarily by erotic desire (that we should see it in no other way is an index of how deeply *Lolita* has colonized our expectations), but by the necessity to prop up a fading memory. Mlle de Saint-Loup must play the role of Albertine's "successor" (6.505) [*"un succédané"* (4.608; 8.2.237)] because the Narrator no longer loves Albertine and, as a result, cannot conjure up the emotions he once felt for her.

Nabokov's early fiction is no stranger to this conventional plot of love followed by indifference: Ganin, Dreyer, Albinus, Sebastian experience the disappointment of a love extinguished. But the protagonists of Nabokov's later fiction suffer, for good and ill, from a different condition: Humbert Humbert, Prnin, Van Veen, and Hugh Person suffer because their love for Dolly, Liza, Ada, and Armande, respectively, will not cool. Indeed, Van's final reunion with Ada at Mont Roux dramatizes the same shocking realities that Proust's narrator must confront during his memoir's final *matinée*. Van and Ada's long-awaited reunion is spoiled by their discovery that they have aged in ways that seem incompatible with their recollections. Spooked by this new reality, Ada flees from the scene of their reunion but returns to Mont Roux during

the night and takes a room below Van's. Upon waking up the next morning, Van discovers her standing on the balcony directly below him. Just as time poses the greatest threat to Proust's narrator's literary enterprise, time imperils Van and Ada's reunion but is triumphantly routed.

LUMPERS AND SPLITTERS

Like Proust's narrator, Humbert needs young girls to keep the past alive, but – significantly – not as crutches for a collapsing memory or as substitutes for bygone affections. Indeed, Humbert suffers for reasons antithetical to those of Proust's narrator: Humbert cannot stop loving and he cannot forget. Whereas Proust's narrator recounts with passive equanimity the extinction of his love for Gilberte, the Duchesse de Guermantes, and Albertine, Humbert forgets nothing. When Humbert alludes to *À la recherche* by telling us that he considered calling part of his memoir "*Dolorès disparue*" (238), he does not mention that his fictional predecessor (that other "internal combustion martyr" as he refers to Proust's narrator) was more fortunate than he is because Proust's narrator's "*Albertine disparue*" (the sixth volume of Proust's novel) becomes – eventually – "*Albertine oubliée*" (4.256; 7.2.187). This "forgotten Albertine" (5.921) survives in the Narrator's memory as the foundation of new domestic rituals:

For even if one love has passed into oblivion, it may determine the form of the love that is to follow it. Already, even in the midst of the previous love, daily habits existed, the origin of which we did not ourselves remember: perhaps it was a moment of anguish early on that had made us passionately desire, then permanently adopt, like customs the meaning of

which has been forgotten, the habit of those homeward drives to the beloved's door, or her residence in our home, our presence or the presence of someone we trust during all her outings. All these habits, which are like great uniform high-roads along which our love passes daily and which were forged long ago in the volcanic fire of an ardent emotion, nevertheless survive the woman, survive even the memory of the woman. (5.921)

Car un amour a beau s'oublier, il peut déterminer la forme de l'amour qui le suivra. Déjà au sein même de l'amour précédent des habitudes quotidiennes existaient, et dont nous ne nous rappelions pas nous-même l'origine; c'est une angoisse d'un premier jour qui nous avait fait souhaiter passionnément, puis adopter d'une manière fixe, comme les coutumes dont on a oublié le sens, ces retours en voiture jusqu'à la demeure même de l'aimée, ou sa résidence dans notre demeure, notre présence ou celle de quelqu'un en qui nous avons confiance dans toutes ses sorties, toutes ces habitudes, sorte de grandes voies uniformes par où passe chaque jour notre amour et qui furent fondues jadis dans le feu volcanique d'une émotion ardente. Mais ces habitudes survivent à la femme, même au souvenir de la femme. (4.255-6; 7.2.186-7)

This recycling of old loves into new habits plays an important role in Proust's famous search for "general laws" of human conduct or "general essences" of things. By privileging the general over the specific, Proust confidently assures us that things stand in for others and therefore can serve as substitutes for the original.

Different readers have given different names to this guiding principle of Proust's poetics. Walter Benjamin invokes it when he refers to Proust's "impassioned cult of similarity"¹¹ while Christian Moraru calls it Proust's "epic associationism."¹² Leo Bersani invokes it, too, when he refers to Proust's "elaborately metaphorical imagination"¹³ and "ecstasy of metaphorical equivalents."¹⁴ Nabokov anticipates Bersani when he identifies the overriding attribute of Proust's style as a complex system of accumulating metaphors.¹⁵

Yet in spite of his open admiration of Proust's intricate layering of metaphor upon metaphor, Nabokov himself cultivated a poetics fundamentally opposed to Proust's spirit of generalization, or what Proust's narrator refers to as his own search for "the general laws" of habit, memory, and spiritual truth. Though he places the following words into the mouth of a dissolute artist, Nabokov agrees with Ardalion that art is nourished by difference and that resemblances matter only "when buying a second candlestick."¹⁶ To use a pair of scientific colloquialisms used in assessments of Nabokov's contributions to butterfly taxonomy, Nabokov was not a "lumper" but a "splitter."¹⁷

Humbert's relentless chasing after ghosts – Annabel's, Dolly's, Quilty's – is a testament to a memory that cannot abstract the general from the specific. His inexhaustible memory evokes an

¹¹ W. Benjamin, "The Image of Proust" in *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 204.

¹² C. Moraru, "Time, Writing, and Ecstasy in *Speak, Memory*: Dramatizing the Proustian Project," *Nabokov Studies* 2 (1995), 176.

¹³ L. Bersani, *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 28.

¹⁴ L. Bersani, "'The Culture of Redemption': Marcel Proust and Melanie Klein," *Critical Inquiry* 12.2 (1986), 417.

¹⁵ Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 220, 233, 241.

¹⁶ V. Nabokov, *Despair* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1989), 40-1.

¹⁷ B. Boyd, *Stalking Nabokov: Selected Essays* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), 250. S.H. Blackwell and K. Johnson, "Introduction" in *Fine Lines: Vladimir Nabokov's Scientific Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 23.

ethical and aesthetic vision that is analogous to the experience of the eponymous protagonist of Borges's "Funes the Memorious" (1942). After the accident that endows him with an "implacable memory" [*"implacable memoria"*], Funes becomes

almost incapable of general, platonic ideas. It was not only difficult for him to understand that the generic term *dog* embraced so many unlike specimens of differing sizes and different forms; he was disturbed by the fact that a dog at three-fourteen (seen in profile) should have the same name as the dog at three-fifteen (seen from the front). (...) He was the solitary and lucid spectator of a multiform world which was instantaneously and almost intolerably exact.¹⁸

This specific example of Funes's debilitating memoriousness enables us to see the name "Lolita" in a dual light. Though a catchall term for the solipsistic tyranny by which Humbert objectifies Dolores Haze, the name "Lolita" and its accompanying rhapsody of names in the novel's opening lines can also be seen as a version of Funes's neurotic specificity. The difference between the dog seen at three-fourteen in profile and the dog seen at three-fifteen from the front is a version of the same obsessive attentiveness to difference detected between "plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock" and "Lola in slacks," or "Dolly at school" and "Dolores on the dotted line" (7). Proust's narrator's cavalier attitude towards the uniqueness of his former loves is caricatured not in Humbert's proliferation of names for Dolly, but in Mrs. Pratt, the headmistress of Beardsley School for girls, who gleefully applies a protean nomenclature to Humbert

¹⁸ J. L. Borges, "Funes the Memorious" in *Ficciones*, ed. and trans. A. Kerrigan (New York, NY: Grove, 1962), 114.

(Dr. Humburg, Dr. Hummer, Mr. Humberson) and Dolly (Dorothy Humbird, Dorothy Hummerson) (166).

Though flowing from the pen of a rapist and a murderer with a “fancy prose style,” this paean to what might be called a poetics of specificity is a version of the same “affectionate precision” [“*laskovaia tochnost*”] that Konstantin Godunov-Cherdyntsev tries to instill in his son during the lessons he gave him on natural history.¹⁹ It is also related to Baratynski’s lines Nabokov recalls from memory in a letter to Véra from July 1926:

I have given her, out of affection,
a capricious name,
the fleeting creation
of my childish tenderness – ²⁰

These lines draw attention to the correspondence between Humbert’s multiplicity of names for Dolly and Nabokov’s own lavishly creative inventory of pet names for Véra. As Olga Voronina has noted in her introduction to *Letters to Véra*, the closest English-language equivalent for the unsparing tenderness and “epistolary passion” that punctuate Nabokov’s letters to his wife is the famous opening of *Lolita*. There is a notable resemblance, she observes, between Nabokov’s expression of love dated 3 July 1926 – “I love you, my Pusms, my life, my flight, my flow, darling pooch...” – and “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta.”²¹

¹⁹ V. Nabokov, *The Gift*, trans. M. Scammell with the collaboration of the author (New York, NY: Vintage International, 1991), 109.

²⁰ V. Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, ed. and trans. O. Voronina and B. Boyd (New York, NY: Knopf, 2015), 151.

²¹ O. Voronina, “‘My beloved and precious darling’: Translating *Letters to Véra*” in Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, lv.

Such correspondences, however, are a common occurrence in the perilously complicated domain of artistic creation. As Nabokov explains in *Speak, Memory*, he frequently “gave away to my characters” treasured memories from his own life. Humbert’s inheritance of Nabokov’s maudlin habits of address to his wife is ultimately no different than the “fabulous lights” that beckoned to Nabokov “from a distant hillside” during a childhood trip abroad and that he later bestowed upon Martin Edelweiss of *Glory*. Humbert’s exploitation of this rich legacy – the “diamonds” of Nabokov’s own “wealth” as he calls them in *Speak, Memory* (373) – in a narrative about child abuse is ultimately no different from Satan’s misuse of his rich gifts to rebel against their giver. The fact that the name “Lolita” becomes a catchall term for the sexual and psychological violence that Humbert visits upon Dolly does not erase the fact that the name is – at the level of text alone if certainly not of context – a marker of affection. The violence resides not in the proliferation of pet names that Humbert bestows upon Dolly but in the cruelty and suffering that he attaches to them by way of his actions.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Humbert’s rhapsody of names for Dolly, like Nabokov’s rhapsody of tender appellations for Véra, stands in stark contrast with Mlle de Saint-Loup’s anonymity. Perhaps Proust’s narrator, so keenly responsive to the poetry of names, felt that her existence was already sufficiently poetic to need any further adornment. Like Lolita, Mlle de Saint-Loup is both girl and poetic construct. But unlike Lolita, she is also “the figure in the carpet” – that is, the teleological frame that organizes the narrative. Like the Trojans who must lose their name in the process of fulfilling their destiny to become the founders of Rome, Mlle de Saint-Loup is the

culmination of a story that began two generations earlier, *even before* Swann came to dine with the Narrator's family at Combray. She must remain nameless because she cannot give rise to her own, future-driven story. Her lack of given name signals that the history that she so poetically represents is now complete and what is now required of the Narrator is an about-turn in time so that he may record the historical trajectory that culminates in their meeting. The book that he will write in the wake of his encounter with Mlle de Saint-Loup has as its *raison d'être* the desire to chronicle the temporal distance embodied in her person.

Humbert's project is the antithesis of Proust's narrator's determination to turn into literary art the family histories that come together in the making of Mlle de Saint-Loup. For Humbert's ambition is not aimed at a Proustian recovery of lost time, but at its annihilation. The language he uses to describe his first glimpse of Dolly on what Charlotte pretentiously calls "the piazza" suggests no mere substitution of one girl for another, but an actual reincarnation: "The twenty-five years I had lived since then, tapered to a palpitating point, and vanished" (36). This vanished quarter century extends only five years beyond those twenty years that Proust's narrator must travel before meeting Mlle de Saint-Loup and begin work on his literary project. It is therefore possible to describe Humbert's pathology as a violent *erasure* of that temporal distance linking the past to the present.

A similar erasure occurs on a smaller scale in the aftermath of Dolly's disappearance. Humbert overcomes his temptation to call this tightly compressed section of his memoir "*Dolorès disparue*" not only because he does not want to plagiarize Proust, but also because, unlike Proust, he sees "little sense in analyzing the three empty years that followed" (238). To invoke the language of embroidery, *À la recherche* proceeds by the *addition* of loop upon loop of needlework, whereas *Lolita* resembles cut work such as *broderie anglaise* where patterns are removed from the

fabric and the margins of the resulting “holes” are adorned with embroidery.

But to use the term *pathology* to refer to Humbert’s efforts to escape from the prison of time by denying time’s authority is to risk divesting him of the moral responsibility upon which he ultimately comes to insist. In the initial stages of his memoir Humbert seeks to construct a narrative of self-exoneration and his engagement with Proust is only one of the mechanisms he deploys in its service. Like Proust’s narrator, Humbert portrays himself as a victim of desires and jealousies that annihilate his capacity to exert his will to a moral purpose. Humbert presents himself as a helpless victim of his nympholepsy as eloquently as Proust’s narrator presents himself as the helpless victim of his hypersensitivity.

Yet Humbert abandons this initial narrative of self-vindication because, like his creator, he cannot renounce his claim to personal agency. Humbert’s unwillingness to give up anything to time is an assertion of his will. Though it is possible that Humbert’s implacable memory is another dimension of his pathology (something akin to a physiological gift such as photographic memory), it is more ethically rewarding to think of it as an act of will. If read as an act of will, his implacable – epic, we might say – memory can be understood as partaking in the same logic as the act of *unnaming* in *The Aeneid*. Juno assuages, in part, what Vergil calls “the memoriousness of cruel Juno” [*“saeuae memorem Iunonis”*] 1.7)²² by insisting that the settlement of the Trojans come at a heavy price: the loss of their name. Humbert assuages what might be called the memoriousness of his regret over the suffering he inflicted upon Dolly in an act of naming obsessively.

²² Vergil’s *Aeneid* is cited parenthetically by book and line number.

Mlle de Saint-Loup's namelessness suggests, at first glance, the kind of complicity with or hushed reverence towards the beloved that we see in the final chapters of *Speak, Memory*. Yet neither complicity nor reverence seems to be the driving force behind Mlle de Saint-Loup's anonymity. Indeed, her introduction at the end of the novel is presented as both the impetus and culmination of an artistic project committed to the idea that – to quote Nabokov quoting Derrick Leon – all of its varied and seemingly separate worlds “are essentially the same world.”²³ As the granddaughter of Swann and Odette, and as the daughter of Gilberte and Saint-Loup, Mlle de Saint-Loup serves as an emblem of the all-encompassing unity that Proust's narrator discovers at the end of his journey in time. By linking these people together, she collapses into one node the novel's various artistic and erotic plots. As a stand-in for this unity, Mlle de Saint-Loup's anonymity is at once crucially significant and significantly trivial: she is like the Trojans, who must – at Juno's behest – lose their name for the sake of becoming settled into a dynastic narrative – the Roman – that is not nominally theirs.

This is a move that Humbert is unwilling to accommodate; Humbert, unlike Proust's narrator, refuses to countenance the possibility that Dolly's identity and personal narrative will perish by becoming dissolved within a larger whole. Two years before seeing Dolly at Coalmont, Humbert turns for help to a Catholic priest; his great hope, he explains, was “to deduce from my sense of sin the existence of a Supreme Being” (266). But the priest's efforts bear no fruit because the universe and Dolly herself strike Humbert to be no less “implacably memorious” than he is:

Alas, I was unable to transcend the simple human fact that whatever spiritual solace I might find (...) nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted

²³ Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 212.

upon her. Unless it can be proven to me (...) that in the infinite run it does not matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac, unless this can be proven (and if it can, then life is a joke), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art. (266)

Humbert shows himself to be even more strong-willed than Juno when he refuses to strike the kind of bargain that Juno strikes with Jupiter. Jupiter – as the ruler of that “infinite run” of time invoked here – cannot bend Humbert to his will because Humbert denies the possibility that his crimes might lose their meaning within the vastness of eternity. By having the name of his beloved – Lolita – grace the beginning, the ending, and the title of his memoir Humbert tries to deny Proust’s narrator’s claim that “a book is a huge cemetery in which on the majority of the tombs the names are effaced and can no longer be read” (6.310) [*“un livre est un grand cimetière où sur la plupart des tombes on ne peut plus lire les noms effacés”* (4.482; 8.2.59)].

Humbert also denies the Narrator’s companion claim that the act of writing dissolves the particular within the general:

Indeed – as I was to experience in the sequel – even at a time when we are in love and suffer, if our vocation has at last been realised, we feel so strongly during the hours in which we are at work that the individual whom we love is being dissolved into a vaster reality that at moments we succeed in forgetting her and we come to suffer from our love merely as we might from some purely physical disease in which the loved one played no part, some kind of malady of the heart. (6.312-3)

En effet, comme je devais l'expérimenter par la suite, même au moment où l'on aime et où on souffre, si la vocation s'est enfin réalisée dans les heures où on travaille on sent si bien l'être qu'on aime se dissoudre dans une réalité plus vaste qu'on arrive à l'oublier par instants et qu'on ne souffre plus de son amour en travaillant que comme de quelque mal purement physique où l'être aimé n'est pour rien, comme d'une sorte de maladie de coeur. (4.483; 8.2.61)

Humbert's loyalties – first to Annabel, then to Dolly – are ill-placed and lead to disaster, but he arouses our admiration for making no conciliatory gestures to this annihilating “*réalité plus vaste*” by still naming and refusing to forget.²⁴

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²⁴ I am deeply grateful to Katharine Streip for answering – in close detail and with patient good humour – my many questions regarding Proust. I am also grateful to Stephen Blackwell, Gerard de Vries, Katherina Kokinova and Andrew Wallace for their generous and insightful responses to my work. The anonymous reader who reviewed the essay for this collection has also offered a number of useful suggestions for revision.

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**PARAMNESIA, ANTICIPATORY
MEMORY, AND FUTURE
RECOLLECTION IN *ADA***

INTRODUCTION: THE FOYER

Partway into Chapter 8 in *Ada*'s third part, Van trips over a "gaudy suitcase" in the Hotel Bellevue's foyer. The bag, we learn, has been left there by an "unfortunate green-aproned *cameriere*." Still composing himself, Van makes for the hotel lounge, only to be interrupted on his way:

A German tourist caught up with him, to apologize, effusively, and not without humor, for the offending object, which, he said, was his.

"If so," remarked Van, "you should not allow spas to slap their stickers on your private appendages."

His reply was inept, and the whole episode had a faint paramnesic tang – and next instant Van was shot dead from behind (such things happen, some tourists are very unbalanced) and stepped into his next phase of existence.¹

Despite his apparent demise, the next sentence continues as if nothing has happened, as Van moves to “the threshold of the main lounge” and, unperturbed, begins to “scan the distribution of its scattered human contents.” This is one of the most enigmatic episodes in the novel, and is seldom mentioned in Nabokov scholarship. The following chapter aims to shed some light on this puzzling passage by unpacking the meaning of Van’s “paramnesic tang,” along with its surprising implications for the rest of the novel.

WHAT IS PARAMNESIA?

There have not been many mentions of this “paramnesic tang” in Nabokov scholarship so far. In his pioneering study *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness*, Brian Boyd uses the word “tang” twice in separate descriptions of Nabokov’s prose:

Nabokov is celebrated for the precision of his visual details, yet it is not the precision alone that imparts that special tang to his descriptions but rather the sense of the crisp autonomy of the thing described.
(...)

¹ V. Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 510. All in-text references hereafter will refer to this edition.

For Nabokov only the perception of a thing's uniqueness is worthwhile. Unless this is grasped, reality has no tang. To grasp it requires the full alertness of the conscious mind, fresh observation, an accumulation of detail, a refusal to sacrifice the discreteness of a thing.²

Though I initially believed these were allusions to the passage in the Hotel Bellevue foyer, a closer reading of Boyd's book revealed that the episode is not explicitly mentioned. Among Boyd's many examples from the text, only two contain the word "tang," and both are quotes from Van's exegetical treatise on time:

[Time] is "a constant accumulation of images" (545) which, though we can no more visit than we can the future, "has at least the taste, the tinge, the tang of our individual being" (560).

(...)

The Past for Van is "colored" and specific: it has "the taste, the tinge, the tang of our individual being" (560). It is "an accumulation of sensa" (544), and out of this accumulation, out of "the colored contents of the Past" (547) memory can choose what it likes, and in any order.³

While Boyd's book is still justly regarded as a benchmark for any analysis of *Ada*, for the purposes of this paper it quickly became clear I needed to broaden my search for scholarly precedents.

J. E. Rivers' paper "Proust, Nabokov, and *Ada*" deserves credit for what I *think* is the first of the few mentions of paramnesia

² B. Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness* (Christchurch: Cybereditions, 2001), 31, 69.

³ *Ibid.*, 189, 191.

in Nabokov scholarship, though his use of it does present some problems. Rivers pronounces that “triply encoded episodes” in *Ada* “are designed to produce in the reader what Nabokov calls elsewhere in the novel ‘a faint paramnesic tang.’”⁴ It remains unclear why Rivers has decided that only *triply* encoded episodes produce a paramnesic effect, other than that he only cites three recurrences of each motif that serves as an example. *Ada* is such a densely woven text that its major motifs recur far more often than that. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth explains this quality of the novel with stylish aplomb:

Just getting through a syntactical unit (sentence, paragraph) [in *Ada*] requires one to keep simultaneously in play several separate thematic voices (...). Like the firefly, each theme signals in “its own specific rhythm” and also in cumulative relation to all the other rhythms, each with its own frequency. By the end of the novel the complexity of this colored anthemion is immense.⁵

As Ermarth says, the sheer scale and frequency of thematic recurrences and resonances in *Ada* is overwhelming. But are *all* its recurrences paramnesic, as Rivers seems to suggest? Since we are investigating what makes the paramnesic episode in the Bellevue foyer unusual, we need to search a little wider for answers.

The OED defines paramnesia as follows: “Memory that is unreal, illusory, or distorted; spec. the phenomenon of déjà vu; an instance of this.” The definition of déjà vu, on the other hand, offers us this: “An illusory feeling of having previously

⁴ J. E. Rivers, “Proust, Nabokov, and *Ada*” in *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1984), 149.

⁵ E. D. Ermarth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 197-198.

experienced a present situation; a form of paramnesia.” *Déjà vu* translates from the French simply as “already seen.” Paramnesia, on the other hand, with its prefix “para-” – which the OED says signifies something “analogous or parallel to, but separate from or going beyond, what is denoted by the root word” – implies a kind of simultaneous amnesia, perhaps a remembering *and* a forgetting rolled into one moment.

Christoph Henry-Thommes’ monograph *Recollection, Memory and Imagination: Selected Autobiographical Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* includes the most detailed discussion of paramnesia in Nabokov scholarship so far, building on the word’s definition in *Webster’s Dictionary*:

Webster’s defines “paramnesia” as “a distortion of memory in which fact and fantasy are confused. Also called pseudomemory.” In this context one must, first of all, keep in mind Van’s programmatic statement that “memory likes the *otsebyatina* (‘what one contributes oneself’)” (*Ada* 441). Secondly, and this is even more important, the interaction and mutual penetration of fact and fantasy (*phantasia*) is a basic feature of the autobiographic act practised by Van and Nabokov, which feeds on both memory and creative imagination.⁶

While neither the OED’s nor Henry-Thommes’ *Webster’s*-assisted definition offers a detailed enough picture of paramnesia to make complete sense of the anomalous foyer passage, they are certainly moving us in the right direction.

⁶ C. Henry-Thommes, *Recollection, Memory and Imagination: Selected Autobiographical Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2006), 315.

J. W. Dunne's book *An Experiment with Time* (1927) includes a brief section regarding "Identifying Paramnesia." It appears in his discussion of the ins-and-outs of keeping a dream diary, instructions Nabokov followed closely in his own experiment with recording his dreams between October 14, 1964 and January 3, 1963.⁷ Though Dunne was without formal training in theoretical science – he was a retired aeronautical engineer when he started writing books – he believed he had proven that dreams could foretell future events, that these future events could ripple backwards into earlier dreams, and that this confirmed that time could flow both forwards and backwards. "Identifying Paramnesia" is singled out as a cognitive problem which recording one's dreams in detail is supposed to safeguard against, since it generates the false impression that you have dreamed before something which you are only just now encountering for the first time. Dunne believed that recording dreams would arm his fellow time-trackers with the means to either confirm or falsify the feeling of "Identifying Paramnesia" when it inevitably struck, creating a written record that would prove, one way or another, if an earlier prophetic dream had indeed taken place.⁸ This is a book we know Nabokov read and admired during *Ada's* composition, and it seems likely that this would have been the most recent, if not necessarily first, place he would have come across such an uncommon term by the time he wrote the scene in the Hotel Bellevue's foyer.⁹ Dunne's gloss of paramnesia is incomplete, however. Though he gestures generally in the direction of a collective body of doctors who all apparently agreed on this definition, other writings and medical journals from the period

⁷ Published recently as V. Nabokov and G. Barabtarlo (ed.), *Insomniac Dreams: Experiments with Time by Vladimir Nabokov* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁸ J. W. Dunne, *An Experiment with Time*. 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), pp. 44-45.

⁹ Nabokov and Barabtarlo (ed.), *Insomniac Dreams*, passim.

suggest that thinking about paramnesia was more complex. Further reading beyond Dunne, and beyond dedicated Nabokov scholarship, reveals a rich vein of pretexts to its appearance in *Ada*.

“Paramnesia” was coined by German psychologist Emil Kraepelin in 1886 as a label to distinguish qualitative from quantitative memory disturbances.¹⁰ By the time it reappeared in Kraepelin’s *Clinical Psychiatry* (1907) as part of a broader discussion of memory disorders, he had refined its specific connotations even further. Here paramnesia is described as “a mixture of invention and real experience” which gives rise to “hallucinations of memory.” It occurs especially often in “paresis, paranoid dementia, and (...) maniacal forms of manic-depressive insanity,” as well as occasionally in “epileptic and hysterical befogged states.”¹¹ A paramnesic hallucination of memory is one that seems as if it has spontaneously come into being, integrating seamlessly into consciousness despite there being no point of origin. The realisation that a real-seeming memory is actually structured around the absence of an experience you *thought you held* ruptures the contiguousness of one’s mental landscape.¹² More simply, paramnesia varies from déjà vu, as the

¹⁰ I. S. Marková and G. E. Berrios, “Paramnesias and Delusions of Memory” in G. E. Berrios and J. R. Hodges (eds), *Memory Disorders in Psychiatric Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 313.

¹¹ E. Kraepelin, *Clinical Psychiatry* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1907), 25.

¹² There is a secondary meaning of paramnesia – which the OED identifies as “*disused rare*” – as a description for the “loss of memory for the meaning of words.” Freud described submerged paramnesia as effectively a card-trick of the mind, carried out when a faulty recollection is successfully substituted in place of a forgotten impression (S. Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 200). These false memories supposedly originate from some interrupted act of orientation earlier in a subject’s life, an unconscious substitution which Freud thinks complicates the analysis of childhood memories because unimportant details act as ‘screen memories’ “for other impressions which are really significant” (Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 83). He argues a ‘screen memory’ is not valuable in and of itself, but for the associations it carries with another buried unconscious memory. Though there has been plenty of scholarly discussion about Freud’s ‘screen memories’, including some cogent criticism from Derrida, and though Nabokov was

OED suggests, because it takes the form of a disruptive incursion into the subject's mental landscape, frequently a source of distress, confusion, discomfort, or even pain. This is precisely the kind of rupture we find again and again in *Ada*.

Havelock Ellis, a pioneering English psychologist, incorporated paramnesia into his book *The World of Dreams* (1911), narrowing in on what the term designates even further by likening it to the state of 'pseudo-reminiscence' that can intrude into and linger on after dreaming, when one is in a hypnagogic state (i.e. either emerging from or falling into sleep):

The best known form of paramnesia is that in which we have the illusion that the event which is at the moment happening to us has happened before (...) or that [it] might happen to us again (...). When we have half awakened from a dream and are just able to realise that it was a dream, that dream constantly tends to appear in a more plausible or probable light than is possible a few moments later when we are fully awake.¹³

Within the next few decades, the term started to infiltrate literary theory, particularly in descriptions of certain characteristics of Romanticism. The earliest example I have found is in Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian's *A History of English Literature* (1933), where the authors describe Romanticism in these terms:

All that Romantic writers imagine and feel is accompanied by a shade of wonder, because they see those emotions and those images rise within

hugely antagonistic towards Freud – “the Viennese quack” in *Strong Opinions* – for the purposes of this paper we are more interested in paramnesia's primary meaning as an illusory distortion of memory.

¹³ H. Ellis, *The World of Dreams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 230-232.

themselves with a surprising spontaneousness, and because all such imaginings, in spite of their novelty, bring with them a disturbing impression of an intimacy of old date. Romanticism is as a whole, in this respect, a phenomenon of collective “paramnesia,” the reviviscence of a subconscious personality.¹⁴

Legouis and Cazamian’s description of the simultaneous wonder and disquiet on display in paramnesic episodes throughout Romanticism emerges again in George Poulet’s paper “Timelessness and Romanticism” (1954). Where Legouis and Cazamian spoke of Romanticism in general, Poulet’s choice of example gives a practical demonstration. He cites an episode from Percy Shelley’s *Speculations on Metaphysics* which serves as a helpful precursor for what Nabokov does with paramnesic hallucinations of memory in *Ada*.

Shelley reflects on an experience he had sometime around 1805 when he was confronted by a fairly “common scene” of fields and windmills somewhere near Oxford:

The scene was a tame uninteresting assemblage of objects (...). The effect which it produced on me was not such as could be expected. I suddenly remembered to have seen that exact scene in some dream of long – ¹⁵

He cuts himself off mid-sentence. The brief explanatory note from Shelley at the foot of the page in the collected edition of his prose works explains the abrupt interruption: “Here I was obliged to leave off, overcome by thrilling horror.” This edition also has an

¹⁴ E. Legouis and L. Cazamian, *A History of English Literature* (London: Dent, 1933), 1030.

¹⁵ P. B. Shelley, “Speculations on Metaphysics” in *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley Vol. II* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1906), 193.

additional recollection from Mary Shelley: “I remember well his coming to me from writing it, pale and agitated, to seek refuge in conversation from the fearful emotions it excited.”¹⁶ My guess is that Shelley’s experience unsettled him not because a past experience is felt to be *still* real, *still* alive and familiar as in the sensation of déjà vu, but because as soon he saw this “tame uninteresting assemblage of objects,” Shelley “remembered to *have seen*” it before. In other words, the full effects of a first encounter with the scene and the memory of having already seen it are experienced simultaneously and arrestingly. Despite the fearful agitation in the midst of which they were set down, Shelley’s words seem extremely well-chosen, preserving the unanticipated sting of Kraepelin’s paramnesia and its a mixture of reality and invention.

This takes us to Bergson’s “serial time,” a concept that was hugely influential on Nabokov. Serial time has an in-built paramnesic tang. Bergson holds that “the formation of recollection is never posterior to the formation of perception; it is contemporaneous with it.”¹⁷ Whatever content there is in the moment of reception must be preserved simultaneous to that moment’s appearance and destruction, and it must be preserved in anticipation of its own reappearance in the subject’s memory. Kierkegaard, too, briefly sketched this serial experience of time as “repetition,” which he described as “recollection forward,” at once pre-empting and *ensuring* the re-emergence of a collected perception.¹⁸ Over half a century later, Bergson expands and enriches:

[Our] actual existence (...) whilst it is unrolled in time, duplicates itself all along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image. Every moment in our life presents two

¹⁶ Ibid., 193.

¹⁷ H. Bergson, *Mind-Energy* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1920), 128.

¹⁸ S. Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Writings, vol. VI: “Fear and Trembling” and “Repetition”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 131.

aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other. Each moment of life is split up as and when it is posited. Or rather, it consists in this very splitting.¹⁹

By Bergson's understanding, then, memory *is* consciousness, and vice versa. It was Gilles Deleuze who applied the term "paramnesia" to Bergson's formulation as a label for the moment when a subject becomes conscious of this duplication. Paramnesia, explains Deleuze, can be understood as the feeling one experiences when "the forgotten thing appears in person to the memory which essentially apprehends it."²⁰ For Deleuze, since memory is the medium through which the perception of matter is made conscious, by the time we are conscious of our surroundings they are no longer "present" to us. There is no such thing as a presence that is not already in the past. Even the memory of a perception is a memory of a memory of a perception, a dizzying co-dependence which Deleuze argues "makes possible a whole pathology of duration."²¹

ANTICIPATORY MEMORY AND FUTURE RECOLLECTION

At this point, it is worth taking the time to introduce John Burt Foster Jr.'s work on "anticipatory memory" and "future recollection" in Nabokov, since it offers some vital clues regarding Van's "paramnesic tang."²²

¹⁹ Bergson, *Mind-Energy*, 135.

²⁰ G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum, 2001), 140.

²¹ G. Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 118.

²² I do not have the space to expand as much as I would like on the different roles of voluntary and involuntary memory in Nabokov's work, and *Ada* specifically, but I will flag it is a rich area for future investigation.

In *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism*, Foster introduces anticipatory memory to describe Nabokov's "paradoxical attitude toward time."²³ Ganin, the main character in Nabokov's first novel *Mary*, decides that the anticipatory ideation he held as a young boy in the period just prior to meeting Mary was crucial to his reimagining of her later in his life. His earlier self's impatience to reach that future, to meet Mary – "not as a specific person, to be sure, but just as [a] dream of meeting some girl"²⁴ – is ultimately what the elder Ganin believes prepared his memory to preserve such vivid impressions, themselves a blend of imagination and reality.

The kind of romanticisation of youthful anticipation we see in *Mary* is characteristic of (very) early-career Nabokov. It would not be long before, as Foster argues, "[t]he picture that initially conveyed romantic anticipation" came instead to suggest "the darker uncertainty of imagined tragedy."²⁵ By Nabokov's third novel, *The Luzhin Defence*, anticipation has become a vehicle for anxiety, fear, and eventually horror. Young Luzhin is agitated by the prospect of his first year of school, which looms over him like "something new, unknown, and therefore hideous, an impossible, unacceptable world."²⁶ As Foster notes of this passage, "[t]here is no room (...) for the initial basis of memory in *Mary*, the promise of happiness to come."²⁷ The description of the moments leading up to Luzhin's suicide at the end of the book only serves to confirm the terrible fears of his younger self, imagined or not. Clinging to the outside edge of a high window, as the transformation of his

²³ J. B. Foster Jr., *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 54.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁶ V. Nabokov, *The Luzhin Defence* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 6.

²⁷ Foster, *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism*, 63.

surroundings into chess-motifs continues unabated, he is horrified by the prospect of a nightmarish future one last time:

Before letting go he looked down. Some kind of hasty preparations were under way there: the window reflections gathered together and leveled themselves out, the whole chasm was seen to divide into dark and pale squares, and at the instant when Luzhin unclenched his hand, at the instant when icy air gushed into his mouth, he saw exactly what kind of eternity was obligingly and inexorably spread out before him.²⁸

Where “anticipatory memory” centralises futurist ideation, “future recollection” sees a subject imagining a hypothetical point in the future where they, or some devoted reader of the yet-to-be-published stories of their life, will attribute some importance to their present experience. Foster identifies the following passage from *Speak, Memory*, concerning the Nabokov family’s time in Crimea in 1918, as “the fullest treatment of future retrospection” in Nabokov’s oeuvre:²⁹

In that summer of 1918, a poor little oasis of miraged youth, my brother and I used to frequent the amiable and eccentric family who owned the coastal estate Oleiz. A bantering friendship soon developed between my coeval Lidia T. and me. Many young people were always around, brown-limbed braceleted young beauties, a well-known painter called Sorin, actors, a male ballet dancer, merry White Army officers, some of whom were to die quite soon, and what with beach

²⁸ Nabokov, *The Luzhin Defence*, 178-179.

²⁹ Foster, *Nabokov’s Art of Memory and European Modernism*, 57.

parties, blanket parties, bonfires, a moon-spangled sea and a fair supply of Crimean Muscat Lunel, a lot of amorous fun went on; and all the while, against this frivolous, decadent and somehow unreal background (...). Lidia and I played a little oasal game of our own invention. The idea consisted of parodizing a biographic approach projected, as it were, into the future and thus transforming the very specious present into a kind of paralyzed past as perceived by a doddering memoirist who recalls, through a helpless haze, his acquaintance with a great writer when both were young. For instance, either Lidia or I (it was a matter of chance inspiration) might say, on the terrace after supper: “The writer liked to go out on the terrace after supper,” or “I shall always remember the remark V. V. made one warm night: ‘It is,’ he remarked, ‘a warm night’”; or still sillier: “He was in the habit of lighting his cigarette, before smoking it” – all this delivered with much pensive, reminiscent fervour which seemed hilarious and harmless to us at the time; but now – now I catch myself wondering if we did not disturb unwittingly some perverse and spiteful demon.³⁰

The fact that he, in writing his autobiography, had now assumed the role of the “doddering memoirist” was an irony not lost on Nabokov. Indeed, he even toyed with it further in “On *Conclusive Evidence*,” which is not a part of Foster’s analysis.³¹ “On *Conclusive Evidence*” is a pseudo-review

³⁰ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (London: David Campbell Publishers, 1999), 193-194.

³¹ This is hardly Foster’s fault. His book was published in 1993. “On *Conclusive Evidence*” was not widely available until it was published in the 28 December 1998/4

which sees Nabokov assuming the voice of an unnamed critic reviewing *Conclusive Evidence* (1951), the first iteration of the autobiography he would eventually complete as *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1967). The nameless critic comments on the episode above:

In the cypress alleys of Crimean gardens (where Pushkin had walked a hundred years before) young Nabokov amused and annoyed a girl friend of his, who had a taste for romantic literature, by commenting upon his own movements or words in the reminiscent, slightly mincing manner his companion might be supposed to develop many years later when writing her memoirs (in the style of memoirs connected with Pushkin): “Nabokov liked cherries, especially ripe ones,” or “He had a way of slitting his eyes when looking at the low sun,” or “I remember one night, as we were reclining on a turfy bank – “and so forth – a game that was surely silly but seems less silly now when it is seen to fall into the pattern of predicted loss, of pathetic attempts to retain the doomed, the departing, the lovely dying things of a life that was trying, rather desperately, to think of itself in terms of future retrospection.³²

That the nameless critic quotes phrases that do not actually appear in Nabokov’s book is amusing enough. He also expands on the subtle suggestiveness behind the young Vladimir and

January 1999 edition of *The New Yorker*. It was then appended to most subsequent editions of *Speak, Memory* as an appendix, starting with the Everyman’s Library edition edited by Brian Boyd in 1999 (from which I draw my pagination; worth pointing out because it differs from other editions).

³² Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 253.

Lidia's "amorous fun" with a not-so-subtle quip about the former's fondness for ripe cherries, stopping short of disclosing exactly *what* they did on the turfy bank that one night in 1918. However, before we have much of a chance to process these entendres, Nabokov – or, rather, the Nabokov holding a cardboard cut-out mask of a stuffy old critic named anything other than "Nabokov" over his face – cuts through an ironic distance several embedded fictional layers deep to activate crushing resonances between the two passages. He reminds us that, like the "merry White Army officers" mentioned in the main text, this "poor little oasis of miraged youth," many of the people he knew then, his father and his brother, and indeed most of the Russia of his childhood, "were to die quite soon." The young Nabokov's game of future recollection becomes, in the hands of the master craftsman he eventually became, an elegy for "the lovely dying things of a life." The very act of recalling these memories, colourful and witty though his descriptions frequently are in both passages, forces Nabokov to confront the fact that his younger self was playfully calling forth images of a future that, unbeknownst to him, would also see him looking back on the destruction of many of the people and much of the culture he was describing. He does not mention in either passage, incidentally, if Lidia and her family survived the horrors that were to follow in the wake of their amorous games – perhaps an absence which speaks volumes. Future recollection, then, becomes an inherently melancholic device for Nabokov, even more so than Foster realised, and *Ada*'s paramnesic episodes bear the mark of this melancholy.

THE TANG OF NABOKOV'S "INSPIRATION" (1972)

The fictional world of the elder Van's narration is beset by structural instability, quite often a direct result of his concatenation

of reality and invention. In what could easily have been a playful mirroring of Kraepelin's definition of paramnesia, Nabokov offers us this line barely twenty pages after Van's encounter with the gaudy suitcase: "Fantasy raced fact in never-ending rivalry and girl giggles" (531). Indeed, the ineptness of Van's reply after tripping over the suitcase signals a lapse in more than just his usual cruel and withering wit; there has been a lapse in his capacity to tell fact and fantasy apart. This is the second explicit instance of a variety of memory hallucination Van calls "forking." The first closes Part Two, following a description of Van's abortive suicide-attempt after Demon (his father) discovers Van's affair with Ada (his sister).

Van sealed the letter, found his Thunderbolt pistol in the place he had visualized, introduced one cartridge into the magazine and translated it into its chamber. Then, standing before a closet mirror, he put the automatic to his head, at the point of the pterion, and pressed the comfortably concaved trigger. Nothing happened – or perhaps everything happened, and his destiny simply forked at that instant, as it probably does sometimes at night, especially in a strange bed, at stages of great happiness or great desolation, when we happen to die in our sleep, but continue our normal existence, with no perceptible break in the faked serialization, on the following, neatly prepared morning, with a spurious past discreetly but firmly attached behind. Anyway, what he held in his right hand was no longer a pistol but a pocket comb which he passed through his hair at the temples. (445)

In this episode, Van seems to hold a gun to his head and pulls the trigger and, *after* having done so, discovers the gun to have

always already been a comb. The gun as described seems as real as anything else on Antiterra, and there's a list of specific details regarding the feel of its nozzle against Van's pterion and the comfortable texture of its concave trigger that vouch for its corporeality. Yet by the time it should already have been too late, some unseen hand has card-tricked the instrument of Van's destruction into a harmless pocket comb.

As narrated, this sequence of events only really makes sense if the Van experiencing the paramnesic distortion of memory is the older Van who is writing the memoir, our narrator. Van himself suggests as much when he concludes the episode by noting there "are other possible forkings and continuations that occur to the dream-mind, but these will do." (446). The present tense here suggests that "dream-mind" refers to Van's mental state as he drafts this section, with our narrator conceding in a rare moment of unguardedness that he has concatenated fact and fantasy. And later, when narrating his stumble over the gaudy suitcase, our narrator has *another* paramnesic experience, again a distorted memory of having been killed by a bullet. Despite old Van's collusive assurance that "such things happen," our previous encounter with his apparent death-by-firearm has taught us that they almost certainly do not. In both cases, our narrator's mind quickly synthesises the impossible event, and Van observes that, even in writing, his memory has somehow transitioned from his "death" to what happened next with "no perceptible break in the faked serialization" (445).

Paramnesic hallucinations of memory often occur in a certain kind of epilepsy, specifically in the midst of the "ecstatic seizures" which trigger an "intellectual aura." The aura in this exceptional type of epilepsy is sometimes described in psychological case studies of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century as a pleasurable experience. Some of the surveyed patients in one study even admitted to deliberately triggering a seizure at some

point, before their condition worsened.³³ Aqua Veen's mysterious illness, described early on in *Ada*, strongly recalls this variety of epilepsy.

The dreadful sickness, roughly diagnosed in her case, and in that of other unfortunate people, as an "extreme form of mystical mania combined with existentialism" (otherwise plain madness), crept over her by degrees, with intervals of ecstatic peace, with skipped areas of precarious sanity, with sudden dreams of eternity-certainty, which grew ever rarer and briefer. (22)

It is not only Aqua who experiences ecstatic seizures like this, but also her "son" Van. Submerged in his perspective, the reader is made to experience some similarly disorienting episodes. Van's description of the euphoric sensation temporarily afforded to him after making love to Ada offers a fine example:

It would not be sufficient to say that in his love-making with Ada he discovered the pang, the *ogon* ', the agony of supreme "reality." Reality, better say, lost the quotes it wore like claws – in a world where independent and original minds must cling to things or pull things apart in order to ward off madness or death (which is the master madness). For one spasm or two, he was safe (...) it lasted a moment, but could be repeated as often as he and she were physically able to make love. (219-220)

³³ J. Hughlings-Jackson, "On a particular variety of epilepsy ('Intellectual Aura'), one case with symptoms of organic brain disease," *Brain* 11, no. 2 (1888): 182-185.

In a more recent medical study conducted by Bjørn Åsheim Hansen and Eylert Brodtkorb, patients explain that the onset of an ecstatic fit triggers a sudden and increasing sense of unfamiliarity with their surroundings, a kind of felt encounter with Viktor Shklovsky's *остранение* (in English "estrangement" or "defamiliarisation").³⁴ As in Van's case, this is often intermingled with an erotic component. One patient described the feeling as an "oscillating erotic sensation, like twinkling polar light," a "trance of pleasure," like "an emotional wave striking (...) again and again," during which one is "compelled to obey a sort of phenomenon."³⁵

Van's "ecstatic seizures" are like Aqua's, in that they grow increasingly unpleasant over time, and they are likened more than once to an epileptic fit.

Despite an athletic strength of will, ironization of excessive emotion, and contempt for weepy weaklings, Van was aware of his being apt to suffer uncurbable blubbing fits (rising at times to an epileptic-like pitch, with sudden howls that shook his body, and inexhaustible fluids that stuffed his nose) ever since his break with Ada had led to agonies, which his self-pride and self-concentration had never foreseen in the hedonistic past. (389-390)

If I had to hazard a guess, and somewhat anachronistically treat Van as if he were a patient for a moment, I'd say that Van's epileptic-like fits probably first manifested around the time his relationship with Ada began. In Van's case, the pleasurable erotic sensation many patients describe appears to have intermeshed fully with his

³⁴ See V. Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose* (Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990).

³⁵ B. Å. Hansen and E. Brodtkorb, "Partial epilepsy with 'ecstatic' seizures" in *Epilepsy & Behavior* 4, no. 6 (2003), 667-669.

passion for Ada, so much so that her absence during their decades-long period of separation later in the novel – where the above passage appears – renders his fits wholly unpleasant. Whether this interpretation/diagnosis is true or not, it is certainly clear that the fits Van describes from early in his life were ecstatic, while his later fits verge on nightmarish. Even once they reunite, just before the death of Ada's doddering husband Andrey Vineland, a moment where Van exercises his withering, cruel, and arcane wit on Ada is accompanied by the physical pain of one of these fits:

As had been peculiar to his nature even in the days of his youth, Van was apt to relieve a passion of anger and disappointment by means of bombastic and arcane utterances which hurt like a jagged fingernail caught in satin, the lining of Hell. (530)

On this occasion, Ada is forced to repeat herself several times to get her point across to an enraged Van in a manner that recalls “a fool dealing with an epileptic.” (530). There is further evidence to suggest that the elder Van who serves as our narrator also suffers from similarly blinding and cruel outbursts, vituperatively referring to a comment made by his half-sister “a mistake on silly Lucette's part.” Indeed, Lucette's comment triggered an extended tirade from his younger self, during which he “went on in a madman's voice so well controlled that it sounded overpedantic (...) rocking this side and that with clenched hands and furrowed brow” (380). To me there is enough evidence to suggest that Van's narration, complete with its arcane inter- and intra-textual parodies and allusions piling up layers deep, acquires some of its murky quality from paramnesic malfunctions of memory.

Nabokov himself hinted with tantalising subtlety that paramnesia, particularly as a symptom of epilepsy, may be a vital ingredient for unravelling Van's tangle of narrative world-building.

In “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*” (1956), he introduces the concept of “aesthetic bliss”:

For me, a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm.³⁶

This was also touched on in “Good Readers and Good Writers” – an earlier lecture published in *Lecture on Literature* (1980) – in which Nabokov described one of the crucial symptoms of “aesthetic bliss” as a “tell-tale tingle” one feels “between the shoulder blades.”³⁷ Most importantly for our purposes, the essay “Inspiration” (1972) sees Nabokov revisit that tell-tale tingle, this time paying particular attention to both the artist’s process and to *Ada*, then his most recent novel:

A prefatory glow, not unlike some benign variety of the aura before an epileptic attack, is something an artist learns to perceive very early in life. This feeling of tickly well-being branches through him like the red and the blue in the picture of a skinned man under Circulation. As it spreads, it banishes all awareness of physical discomfort – youth’s toothache as well as the neuralgia of old age. The beauty is that, while completely intelligible (as if it were connected with a known gland or led to an expected climax), it has neither source nor object. It expands, glows, and

³⁶ V. Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. A. Appel (London: Penguin, 2000), 314-315.

³⁷ V. Nabokov, “Good Readers and Good Writers” in *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 64.

subsides without revealing its secret. In the meantime, however, a window has opened, an auroral wind has blown, and every exposed nerve has tingled.³⁸

In the essay, this passage occurs in the lead-up to an extended quote from the first chunk of writing Nabokov scribbled down for *Ada*, a fascinating variant of a memorable scene in the Villa Venus scene in Part 2 Chapter 3. Van clutches tight a terrified young girl in whose form he is attempting to re-embody his long-estranged Ada, the ocean wind howling and the walls crumbling around him. Indeed, the entire first half of “Inspiration” can easily be read as a subtle corrective to early misreadings of *Ada*. Nabokov closes the essay by asserting that every good artist knows how to distinguish the tingle of inspiration from “the froth of a fit.” (311). I would argue that Van *cannot* distinguish these, or is unwilling to, until very late in his life.³⁹

TINGLES, STINGLES, AND *SHCHEKOTIKI*

The novel’s own “tell-tale tingles” are worth pursuing, blowing an auroral wind through its exposed nerves, and through all its veins and ventricles in the diagram of a body under the entry

³⁸ V. Nabokov, “Inspiration” in *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 309.

³⁹ Galya Diment has speculated that Nabokov himself may have suffered from a mild, and undiagnosed, form of epilepsy (See G. Diment, “Nabokov and Epilepsy,” *Times Literary Supplement*, August 5, 2016). Dr. Séamus Sweeney from the Department of Psychiatry at St Luke’s Hospital in Kilkenny wrote a sceptical “Letter to the Editor” in response to Diment’s article (S. Sweeney, “Letters to the Editor,” *Times Literary Supplement*, August 12, 2016), in which he argues that “No doctor would (or rather, should) diagnose patients without actually meeting them.” While it is hard to disagree with Sweeney’s assessment, Diment’s article is nonetheless intriguing, for drawing attention to the striking resemblances between Nabokov’s descriptions of the artistic process and epileptic-like symptoms. I am not aware of anyone other than Diment and myself having suggested there might be a link here (D. Potter, “The Not-So-Faint Paramnesic Tang of Nabokov’s *Ada*,” paper presented at annual Nabokov Reading conference at the Vladimir Nabokov Museum, Saint Petersburg, July 2, 2015).

for “Circulation” in Nabokov’s hypothetical encyclopaedia. In Part Three Chapter 4 we are introduced to Spencer Muldoon, a patient of Van’s who was “born eyeless” and suffers both from “fits of violent paranoia” and “a singular case of chromesthesia.” Muldoon’s mysterious condition sees him able to perceive a “gamut of ‘stingles’” by stroking the tops of pencils, a sensation likened to “the tingling aftereffects of one’s skin contact with stinging nettles” (469). This episode would not necessitate a mention here except that Muldoon’s “stingles,” or something very much like them, also seem to be experienced by *Van*, at first subtly but with increasing obtrusiveness as the novel progresses. Two pages into Part 4, for example, which we are told comprises the text of a philosophical treatise Van eventually published as “The Texture of Time,” the word “*shchekotiki*” appears. Expressing his thoughts out loud into his speaking-jewel as he perseveres through heavy rain on the motorway, Van fumbles and rummages at once for a road map, for the correct words, and for some precursor to his ideas:

What an effort, what fumbling, what irritating fatigue! (...) And Aurelius Augustinus, too, he, too, in his tussles with the same theme, fifteen hundred years ago, experienced this oddly physical torment of the shallowing mind, the *shchekotiki* (tickles) of approximation, the evasions of cerebral exhaustion – (537)

While the precursor Van eventually settles on is Saint Augustine (full name Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis), he unknowingly activates a different pre-text. A fuller definition of *shchekotiki* appeared in *Bend Sinister* (1947), where Nabokov cited it as an outmoded piece of child-like slang dating back to the Silver Age:

I might start writing the unknown thing I want to write; unknown, except for a vague shoe-shaped outline, the infusorial quiver of which I feel in my restless bones, a feeling of *shchekotiki* (as we used to say in our childhood) half-tingle, half-tickle, when you are trying to remember something or understand something or find something, and probably your bladder is full, and your nerves are on edge, but the combination is on the whole not unpleasant (if not protracted) and produces a minor orgasm or “*petit éternuement intérieur*” when at last you find the picture-puzzle piece which exactly fits the gap.⁴⁰

This passage reveals that the cursory English-language gloss of *shchekotiki* offered by Van in *Ada*, “tickles,” completely (and, I venture to say, suspiciously) elides the sensation’s other half, its *tingles*. In a sense, I’d argue that *this* is the missing picture-puzzle piece in “The Texture of Time.” Not only is Spencer Muldoon strongly evoked by Van’s description of his car’s wiper blade – “the wipers functioning metronomically, chronometrically: the *blind finger* of space poking and tearing the texture of time” (537, my emphasis) – the reader, if they chase up other appearances of the word earlier in Nabokov’s oeuvre, is unexpectedly stung by the bursting forth and breeching of *shchekotiki*’s papered-over tingles.

Some of the most striking episodes of Van’s hallucinations of memory are preceded by some variant of “sting” or “tingling,” ranging from an “uncanny tingle” during a disquieting anecdote of Lucette’s about Ada’s wedding (481), or a description of young Van lying in a hammock staring up at a ceiling of stars, “that meaningless space overhead, underhead, everywhere, the demon counterpart of divine time, tingling about him and through him,

⁴⁰ V. Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 157-158.

as it was to retingle – with a little more meaning fortunately – in the last nights of a life, which I do not regret, my love” (73-74). In every instance, the sting takes on a strong paramnesic tang. In fact, the *tang* itself has concealed another kind of stinging tingle. The OED reveals that the word “tang” is a carry-over from Middle English, originally referring to the sting thought to be concealed in a snake or a serpent’s tongue.⁴¹ This, too, “retingles” in the passage Van composes on what seems to be his final night of life. In what editor Ronald Oranger tells us is a hastily scrawled note written “on a separate writing-pad page” and tucked into the manuscript with instructions to “Insert” it soon after Van’s description of the euphoria of making love to Ada, Van writes the following:

For the sake of the scholars who will read this forbidden memoir with a secret tingle (...) – its author must add in the margin of galley proofs which a bedridden old man heroically corrects (for those slippery long snakes add the last touch to a writer’s woes) (...) the rapture of her identity, placed under the microscope of reality (...) shows a complex system of those subtle bridges which the senses traverse – laughing, embraced, throwing flowers in the air – between membrane and brain, and which always was and is a form of memory, even at the moment of its perception. I am weak. I write badly. I may die tonight. (220)

Once again fantasy races fact in “never-ending rivalry and girl-giggles,” this time “throwing flowers in the air” as they run, and as “those long slippery snakes add the last touch to a writer’s

⁴¹ Further resonances activate when one remembers the passage in *Speak, Memory* (1966) where Nabokov derides his “miserable” first attempt at writing a poem: “I vaguely remember the mention of ‘memory’s sting’ – *vospominan’ya zhalo*.” (Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 175).

woes.” Van’s euphoric appreciation of Ada, “the rapture of her identity placed under the microscope of reality,” is said to be the glue that has held Van’s manuscript, and indeed his mind and his senses, together. By imparting a “secret tingle” to the scholars he anticipates – or “future recollects,” if we remember our time with Foster – will pick up and read his “forbidden memoir,” Van passes on the euphoric qualities of his paramnesic fits, even as the “snakes” of his now-painful illness sting and consume him.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: DOES THIS CHANGE HOW WE READ *ADA*?

In the novel’s final chapter, Van’s epileptic symptoms appear horrifically painful: “Sudden ice hurtling down the rain pipe: brokenhearted stalactite” (583). Van explains that he and Ada dismissed his illness “for a whole summer of misery” as little more than a simple “touch of neuralgia.” Once properly diagnosed by his Swiss doctor, Lagosse, Van finally admits to himself that, rather than a mere touch, each of his painful fits is more like “[a] giant, with an effort-contorted face, clamping and twisting an engine of agony” (587). This oppressive giant of an epileptic aura seems to have dogged Van’s mental state his entire life, in one form or another. Not only have his paramnesic symptoms made it hard for him to distinguish fact from fantasy, we have ample reason to believe that Van’s writing has imprinted, and now communicates, the idiosyncratic manner in which his illness sees him experience the world. Whether knowingly, unknowingly, or a mixture of both, Van’s narrated world is an unstable blending of contradictions, jarring fantastical elements, and hallucinated temporalities. The psychological novelty of Van’s manuscript is all but confirmed when in the final chapter Van makes passing reference to Dr. Lagosse’s “intense interest

in the almost completed but only partly corrected book,” at one point excitedly exclaiming: “‘*Quel livre, mon Dieu, mon Dieu*’” (“What a book, my God, my God”) (586). Van obviously interprets his doctor’s enthusiastic effusion as praise for the quality of his art. In light of all we have unpacked, however, it seems just as likely that what Lagosse saw in Van’s book was a thrilling articulation of a rare psychological condition, and one which may just be astounding enough to attract serious notice from the psychological community. Bold, and possibly weird, though that claim may seem, it receives some immediate support on the following page. Van’s editor Ronald Oranger informs us (parenthetically, where many of Nabokov’s best secrets are hidden) that since Van’s death, “Dr” Lagosse has been made a full Professor (587). In the preface to the English edition of *Glory* (1971) – two years after *Ada*’s first publication – Nabokov acknowledges that many of his novels contain subtle paratextual markers that exist to create fictional levels “beyond the time-frame of the novel in an abstraction of the future that the reader can only guess at.”⁴² *Ada* contains a marker such as this in the form of its brief prefatory note:

With the exception of Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Oranger
a few incidental figures,
and some non-American citizens, all the persons
mentioned by name in this book are dead.

[Ed.]⁴³

⁴² V. Nabokov, *Glory*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), xiv.

⁴³ This passage does not even have a page number. Since the first page of the first chapter is Page 3, and there are two pages between that and the note in question – the first saying simply “Ada” and the second “Part One” – and since there are no roman-numerals on any of the pages leading up to this, the prefatory note could be said to be on Page 0. To me, at least, this seems consistent with Nabokov’s sense of humour.

We already know that the non-American Lagosse is still alive, through Oranger's parenthetical acknowledgement of his promotion. Lagosse's promotion may be as significant a last-minute revelation as Van's suggestion that Antiterra, the planet on which the events of his memoir have all supposedly taken place, is actually a fictional construct, and he lives in the mid-twentieth-century on the Earth-resembling Terra after all (582). It points to the most remarkable aspect of Van's memoir as decreed by his doctor, who, according to a pair of crucial paratextual markers, occupies a fictional level outside of Van's narration. Dr Lagosse was most likely struck by the text's unintentionally vivid illustration of how the outside world appears to someone with Van's unusual neuro- and psychological ailments.

The briefly sketched figure of Doctor/Professor Lagosse brings to mind another Doctor, Dr Weber, the psychiatrist in charge of Daniel Paul Schreber, whose illness formed the basis for one of the most famous psychiatric case-studies of the early twentieth century. Schreber wrote his book, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903), in order to explain the complex internal logic of an extensive network of paranoid delusions – including that he was in direct communication with God through the rays of the sun tickling his nerve-endings – and to argue a case for his release from incarceration. Perhaps predictably, his *Memoirs* had the opposite effect, as Dr Weber's testimony to the court – included as an appendix to most editions of Schreber's book – demonstrates:

[Schreber's *Memoirs*] are not only valuable from the scientific medical [sic] point of view for assessing the total character of his illness, but they also afford ample support of practical value for the understanding of the patient's behaviour.

(...)

When one looks at the content of his writings, and takes into consideration the abundance of indiscretions relating to himself and others within them, the unembarrassed detailing of the most doubtful and aesthetically impossible situations and events (...) one finds it quite incomprehensible that a man otherwise tactful and of fine feeling could propose an action which would compromise him so severely in the eyes of the public, were not his whole attitude to life pathological, and he unable to see things in their proper perspective, and if the tremendous overvaluation of his own person caused by lack of insight into his illness had not clouded his appreciation of the limitations imposed on man by society.⁴⁴

I have cherry-picked those passages, of course, but Weber could just as easily be talking about Van. Our narrator's abundance of indiscretions extends far beyond his cruel, and "usual," withering wit, from the rape of an underage concubine (357) to the blinding of photographer Kim Beauharnais with an alpenstock (441). He certainly overvalues his own person, to paraphrase Weber, and does not understand his limitations; Van expends a great deal of air in his "Treatise" arguing against the existence of the future, and that he personally is immune to death in quite a literal sense – "Who said *I* shall die?" (535). Those concordances aside, however, the point is that Dr Lagosse could easily be intended to serve a similar narrative function as does an unwitting Dr Weber in Schreber's book. If Van's memoir was indeed the prestigious discovery that led to Lagosse's promotion, I would like to think

⁴⁴ D. P. Schreber, *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, trans. and ed. I. Macalpine and R. A. Hunter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 275, 283.

it had something to do with the book's carefully woven network of ecstatic tingles and paramnesic tangs.

If reaching any totalising “answer” to the passage I opened with has ended up exceeding the ambit of this chapter, I hope its exploration of Van's paramnesia in such a way as to raise some interesting and, as far as I am aware, novel questions about the troubled psychology of our narrator has proven consolation enough. Van's sanity, or lack thereof, has only been lightly questioned in Nabokov scholarship so far, and a great deal more work is needed to unlock the ambivalent secrets of his memoir.

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**MEMORY, IMAGE, AND COMPASSION:
NABOKOV AND BENJAMIN
ON CHILDHOOD**

In his early paper on psychotherapy of hysteria included in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), published together with Josef Breuer, Sigmund Freud pointed to a recurring feature of his patients' memory.¹ Namely, many of them claimed to be in command of their life narratives which they saw as fully consistent, chronologically organized and gapless. However, when analyzed carefully during the therapy, the stories turned out to be broken and scrambled. Thus, Freud was able to define the deconstructive gesture of doing away with the apparent consistency of the patients' life narrative and bringing to the fore their shattered nature as the first step in the healing process.

¹ S. Freud, *Zur Psychotherapie der Hysterie*, in *Studienausgabe. Ergänzungsband* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2000), 85-87.

A few years later, with his psychoanalytic theory and practice already more or less established, in his famous analysis of the Dora case (1905), he was able to add a dialectical compliment to this early insight.² Now he claimed that the discovery of the scrambled nature of the life narrative as remembered by his patients – a discovery which demands going beyond the apparent consistency that the patient often believes to be an obvious quality of his memories – is actually the proof for his illness being of mental (namely hysterical) rather than of somatic nature. In other words, if a patient with somatic symptoms is able to tell his/her life truly consistently, it is just his/her body that is ill. If, however, the doctor is able to show the shattered nature of the narrative – even while the patient thinks everything is fine with his/her story – then the somatic symptoms are to be seen as resulting from the conversion from the mental to the somatic. Moreover, Freud believed to have thus found a definition of mental health and the aim of his therapy: the aim would be to create not an apparent but a true consistency of the patient's life narrative; if, after the treatment, the patient is able to remember things in a fully consistent, chronological, gapless way – he or she may be seen as cured.

Of course, Dora's treatment itself being only fragmentary, even at this stage Freud did know that this ideal is never to be reached completely – but an ideal it was. It is the ideal of symptoms being dissolved into recollections and of the subject regaining his/her sovereignty by mastering his/her gapless life narrative in his/her memory. Moreover, in an appendix to his report on the case of little Hans (1909), Freud added one more dialectical compliment to his ideal vision of health.³ Namely, he claimed that when Hans visited him as an adult man he was unable to remember either his childhood neurosis, or the treatment. The knot has been

² Freud, *Bruchstück einer Hysterie-Analyse*, in *Studienausgabe*, vol. 6, 95-97.

³ Freud, *Analyse der Phobie eines fünfjährigen Knaben*, in *Studienausgabe*, vol. 8, 123.

disentangled and what remained was just a straight, eventless piece of string. A consistent narrative or empty memory: these two ideals dialectically complement each other. Either way, the string has been straightened up.

Now, not much later Freud was forced to revise his early optimism, mostly as a result of his analysis of the Rat-Man and the Wolf-Man. The case of the Rat-Man (1909) taught him – or so we can read it – that the compulsive images and symptoms are never to be disentangled into elements of a consistent life narrative, but rather into constellations of images and habits that simply cause less suffering.⁴ The case of the Wolf-Man (1918) taught him that our life narrative will never form a straight line, because it will always be marked by strange anachronistic loops with some later events activating and partly shaping some earlier ones as a result of that maddening phenomenon he called *Nachträglichkeit* or “afterwardsness.”⁵ Thus, while Freud never admitted it openly, the ideal of the straight string of our life narrative had to be abandoned – even as an ideal.

In this (implicit) abandonment of the early ideal Freud would have been supported by two very different authors who devoted quite a while to meditations on the mechanisms of memory, namely Walter Benjamin and Vladimir Nabokov. It is pretty clear that neither of them would have agreed with Freud’s initial vision, but it is not so easy to define what exactly they thought about the structure of memory and about the way we tell our life narratives to ourselves and others. In an attempt at such an approximate definition I would like to arrange an encounter between two key texts by these two authors, namely, between Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood around 1900* and Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*.

⁴ Freud, *Bemerkungen über einen Fall von Zwangsneurose*, in *Studienausgabe*, vol. 7, 35-103.

⁵ Freud, *Aus der Geschichte einer infantilen Neurose*, in *Studienausgabe*, vol. 8, especially 220-223.

The links, tensions, similarities and differences between these two books are numerous, fascinating and highly instructive. The complexity of this constellation is truly awe-inspiring, so in order not to remain in the state of paralyzing awe I will begin by stating the following. Both texts were written by political exiles. Benjamin began writing his book just before he was forced to leave Berlin in 1933, but the main work was done after that date, while the author lived in Paris. Thus, while Benjamin, from his Parisian exile in the 30ties, is remembering his Berlin childhood, Nabokov, mostly from his American exile, is remembering his Russian childhood as well as partly his own life in Berlin in the 30ties, with no Benjamin around anymore. Both texts were rewritten and revised by their authors numerous times, Benjamin being ultimately unable to complete and publish his text as a book, for both internal and external reasons. Both texts are consciously doing away with the early Freudian ideal of a consistent, gapless, chronological life narrative to be recovered and mastered by the remembering subject. They are consciously fragmentary and not-really-chronological (in the case of Benjamin: not chronological at all). More importantly, they are much more interested in capturing in language the worlds of child's experience than reporting the so-called events: both of history and of biography. Benjamin disregards the events almost completely, Nabokov does "relate" them, but chooses them highly capriciously, omits many and deals with some a number of times, imitating the circling and zigzagging nature of our memory. Indeed, both texts constantly meditate on the very process of remembering and the remembered subject constantly enters into interaction with the remembering one.

Perhaps we can at least partly grasp the complex nature of these two texts by saying that what they are aiming at is not a consistent narrative, but rather a series of flashing images appearing in and by means of language. As for Nabokov, this distinction between narrative and images can perhaps help us

capture the author's anxious urge to freeze the flow of time, both in an attempt to save the lost ones and in an attempt to present the ultimate futility of such an enterprise. I shall come back to this point at the very end of my essay. In case of Benjamin – with whom I would like to deal first in more detail – the idea of image as the actual aim of the memory efforts is most explicitly stated.

In the foreword to the latest version of his Berlin book, Benjamin writes openly that when he realized he was going to lose the city of his childhood he decided to conjure up *the images* capturing his childhood experience as a sort of vaccine against the coming exile.⁶ The intriguing idea of vaccine seems to suggest that the images of a childhood that is already gone contain the virus of loss and so, when injected, can save the remembering subject from the feeling of radical loss induced by the actual exile. Beautiful, paradoxical and melancholy as this argument is, it implies a still relatively optimistic ideal of the possible mastering of the past experience together with its losses. In the text proper, Benjamin makes even stronger claims on the capabilities of memory images. In one of the short chapters of the book, he recalls his fascination with the little packages his rolled up socks used to form. He liked to invert the packages and get the “content” out, only to notice that the content was the package itself.⁷ In his earlier essay on Marcel Proust, he uses the same image in order to apply it quite explicitly to the workings of memory. According to Benjamin, Proust inverted the little packages of his memories, so out of the dialectic interplay between the package (i.e. the texture and medium, or the How of memory) and the content (i.e. what is remembered, or the What of memory) something third would spring: namely, in Benjamin own words, *an image*. This image does not show the

⁶ W. Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. Howard Eiland, in *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael Jennings et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 1996-2003), vol. 3, 344.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 374.

past “objectively” but it captures something much more important, i.e. the way the child has experienced things. Thus, the memory images are able to show, as Benjamin says, “the true surrealist face of existence.”⁸

This is, I believe, the gist of the epistemology underlying the book on Berlin. According to Benjamin, a child’s subjectivity – its body always already interwoven with its linguistic abilities – fluctuates dialectically between individuation and participation in the surrounding world. By somatic participation in the world (with language, senses and movement always collaborating with each other), the child collects bits of experience that cannot be thetically stated in an objective report. Now, the remembering subject tries to imitate the dynamics by diving into the past with his/her own language and then re-emerging again. What has been recorded as the somatic/sensuous experience is to pop up on the surface of language as an image and break the temporal flow of the narrative. The images stand in an inextricable connection with what Benjamin calls “names,” the fragments of the true language from before the Fall and thus also bits of truth as such, even if Benjamin is not fully consistent about this relation. Most often the “names” are not to be identified with actual words, but rather they should be seen as manifested by the images appearing in language, the images produced by a constellation of phenomena evoked by the text. In some cases, though, Benjamin does seem to perceive the actual proper names of places or people as capturing bits of truth, but even then the names appear not simply as isolated, conventional linguistic signs but always surrounded by a dense and neatly reconstructed aura of multiple images, as the heart of their constellation.

⁸ W. Benjamin, *On the Image of Proust*, trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 240.

However this may be, what is at stake is more than just a vaccine against exile. Although Benjamin does away with the idea of the consistent, linear life narrative, he does not give up on the idea of truth about our lives that is to be reached in memory images. Admittedly, what he means is not the boring objective truth of how things really were, but rather the true image of the surprising, surreal face of reality as captured by children in their linguistic and somatic experience. Admittedly, as the language needs to break in order to open itself to the images, the remembering subject of this language is radically redefined in the very process of remembering. But if the ill subject cured by Freud is redefined into a new one by discovering that his/her life narrative was only apparently consistent and then by establishing real consistency and mastering his own past in the memory narrative, so does Benjamin's remembering subject redefine him/herself and in this redefined form grasps the image-truth about his/her past, even if he/she does it in flashes rather than in a story.

Now, one can point to at least one passage in *Speak, Memory* that can be seen as at least partly corresponding to Benjamin's meditations on memory and name. The theological pathos of regaining the bits of the prelapsarian language is obviously absent from Nabokov's text and what appears on the level of language is a literally understood, conventional name rather than an image. This very name, however, is identified by Nabokov as an echo or the crystallized essence of an image. Thus, at the end of chapter seven, having described an emblematic penholder with "a miraculous photographic view of the bay" in Biarritz where he spent his vacation, miniaturized and seen as if through a peep-hole of memory, Nabokov announces that now he does remember a name he has been desperately searching for:

And now a delightful thing happens. The process of recreating that penholder and the microcosm in its

eyelet stimulates my memory to a last effort. I try again to recall the name of Colette's dog – and, triumphantly, along those remote beaches, over the glossy evening sands of the past, where each footprint slowly fills up with sunset water, here it comes, here it comes, echoing and vibrating: Floss, Floss, Floss!⁹

Indeed, the traces of people on the beach or elsewhere might disappear irrevocably, but the *gloss* of the sand reappears in language, echoed and rhymed, as the proper name of the dog.

Although, as we shall see shortly, this passage does have a pretty close equivalent in Benjamin, this parallel should not make us miss the crucial difference between the respective epistemologies embedded in Benjamin's and Nabokov's books. Let me put it this way. In his seminal essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin studied the fate of the very idea of the original in our times.¹⁰ He famously pointed out not only that this notion does not apply to the new media such as photography or film, but that the discovery of mechanical reproduction retroactively ruins the idea of the original in traditional art. Oddly enough, even though Benjamin was still rewriting his Berlin book while working on this famous essay, there seems to be no interaction between these two texts. The Berlin book is "pre-photographic" in the sense that it still implies the belief in the very possibility of getting to the original source – to the original images that form the true self of the remembering subject. Now, it might seem that Nabokov is no different in this respect or that he is following even less revolutionary an epistemology. Isn't his autobiography a sequence of recollections that may be fragmentary

⁹ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York, Vintage Books, 1989), 151-152.

¹⁰ W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 101-133.

and somewhat random, but are nevertheless (to be seen as) true in a rather traditional sense of the word?

I do not think this is the case. Although on the face of it, in its technique and style, Nabokov's book appears to be much more traditional an autobiography than the scrambled and wild series of memory experiments that forms the Berlin book, these are, indeed, only appearances. Paradoxically enough, and of course unwittingly, Nabokov follows Benjamin's own insights concerning the status of the original much more faithfully than Benjamin himself is. Incidentally, not without a skillful use of actual photographs and photography as a metaphor, in his book of memory he is constantly demonstrating our inability to grasp the original image and hence the truth about ourselves. More precisely, he questions the very existence of the original – perhaps not only in the age of the mechanical reproduction. As W.G. Sebald rightly observes in his essay on Nabokov's autobiography: "despite the evocative accuracy of his memories, he sometimes wonders whether that Arcadian land ever really existed. Cut off irrevocably as he was from his place of origin by the decades of terror in Russian history, he must surely have felt that retrieving one of its images caused him severe phantom pains."¹¹ In Nabokov's view, both as exiles and adults (i.e. exiles from the land of childhood) we are but copies of ourselves and our memories are copies, too. As copies, as simulacra, they are fake even if they are accurate, which, by the way, they rarely are, our memory being always already mixed with phantasy. Admittedly, as we have seen, Benjamin's vision of truth of our memories does not have much to do with the Aristotelian definition of truth as correspondence; but a belief in truth it is. It is a belief that, going beyond the memory of dull facts, we can capture the surrealist experience of our childhood in linguistic images-names.

¹¹ W. G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*. Trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 143.

Nabokov ultimately rejects any notion of truth in memory and shows how – rather than mastering our memories and thus achieving self-knowledge – we keep on wandering in the hall of mirrors and reproductions, taking copies for the originals and our phantasies for true recollections, incapable of recovering anything substantial.

This may seem to be a rather extreme vision of Nabokov's epistemology of memory. In order to substantiate it, and in order to show the contrast between Benjamin and Nabokov, let us take a look at one of the parallel passages in the two books. In the section entitled – yes! – *Butterfly Hunt*, Benjamin once again invokes the dialectic of participation and individualization that governs the experience of children. Remembering how, as a child, he hunted for a butterfly, he writes:

Between us, now, the old law of the hunt took hold: the more I strove to conform, in all the fibers of my being, to the animal – the more butterfly-like I became in my heart and soul – the more this butterfly itself, in everything it did, took on the color of human volition; and in the end, it was as if its capture was the price I had to pay to regain my human existence.¹²

But if the result of this interplay is to be not so much the object called butterfly, but the butterfly as hunted, as experienced, as the thing Benjamin almost was himself as a child, the procedure is repeated on the level of the remembering subject, so that the author's hunting-net (and mouth) will not remain empty, either:

The air in which this butterfly once hovered is today wholly imbued with a word – one that has not reached my ears or crossed my lips for decades. This word has

¹² Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, 351.

retained that unfathomable reserve which childhood names possess for the adult. Long-kept silence, long concealment, has transfigured them. Thus, through air teeming with butterflies vibrates the word “Brauhausberg,” which is to say, “Brewery Hill.” It was on Brauhausberg, near Potsdam, that we had our summer residence. But the name has lost all heaviness, contains nothing more of any brewery, and is, at most, a blue-misted hill that rose up every summer to give lodging to my parents and me.¹³

On the one hand, this section of Benjamin’s book seems to offer a pretty good parallel to the “Floss” passage from Nabokov’s book. Just like in the recollection of Biarritz, an actual name that resurfaces in the text captures and summarizes here the essence of a whole bundle of sensations. On the other hand, however, it can be contrasted quite radically with another passage in *Speak, Memory*, which also deals with the butterfly hunt. It is one of the most striking moments in the whole book, hilarious and melancholy at the same time, which emblematically shows to what extent – appearances notwithstanding – Nabokov is skeptical about the very possibility of grasping truth in memory. What I mean is the passage where Nabokov describes a hunt beyond the river Oredezh, on a marsh which the Rukavishnikov family allegedly called “America.” The whole thing begins like a decent recollection:

There came a July day – around 1910, I suppose – when I felt the urge to explore that vast marshland beyond the Oredezh. After skirting the river for three or four miles, I found a rickety footbridge.

¹³ Ibidem.

While crossing over, I could see the huts of a hamlet on my left, apple trees, rows of tawny pine logs lying on a green bank, and the bright patches made on the turf by the scattered clothes of peasant girls, who, stark naked in shallow water, romped and yelled, heeding me as little as if I were discarnate carrier of my present reminiscences.¹⁴

This masterful opening makes us think we are in full control of the duality of the subjects – the remembered and the remembering one – even as they are juxtaposed in this humorous passage. Thus, we really cannot expect that we are heading for a trap. And yet, having struggled through a purposefully long, dense paragraph describing the subject struggling through the bog, we come out onto the following sentences:

At last I saw I had come to the end of the marsh. The rising ground beyond was a paradise of lupines, columbines, and pentstemons. Mariposa lilies bloomed under Ponderosa pines. In the distance, fleeting cloud shadows dappled the dull green of slopes above timber line, and the gray and white of Longs Peak.¹⁵

Thus, we are truly in America, and we've been there all along, with the sad exile trying to remember, reimagine or reinvent a marsh in Russia which has become a copy of itself, a papier-mâché model with rather theatrical or cheap cinema-like naked peasant girls paddling in the shallow water. Nabokov is making fun of his readers, but so is he making fun of his own anamnetic attempts at gaining the truth and regaining his own shattered

¹⁴ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 137-138.

¹⁵ Ibid., 138-139.

identity. He knows he is a simulacrum, telling himself dubious, fake stories about his own childhood. Whatever butterflies Nabokov did successfully hunt in Russian and American Americas, in this passage he shows an empty net – and there are no names of truth to be presented to the reader either.¹⁶

I began by showing certain general analogies between Benjamin and Nabokov and then proceeded to show the radical difference. Thus, I want to end by bringing them again closer to each other. Let us take a look at Benjamin once more.

I mentioned above that Benjamin's reflections on the new media did not leave their mark on his Berlin book – just as if he were imagining his childhood as a land from before the photographic Fall of truth. Indeed, even the explicit references to photography and film in the first and last sections of the book (in its earliest version) seem to support this claim. In the first section Benjamin describes how, while posing for a photograph in an atelier, he felt that he was losing his individuality. However, the actual cause of this loss is the experiential participation or immersion in the surrounding world, rather than the mechanical reproduction which is not mentioned at all.¹⁷ In the last section a little hunchbacked daemon is identified as the owner of all the true body-images of Benjamin's own memory, the ones that were not to be consciously remembered by the adult subject and that were to be recovered in the book. Now the dwarf is showing them as if in a booklet to be flicked through rapidly, "one of those

¹⁶ Danila Siergeyev drew my attention to the fact that in the Biarritz passage Nabokov may be playing with the word "loss" as literally hidden both in the word "gloss" and, more importantly, in the name "Floss." If we follow this brilliant suggestion we may argue that even in that passage, while seemingly declaring the triumph of memory, Nabokov is consciously ridiculing himself and his attempts at regaining the names of his childhood: the very name he regains is the hollowed name of loss which only emphasizes his inability to retrieve the truth of his past.

¹⁷ Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, 390-393.

that preceded cinematography.”¹⁸ Indeed, the memory images Benjamin has in mind come from the age before the cinema.

And yet, there is one single reference to the photographic image itself in Benjamin’s book and it is most striking. There is, namely, a whole section devoted to the Imperial Panorama, which – while leaving out the issues of technical reproducibility – addresses briefly some of the themes that were to be of much importance for Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*. What is most remarkable, however, is a short passage which concerns a peculiar sound. Benjamin writes:

There was no music in the Imperial Panorama – in contrast to films, where music makes traveling so soporific. But there was a small, genuinely disturbing effect that seemed to me superior. This was the ringing of a little bell that sounded a few seconds before each picture moved off with a jolt, in order to make way first for an empty space and then for the next image. And every time it rang, the mountains with their humble foothills, the cities with their mirror-bright windows, the railroad stations with their clouds of dirty yellow smoke, the vineyards down to the smallest leaf, were suffused with the ache of departure.¹⁹

Thus, nothing changes in the image, but the sound of the bell makes us look at it as if it were already going or gone, thus turning the brief moment between the sound and the actual departure into an unbearably intense moment of the anticipated apocalypse.

¹⁸ W. Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*, in: W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989), vol. 4, p. 304. The comparison does not appear in the latest version of the section which served as the basis for the English translation published in the *Selected Writings*.

¹⁹ Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, 347.

Now, this apocalyptic piece may be read side by side with one of the most moving passages in *Speak, Memory*, namely, the conclusion of chapter three. For here is Nabokov:

I see again my schoolroom in Vyra, the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window. Its reflection fills the oval mirror above the leathern couch where my uncle sits, gloating over a tattered book. A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. The robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die.²⁰

It would seem that Benjamin and Nabokov are saying two radically opposed things or speaking of two radically opposed experiences. Benjamin is remembering a frozen, melancholy image which is about to disappear and which – due to the sound of the bell – is surrounded by a thin black rim of its own doom. Nabokov is remembering a frozen, shining image which seems to annihilate time and makes ourselves seem spectral. But the difference is only apparent. Dialectically complementary, both images show the very same thing: the heartbreaking drama of passing and loss, with Nabokov, self-ironically, trying to hold his loved ones in an image and showing, at the same time, the futility of the attempt. The very immobility of the image ironically evokes the inevitability of passing.

It is also in these two images that a key aspect manifests itself: the aspect of compassion. In Nabokov it is the compassion for the loved and lost ones; in Benjamin it is extended into the compassion

²⁰ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 76-77.

for the people and things we haven't known but whom we watch in the Imperial Panorama. And perhaps it is compassion which can form a common ground between the two authors – beyond the radical split between Benjamin's belief in truth and Nabokov's skepticism. On the one hand, compassion may be the true name of Benjamin's non-Aristotelian truth. The true image is not the one which agrees with reality, but the one which makes us grasp the misery of the lost ones. This is, indeed, the gist of the epistemology of the *Arcades Project* the arrival of which is, so to speak, signaled by the very bell in the Panorama section of the Berlin book. On the other hand, compassion may be lying at the very heart of Nabokov's aestheticism. He is no moralist and he might be, true, interested only in the aesthetic effect. And yet, the hidden hunchbacked dwarf that moves his aesthetic machine and does not allow it to become an empty doll might be the ethical moment of compassion. But if this is the case, then there is one more aspect to Nabokov's project which, incidentally, I find missing in Benjamin. However sure of himself Nabokov may often pretend to be – and however full of himself he might have been indeed – he is also almost explicitly telling us that he cannot do what he would like to do most, that is, bring back his lost ones. Thus, apart from evoking the images of compassion for those he loved, he also begs his readers – to feel compassion for the author himself.

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Gerard de Vries

**MEMORY AND FICTION IN NABOKOV'S
*SPEAK, MEMORY***

Nabokov offers the readers of *Speak, Memory* much guidance on how to read his autobiography. He opens his autobiography with an elaborate statement about his belief in timelessness, and in his own immortality. For a few pages we are allowed to forget this preamble, before the reader is notified that following “the thematic designs through one’s life” should be the true purpose of autobiography.¹ In the revised edition of his autobiography Nabokov added a “Foreword” and an “Index.” This index, writes Nabokov, lists some of the themes “connected with his past years,” a helpful hint to divulge some of these “thematic designs.” Moreover, Nabokov wrote in 1950 a final chapter for his autobiography, “Chapter Sixteen,” which was only published in 1999. In this chapter, Nabokov says that his book is entirely based on these thematic patterns which have been planned

¹ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 27.

“by unknown players of games.”² In this chapter he also elucidates some of its dominant specimens. And these players, whom in his autobiography he also calls “tender ghosts,” may be members of his family and friends who have passed away and watch over the quick (139). So it seems that *Speak, Memory* does not only provide conclusive evidence that Nabokov existed, but contains in its folds also the demonstration that his soul, like the souls of his predecessors, is still alive somehow. Our task, as readers, is now well-defined: we simply have to follow the themes pointed out in the “Index” and in “Chapter 16” and see for ourselves that these themes belong to patterns which precede Nabokov’s life and might proceed beyond it.

I have tried to follow Nabokov’s directions in a paper for the 2012 St. Petersburg Nabokov Readings, but my quest did not bring me far. Take for example the two presences of General Kuropatkin, which are unified by Nabokov into a so called “match theme” (27). It has been referred to numerous times by Nabokovians, but as far as I know no one has been able to explain its assigned meaning, or even why these matches matter at all. And we may also have a closer look at the most tragic event in Nabokov’s early life, the death of his father on March 28, 1922. Nabokov was informed about his father’s assassination by a telephone call. This telephone call interrupted his reading of Alexander Blok’s verse on Italy to his mother. Nabokov writes that he “had just got to the end of a little poem about Florence, which Blok compares to the delicate smooky bloom of an iris” (49). Nabokov most likely took this passage from his diary.³

² “Chapter Sixteen.” *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (London: Penguin, 2000, 238-251), 241.

³ The part of his diary devoted to this event is quoted in B. Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 191-193. Referred to as *VNYR* in subsequent references.

The rich imagery of this phrase: the Italian city, the art of Blok, the smoke and the flower, radiates to other dramatic events, such as the final parting with his first love, Tamara, during a summer evening in St. Petersburg when the sky was filled with the dark smoke of burning peat. "It can be proven," Nabokov writes, "by published records that Alexander Blok was even then noting in his diary the very peat smoke I saw" (241).

This seems a very remarkable coincidence; the loss of two beloved ones, closely linked with the writings of Blok. This becomes even more surprising when we read that Alexander Blok ends his Florence poem with the image of a sky blackened by the smoke of a burning city.⁴ (If one compares the lines from *Speak, Memory* quoted above with those of Nabokov's diary, it appears that he added the words "to the end" in his autobiography.) However, during the summer when Nabokov last saw Tamara, St. Petersburg suffered from burning peat constantly. Blok mentions it (at least) twice in his diary, on June 16, and on August 6, which takes away the uniqueness of Nabokov's references.⁵ And his last meeting with Tamara is no longer so very heartrending when one learns that Nabokov had "presumably" just seen Eva Lubrzenska, a "young lady of fashion" with whom he had an affair for already half a year.⁶

Despite his emphasis on the patterns which design his life, Nabokov also frequently grounds his awareness of timelessness on his childhood memories. It is the ecstasy Nabokov as a boy experienced during the hunting of butterflies, during his bicycle rides at sunset and when recollecting his schoolroom in Vyra that

⁴ See K. Mochulsky, *Aleksandr Blok*, trans. D. V. Johnson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 254.

⁵ See D. M. Bethea, "Nabokov and Blok," in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. V. E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 380 and Mochulsky, *Aleksandr Blok*, 388.

⁶ Boyd, *VNRY*, 130, 123.

convince him that “nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die” (77). In this respect Nabokov has many precursors, of which the most distinguished ones are probably William Wordsworth and Marcel Proust.

Nabokov refers to Wordsworth at the very beginning of *Speak, Memory* when he tells that in his childhood he “was unaware that time (...) was a prison” (20). This refers to Wordsworth’s “Ode. Imitations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” where the poet relates how “Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy.”⁷ And Nabokov also encapsulates Proust’s great work *Remembrance of Things Past* as concisely as possible. Proust’s opus begins when the narrator recalls the particular evening when he as a small boy is waiting for his mother’s good night kiss. Because she has to entertain visitors, she is not willing to go upstairs to the boy’s bedroom. During the waiting hours that ensue the boy becomes so upset that his mother decides to read a book to him to calm him. This book is *François le champi* written by George Sand. At the very end of Proust’s works, after about three thousands of pages, the narrator, now much older, happens to come across this very same book. He is so moved that “tears come to [his] eyes.” And the happiness he feels makes him aware of “something whose value was eternal.”⁸ In Chapter 3 of *Speak, Memory* Nabokov tells about similar experience, how he after some decades comes across a book he cherished in his childhood, *Les malheurs de Sophie*, by Mme de Ségur (also the author of *François le bossu*). This releases a number of reminiscences that ignite the notion that “nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die” (77).

⁷ W. Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works* (London: OUP, 1939), 587-590, lines 67-68.

⁸ M. Proust, *Remembrance of Thing Past*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and T. Kilmartin, 3 vols (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 1:44; 3:918; and 3:1093.

Certain memories that are often visited may acquire a certain fixation. Nabokov calls such recollections “postcards,” Proust talks about photographic “negatives.”⁹ Like stills from a movie they become disconnected from the story they belong to. They acquire, in Nabokov’s words, “a deathly gloss.” There are also memories which harbour such emotional value that they are very unlike these immobilized relics. Wordsworth called these special remembrances “spots of time,” Proust uses the French word “pan,” and Nabokov refers to a “patch of the past,” and also to a “caramel,” a vessel that despite its small size was used to sail the Atlantic Ocean.¹⁰ Such spots of time reveal, when revisited, a vitality and an inexplicable happiness. And it is these memories which are marked as possessing an eternal value by Wordsworth, Proust and Nabokov.

There is, however, something strange with the happiness attributed to childhood memories. Too many people have testified such blissful moments, even those whose youth was quite miserable. A most suspect part of happy childhood memories is the sun shining eternally. In the very first recollection Nabokov relates in *Speak, Memory*, the sun is mentioned four times: there is a “strong sunlight,” and “lobed sun flecks” (21). Young Nabokov walks from “sun fleck to sun fleck” and his father’s dress come[s] “out like the sun” (22). Likewise the first walk recalled by Proust, the “Méséglise way,” is made in “the full glare of the sun.” The “sunlight fell... implacably from a motionless sky” and “cast a checkered light upon the pound” while throughout “the heat of the sun” is felt (1:

⁹ V. Nabokov, *The Gift*, trans. M. Scammell in collaboration with the author (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 17. Proust, *Remembrance*, 3: 931.

¹⁰ See J. Bishop, “Wordsworth and the ‘Spots of Time,’” repr. in *William Wordsworth*, ed. G. McMaster (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 440-463. See J. B. Foster, Jr. *Nabokov’s Art and European Modernism* (Princeton: PUP, 1993), 119; Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 75, and V. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 143. Cf. V. Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 588: “are not our childhood memories comparable to (...) caravels, indolently encircled by the white birds of dreams?”

147-150). The sun accompanied Wordsworth's childhood, despite the many showers in the English Lake District, as well: "We'll talk of sunshine and of song, / And summer days, when we were young."¹¹ In his fictitious memories *Coming up for Air*, George Orwell writes "it was summer all the year round." "[B]efore I was, say, eight, it's always summer weather that I remember."¹²

In the story titled "The Bishop" Anton Chekhov sights "[w]hy did those long-past days, gone beyond recall, seem brighter, richer, and more festive than they had been in reality?"¹³ In his autobiography Chesterton makes the same observation, as he cannot understand why childhood recollections "lift anybody into the seventh heaven of happiness?"¹⁴ And Chesterton, who seems the last person in the world to be at a loss for an answer, continues by adding that he had "never seen any sort of rational explanation."

Russian memoirists have given part of an answer by telling that it is not the past but the adult reminiscences of the past that cause such bliss. Sergey Aksakov, whose *Years of Childhood* seem to me as fine as Nabokov's memoirs, writes that he had such elated experiences only when he "had grown into maturity."¹⁵ And Alexander Herzen is even more pointed when he writes that only "when [one] discovers that life is practically over, and that all that remains [is] a mere continuance of the past," that he discovers "the brightness and warmth and beauty of early recollections."¹⁶

An explanation for this phenomenon might be that during one's life one has been able to dispel all miserable and painful events from one's memory. I suppose that "repressed" is the term preferred by Freudians. I don't think this explanation is much

¹¹ "To a Butterfly" (Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works*, 106.)

¹² G. Orwell, *Coming up for Air* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 37.

¹³ A. Chekhov, *Selected Stories*, trans. J. Coulson (London: OUP, 1963), 348.

¹⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986), 33.

¹⁵ S. Aksakov, *Years of Childhood*, trans. J. Duff (Oxford: OUP, 1983), 216.

¹⁶ A. Herzen, *Childhood, Youth and Exile*, trans. J. Duff (Oxford: OUP, 1980), 50.

to the point. If one could successfully obliterate all unfortunate parts from one's past, one would be most willing to live in the past again. But nobody has such a wish. Proust's narrator clearly remembers how very unhappy he was while waiting for his mother (1: 41). Lytton Strachey, to give a very convincing example, wrote about his parental home showing similar conflicting sentiments. When he dreams about its drawing room he becomes "positively delighted." At the same time he writes that he "can imagine nothing which would disgust [him] more" than to have to return to that house.¹⁷ "I'm finished with this notion of getting back into the past," writes George Orwell.¹⁸

Nabokov has expressed the same sentiment, albeit, of course, much more circumstantial. In *Pnin*, the protagonist, after "thirty-five years of homelessness" and exile, finds a house in which everything reminds him of Russia (144). "Never before in Nabokov's work has a character come so close to truly 'regain' a genuine physical paradise," writes Richard Borden.¹⁹ The house could have been one in "Kharkov or Kazan," and outside grow "Russian garden graces." The reflections of the lights are remindful of the sunlight colours of Russian country houses, and the china closet rumbles in the same way as they did in his Russian past. Pnin even measures his garden in "arshins," an obsolete Russian word for yard (144-5).

Earlier in the novel we see Pnin entering a bookstore with a "Scotch-taped" parcel (99). This shop is owned by a "Mr Tweed" (100). His trip to the summer house of his friend Kukolnikov leads him to "Mount Ettrick," a name mentioned no less than three times (111-12).

¹⁷ L. Strachey, "Lancaster Gate" in *The Shorter Strachey*, eds. M. Holroyd and P. Levy (London: OUP, 1980), 2.

¹⁸ Orwell, *Coming up for Air*, 215.

¹⁹ R. Borden, "Nabokov's Travesties of Childhood Nostalgia," *Nabokov Studies* 2 (1995), 129.

Why these references to Scotland, and two of its streams, the river Tweed and the Ettrick Water? Because these contain a warning that Pnin should better not try to revive his Russian past in his new house. Between the Tweed and the Ettrick rivers runs the Yarrow Water. This river lends its name to a well-known poem by William Wordsworth, titled “Yarrow Unvisited,” of which the penultimate stanza goes as follows:

Be Yarrow stream unseen, unknown!
It must, or we shall rue it:
We have a vision of our own;
Ah! Why should we undo it?
The treasured dreams of times long past,
We'll keep them, winsome Marrow!
For when we're there, although 'tis fair,
'T will be another Yarrow!²⁰

And we know what happens to Pnin, as he has to leave his house soon after he moves in.

Instead of oblivion it is the imagination that renders the past its glamour and splendour it never possessed in reality. To explain how imagination beautifies the past, we cannot do better than refer to William Hazlitt, England's finest essayist (*pace* Dr Johnson). Hazlitt conflates time and space: “[d]istance in time has much the same effect as distance of place,” he writes. “In looking at the misty mountain-tops” they “lose their grossness and their husk, are rarefied, expanded, melt into softness and brighten into beauty.”²¹ The same is expressed in the often quoted lines

²⁰ Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works*, 293.

²¹ W. Hazlitt, “Why Distant Objects Please,” *Table Talk* (London: J.M. Dent, 1925), 255-56.

by Thomas Campbell: “‘Tis distance lends enchantment to the view / And robes the mountain in its azure hue.”²²

In John Shade’s poem “Mountain View” the first lines also tell how the imagination gives splendour to remoteness: “Between the mountain and the eye / The spirit of the distance draws / A veil of blue amorous gauze.”²³

The closeness between remembered images and invented ones is beautifully expressed by Nabokov’s phrase that “[m]emory [meets] imagination halfway in the hammock of [a] boyhood’s dawns.”²⁴ Marcel Proust is saying much the same as he concludes that the memory only produces images which need interpretation and completion by means of the memoirist’s art.²⁵ Not surprisingly, Nabokov concludes his discussion of Proust’s opus with referring to these very passages, in his *Lectures on Literature*.²⁶

The art of a memoirist mirrors that of a painter. However rich a painter’s imagination might be, whatever story he wishes to tell, in the end there is only one picture in which the artist has to confine all his ideas. The memoirist’s position is its opposite; he has only a few stylized images, drawn from memory, and out of these he has to make an entire story.

Proust’s biographer, George Painter, says that *Remembrance of Things Past* “is not, properly speaking, a fiction, but a creative autobiography.”²⁷ Perhaps we should regard *Speak, Memory* in a comparable way, not as a straightforward autobiography, but as a novel about Nabokov’s childhood.

²² Quoted in M. Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. A. Davidson (London: Fontana, 1966), 38.

²³ V. Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 115.

²⁴ Nabokov, *Ada*, 70.

²⁵ Proust, *Remembrance*, 3: 912.

²⁶ V. Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. F. Bowers (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), 249.

²⁷ G. Painter, *Marcel Proust* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), xiii.

And what about the metaphysical claims we started this paper with? Perhaps we should remind ourselves what Matthew Arnold said of Wordsworth's art, that "we cannot do him justice until we dismiss his formal philosophy."²⁸ This means that I quite endorse D. Barton Johnson's advice not to emphasize Nabokov's "otherworlds philosophy," because it "deflect[s] attention from the area of Nabokov's greatest originality – the brilliance of his style and wit."²⁹

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²⁸ M. Arnold, *Essays in Criticism* (London: J.M. Dent, 1964), 304.

²⁹ D. B. Johnson and B. Boyd, "Prologue: The Otherworld," in: *The Shape of Nabokov's World*, Vol. 1 of *Nabokov's World*, eds. J. Grayson, A. McMillin and P. Meyer (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 21.

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**MEMORY'S INVISIBLE MANAGERS:
THE CASE OF LUZHIN**

I would like to set my discussion of Nabokov and Memory in the context of *The Defense*, for a number of reasons: it is Nabokov's first novel in which the problem of memory acquires a truly sinister dimension (true, Ganin's reminiscing also verges on obsession and is highly dubious, but its destructive, fatal potential is not equally prominent); second, it is in *The Defense* that Nabokov develops the narrative strategies which later became the hallmark of his fiction: 1) the weaving into the story of thematic patterns whose repetition calls the reader's attention to interpretive keys (in Luzhin's case that would be, for example, mechanical dolls, manikins or puppets, or the theme of the musical prodigy, the Wunderkind); 2) the agonistic relationship between the main protagonist and the implied author who – like later in *Pnin* – turns out to be a manipulative figure, an insidious biographer; and finally, 3) the thing that has always fascinated me about Luzhin's story is that in it Nabokov seems to be indulging in a peculiarly perverse

exercise, namely – a dark caricaturization of his own childhood, artistic career, family life, as if his intention was to prepare (in photographic terms) a negative for the brilliant scenes of *Speak, Memory*. This sort of approach, as is well known, has been mocked and discouraged by Nabokov on many occasions, most vehemently in the forewords to the English translations of his Russian novels. Introducing *The Defense* to the English reader, he wrote:

the little Freudian who mistakes a Pixlok set for the key to a novel will no doubt continue to identify my characters with his comic-book notion of my parents, sweethearts and serial selves. For the benefit of such sleuths I may as well confess that I gave Luzhin my French governess, my pocket chess set, my sweet temper, and the stone of the peach I plucked in my own walled garden. (11)¹

I think, however, that we may benefit by being a little froward in dealing with Nabokov's foreword which, as Donald Barton Johnson has demonstrated, should be treated with great circumspection (it puts the reader on the wrong track with its chess-problem comparisons and the mention of scenes which are in fact not to be found in the novel).² Anne Smock, in her book *Double Dealing*, warns that we should not be too "confident that what is written in a [Nabokovian] preface, or said during an interview, is free of the duplicity that abounds inside a novel."³ How, for example, are we to understand Nabokov's claim that

¹ V. Nabokov, *The Luzhin Defense* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000). All following citations from the novel will refer to this edition.

² D. B. Johnson, *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985).

³ A. Smock, *Double Dealing* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), cited in: G. Green, *Freud and Nabokov* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 90.

“[of] all my Russian books, *The Defense* contains and diffuses the greatest ‘warmth’” (10)? Far more than “lovable,” as Nabokov puts it in the foreword, Luzhin is piteous and wretched. There is something suspicious about this warmth placed in inverted commas; almost a touch of cruel irony, detectable also in the comment that “I greatly enjoyed taking advantage of this or that image and scene to introduce a fatal pattern into Luzhin’s life” (8). In fact, we can even imagine that it is not Nabokov speaking in the Preface, but a malicious double of the author, the shadowy, intradiegetic narrator of *The Defense* itself [“a celebrated writer, a very pale man with a very conspicuous goatee” (90)⁴], akin to the figure of Vladimir Vladimirovich in *Pnin*.

By treating *The Defense* as the dark reverse of *Speak, Memory* I do not wish to suggest that it dramatizes actual events in Nabokov’s life which have been censored or repressed by the autobiographer (although *Speak, Memory* no doubt contains purposeful and telling omissions). I am simply interested in certain uncanny symmetries between the two books, and contrary to what Nabokov says they are more numerous and subtle than the simple fact that the author lends his character his governess, a chess set, the (supposedly) sweet temper, and the peach stone. Generally speaking, Nabokov seems to be pondering with horror the possibility that if circumstances had been just slightly different the general pattern of his own happy childhood would have yielded a nightmarish scenario. The country estate of the Luzhin family, with its sawmill, is easily recognizable as Nabokov’s Vyra, but instead of the paradisiacal world described in *Speak, Memory*, the atmosphere of the place where Luzhin grew up is stifling, marked by loneliness and alienation. The parents, glorified and described with such tenderness in *Speak, Memory*, in *The Defense*

⁴ The only time the narrator speaks in the plural, as if forgetting himself, is in chapter three. He is obviously a former classmate of Luzhin’s. Recalling a day when one of their teachers was late for class, he says: “Our bliss, it seemed, was bound to be realized” (48).

are selfish, superficial people, incapable of establishing any emotional ties with their son. Talent, instead of introducing the young man to the exciting world of prose and poetry, “brilliant planets and pale galaxies,”⁵ binds his fate to an art that is not quite art, a “spectral art” (110), as Luzhin’s wife puts it, which serves to deepen his detachment from the world, or – clinically speaking – to exacerbate his autism. This is another dark reversal in *The Defense* – chess, a game which Nabokov loved, whose combinations he saw as poetic, and placed his “problems” alongside his “poems,” becomes a dangerous obsession, trapping Luzhin on the two-dimensional plane of sterile abstraction, debarring him from life, its full-blooded details and sunny trifles which, as Nabokov puts it in his *Lectures on Literature*, the true artist notices, collects and fondles – I will return to this negative characterization of chess in a moment. This Janus-faced symmetry between Nabokov (the “happy double” (126) with which Luzhin is unable to merge) and Luzhin (the terrible double) is also visible of course when we look at the women in their lives: one marries his muse, one who appreciates and understands his art, the other – a well-intentioned, but after all narrow-minded woman, who treats Luzhin like a child, or a helpless puppy, and is unwittingly cooperating with the evil designer of Luzhin’s life.

Apart from these generalities, however, there are certain important details which are at the heart of some of *Speak, Memory*’s most important meditations on the past and artistic remembrance, and which are repeated (or rather – prefigured) in *The Defense*, but endowed with a different, darker aura, triggering bleak or even sinister associations. Compare for example the descriptions of mushroom-picking: in *Speak, Memory* it is Nabokov’s mother who takes “great pleasure” in this “very Russian sport of hodiť po gribi (looking for mushrooms). Fried in butter and thickened

⁵ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 216.

with sour cream, her delicious finds appeared regularly on the dinner table. Not that the gustatory moment mattered much.”⁶ Mushrooms are referred to here (inaccurately, by the way) as “beautiful plants” and Nabokov dwells on their beautiful details: the spongy flesh, the colors, “a grass blade sticking to a (...) cap, or moss still clothing the bulbous base of a (...) stem.”⁷ The scene ends with a description of a rather charming creature: “a tiny looper caterpillar (...) measuring, like a child’s finger and thumb, the rim of the table.”⁸ Luzhin’s perception of mushroom-picking is in very different tones: they are sticky and soiled, and Luzhin is ostentatiously unwilling to share his father’s excitement:

His son followed behind him at a few paces’ distance, with his hands behind his back like a little old man, and not only did he not look for mushrooms but even refused to admire those his father, with little quacks of pleasure, unearthed himself. (58)

An animal is also mentioned here, but a somewhat repulsive one: “the undersides [of the mushrooms were] holey, and occasionally a yellow slug would be sitting there” (58).

Let us take another example: in *Speak, Memory*, one of the most luminous and hopeful tableaux of memory is the description of Nabokov’s schoolroom in Vyra:

I see again my schoolroom in Vyra, the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window. Its reflection fills the oval mirror above the leathern couch where my uncle sits, gloating over a tattered book. A sense of security, of

⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁸ Ibidem.

well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die.⁹

The same bumblebee in *The Defense* connotes quite different things: instead of the open-eyed vision, there is a sense of drowsiness, boredom and ominous reverie; instead of warmth and security – a feeling of alienation and entrapment:

Afterwards, lolling on the drawing room couch, he drowsily listened to all manner of slight sounds, to an oriole's cry in the garden, to the buzzing of a bumblebee that had flown in the window, to the tinkle of dishes on a tray being carried down from his mother's bedroom – and these limpid sounds were strangely transformed in his reverie and assumed the shape of bright intricate patterns on a dark background; and in trying to unravel them he fell asleep. (60)

Even the wallpaper in Nabokov's and Luzhin's rooms is at once similar and ominously different: both have blue designs, but whereas in *Speak, Memory* the focus is on the color which underscores the atmosphere of dreamy "summer warmth," in *The Defense* it is the repetitiveness of the pattern that is emphasized; the blue band of the wallpaper forms a vicious circle within which the seemingly innocent scene – a goose chasing a puppy – takes on the menacing aspect of relentless persecution: "The wallpaper there was white, and higher up was a blue band on which were drawn

⁹ Ibid., 52.

gray geese and ginger puppies. A goose advanced on a pup and so on thirty-eight times around the entire room” (32-33). It is almost as if scenes in Nabokov’s novel were casting a shadow over similar ones in his autobiography and bringing out their dark potential: the roses, the bumblebee suddenly appear ambiguous; instead of pleasant laziness and safety, they start connoting sinister repetition.¹⁰

But perhaps the most striking resemblance between the autobiographer of *Speak, Memory* and the evil designer of Luzhin’s life lies in their method – the setting up of repetitive patterns, or “thematic designs” as Nabokov calls them when recounting the changing fortunes of General Kuropatkin. The story is as follows: Nabokov meets Kuropatkin in 1904, at the height of his career and, at the same time, shortly before his greatest failure – the defeat of the Russian army under his command during the Russo-Japanese war; the old General shows the boy a trick with matches; many years later, during the Revolution, Kuropatkin is hiding from the Bolsheviks, he is disguised as a peasant and meeting Nabokov’s father in St. Petersburg, accosts him, asking for a match to light a cigarette. At this point Nabokov breaks off, saying that he hopes the General evaded imprisonment, thereby suggesting that he does not know what happened to him, and goes on to state “the true purpose of autobiography”:

What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme:
those magic ones he had shown me had been trifled

¹⁰ Although Nabokov is well-known for his abhorrence of “[the] notion of symbol itself” and even claimed to have “once failed a student (...) for writing that Jane Austen described leaves as ‘green’ because Fanny is hopeful, and ‘green’ is the color of hope” (V. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 264), I nevertheless think it is interesting in the context of the Vyra schoolroom passage to note the symbolic meanings popularly associated with blue roses: 1) because blue roses do not exist nature, they symbolize not only imagination, but also that which is unattainable and wishful; 2) and given that they are the result of fabrication, blue roses are also associated with manipulation.

with and mislaid, and his armies had also vanished, and everything had fallen through, like my toy trains that, in the winter of 1904–05, in Wiesbaden, I tried to run over the frozen puddles in the grounds of the Hotel Oranien. The following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography.¹¹

The connection between the two scenes is quite tenuous and in fact, as I have argued elsewhere,¹² it is established by means of a narrative trick which in cinematographic terms could be called a “dissolve” – the merging of one image into another (and here, of course, we should keep in mind the sinister aspect of the movie industry in Nabokov's novels, and, in *The Defense*, Valentinov the movie producer). The autobiographer in the Kuropatkin episode is not following any design that is objectively there; he is imposing it. Rephrasing Nabokov's own words from the foreword to *The Defense*, we may imagine him saying: “I greatly enjoyed taking advantage of the [match] image to introduce a (...) pattern into Kuropatkin's life.” In this case the pattern is meant to fend off anxiety in the face of chaos; it introduces a semblance of order and is hopeful. Such fictive memory is soothing, redemptive and kindly (by which I mean sparing towards Kuropatkin whose fate, I suspect, Nabokov knew quite well – but this is a different story, which we do not have time to delve into here¹³).

On the other hand, Nabokov's novels present us with designers of patterns who are malevolent, or simply mean (as in

¹¹ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 12.

¹² M. Wiśniewski, “Nabokov's ‘Screen Memory’,” *Nabokov Studies* 15 (2017).

¹³ More about this in my essay “Retouching the Past: Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* as Fictive Autobiography,” especially p. 312–313. Cf. K. W. Shands, ed., *Writing the Self: Essays on Autobiography and Autofiction* (Stockholm: Södertörns högskola, 2015).

Pnin); Nabokovian stories of mnemonic deviants (as we might call them) convince us that patterns can be oppressive, reductive, fatal; that attention to patterns might be a harmful obsession, or that the very perception of patterns (similarities, repetitions) might be a delusion. In short, artistic and redemptive memory is constantly threatened by its sinister double. One scenario in which this Janus-faced ambiguity of memory is played out is when the artist-memoirist becomes aware that the patterning of the past, which he thought was of his own making, is in fact a repetition of clichés. In other words, it is a question of agency: to his horror, the memoirist discovers that he cannot narrate his story on his own terms, but that an invisible manager (as Luzhin calls him) is narrating it (95).

One of those oppressive, alien narrative devices in Luzhin's life (one which reduces the specificity of his art to a cliché) is that of the musical prodigy, the sentimental story of the Wunderkind discovered late at night by his father playing the piano. In fact, when we reread the novel, Luzhin's opposition to this pattern can already be detected in chapter one when his grandfather, composer and violinist, is mentioned for the first time:

A daguerreotype of his maternal grandfather – black sidewhiskers, violin in hand – stared down at him, but then completely vanished, dissolving in the glass, as soon as he regarded the portrait from one side – a melancholy amusement that he never omitted when he entered the drawing room. (23)

What on first reading seems just a childish amusement, takes on the aspect of a desperate but futile attempt to make the image of the famous grandfather go away; or in other words – to resist the imposition on his life of a narrative frame which automatically posits him as the distorted, aberrant version of

the young virtuoso. Within this frame he is doomed to become a disappointing caricature of the commonplace fantasy indulged in both by his father and later by his fiancée. Luzhin's predilection for caricature, his only other artistic talent apart from chess (also mentioned in chapter one where Luzhin senior recalls "the unbelievable caricature" (17) which his son drew of the governess) may likewise be understood in this context: it does not have to be interpreted as prefiguring Luzhin's later madness (the madness of seeing his own life in a distorted way, of insisting that it is governed by sinister similarities), but may be taken as another symptom of resistance – Luzhin repays with caricature for being himself, from the very beginning, insidiously caricatured. From the beginning, since the terms in which a young violinist introduces Luzhin to chess are of course already those of the evil designer of Luzhin's story: "'What a game, what a game,' said the violinist, tenderly closing the box. 'Combinations like melodies. You know, I can simply hear the moves'" (43). However, what is even more striking for the re-reader of *The Defense* is that in the foreword Nabokov, or perhaps – as I suggested before – the author of the novel who is also its inconspicuous character, mentions that he himself had to struggle against the very same forces which oppress Luzhin by attempting to replace his chess-identity with a musical cliché.

Poor Luzhin has had to wait thirty-five years for an English-language edition. True, there was a promising flurry in the late thirties when an American publisher showed interest in it, but (...) our brief conjunction ended abruptly upon his suggesting I replace chess by music and make Luzhin a demented violinist. (7-8)

While scoffing at this suggestion, Nabokov is in fact surreptitiously introducing the reader not only to one of the

major themes of his novel, but also to its central problem – that of narrative control; or speaking more broadly – of the creative artist’s autonomy. This seemingly irrelevant anecdote reveals something crucial about the author of *The Defense* (whoever he might be): he is doing to Luzhin exactly what the American publisher tried to do to him. Strictly speaking then, the author is both rejecting and following the publisher’s advice, inasmuch as his narrative strategies bring about the effacement of Luzhin by the figure of the musical prodigy. Luzhin the chess player has to be erased out of the picture so that someone else’s design can prevail, which is made evident by Luzhin Senior’s symbolic filicide when he is planning his last novel: “‘He will die young,’ he said aloud (...). ‘Yes, he will die young, his death will be logical and very moving. He will die in bed while playing his last game’” (78).¹⁴ In other words, Luzhin’s genius cannot define itself on its own terms. This is most evident in the description of the game Luzhin plays with Turati. The fact that Luzhin is unable to use his painstakingly prepared defense against the Italian grandmaster, that he is, in other words, deprived of initiative, is also made manifest on the narrative level by the use of musical metaphors in the scene. In a sense, Luzhin has lost the game the moment its progress started to be defined in terms of a musical composition, a concert. This is the place where the narrator, Luzhin’s father and his fiancée are all in collusion against Luzhin. Consider the comparisons: 1) “At first it went softly, softly, like muted violins”; 2) “Then, without the least warning, a chord sang out tenderly”; 3) “forthwith a trace of melody very softly manifested itself on Luzhin’s side”; 4) “then

¹⁴ It is worth noting that the “familiar pattern” whose “consecutive repetition (...) in his present life” (213-214) Luzhin recognizes with a shudder in chapter 13 is also, strictly speaking, a “familial pattern,” since it is produced and reproduced by his family members: it originates with Luzhin’s grandfather, is developed by his father, and unwittingly sustained by his wife.

there was another sudden flare up, a swift combination of sounds” (137). What is doubly interesting in this scene is that traces of Luzhin’s resistance to the pattern can, I believe, be glimpsed in it. Here’s what I mean.

The only moment in the novel when Luzhin tries to explain the beauty of chess on his own terms is in chapter eight when his future father-in-law naively asks him if “there [is] a move in chess that always enables one to win” (121). It is the only time when the discourse of algebraic notation enters the text – a discourse which the implied author of the novel has to eliminate from his narrative precisely because it is so un-novelistic and could put off a reader who does not know much about chess. This, by the way, is one of the surprising things about *The Defense* – that the novel, in fact, requires so little knowledge of chess. It is also, I think, a symptom of the evil designer’s triumph over Luzhin. Unsurprisingly therefore, when Luzhin starts “talking chess,” giving the position of White,¹⁵ he is immediately silenced:

“We’ll simply take the endgame position at the point it was interrupted today. White: King c3, Rook a1, Knight d5, Pawns b3 and c4. Black...” “A complicated thing, chess,” interjected the gentleman and jumped buoyantly to his feet, trying to cut off the flood of letters and numbers having some kind of relation to black. (121-122)

But there is one more detail that is telling in this scene, namely – Luzhin speaks of two kinds of “moves” and in the way they are described there is the tension between what I call

¹⁵ It is quite important here that this is Luzhin’s own position in the most recent game: Luzhin is playing White and he is winning, as opposed to his position in the novel where he is identified with Black that always has to lose in a chess problem.

Luzhin's terms and those of the narrator, the invisible manager. There are, says Luzhin, "quiet moves and strong moves": one metaphor is in terms of sound, melody or music – it is part of the oppressive pattern and of course "quiet moves" are what in the end undo Luzhin; the other metaphor, the one which more accurately describes Luzhin's chess temperament when he was a budding chess player and still uninfluenced by Valentinov, is in terms of force. That is why I said you get a glimpse of the contest between the two narrative strategies in the account of the game with Turati where apart from the musical terminology there is a brief attempt to speak precisely in terms of force: "then there was another sudden flare up, a swift combination of sounds: two small forces collided and both were immediately swept away" (137). In this light, the story of Luzhin is that of a forceful artist (setting his own patterns, introducing his own rules) who suddenly finds himself in an unexpected predicament: he is deprived of his own voice, reduced to the position of an imitator; the artistic devices which define him unexpectedly turn out to be not his own, in short – he has become a cliché. This is exactly what the narrator tells us about Luzhin's career as grandmaster, once again comparing him to a composer, but also, notably, for the first and only time in the novel, to a writer:

Luzhin's game, which in his early youth had so astounded the experts with its unprecedented boldness and disregard for the basic, as it seemed, rules of chess, now appeared just a little old-fashioned compared with the glittering extremism of Turati. Luzhin's present plight was that of a writer or composer who, having assimilated the latest things in art at the beginning of his active career and caused a temporary sensation with the originality of his devices, all at once notices that a change has imperceptibly taken place around him,

that others, sprung from goodness knows where, have left him behind in the very devices where he recently led the way, and then he feels himself robbed, sees only ungrateful imitators in the bold artists who have overtaken him, and seldom understands that he himself is to blame, he who has petrified in his art which was once new but has not advanced since then. (97)

This anxiety (characteristic of the avant-garde artist) is what constantly torments Nabokov's fictional characters (including, to some extent at least, the fictional character of the autobiographer in *Speak, Memory*). That their narratives of the past will be revealed as fictive is not their major concern (in fact, they glory in their own artistic power to make the past adhere to patterns contrived by them; to fall in step with their narrative, so to speak). The other side of this artistic hubris, however, is the nagging suspicion that instead of being pattern-makers they are in fact pattern-followers. That they are not narrating their own story, but are unwittingly taking part in a performance staged by an invisible manager. The dream of perfect artistic control has its cost, which Nabokov is fully aware of, and which he ironically acknowledges by surrounding his happy memoirists (Fyodor in *The Gift*, his alter-ego in *Speak, Memory*) with mnemonic neurotics of all sorts.

My purpose in bringing out traces of Luzhin's resistance to the oppressive design which the narrator weaves around him was to argue that *The Defense* is primarily a story about the creative artist's anguish that he is not speaking on his own terms. I am disinclined to read this novel simply as a study of madness, or more precisely – of the difference between the chimeras of the lunatic's mind and artistic imagination, as some critics have done. Julian Connolly, for example, argues that "*The Defense* is a characteristic Nabokov text in that it exposes the artistic shortcomings of its protagonist while asserting the skill of the

author in the same arena.”¹⁶ Connolly then, like many others, sees the novel in terms of a conflict between “good” and “bad” artists. Although they share certain basic characteristics, most notably – the “ability to seize upon and recombine perceived elements of the visible world” in order to transform reality, which the artist does by “following (...) thematic designs” in it, what sets them apart is that the “good” artist does not permit “a creative fantasy to reach the stage [in Nabokov’s own words] of ‘morbid exaggeration’.”¹⁷ What this implies is that the “good” artist is always aware that the designs he seems to follow are not objectively there, but belong to the order of “creative fantasy,” the purpose of which is “to sustain a world of harmony,”¹⁸ or in other words – to affirm order and significance in a world fraught with loss, confusion, disappointment and death. The “exaggeration” of the “bad” artists, on the other hand, consists in their inability to recognize the designs for what they are: creative fantasies, poetic visions. This is the gist of Alexander Dolinin’s observation that “Luzhin does not correctly understand the very nature of ‘repetitions,’ for they are not exact doubles, but variations, like harmonies in an inexact poetic rhyme.”¹⁹ The “bad” (and thus verging on “mad”) artists do not accept the tentative nature of the designs they perceive, their “loose” hold on reality, so to speak. In short, like so many Nabokovian characters, they take imagination for reality. This has two, interconnected consequences. First, because reality tends to slip away from the grasp of the designs which the artist imposes on it, a “bad” artist like Luzhin will gradually turn away from real life (and real human relations) to embrace an ever more rigid,

¹⁶ J. W. Connolly, *Nabokov’s Early Fiction: Patterns of Self and Other* (Cambridge University Press, New York 2009), 95.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

¹⁹ Quoted in: E. Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010), 210.

but also ever more sterile (or, as in Kinbote's case, ever more narcissistic) level of order. "Such characters – says Connolly – retreat from the unpredictable world of everyday life in order to construct a new world where they hope to exercise absolute authority."²⁰ But since the "bad" artist does not recognize the fact that the designs he follows in the world, or in the course of his life, are of his own making, and since reality eventually comes back with a vengeance, he starts believing in the existence of some alien force bent on his destruction. As Geoffrey Green puts it in his book on Nabokov and Freud: "No matter how fervently the alternative reality is built up, the worldly assassin will arrive to destroy it, 'a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus'."²¹

Of course, this reading of Luzhin or Kinbote is not unwarranted, but it seems to me that it takes at face value some of Nabokov's strong opinions in which he insists on an absolutely strict separation between artists and madmen, or between "good" and "bad memoirists." I have in mind statements such as: "Lunatics are lunatics just because they have thoroughly and recklessly dismembered a familiar world but have not the power – or have lost the power – to create a new one as harmonious as the old"²²; or: "The bad memoirist re-touches his past, and the result is a blue-tinted or pink-shaded photograph taken by a stranger to console sentimental bereavement. The good memoirist (...) does his best to preserve the utmost truth of the detail."²³ And yet, it seems to me, what makes many of the Nabokovian characters so fascinating, including the character of the memoirist in *Speak, Memory*, is the fact that in their case the strict lines separating artists from madmen, "good" memory from "bad," become

²⁰ Connolly, *Nabokov's Early Fiction*, 85.

²¹ Green, *Freud and Nabokov*, 110.

²² V. Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1980), 377.

²³ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 158.

blurred. After all, when John Shade steps in to defend Kinbote, he famously says: “That is the wrong word... One should not apply it to a person who deliberately peels off a drab and unhappy past and replaces it with a brilliant invention.”²⁴ The “wrong word” to which he reacts is, apparently, “lunatic,” but what would the right word be? Perhaps “artist.” It is telling, however, that neither word appears in this passage, which suggests that Kinbote occupies an ambiguous position between lunacy and art. Similarly, although Nabokov often associates “bad” memory with the tricks of photographic retouching and cinematographic techniques,²⁵ his own reminiscences in *Speak, Memory* are no doubt “tinted” and “retouched” on many occasions, presented in “frames”; the details which are supposedly preserved by the “good” memoirist in their “utmost truth” are more likely fabricated and distorted, since – as Nabokov admits – “[the] distortion of a remembered image may not only enhance its beauty with an added refraction, but provide informative links with earlier or later patches of the past”²⁶; and finally, many of the tableaux of childhood which Nabokov paints in his autobiography are clearly meant “to console (...) bereavement,”²⁷ even if their sentimentality is tempered by Nabokov with subtle irony.

Therefore, rather than seeing *The Defense* as a portrait of the “bad” artist/memoirist, I suggest to treat it as an exploration of every artist’s nightmare: of “the terror – as Eric Naiman puts

²⁴ V. Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1984), 219.

²⁵ Most notably in *Ada, or Ardor* where Marina, who is dubbed by Van Veen a “dummy [with a] screen-corrupted mind,” says: “Someday (...) one’s past must be put in order. Retouched, retaken. Certain ‘wipes’ and ‘inserts’ will have to be made in the picture; certain telltale abrasions in the emulsion will have to be corrected; ‘dissolves’ in the sequence discreetly combined with the trimming out of unwanted, embarrassing ‘footage,’ and definite guarantees obtained; yes, someday – before death with its clapstick closes the scene.” V. Nabokov, *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 253-254.

²⁶ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 122.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

it – that comes from finding oneself in someone else’s text.”²⁸ This can be interpreted not only to mean that a character within a Nabokov novel comes to realize his fictional status, the fact that he is pinned down “to the two-dimensional board of fictive life,”²⁹ but also – that a writer discovers with dismay how unoriginal and clichéd are the things he took to be the hallmarks of his unprecedented style. This is the anxiety underpinning many of the passages in *Speak, Memory*, for example when Nabokov begins to doubt the genuineness of his feelings towards Tamara, suspecting that they may have been the side-effect of his literary infatuations, primarily – with the poetry of Blok. In short, the threat of having one’s individual vision reduced to a commonplace fantasy, or – more generally – of having one’s life narrated by someone else, an “invisible manager,” is not an external one (a calamity which can befall the work of art in the hands of a deranged critic), but an integral part of the dramas staged by Nabokov in his novels, a permanent ambiguity present in his works.

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²⁸ E. Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely*, 203.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

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**TIME, HISTORY AND OTHER
PHANTOMS IN *THE REAL LIFE
OF SEBASTIAN KNIGHT***

THE BLUNDERING BIOGRAPHER

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is in many ways unique in Nabokov's oeuvre. It is his first novel written in English and it expressly introduces for the first time a peculiar metafictional puzzle that will become Nabokov's hallmark. The narrator's ontological status is highly ambiguous: he lacks a name, deigning to provide his readers with a single letter only, as if insisting on deleting his persona from the story he is constructing, that is, the biography of the recently deceased and supposedly brilliant writer Sebastian Knight, who happens to be V's half-brother. We know little about V's personal affairs, yet, the biography which V states to be as free from invention

as humanly possible,¹ is nothing if not the story of V's search for the truth of Sebastian's life, in which V and not Sebastian is cast in the role of the knight errant. V claims to operate on a level superior to that of his subject (Sebastian as a human being and writer), and yet strangely appears to mingle with the colorful characters of Sebastian's fictions, of which we first learn from the summaries of Sebastian's novels dutifully provided by V.² In Linda Hutcheon's words, "each of Knight's novels functions as a *mise en abyme* of Nabokov's novel itself."³ This rather extraordinary state of affairs is passed over without any kind of commentary by the narrator, indicating that either he is completely oblivious of the uncanny resemblances (which would prove that he is a callow biographer indeed), or that these anomalies are actually deliberately constructed by him, to trap the reader in an involuted textual universe.⁴

This narrator appears to be particularly "un-Nabokovian": diffident and reticent, uncertain of his narrative power, painfully conscious of the gaps and missing links in his story, blundering in his pursuit of a faithful image of Sebastian's life. V at once appeals to the reader's sympathy: his vulnerability, modesty

¹ "I want to be scientifically precise. I should hate being balked of the tiniest particle of truth..." V. Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 63. All further in-text references refer to this edition.

² For detailed analysis of narrative embedding see S. Rimmon-Kenan, "Problems of Voice in Vladimir Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*," *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature* 1.3 (1976): 489-512; A. Olcott, "The Author's Special Intention: A Study of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*," in C. R. Proffer, ed. *The Book of Things about Vladimir Nabokov* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1974).

³ L. Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), 54.

⁴ J. Connolly provides a different reading of the correspondences between Sebastian's fictions and V.'s adventures: "Is he [V.] so immersed in the world of Sebastian's fiction that he projects those identities onto people he meets, or, on the contrary, is he imposing his own experiences onto 'Sebastian's' fiction, inventing fiction by Sebastian that he populates with people he himself has met?" – J. Connolly, "The Challenge of Interpreting and Decoding Nabokov: Strategies and Suggestions," *Cycnos* 24.1 (2007).

and self-depreciation are endearing and seem to testify to the integrity of his character. And yet, this blundering biographer puts together a rather peculiar account. The very first thing he does when he begins his project is to burn important documents – “the two bundles of letters on which Sebastian had scribbled: to be destroyed” (36). Of course, a person who fulfils the will of his deceased brother despite his own interests appears admirable; yet, such obedience is madness for the aspiring biographer. After all, it would be quite easy to convince oneself that Sebastian’s instructions did not specify that the letters may not be read before burning. Clearly, they may not be made public, but the information concealed within the two bundles is simply invaluable as a “silent” starting point for the research into the events of Sebastian’s life. As it is, this first act of destruction *creates* the great mystery to be solved by the narrator, constructs the puzzle of the untraceable *femme fatale*.

The information thus lost is never recovered – which is another strangeness of V’s project. V guesses that the letters are from two women in Sebastian’s life: Clare and the woman for whom Clare was abandoned. Both played a great role in Sebastian’s life, both are still alive. Yet, V never manages to talk to Clare – prevented by the same quaint notions of “biographer’s ethics” that moved him to burn the documents: V finds it impossible to mention Sebastian to Clare only because she is pregnant (even though she is by now happily married). Later still Clare dies, without disclosing any of Sebastian’s secrets to his blundering biographer. The second woman proves completely inaccessible, since none of Sebastian’s acquaintances know anything about her at all. And even when by a stroke of rare and rather incredible luck V acquires a list which is supposed to include the name of the mystery woman, she continues to elude him. This proves to be a pattern: even though he is dealing with quite a recent past, he fails to get access to the memories of Sebastian’s contemporaries:

the first-hand witness accounts are either missing or prove “dead,” unsatisfactory, tainted with subjective matter.⁵

When V runs into a dead end, his strategy is to move his project forward through inspired guesswork that remains unverifiable. This is how he convinces the reader that the mystery woman is Madame Lecerf, suggesting that she is, in fact, Nina Rechnoy. As Julian W. Connolly notes, “his encounter with Madame Lecerf emits a faint odour of the absurd or farcical.”⁶ The evidence on which V bases his assumption is flimsy to say the least: she is attractive; she tells stories about a moody lover; she may have had a lover with peculiar skills which may be shared by Mr. Rechnoy’s brother; and, most crucially, she may speak Russian. This list could suffice in a mediocre detective novel, but it would be hardly acceptable in a serious biographical work. Moreover, once V makes his inspired guess that Nina is, in fact, Sebastian’s *femme fatale*, he... immediately leaves her, neglecting not only to obtain any reasonably certain collaboration, but also, and most crucially, to gain any further information about Sebastian from this most valuable – though probably unreliable – source.

V thus proves a very peculiar biographer indeed. Most importantly, he refuses to treat seriously such concepts as time, history and reality, and ends up by claiming to actually *become* his subject⁷:

⁵ Another instance of a wasted personal testimony is V’s retelling of Natasha Rosanov’s remembrances of Sebastian. The reader learns that V tracked Natasha down and managed to talk to her at length. Yet, the narrative presents the story of her relationship with Sebastian in a wilfully oblique manner, as an unfinished drawing. The episode itself appears so banal that it hardly contributes anything to the portrait of Sebastian – either as a writer, or as a human being. It is stylized out of any meaning.

⁶ J. Connolly, “From Biography to Autobiography and Back: The Fictionalization of the Narrated Self in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*,” *Cynos* 10.1 (1993), 41.

⁷ A. Olcott notes that one of the books on Sebastian’s bookshelf is *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and believes that it has a bearing on V’s final pronouncement that “he and his brother merge into one personality that might be both, either, or neither of them” – Olcott, “The Author’s Special Intention...,” 106. If so, the inference the reader should draw from such connection is very sinister.

the soul is but a manner of being – not a constant state – that any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations. The hereafter may be the full ability of consciously living in any chosen soul, in any number of souls, all of them unconscious of their interchangeable burden. Thus – I am Sebastian Knight. I feel as if I were impersonating him on a lighted stage, with the people he knew coming and going (...) I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows.

(202-203)

Nabokov in his essay “Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible” discusses biography as a genre and shows exactly how he viewed such attempts of a biographer to merge with his subject:

The fictionizing biographer organizes his finds as best he can and, since his best is generally a little bit worse than the worst of the author he is working on, the latter’s life is inevitably distorted even if the basic facts are there. (...) To give himself a rest after his labors, the biographer calmly proceeds to don his subject’s waistcoat with its heart-shaped cutout, and smoke the great man’s pipe.⁸

Many readers, however, pass over V’s audacity verging on insanity, accepting V’s claim that Sebastian’s real life resided in his works – or in the “story of his style”⁹ – and not in the facts of his life, and treating the final preposterous claim as an epiphany, its

⁸ V. Nabokov, “Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible,” trans. D. Nabokov, *The New York Review of Books*, March 31, 1988.

⁹ V. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 154-155.

truth confirmed by the beauty of its style.¹⁰ And Nabokov's essay seems to bolster this reading: "After all, what does it matter if what we perceive is but a monstrous hoax? (...) What is the difference! The joy that we derive is one that the bitterest criticism, including that which I direct at myself, cannot destroy."¹¹ Nabokov goes on to gleefully insist that if the fictions about the artist's life are injected with the same intense love one feels for the works of the artist, they gain kinship with the creations of the artist. And yet, he does not let us forget that this kinship exists only on the level of fictional existence – the fictionalized biographee joins the ranks of his own fictive creatures, and the entire pursuit of biography is still "a monstrous hoax." V's claim is clearly an instance of a biographer who becomes an impersonator, who animates the dead body of the deceased with his own thoughts, fantasies, desires – in short, we are dealing with an impostor.

THE PICTURE POSTCARD METHOD

In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* the word "history" does not appear at all, but the word "time" is a constant refrain, surfacing in the text in all its many uses, senses and guises. It is the narrator's obsession – he seems constantly to have trouble negotiating between the past, present and future. The narrative begins with the account of Sebastian's birth and childhood – a perfectly proper beginning, except that immediately tiny cracks appear in the smooth surface of the objective history. The first sentence provides the date of Sebastian's birth, the second jumps ahead

¹⁰ For instance, V. E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 147; M. Wood, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 52-53 (among many others).

¹¹ Nabokov, "Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible."

into the future, to the time of the narrator's émigré life in Paris, where he happens to meet an old Russian lady "who has for some obscure reason begged me not to divulge her name" (3). She used to keep a diary (and here we are transferred back to the 31st of December 1899, the last day of the dying century) and dutifully recorded the weather on the day Sebastian was born:

the morning of Sebastian's birth was a fine windless one, with twelve degrees (Reaumur) below zero... this is all, however, that the good lady found worth setting down. On second thought I cannot see any real necessity of complying with her anonymity. That she will ever read this book seems wildly improbable. Her name was and is Olga Olegovna Orlova – an egg-like alliteration which it would have been a pity to withhold.

(3)

Here is another curious trait to be added to the portrait of our biographer: his ethics do not require him to comply with the requests of his informers. There is, in fact, no reason to *divulge* the name – Olga Olegovna never reappears in the narrative and her role in Sebastian's life is simply null. Therefore, we must assume that our biographer is more interested in stylistic oddities – "an egg-like alliteration" – than in the relevance of the information he collects and reports. He also off-handedly states that the "collecting of daily details (...) is always a poor method of self-preservation" (3) – a strange, counter-intuitive statement to make for someone who is after the task of preserving and documenting the memory of his dead brother. Perhaps this is precisely why during V's visit to Sebastian's apartment the objects he finds there are mute, wearing an air of secrecy – he is not interested in quotidian details enough to read Sebastian's life

through the shapes of his daily companions. And yet he intuits that they do possess a memory.

But let us return to the question of the weather. After citing Orlova's report, the narrator continues:

Her dry account cannot convey to the untravelled reader the implied delights of a winter day such as she describes in St. Petersburg; the pure luxury of a cloudless sky designed not to warm the flesh, but solely to please the eye; the sheen of sledge-cuts on the hard-beaten snow of spacious streets with a tawny tinge about the middle tracks due to a rich mixture of horse-dung; the brightly coloured bunch of toyballoons hawked by an aproned pedlar; the soft curve of a cupola, its gold dimmed by the bloom of powdery frost; the birch trees in the public gardens, every tiniest twig outlined in white; the rasp and tinkle of winter traffic... and by the way how queer it is when you look at an old picture postcard (like the one I have placed on my desk to keep the child of memory amused for a moment) to consider the haphazard way Russian cabs had of turning whenever they liked, anywhere and anyhow, so that instead of the straight, selfconscious stream of modern traffic one sees – on this painted photograph – a dream-wide street with droshkies all awry under incredibly blue skies, which, farther away, melt automatically into a pink flush of mnemonic banality.

(3-4)

In the passage quoted earlier, V begins with a dry account – a fine, windless morning and the exact temperature. Now, the biographer is dissatisfied with the bareness of this report and

elaborates it with his own memory of a fine Russian winter morning. Since he is supposed to share his childhood with Sebastian, residing in the same house, this might even be considered credible. Yet, this “memory” quickly turns out to be nothing but a description of a picture postcard. “The child of memory” is amused because the projected image corresponds to often repeated descriptions of glorious Russian winter, for instance, in Pushkin’s poem every Russian child knows by heart: “*Мороз и солнце, день чудесный...*”¹² The picture postcard replaces real memory – it presents a typical scene which might have been lovely once, when the haphazard run of the sledges still surprised and pleased the child observer’s eyes, but which by now has turned into a “pink flush of mnemonic banality.”

Thus, the peculiarity of V’s memory is signaled as early as his dismissive attitude to reality. In fact, the picture postcard method of recollection is also a strategy, to which V frequently resorts: narrating the episode of the first meeting between Sebastian’s father and mother, he mentions a fox hunt in Rome, adding: “whether this was mentioned by my mother or whether I subconsciously recall seeing some dim snapshot in a family album, I cannot say” (6). The image which replaces the genuine memory itself dissolves in the mnemonic flash.

MR GOODMAN AND THE PARODY OF HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

But if V proves such an indifferent biographer, he still manages to retain the reader’s sympathy. In part, this is because he introduces

¹² “Snow, frost and sunshine: lovely morning!” – “Winter Morning,” trans. I. Zheleznova in A. Pushkin, *Selected Works in Two Volumes. Volume 1: Poetry* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1922), 41.

another figure of a biographer so incompetent and repulsive that his own peculiar methods of research pale in comparison.¹³ Alexandrov calls him “the obvious embodiment of all Nabokov reviled.”¹⁴ Mr Goodman, Knight’s former secretary, who managed to dash off a volume of his biography before V even got properly started on his task, is a perfect villain in terms of his profession: he writes his *Tragedy of Sebastian Knight* to comply with his thesis, namely, that contemporary society destroyed the sensitive soul of Sebastian Knight who therefore did not live up to the promise of his talent. As V explains,

Mr. Goodman’s method is as simple as his philosophy. His sole object is to show “poor Knight” as a product and victim of what he calls “our time” – though why some people are so keen to make others share in their chronometric concepts, has always been a mystery to me. “Postwar Unrest,” “Postwar Generation” are to Mr. Goodman magic words opening every door.

(60)

Of course, such a biographer is a disgrace to his kind, and the proper lashing he gets at V’s hands in the novel is well deserved. V expertly demonstrates the lamentable inadequacy of Goodman’s biography by quoting a series of unforgivable clichés (“‘The War,’ says Mr. Goodman without so much as a blush, ‘had changed the

¹³ Gerard de Vries points out that while V is quite right that “Mr. Goodman was no Boswell” (61), neither is V: “[his] complete lack of interest to reveal the documents he uses (...) is unlike Boswell’s assiduity (...). The dates V produces, to give another example, are highly vague or even inconsistent.” For an example of this, de Vries points to the implausible timing of V’s visit to Madame Lecerf’s country house, and of Sebastian’s death. G. de Vries, *Silent Love: The Annotation and Interpretation of Nabokov’s The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), 32, 81-82.

¹⁴ Alexandrov, *Nabokov’s Otherworld*, 143.

face of the universe’” (60)). He also indicates that Goodman’s knowledge of the facts of Sebastian’s life is seriously at fault: this biographer appears to know next to nothing about the writer’s childhood or the women in his life whatsoever. But there seems to be something that angers V much more than the biographer’s incompetence or his terrible style.¹⁵ He seems to deeply object to Goodman’s use of the idea of time, and to believe that relating one’s character, achievements, troubles and cares to the historical period in which one happens to live is an erroneous, even farcical gesture:

Time for Sebastian was never 1914 or 1920 or 1936 – it was always year 1. Newspaper headlines, political theories, fashionable ideas meant to him no more than the loquacious printed notice (in three languages, with mistakes in at least two) on the wrapper of some soap or toothpaste. The lather might be thick and the notice convincing – but that was an end of it. (...) Time and space were to him measures of the same eternity, so that the very idea of his reacting in any special “modern” way to what Mr. Goodman calls “the atmosphere of postwar Europe” is utterly preposterous.

(63)

This demonstrates that Mr Goodman’s book is a perfect parody of a historical analysis. The clichéd phrases quoted by V in addition to the already quite unprepossessing picture of the personage that he painted in the previous pages make the reader flatly reject Mr Goodman’s thesis. And yet, what exactly

¹⁵ Stuart insightfully compares the methods used by V and Goodman, finding many disturbing similarities. D. Stuart, *Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1978).

is V saying? He emphatically denies any connection between the grand narrative of history and personal fate. And this, in turn, suggests that if no such connection exists or matters, history with its upheavals and tragedies may be safely ignored. And while this view sounds quite “modern” or even “postmodern,” it is also utopian at the very least. It is undeniable that the circumstances of Knight’s life are closely linked with the historical events – if only for the reason that the Revolution threw him into emigration, cutting him off from his past. Nabokov writes this book between 1938 and 1939, when history is unignorably present in his own life, hot at his heels. As Will Norman notes,

This image of the “unseasonable” Nabokov, safely encased in a time capsule, immune to the vicissitudes of history, has had immense power. It appeals to the author’s own self-image as uninfluenced by his times, as well as to those critics who choose to play by Nabokov’s own rules by regarding him as above subjection to historicist readings. (...) In contrast to Sebastian’s history-defying composition and aesthetic (...), there remains the jarring narrative of his awkward existence within a time-bound, historical moment.¹⁶

There are several instances when history seems about to burst through the pattern of the novel, forcing the narrator to take it into account. Yet, he usually manages to ignore it, as if deliberately oblivious to the obvious. One such instance is the Berlin episode in which V visits one of the women on Silberman’s

¹⁶ W. Norman, “The Real Life of Sebastian Knight and the Modernist Impasse,” *Nabokov Studies* 10 (2006), 67-68.

list. He finds her in a house immersed in grief, immediately after the funeral of her brother in law – we observe V barging in with his private concerns at the worst possible moment. But the historical context makes this situation even more peculiar: Helen Grinstein's family is clearly Jewish, and this is Berlin in 1936. The Nuremberg Laws have already been passed, and there is much more than the natural loss of a loved one behind the grief of the family. But V seems completely unaware of this. This must be more than unawareness, however, since he also clearly tries to prevent the reader from noticing the ugly background of history – when Helene Grinstein begins explaining the condition in which he finds her, she is not allowed to finish her sentence: “Well, you see, my brother-in-law has died and... No, no, sit down. It has been an awful day” (133). The three dots – the space in which the narrator must have interrupted her, either by gesture or words – replace what, after all, must have been obvious to anyone in Hitler's Berlin.

Still another scene makes the tension between the private quest and the threatening historical context even more tangible. When V is trying to reach Sebastian before his death, rushing to the train and forgetting the address at home, he makes some calls to recover this information from a phone booth. The calls are unsuccessful, but he does manage to remember the name of the town with the help of a particular prompt:

Would I never get to Sebastian? Who were those idle idiots who wrote on the wall ‘Death to the Jews’ or ‘Vive le front populaire’, or left obscene drawings? Some anonymous artist had begun blacking squares – a chess board, ein Schachbrett, un damier.... There was a flash in my brain and the word settled on my tongue: St Damier! (195-196)

The graffiti on the walls of the booth are the signs of the times in which V and Sebastian are forced to live, whatever strategy of avoidance and denial they employ.¹⁷ The phrases on the walls are loud voices of history – fascism and communism clashing in ugly dissonance – or in suspicious unison (the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact is only a couple of years away). The chessboard between them might be read as a cliché of the playground between the warring powers – the chessboard of history. Yet, by refusing to read it in this all-too-obvious manner, V manages to recover a clue that leads him to Sebastian. Memory wins over history. Note also that the chessboard seems to be drawn over the other graffiti, partially obliterating them – and the marginal private element overlaps the general context. What appears “on the private margin of the general history”¹⁸ makes that history irrelevant.

The denial of history may therefore appear as a deliberate strategy adopted in order to escape the demands of ideology (all too often shadowing history as its demented twin) and create a safe haven within one’s art to which one may withdraw from the approaching horrors. However, the text subtly undermines this notion. True, with a hero who never wears a wristwatch and a narrator who rejects the very idea of time, Nabokov seems to suggest that history is merely one of the concepts “that have been shown (commercially) to attract mediocre minds” (60) and that therefore it must be discarded in a work of art, to avoid the trap of the cliché. But since this is precisely the argument advanced by our blundering biographer, this notion should be examined with more care.

¹⁷ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing these two episodes to my attention.

¹⁸ Leona Toker’s translation of the sentence from “Другие берега,” *Terra Incognita* (Moscow: DEM, 1990), 13 (“[П]о личной обочине общей истории.”). Cf. Leona Toker’s essay in this collection.

WHO IS V?

As many critics have noted, V may not be who he pretends to be – he may not be Sebastian’s relative at all.¹⁹ He may not even exist, functioning merely as a disguise adopted by Sebastian to write his own dark parody of a biography.²⁰ Alternatively, Sebastian might just as well be V’s fiction (another reading discussed in Nabokov criticism).²¹ However, rather than denying V’s or Sebastian’s existence, or trying to merge them into some kind of super-persona, it might prove far more interesting to allow V to retain his individual voice in the novel, with all of its puzzling ambiguities. As a matter of fact, when we examine closely some of the specific facts and dates he discloses, there begin to appear curious and perhaps meaningful omissions within the tale. One such elision concerns the narrator’s date of birth. While Sebastian’s coming into the world is elaborately described (notwithstanding the digressive, rather than factual, nature of the depiction), with his day of birth heralded in the very first sentence of the novel, V’s birthday is given no such attention.²² We learn only of the more or less six-year difference between the two half-brothers, with

¹⁹ See, for example S. Fromberg, “The Unwritten Chapters in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 13 (1967): 426-442; J. B. Sisson, “*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*,” in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. V. E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 635.

²⁰ D. Stuart, *Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody*, 37; C. Nicol, “The Mirrors of Sebastian Knight,” in *Nabokov: The Man and His Work*, ed. L. S. Dembo (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 93; B. K. Marshall, “Sebastian Speaks: Nabokov’s Narrative Authority in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*,” *Style* 23.2 (1989): 213-224. Other critics suggest that Sebastian might be directing V’s exploits from beyond – see Alexandrov, *Nabokov’s Otherworld*, 137-159.

²¹ Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, 53; K. A. Bruffee, “Form and Meaning in Nabokov’s *Real Life of Sebastian Knight* an Example of Elegiac Romance,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 34.2(1973): 180-190.

²² S. P. Stegner reads this as a suggestion that “V. does not exist at all as a separate ‘soul’” – S. P. Stegner, “The Immortality of Art: Vladimir Nabokov’s *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*,” *Southern Review* 2.2 (1966): 292.

that age relationship reiterated at every opportunity: “I was born (...) some six years later” (4), “six years my senior” (14), “when he was sixteen and I ten” (15). In all these instances, V’s age is always contingent on Sebastian’s, and no specific date is given.²³

V’s constant withholding of information on his own subject becomes conspicuous, and even somewhat comic. He behaves “as if he inhabited one of those cautious nineteenth-century novels, where the names of persons and places, and the terminal figures of dates, disappear into dashes and hints.”²⁴ Later on, this restraint on V’s part is further accentuated when the straightforward question directed at him by Madame Lecerf is left on the page without a clear answer: “‘And how old are you?’ she went on. ‘Twenty-eight? Have I guessed? No? Oh, well, then you’re older than me’” (154). What is remarkable in this seemingly casual exchange is the fact that it is only the reader (despite being a “silent witness” to the conversation) who is denied the information about the narrator’s age since, as can be surmised from the last sentence, Madame Lecerf does learn from V how old he is. Such maneuvers on the narrator’s/author’s part in this passage are surprising, pointing perhaps to some fact about V’s life he might wish to conceal from the reader.

BIRTHDATES

There is one more passage in the novel concerning the narrator’s age which, unlike the ones mentioned above, invokes a specific event fixed in time – the escape of V, his mother, and Sebastian, from Russia.

²³ Six years seems to have a special significance in the novel, not only as a temporal distance between the two half-brothers, as a chasm that keeps dividing them: at the moment of Sebastian’s death, V has not seen him for six years.

²⁴ Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, 34.

In November of 1918 my mother resolved to flee with Sebastian and myself from the dangers of Russia. Revolution was in full swing, frontiers were closed. (...) At the starting point of our train journey, we found ourselves, my mother and I, waiting for Sebastian, who, with the heroic help of Captain Belov, was trundling the luggage from house to station. (...) On our way to the station we had passed Sebastian and Belov pushing the heavily burdened wheelbarrow through the crunching snow. This picture now stood motionless before my eyes (I was a boy of thirteen and very imaginative) as a charmed thing doomed to its paralysed eternity.

(22-23)

The passage is visually arresting and its vividness distracts the reader from one interesting fact which until recently seems to have escaped scholarly attention, namely that since V. is 13 in November 1918, his year of birth must fall around the year 1905.²⁵ A closer look at the events of that year and the previous one (i.e., the time of V's conception) indeed might leave one somewhat puzzled as to the circumstances leading to V's coming into the world. The key historical event of that time was the Japanese war, declared on January 27, 1904 (old style). Participation in the war according to V "allowed my father that happy activity which helped him – if not to forget Virginia – at least to make life worth

²⁵ Boyd records 1906 as the year of V's birth, and Olcott's chronology of the novel does the same. This is most likely based on the frequently repeated statements by V that he was born six years after Sebastian. However, if he was born in 1905, this would still be consistent with these statements, if V is actually counting the calendar years (1899+6=1905). Cf. B. Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 496; Olcott "The Author's Special Intention," 119. In his 2016 monograph, de Vries does record 1905 as V's year of birth, without, however, discussing the relevance and implications of this fact – de Vries, *Silent Love*, 78.

living again” (7). Returning from the war (which ended on August 23rd, 1905 old style), V’s father quickly divorces Virginia and marries V’s mother that same year. Taking into account the time it must have taken to get back from the frontline to St. Petersburg, finalize the divorce proceedings, and prepare the wedding, the happy event probably took place at the very end of 1905. But even if we ignore these circumstances, the bare fact of V being born in 1905 would mean that he must have been conceived that same year, or (assuming that he is born at the very beginning of the year) within the last nine months of 1904. All this time is spent by his father far away from St. Petersburg, fighting the Japanese in the Far East.

There is one additional circumstance that may help to explain this paradox. Though the war was announced at the end of January, it took quite a long time for the Russian forces from the capital to actually get to the front. General Kuropatkin, the General Commander of the Russian Army, according to his diary, left Moscow on February 29th (old style).²⁶ Diaries of other officers dating from the same period indicate that some of them left the Russian capital as late as April 1904.²⁷ If Sebastian’s father did the same, it is at least feasible that V would be conceived before his departure, and then born nine months later, in January 1905.

This chronology plays havoc with the simple outline of events as set forth by V. He describes Virginia’s desertion of her husband and son as a mere whim. And yet, the chronology suggests that the time of Virginia’s affair with Palchin coincides with V’s conception. This would throw a completely different light on her

²⁶ А. Куропаткин, *Дневник (14.02.- 24.03.1904)*, *Красный Архив* 5 (1924) [A. Kuropatkin, *Diaries (14.02 – 24.03.1904)*, *Krasny Arkhiv* 5 (1924)], 90-2.

²⁷ See: А. Квитка, *Дневник Забайкальского Казачьяго Офицера. Русско-Японская Война 1904–1905 гг.* (С.-Петербург: В. Березовский. Комиссионер Военно-Учебных Заведении, 1908) [A. Kvitka, *Diary of the Transbaikalian Cossack Officer. Russo-Japanese War 1904–1905* (St. Petersburg: V. Berezovskiy. Komissioner Voennno – Uchebnykh Zavedenii, 1908)], 3.

actions: she may be simply trying to leave Sebastian's father because of *his* unfaithfulness to her, trying to pay him back in kind for *his* desertion. It would also explain why Sebastian's father is so eager to protect her honor many years later – he would be, under the circumstances, suffering from a guilty conscience. And it would also explain the strained relationship between the half-brothers: Sebastian would always see V as someone who caused his mother's departure and unhappiness.

This is, of course, only one explanation of the tangle in chronology. Another possibility would be to view V as simply not related to Sebastian, conceived by another (and unknown to us) father. This seems less likely, however, because in V's childhood memories Sebastian's father seems very fond of the younger of the brothers. Still, the question of paternity seems to be less than certain in the novel, and while as a child V might have remained ignorant of this situation, in his adulthood he must have made appropriate calculations with consequent deductions.²⁸ This might be why he chooses to talk so little of himself – or, rather, to talk much, without telling us anything in particular, and thus drawing attention to his persona as an enigma of the text, possibly more interesting than the enigma of Sebastian himself. This might be also why he declines to provide his true credentials – to prevent any possibility of an alternative enquiry into the past of his family. Let Sebastian be known only as Knight, with a mysterious Russian family somewhere in the background,²⁹ complete with grand notions of absurd chivalry, selfless honor and noble heroism. Sordid reality with its complications can be safely hidden behind this "truth."

²⁸ Sisson writes: "Curiously, in referring to his and Sebastian's father, V. usually writes, 'my father.'" – Sisson, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, 635. Perhaps, this can be explained by V's constant desire to reassert his status.

²⁹ It must be noted that Sebastian's Russian surname is never divulged – a rather odd omission in a biography.

As Olcott writes, “often V. is clearly imprecise, but whether or not he is inaccurate, mistaken, or lying is never clear, because there is in the center of the novel the intricate chronological structure which reduces any question to ultimate ambiguity.”³⁰ The intricate chronology remains hidden – V seems to work very hard making sure that this is the case. He writes a biography in which the date of its subject’s death is never mentioned (we know merely that it took place at the beginning of 1936), and in which many other key events are dated only tentatively. Apart from the personal motives elucidated above, the reason for this curious reticence must be the narrator’s attitude to time, chronology and, in a more general sense, history. Let us note that it is a historical event (the Russo-Japanese war) that exposes the problems in V’s biographical outline. History is clearly his enemy, and he does all he can to push it into the realm of the unreal, as a tired phantom, transparent old-fashioned idea, or a worn-out mask.

Be it as it may, V certainly cannot be considered a reliable source on Sebastian’s life. Thus, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is a biography which proves to be a work of imagination (at best) or a forgery written by an impostor (at worse). It may appear that Nabokov in this novel is explicating the modernist idea of the impossibility of writing a biography, earlier explored by Virginia Woolf in *Orlando* and *Flash*.³¹ But here again, more is at stake. Michael Wood suggests a tantalizing reading of the word “real” in the title of the novel: “the real life of Sebastian Knight (...) is just the life we shall never see again, the life that was once secret and is now lost. Biography in this sense is not a quest for truth but a refusal of death.”³²

³⁰ Olcott “The Author’s Special Intention,” 115.

³¹ Sissy Frank identifies *Orlando* as one of the possible sources for the idea of the fluid gender identity of Sebastian’s last lover – see S. Frank, *Nabokov’s Theatrical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 169-170.

³² Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts*, 31.

If Sebastian's reality remains uncertain, it is because his memories remain inaccessible to us. He must have left traces of his past in his books, but, even if nothing was invented, without the figure of the memoirist the unique color of his reality is missing – the image is frozen until V animates it with his imagination. V's own memories, as has been shown above, are unreliable, overwritten by the banal postcard images and Sebastian's narratives which always skirt reality by a wide margin. It seems that the precious matter of memory does not lose its value only when it remains private – once articulated, the tale replaces the remembrance, the postcard replaces the image. As *Speak, Memory* proves, Nabokov continuously struggles with this theme, trying to rescue his own memory from the figures of his fictions. In a similar manner, V usurps Sebastian's past, wearing Knight's memories like a mask or a costume, impersonating him. And the reader may play the same game. Sebastian's soul becomes "a manner of being" and is available to anyone who cares to "find and follow its undulations."

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BIOGRAPHER AS IMPOSTOR: BANVILLE AND NABOKOV

NABOKOV'S LONG SHADOW

It has already been demonstrated that John Banville is obsessed with Nabokov, that he cites Nabokov's texts continuously and that he frequently uses the older writer's literary models as scaffolding for his own structures. Imhof points out Nabokov's influence already in Banville's *Nightspawn*,¹ and insists on Nabokov's presence throughout the Irishman's *oeuvre* in many aspects:

Banville's fictions have always possessed a Nabokovian side to them, if by that term one means to denote an indefatigable interest in shape, in patterning; a magnificent mastery in using words

¹ R. Imhof, *John Banville: A Critical Introduction* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1989), 37.

to weave intricate storyteller's bookwebs and in using them in a most precise and dense, poetic manner, in creating "worlds within the word." (...) Banville has shown that he even shares with Nabokov a frivolous fondness for coincidences. And as with Nabokov's coincidences, so with Banville's: they are essentially not coincidences at all; they only appear so. What seems random, contingent betrays itself on closer scrutiny to be permeated by a sense of order.²

Banville himself does not hesitate to admit that Nabokov is an influence, making sure, however, to retain a certain detachment: "I love Nabokov's work, and I love his style"³; "Nabokov was a great love of my youth, but I find his artistic self-absorption and tone of self-satisfaction increasingly irritating."⁴ More generally, Banville willingly confirms his deliberate use of intertextuality: "books are to a large extent made out of other books"⁵; "one has to have a scaffolding, a base, so that one can then go on and do things more interesting."⁶

We can attempt to read Banville through Nabokov, finding, for instance, in *The Book of Evidence* the short-hand references to the works of the Russian-American writer, notably, *Lolita*⁷

² Ibid., 153.

³ J. Banville, B. McKeon, "John Banville: The Art of Fiction," *The Paris Review* 188 (2009), 140.

⁴ J. Banville, N. Charney, "How I Write: John Banville on 'Ancient Light,' Nabokov and Dublin" *Daily Beast*, March 10, 2012. Banville's somewhat contradictory attitude to Nabokov is discussed in J. Kenny, *John Banville* (Dublin and Portland, OR: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 43-44.

⁵ J. Banville, Rudiger Imhof, "John Banville Interviewed by Rudiger Imhof," *ILS* 6 (1987): 67.

⁶ Ibid., 69.

⁷ J. Butkutė, "Postmodern Transgressions of Narrative: An Intertextual Dialogue between J. Banville's *The Book of Evidence* (1989) and V. Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955)," *Literatūra* 49.5 (2007): 17-25.

and *Despair*,⁸ functioning as clues to the hidden essence of the Irishman's text. The same exercise may be continued almost indefinitely, moving on to other novels, finding references, direct or submerged citations, episodes that obliquely or obviously evoke Nabokovian imagery. Anyone reading Banville with a foreknowledge of Nabokov will feel the connection, will spot the references – they may be taken for granted. But in *The Newton Letter*⁹ Banville goes beyond the intertextual game of using Nabokov's works as scaffolding or road signs, as helpful clues or false evidence deliberately planted for the reader. He rewrites Nabokov – retaining the mysterious equilibrium of his prose, keeping its metaphysical riddles unsolved, but rather reformulated, with new characters wearing new masks, and a floundering and unnamed narrator whose voice is hauntingly familiar without being recognizable.¹⁰ This essay will follow the pattern of Nabokov's text in Banville's story, indicating the pernicious nature of the seemingly benevolent narrative voice, exposing the deceit of self-deprecation which conceals the self-indulgent narcissism of the biographer-hero. It will examine the epistolary theme which appears in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and is expanded into the main motif in *The Newton Letter*, becoming a metaphor of the

⁸ I. Książopolska, "Banville and Nabokov: 'A Quality of the Numinous' in *The Book of Evidence*," presented at Nabokov Readings 2016, Nabokov Museum, St. Petersburg.

⁹ J. Banville, *The Newton Letter* (London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 1999). All further in-text references refer to this edition.

¹⁰ The intertextuality of Banville's works is very complex and it would be simplistic to claim any single text as the definitive "source." Imhof discusses Henry James's *The Sacred Fount* as a possible subtext, and identifies and substantiates another crucial reference to Hugo Von Hofmannsthal's *Ein Brief* – Imhof, *John Banville*., 141, 143. Goethe's *Elective Affinities* is the immediately recognizable subtext of *The Newton Letter*, with the basic character arrangement kept intact (the married pair, Charlotte and Edward (Eduard), Otilie who is Charlotte's niece and the 'lodger' who becomes entangled with both women (Ibid., 145-147). Imhof points out, however, that the parallel with Goethe works almost exclusively through what Banville's narrator imagines (Ibid., 146), and thus, most likely, the names are borrowed by him from Goethe as alias for the characters in his own story.

human pursuit of illusion through negotiation between memory and history.

EPISTLES TO HISTORY

In *The Newton Letter* “Banville hints at the ways in which real lives are often fictionalised, in which people are made to become ‘characters’.”¹¹ It is usually read as a text about a disillusioned biographer, who is forced to painfully realize his own limitations and – by transference – the limitations of the genre. His project of Newton’s biography is abandoned, because real life appears to charm him away from it. He retires to the Irish coast, claiming to be escaping from Clio, the Muse of History, to whom he addresses and dedicates his narrative. The book we are reading is *not* Newton’s biography, though we may have been led to expect one, since this is the third novel in the *Revolutions* series, coming after *Dr. Copernicus* and *Kepler*. Yet, this is a book written *instead* of the allegedly painstakingly researched and almost completed biography of the scientist. It is written as an escape from history, as a deviation from the narrow path of fact into the wild fields of conjecture.

The text is written in the form of an extended letter, addressed to Clio, who may or may not be an actual person, a former lover, perhaps.¹² It is, thus, a confession which looks forward to the next

¹¹ M. O’Connell, *John Banville’s Narcissistic Fictions* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 161.

¹² However, one tends to agree with Mark O’Connell who states that in Banville’s texts the apparent narratee is a fiction within fiction, or a mere form: “The reader is not the object of the documents; they are, within the internal logic of the novels, entirely self-directed. Even when the narratives are nominally ‘addressed’ to implied readers – the ‘Clio’ of *The Newton Letter* (1982), for instance, or the ‘My Lord’ of *The Book of Evidence* (1989a) – these are really just imagined surrogates for the narrator’s own self, the authority to whom he must ultimately answer. These are textual self-portraits for which the narrators are objects as well as subjects.” – *Ibid.*, 1.

novel in the series, *Mefisto*, to the novels in the *Frames* series, and which also echoes the two earlier books, *Nightspawn* and *Birchwood*. Banville frequently resorts to the first person narrator, favoring the confessional style. In *The Newton Letter* the narrator explains to his mysterious correspondent why he abandoned his scholarly work, how he fell in love with the mysterious strangers met upon his arrival in Ireland and how his fascination with the Fern House family weaned him away from the unfinished manuscript. He still muses from time to time over the two strange letters written by Newton late in his life. The letter which is the book and the letters which function as riddles within it form the convoluted paper frame within which the story of the Fern House is set. The unravelling of the mystery of the Lawless family becomes the narrator's new quest and the reader familiar with Banville's earlier fictions recognizes the name and shares the fascination: the Lawlesses were featured in *Birchwood*, a strange fantastic novel about timelessly omnipresent history.¹³

The narrator, however, is at a disadvantage: he has no knowledge of the family history, nor is he able to glean any. While he listens to accounts of the past, he is too distracted by the present to pay any attention to them. He seems to deduce something about the family drama by watching – often furtively – Charlotte (with whom he claims to be in love), her niece Ottilie (with whom he is sleeping), Charlotte's husband Edward (a terminally ill alcoholic) and the boy Michael (who is at first assumed to be Charlotte's son, then Ottilie's, and finally turns out to have been adopted). The narrator suspects evil, incest, abuse. Yet, he is soon proven quite wrong in all his conjectures. Banville's reader, however, would be very likely to build hypotheses very similar to those of

¹³ In *Birchwood*, Irish history is presented anachronistically: "events and attitudes of the past two hundred years of Irish history find their parallel in the story. The cyclical effect of that history is disclosed: the futility of many actions and the repetitive struggles of political factions" – Banville, cited in Kenny, *John Banville*, 66.

Banville's narrator, because his earlier books firmly fixed such themes as indispensable attributes of his plots. The reader is betrayed together with the narrator, and the feeling of letdown creates a certain bond between them.

The narrator's predicament is almost comic: it seems that not only the distant past of the great dead man is a closed book to him, but so is the still vibrant, still accessible past of the living. And, as befits a comic blunderer, at the end of the book he arrives at a final conclusion that since the texture of life itself is such that nothing can be grasped, nothing properly deduced from it, he may as well write the biography of Newton after all, however imperfect and fictionalized it may be.

Nabokov's taciturn yet arrogant biographer in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* seems a Russian-born Doppelgänger of Banville's narrator.¹⁴ Nabokov's novel is a development of his persistent sense that the "truth" of the self is fugitive and evanescent: "Is it possible to imagine the full reality of another's life, to relive it in one's mind and set it down intact on paper? I doubt it: one even finds oneself seduced by the idea that thought itself, as it shines its beam on the story of a man's life, cannot avoid deforming it."¹⁵ The sentiment is obliquely repeated by the narrator (unnamed, except for the initial V), who hopes that placing two contrasting episodes from the life of Sebastian Knight would allow him to approximate the object of his quest, the *reality* of another's existence: "Two modes of his life question each other and the answer is life itself, and that is the nearest one ever can approach a human truth."¹⁶ He is, however, despite his pessimistic

¹⁴ Mark O'Connell discusses the resemblances between the use of *mise-en-abyme* device by Banville and Nabokov as a "method whereby the fiction can narcissistically contemplate its own reflection" – O'Connell, *John Banville's Narcissistic Fictions*, 177-178.

¹⁵ V. Nabokov, "Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible" trans. D. Nabokov, *The New York Review of Books*, March 31, 1988.

¹⁶ V. Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 135.

attitude to reality, very busy trying to construct that very “real” life out of bits and pieces of facts and, most crucially, carefully arranged passages from Sebastian’s novels. His methods appear particularly suspect, especially when viewed alongside the critique of the genre of biography in Nabokov’s “Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible” (written in 1936, near the time of conception of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*).¹⁷

SEBASTIAN’S LETTERS

In *Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, letters play a curious role. Two bundles are burned by V immediately after Sebastian’s death, even though he guesses that these are the precious missives from the two women in Sebastian’s life, Clare Bishop (his kind and generous mistress-muse) and the mysterious woman who replaced her, dark and devastating – and untraceable. The unread letters thus represent, in Barabtarlo’s words, “*la femme sympathique* and *la femme fatale*.”¹⁸ Novelistically, this is perfect: the two bundles stand for the two most important chapters in Sebastian’s life, which are turned into two tantalizing voids when the papers are burned, and yet provide just enough prompting to investigate these two (deleted) stories. But whether such neat management of objects and their

¹⁷ *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* was begun in December 1938 and already passed on for proofreading to Lucie Leon Noel in January 1939 – cf. B. Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 494, 503. Curiously, Nabokov wrote to Edmund Wilson in 1941: “I am very happy that you liked that little book. As I told you, I wrote it five years ago, in Paris” – clearly a case of a memory lapse, but an interesting one, which would link the composition of the novel with the moment of creation of “Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible.” V. Nabokov, E. Wilson, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*, ed. S. Karlinsky (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001), 57.

¹⁸ G. Barabtarlo, “Taina Naita. Narrative Stance in Nabokov’s *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*,” *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 6.1 (2008): 64.

referential auras would be plausible in real life is a different question altogether. The only part of the correspondence that V manages to get a glimpse of through the flames is the line “thy manner always to find” written in Russian.¹⁹ Gerard de Vries wryly asks, “what skills as a graphologist does one need to make out in a split second that the handwriting is definitely that of a woman?”²⁰ Whether or not V’s conjecture is correct, the readers are allowed to witness his rather unscrupulous methods of research: he destroys evidence, and yet manages to build a (mis)reading based on its fragment, randomly revealed to him by fate. Of course, nothing is random in Nabokov’s universe, and V’s statement “not that I might have expected from the flame of chance the slick intent of a novelist’s plot” only emphasizes the significance of this “chance” revelation. Its purpose, however, might be not to indicate a direction for an investigation of Sebastian past, but precisely to reveal the peculiarities of his biographer, that is, the tendency to jump to conclusions based on his own desires and needs, rather than on facts.

Another letter appears inserted into one of Sebastian’s books, and seems oddly autobiographical, at least according to V’s assurances. V quotes the entire letter and draws all-too-evident conclusions about the termination of Sebastian’s relationship with Clare and the appearance of the new woman in his life:

¹⁹ Russian translations of the novel propose different renderings of this phrase back into Russian: “твоя привычка вечно находить” in: В. Набоков, *Романы: Истинная жизнь Себастьяна Найта; Пнин; Просвечивающие предметы*, перевод А. Б. Горянин, М. Б. Мейлах (Москва: Художественная литература, 1991); «твою манеру вечно выискивать,» in В. Набоков, *Подлинная жизнь Себастьяна Найта*, перевод С. Ильин, *Собрание сочинений американского периода: Подлинная жизнь Себастьяна Найта; Под знаком незаконнорожденных; Николай Гоголь* (Санкт-Петербург: Симпозиум, 2004), 55; «...твоя манера всегда находить...» in *Истинная жизнь Себастьяна Найта*, перевод: Г. А. Барабтарло (Москва: Азбука-классика, 2009).

²⁰ Gerard de Vries rightly finds the way V translates the phrase from Russian artificial: “‘Thy’ is the possessive form of ‘thou’, both archaic words used to stress informality, which seems unnecessary here as colored stationery is used for private correspondence only” – G. de Vries, *Silent Love: The Annotation and Interpretation of Nabokov’s The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), 23.

This will smart, my poor love. Our picnic is finished; the dark road is bumpy and the smallest child in the car is about to be sick. (...) You always knew what I meant. Life with you was lovely – and when I say lovely, I mean doves and lilies, and velvet, and that soft pink “v” in the middle and the way your tongue curved up to the long, lingering “l.” Our life together was alliterative, and when I think of all the little things which will die, now that we cannot share them, I feel as if we were dead too. And perhaps we are. You see, the greater our happiness was, the hazier its edges grew, as if its outlines were melting, and now it has dissolved altogether. I have not stopped loving you; but something is dead in me, and I cannot see you in the mist... This is all poetry. I am lying to you. (...) I think you have guessed how things stand: the damned formula of “another woman.” I am desperately unhappy with her – here is one thing which is true. And I think there is nothing much more to be said about that side of the business.²¹

Indeed, the image of Sebastian’s life with Clare presented earlier in the narrative seems to be directly reflected in the fictional letter. And yet, do we know what evidence V’s representation of Sebastian and Clare is based upon? V did not spend much time with the couple, and any information about Clare comes to him through the hearsay of distant acquaintances, and his own wishful thinking. It seems likely, in fact, that his picture of Sebastian’s relationship with Clare is based primarily on what he read in *Lost Property*, a fiction which he proclaims Sebastian’s most autobiographic work, without, however, allowing the reader to judge for himself if that is, in fact, so. V frequently resorts to quoting *Lost Property* as

²¹ Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, 110-111.

his most precious, most unimpeachable source. And this technique is discussed *expressis verbis* by Nabokov in his essay:

The formula is a familiar one. One begins by sifting through the great man's correspondence, cutting and pasting so as to fashion a nice paper suit for him, then one leafs through his works proper in search of character traits. And God knows one is pretty unfastidious about it. I have had occasion to find some rather curious items in these accounts of eminent lives, such as that biography of a famous German poet, where the content of a poem of his entitled "The Dream" was shamelessly presented *in toto* as if it had actually been dreamt by the poet himself.²²

Quoting a poem as a source on the poet's private dreams is quite as bad as quoting a comically misaddressed love letter from a novel as a source on the novelist's private nightmare of a love life.

A most tantalizing passage within the quoted love letter is the alliterative game with a "v" sign inserted into it: "when I say lovely, I mean doves and lilies, and velvet, and that soft pink 'v' in the middle and the way your tongue curved up to the long, lingering 'l'." Brenda K. Marshall who proposes a hypothesis that "V" is merely a mask used by Sebastian to write his own autobiography, indicates this passage as key to that hidden identity: "Sebastian has plucked his 'soft pink 'v'(112) from his 'most autobiographical work,' *Lost Property*, to serve as narrator/sleuth for his fictional (auto) biography."²³ Of course, this is one possible reading, quite as likely

²² Nabokov, "Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible."

²³ B. K. Marshall, "Sebastian Speaks: Nabokov's Narrative Authority in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*," *Style*, 23.2 (1989): 217.

as the hypothesis that it was V who invented Sebastian,²⁴ or that Sebastian's ghost is writing the story from beyond the grave,²⁵ or that both Sebastian and V are aliases for yet another writer, who remains unknown to them but to the reader may seem an inverted reflection of Vladimir Nabokov himself.²⁶ All these readings are prompted without any seeming preference by the final lines of the novel: "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows."²⁷ There is also a reading that sees V as an impostor, interloper who only claims to be related to Sebastian in order to support the implausible claims of his "biography."²⁸

Returning to "the soft pink 'v'," this cypher decidedly seems important in the context of our narrator's identity, no matter which hypothesis we prefer. But, if we try to follow Brenda K. Marshall's lead, we may find a certain incongruity: "the soft pink 'v'" appears oddly feminine and even somewhat erotic, a rather unlikely choice for an alias, set as it is within lush and rather sugary plethora of metaphors. In fact, the passage *in toto* feels like something written by a man remembering his own name being pronounced by the

²⁴ M. Wood, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 53.

²⁵ S. Fromberg, "The Unwritten Chapters in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 13.4 (1967-8): 441-442; W. W. Rowe, *Nabokov's Spectral Dimension* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981), 21-25; V. E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 137-159.

²⁶ Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 499. Boyd discusses also the possibility of additional complication: V is invented by Sebastian, invented by the Author.

²⁷ Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, 203. Together with the most straightforward reading (for instance, in A. Olcott, "The Author's Special Intention: A Study of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*" in C. R. Proffer, ed. *The Book of Things about Vladimir Nabokov* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1974), 104-121), these hypotheses compile the five options of Gennady Barabtarlo's critical summary – "Taina Naita. Narrative Stance in Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*," 61. Siggy Frank suggests another possible reading: the text is authored by both Sebastian and V simultaneously – *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 162-171.

²⁸ J. B. Sisson, "The Real Life of Sebastian Knight," in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, V. E. Alexandrov, ed., (New York: Garland, 1995), 635.

beloved,²⁹ a memory saturated with the poisonous sweetness of betrayed confidence. In the plot of *Lost Property*, the love letter cited above also includes some rude comments about the author's employer, and this letter is accidentally sent to the employer instead of the lover, while the envelope with the lover's address contains the business missive instead. But this would-be comic error is cancelled by fate: the plane bearing these letters crashes and they remain undelivered, dead letters. The odd style of the letter, the strange and conspicuous appearance of "v" in it, and the theme of a wrong addressee taken together suggest a tempting, and so far unexplored, possibility: could this be an example not of Sebastian shamelessly addressing Clare from the pages of his fiction, in full view of all the curious readers, but of Sebastian actually using someone else's real letter, accidentally intercepted by him and reworked into a fictive form? We know next to nothing about V's love life, but he is clearly not immune to feminine charms, and therefore it is conceivable that he might have had love affairs while Sebastian was still alive, and he might have mistakenly sent Sebastian a love letter intended for someone else. And Sebastian would certainly not be above reproducing this comic trick of fate (misaddressed letter, betraying most intimate thoughts and emotions to the wrong person) in his fiction, with a covert but recognizable reference-attribution to the actual letter writer (V). To Sebastian such "topsy-turvical coincidence" would be most valuable as contributing to his "research" into "the probing of aetiological secret of aleatory occurrences."³⁰

The theme of misaddressed or re-addressed epistles resurfaces in Sebastian's letter to V, which, he admits, "had been destined (...) to quite a different person."³¹ In this letter we find

²⁹ Of course, "soft pink 'v' (...) and the way your tongue curved up to the long, lingering 'l'" recalls one particular name: Vladimir.

³⁰ Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, 94.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

Sebastian's instructions to burn the two bundles with which V's quest will begin. It is formulated in a strangely metaphoric manner, which remains in part undecoded by V:

Some day you may come upon certain papers; you will burn them at once; true, they have heard voices in [one or two indecipherable words: *Dot chetu?*], but now they must suffer the stake. I kept them, and gave them night-lodgings [*notchleg*], because it is safer to let such things sleep, lest, when killed, they haunt us as ghosts. One night, when I felt particularly mortal, I signed their death-warrant, and by it you will know them.³²

The way Sebastian speaks of the letters is quite telling: he treats them as if they were living creatures, whom he himself is unable to murder, because he is afraid they might come back to haunt him. Yet more revealing is the pronoun "us" – V is thus included in Sebastian's fear, and the sentence becomes a prediction: when V burns the papers, they unrelentingly haunt him throughout his life in the book. The *Dot chetu* passage was decoded by Nabokov scholars through the interplay of Cyrillic and Latin alphabets: *Дом чемы* = *Domremy*, the native village of Joan of Arc, where she saw visions and heard voices.³³ The metaphor is striking, but perhaps more important is the hint that it leaves for the readers: pay attention to the two sets of alphabets our authors have at their disposal.

And this comes handy when we remember that Sebastian before his death was collecting data for a "fictitious biography." However, in his case this did not mean a work that would fictionalize the life of some famous person (Pushkin, Newton, Nabokov, Knight), but a fiction stylized as a biography which

³² Ibidem.

³³ de Vries, *Silent Love*, 70, 171.

would use the tidbits of factual items (photographs) to create the counterfeit of the actual existence of its subject. Sebastian was thus planning a hoax, intending to act as an impostor-biographer. And though V reverts to the usual formula of biography, he somehow manages to put Sebastian's plan into action. As Siggy Frank points out, "V. has even fulfilled Sebastian's last creative project to write a biography of Mr. H., or – if one considers the identical appearance of the Cyrillic letter H which signifies the sound N – the biography of Mr N. which is the first letter of 'Nait', the Russian transliteration of 'Knight'." ³⁴ Mr N. can, of course, also stand for Nabokov, in which case the novel may be seen as a fictionalized autobiography, with fiction playing first fiddle. With the ambiguous authorship and no less ambiguous subject, the novel is an elaborate parody of the biography genre. The chief mask, V, deals with facts, informers and their evidence in a highly imperious manner, and in the end performs the final feat – to quote Nabokov's essay once again, "the biographer calmly proceeds to don his subject's waistcoat with its heart-shaped cutout, and smoke the great man's pipe" ³⁵ – preposterous, but true to the genre. And because in the world of V's readers – i.e., in our world – no such writer as Sebastian Knight ever existed, his book does in the end work in the way Sebastian originally intended: as an elaborate hoax, as fiction *pretending* to be a biography.

FROM V TO N

Banville appears to deliberately revisit the Nabokovian model of miscarried biography, stitched together as a patchwork of fictions, by further minimizing the historical subject of the biographical

³⁴ Frank, *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination*, 171.

³⁵ Nabokov, "Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible."

project and elaborating the narrator's persona, who takes center stage. This narrator claims to have worked on his project for seven years, yet we learn very little about it – the pages remain untouched on his desk, as if carefully showcased for those who may – accidentally or by design – enter his lodge.

When Banville's narrator (let us call him N, for symmetry's sake) addresses the subject of history, he always tends to personify it, revealing an odd helpless fondness, mixed with a remarkably strong sentiment of guilt and embarrassment – as if he were speaking to an old mistress, abandoned for some new flame:

Words fail me, Clio. How did you track me down, did I leave bloodstains in the snow? I won't try to apologise. Instead, I want simply to explain, so that we both might understand. (...) But Clio, dear Cliona, you have been my teacher and my friend, my inspiration, for too long, I couldn't lie to you. Which doesn't mean I know what the truth is, and how to tell it to you. I'm confused. I feel ridiculous and melodramatic, and comically exposed. I have shinned up to this high perch and can't see how to get down, and of the spectators below, some are embarrassed and the rest are about to start laughing.

(1, 2)

I set out to explain to you, Clio, and to myself, why I had drown'd my book. Have you understood? So much is unsayable: all the important things.

(53)

The intonation is recognizable: the letter-writer of *Lost Property* used a similar way of expression to poetically muffle his acts of betrayal. Yet, when N speaks of his new love, memory, instead of tenderness there is something like awe and fear, and

incomprehension. His poetic, evocative speech bristles with warning signs:

In moments like that you can feel memory gathering its material, beady-eyed and voracious, like a demented photographer. I don't mean the big scenes, the sunsets and car crashes, I mean the creased black-and-white snaps taken in a bad light, with a lop-sided horizon and that smudged thumb-print in the foreground.

(51)

Memory is cast as a demented photographer – a would-be-artist, who goes mad and yet still retains the ability to arrest reality. Nabokov's mad photographer who appears in *King, Queen, Knave* may help us understand the nature of memory's malaise. First, the reader is made to notice the shadow of the photographer in the picture of Dreyer taken in the ski resort,³⁶ next, the photographer appears in person, walking the seaside, announcing "The artist is coming! The divinely favored, der *gottbegnadete* artist is coming!"³⁷ The chief symptom of madness is self-obsession, akin to the megalomania of the artist, who always leaves a trace of himself in the picture he takes: the "smudged thumb-print" or a long shadow.

N's attempt to replace Clio with Mnemosyne fails to do the trick. Postmodern discourse distrusts history with its grand narratives, its ideological lining, its predilection for drama, its preference for the winning side, while the tremulous, personal, emotional and admittedly subjective accounts – memories – are held to be more reliable if only because their subjectivity is left in

³⁶ V. Nabokov, *King, Queen, Knave* (New York, Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 153.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 234. Interestingly, Siggy Frank suggests that in both episodes the same photographer appears – Frank, *Nabokov's Theatrical Imagination*, 142.

plain sight. But, as Le Goff indicates, this view is groundless, since historical accounts are by far more open to scrutiny and verification through independent evidence than personal, uniquely held and therefore unverifiable memories.³⁸ When history is courted as an old lover, addressed as a personal friend, when it is called by names of endearment (Clio, Cliona), even then it still remains itself: an elusive, melancholy dame prone to abstraction. Mnemosyne, on the other hand, is as elusive, and, it seems, mad into the bargain. She is that demented photographer forcing the past – still warm, still recent – through its mad lens, distorting it into a story with a linear perspective, a biography without a subject, and stamping it with a master sign of its presence.

Attempting to describe Charlotte, the object of his adoration, N is forced to admit:

When I search for the words to describe her I can't find them. Such words don't exist. They would need to be no more than forms of intent, balanced on the brink of saying, another version of silence. Every mention I make of her is a failure. Even when I say just her name it sounds like an exaggeration. When I write it down it seems impossibly swollen, as if my pen had slipped eight or nine redundant letters into it. Her physical presence itself seemed overdone, a clumsy representation of the essential she. That essence was only to be glimpsed obliquely, on the outer edge of vision, an image always there and always fleeting, like the afterglow of a bright light on the retina.

(52)

³⁸ J. Le Goff, *History and Memory*, trans. S. Rendall and E. Claman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), xi-xii.

The passage seems steeped in exalted adoration, written as a modernist elegy to silence, to the perfectly ungraspable loveliness of the other, as a perfect ethical epiphany. And yet, as often in Banville's fictions, moments of such rapture are fraught with darkness: if words cannot describe Charlotte, if her physical presence is not her real self, if only in silence the elusive "essence" of her being may be intuited – how may we be sure that it is indeed Charlotte who is being described, and not N's fantasy of a perfect lover. Not only "such words don't exist" – such a person does not exist either.

But if so, perhaps we have dismissed history and memory too quickly, accusing them of inefficiency, unverifiability, narrativity, unreliability or outright falsity – perhaps, then, the problem is with the historian and not the tale. Let us watch him enter the story of the Lawless family:

The lodge, as they called it, stood on the roadside at the end of the drive. (...)The door screeched. A bedroom and a parlour, a tiny squalid kitchen, a tinier bathroom. Otilie followed me amiably from room to room, her hands stuck in the back pockets of her trousers. Mrs Lawless waited in the front doorway. I opened the kitchen cupboard: cracked mugs and mouse-shit. There was a train back to town in an hour, I would make it if I hurried. Mrs Lawless fingered the brim of her sun hat and considered the sycamores. Of the three of us only blonde Otilie was not embarrassed. Stepping past Charlotte in the doorway I caught her milky smell – and heard myself offering her a month's rent in advance.

(4)

This is *Lolita* in reverse: Humbert looking at the squalid house thinks about the next train out of town, and then notices the

girl on the lawn and – takes the room.³⁹ Banville only shifts the erotic object: Charlotte, the old hag in Humbert's story, becomes the object of desire, while Otilie, with her passion for N, is only a tool for him to gain access to Charlotte. Of course, both women are adults, and while N's behavior may not be ethically sound, there is nothing criminal in it. Yet, the sinister shadow that fell over the page as we read this passage and recognized the connection, lingers. N soon suspects Edward of having seduced Otilie when she was still a young girl, probably underage, and thus to be the father of Michael. This family drama appears to him in a flash revelation while he is watching Edward, Otilie and Michael at a small party: "I turned starry-eyed from the piano and saw the three of them, Otilie and Edward and the child, posed in a north light by the window like models for the *Madonna of the Rocks*" (63-64). That is, the trio appears as Mary, Joseph and little Jesus. The trouble is, in *Madonna of the Rocks*, or rather the *Virgin of the Rocks*, the famous painting by Leonardo, there is no Joseph present. This painting exists in two nearly identical versions,⁴⁰ varying in details of color, children's faces and the position of the Angel, as well as more subtle elements of botany and geology. In the Louvre version, there is Mary, and an exquisite feminine angel, half-turned to face the spectator, pointing with an

³⁹ V. Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, edited with preface, introduction and notes by A. Appel, Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1991), 39.

⁴⁰ One is held in Louvre (finished by mid-1480s), the other in the National Gallery in London (completed in 1508). There is still some debate on whether both versions were executed by Leonardo; the "analysis of the vegetation and geology in the landscape" lead some art historians to believe that the National Gallery version (with the angel not looking directly at the spectator) may have been painted by Leonardo's assistants. D. Alberge, "The Daffodil Code: Doubts Revived over Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* in London," *The Guardian* December 9, 2014. Cf. L. Keith, A. Roy, R. Morrison and P. Schade, "Leonardo da Vinci's 'Virgin of the Rocks': Treatment, Technique and Display," *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 32 (2011): 32-56; A. Pizzorusso, "Leonardo's Geology: The Authenticity of the 'Virgin of the Rocks,'" *Leonardo* 29.3 (1996): 197-200. The theme of authenticity is crucially important in Banville's poetics, and in *The Newton Letter* it remains a constant motif, "a tiny delicate music" (47).

elongated delicate finger to the figure of puffy-cheeked cherubic child (Christ?), his palms folded in prayer, who faces the other no less cherubic babe (John the Baptist?), who, in turn, offers the first one a benediction with his softly curled two fingers.⁴¹ In the National Gallery version, the Angel looks with thoughtful sadness at the child supported by Mary, eyes half closed, a delicate and almost erotic blush shading the Angel's cheek. But neither painting contains even a hint of a possible father figure.

There is a number of derivative paintings, mostly developing the theme of the two lovely babies blessing each other, and one of them, by Leonardo's pupil Bernardino Luini, who painted endless sweetly smiling Madonnas, does feature Joseph. It is not called the *Madonna of the Rocks*, but *The Holy Family with St. John*. As a historian, our narrator should be able to be a little more precise about the paintings he is referring to. Of course, one additional irony of the "revelation" he experiences when looking at the trio is the fact that Joseph in the biblical story is *not* the father of the baby.

Art works are important to Banville – the entire *Frames* trilogy is about paintings, artists and counterfeiters, and he has extensive knowledge of art history. Therefore a mistake that N makes in the title of the painting or the exact configuration of its figures is surely significant. Nor is this the only such mistake. Looking at Charlotte, N muses: "With her sorrowing eyes, pale heart-shaped face, those hands, she might have stepped out of a Cranach garden of dark delights" (73-74). While Cranach did paint the paradisaal scene several times in his career, obviously the

⁴¹ In the context of misinterpretations so important for Banville's work, it is interesting to note the controversy that exists in the identification of the two baby figures. In the Louvre painting, the child gently held by Mary may plausibly be Jesus, and the other, offering benediction to him, may be understood as John the Baptist. However, the National Gallery painting shows the two figures as if reversed: the baby touched by Mary is most likely John the Baptist, because of the particular elongated cross he holds, traditionally designating Baptist's figure. Cf. P. Barolsky, "The Paradox of Leonardo's 'Virgin of the Rocks,'" *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 18.4 (1999): 16-18.

painting entitled *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is by Hieronymus Bosch, not Cranach, and the heart-shaped face is characteristic of women in the paintings by both artists. Again, this is a strange mistake for a historian to make – the *Virgin of the Rocks* and *The Garden of Earthly Delights* are paintings known very well even to laymen.

One more minor but curious instance in which our historian betrays his rather sketchy knowledge of both art history and Newton's biography may be noticed in the episode in which Otilie tries to make N more comfortable in his lodge: "she brought prints clipped from glossy magazines and pinned them over the bed, film stars, Kneller's portrait of Newton, the Primavera" (32). The trouble here is the casual mention of Godfrey Kneller's portrait. In fact, there are two: one was commissioned in 1689 by Newton, "at the height of his mental powers and on the threshold of international fame,"⁴² and the other was executed in 1702, and represents a much older man, wearing an elaborate wig and a somewhat sour expression.⁴³ Both portraits are often reproduced in works related to Newton, and yet the narrator speaks as if he were unaware that there are two paintings of Newton by Kneller, with Newton's 1693 mental crisis (which N claims to be the very heart of his biography) between them.⁴⁴

There are further problems with our "historian": like V, he seems to be rather negligent about facts.⁴⁵ Fascinated as he is by the family of the Lawless, he still admits that "though she told me

⁴² G. E. Christianson, *Isaac Newton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 79-80.

⁴³ The painting is held in the National Portrait Gallery in London, the earlier portrait is in the private collection.

⁴⁴ The period of 18 months in 1692-1693 is generally believed to be the time of Newton's temporal insanity – cf. M. Keynes, "Balancing Newton's Mind: His Singular Behaviour and His Madness of 1692-93," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 62.3 (2008): 289-300.

⁴⁵ For discussion of V as faulty historian see: de Vries, *Silent Love*, 32, 81-82; Sisson, "The Real Life of Sebastian Knigh," 633-643.

a lot about the family I learned little. The mass of names and hazy dates numbed me. It was all like the stories in a history book, vivid and forgettable at once” (33). Such a statement would sound quite matter-of-fact if pronounced by a man of any profession with the exception of the historian for whom dates and names constitute the texture of the past, allowing the scholar to catch hold of some verifiable essence to which anecdotes, gossip, impressions and emotions attach themselves. Yet, he chooses to ignore anything that might be tangible, instead vacantly listening to the noise of time, the forgettable prattle of the moment.

This may lead us to wonder whether he is in fact a historian. He claims to find employment at Cambridge, but it is unclear precisely in what academic discipline. Of his book itself – which is supposed to be nearly finished – we learn disconcertingly little. No citations are provided, and with the exception of the two letters by Newton and a curious incident of a fire – anecdotal, as N hastens to assure us – there are no traces of Newton’s biography in the novel at all. N does speak of his “competitor,” another scholar who published Newton’s biography, and, like V when he speaks of Goodman, his tone is dismissive verging on abusive:

I like his disclaimer: *Before the phenomenon of Isaac Newton, the historian, like Freud when he came to contemplate Leonardo, can only shake his head and retire with as much good grace as he can muster.* Then out come the syringe and the formalin. That is what I was doing too, embalming old N.’s big corpse, only I did have the grace to pop off before the deathhead grin was properly fixed.

(25)

The biographer as an embalmer: such is the noxious image N constructs. And the image is already familiar from Nabokov’s

essay on biography: “It seems to me, in short, that by dint of palpating and frisking in search of the human side one reduces the great man to a macabre doll, like those pink cadavers of defunct Tsars that used to be skillfully touched up for the funeral ceremony.”⁴⁶ The biographer turns the dead body into a presentable pink doll, benevolently smiling at posterity.

Banville’s N tries to convince us that it is by far better to leave the subject alone, and instead to ponder endlessly over the misgivings and ambiguities. Yet, even here we encounter suspicious elements. There are two letters cited in the novel, the first one written by Newton after a fire in his rooms destroyed his papers,⁴⁷ which sounds like a paranoid missive by a disturbed man who suspects his closest friends of conspiracy against him; the second letter is calmer and by far more articulate, fluent in its melancholy disillusionment with the most certain aspects of reality:

They [the common tradesmen] would seem to have something to tell me; not of their trades, not even of how they conduct their lives; nothing, I believe, in words. They are, if you will understand it, themselves the things they might tell. They are a form of saying – and there it breaks off, the rest of that page illegible (because of a scorch mark, perhaps?). All that remains is the brief close: My dear Doctor, expect no more philosophy from my pen. The language in which I might be able not only to write but to think is neither

⁴⁶ Nabokov, “Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible.”

⁴⁷ The fire incident which might have destroyed an important work by Newton is much disputed and generally considered fictional (cf. Brewster, *Memoirs*, 94-95, 132, 137-138; Christianson, *Isaac Newton*, 84-85); the letter to Locke (dated 16 September 1693) is, however, authentic – see I. Newton, *The Correspondence of Isaac Newton*, eds. H. W. Turnbull, J. F. Scott, A. R. Hall and L. Tilling, vol. III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 283-284.

Latin nor English, but a language none of whose words is known to me; a language in which commonplace things speak to me; and wherein I may one day have to justify myself before an unknown judge.

(59-60)

It is beautifully quotable – it sounds like a stirring elegy to the loss of certainty, and echoes N's epistles to Clio. Even the fact that only part of it is legible seems deeply poignant – the letter seems marked by the seal of fate. It is also counterfeit.⁴⁸ Historical sources of Newton's life do not contain such a document. The fire in Newton's room is merely an anecdote, a legend – just as many biographical "facts" which attach themselves to Newton's character. The epigraph to Banville's novel is another example of such mythical "fact." It is, purportedly, a sentence pronounced by Newton on his deathbed: "I seem to have been only as a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me." Even cursory glance suggests that the sentence is too carefully constructed to be unrehearsed. It is merely hearsay, reported in a 1855 biography by David Brewster, but not substantiated by any documentary evidence.⁴⁹

Most critics have chosen to view Newton's second letter as Banville's fictive development of the sentiments of a scientist who realizes his own inadequacy in the face of reality. The *Science Tetralogy* to which the novel belongs certainly testifies to the

⁴⁸ Newton did write a second letter to Locke 15 October 1693, but it was simply apologetic – he explained his ill temper by pleading illness through exhaustion: "when I wrote to you I had not slept an hour a night for a fortnight together and for five nights together not a wink" – Newton, *The Correspondence of Isaac Newton*, 284-285.

⁴⁹ D. Brewster, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings and Discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton* (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable, 1855), 407.

writer's preoccupation with this theme. And yet, since the letter is deeply embedded in the narrative, we would be justified in viewing it as N's invention. Or, to be more exact, the letter is not quite invented but rather plagiarized: the text closely follows the novel *Ein Brief*, written by Hofmannsthal.⁵⁰

It is no wonder, then, that the biographer's efforts do not produce a finished book, if the key evidence that he endlessly examines is a novelistic fabrication, with slight revisions by himself. Such a compilation works perfectly well as a story to tell the Lawless ladies, to whom Newton is merely "that astronomer." It would not serve at all, however, in a published monograph with the author's name on the cover. Other researchers, probably headed by the chief embalmer Popov, would immediately point out the counterfeit records and destroy N's reputation. For him the solution is thus to always remain on the brink of writing, pondering on the lovely words of Newton that he himself invented.

If Nabokov's V is a poor shadow of the dead writer Sebastian Knight, telling the story of his search for historical truth of the past, or Sebastian's collaborator who goes a little too far in his biographical fervor, Banville's N most likely is, despite his assurances and pretenses, a fraud, an impostor, who has very little to do with history or truth. But then, is not V, ecstatically certain of having found the truth about Sebastian by becoming his double, also a sort of an impostor? And is not any writer dealing with the past, plundering the deposits of his own and others' memories, "a Leonardo,"⁵¹ a pretender, an impersonator, a fraud, staging an elaborate hoax of reality for the benefit of the credulous readers?

⁵⁰ Imhof, *John Banville*, 143-145.

⁵¹ V. Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 358-367. The structure of the story includes a beginning and ending which deliberately undermine the stable reality of the presented world, emphasizing the fictional status of the setting, characters and events. Thus, it integrates the theme of counterfeit with the motif of fictionalizing as an attempt to understand reality.

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**MEMORIES TRICK – MEMORIES MIX:
*TRANSPARENT THINGS***

In Nabokov's works memories are always essential. Among them *Transparent Things* can be called the quintessential novella about memories. The protagonist, Hugh Person, driven by the memories of Armande, his dead wife, returns to Switzerland after eight years and tries to revisit the places which haunt his memory. He wishes to make "contact with her essential image in exactly remembered surroundings."¹ As has been indicated by Simon Karlinsky,² his attempt seems similar to that of the protagonist of "The Return of Chorb" who traces in reverse every step of his honeymoon trip desiring to recreate the near past he experienced with his wife so that "her image [will] grow immortal and replace her

¹ V. Nabokov, *Transparent Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 95. All further in-text references refer to this edition.

² S. Karlinsky, "Russian Transparencies," *Saturday Review of the Arts*, January 6, 1973, 44-45.

forever.”³ However, unlike Chorb, almost every time Hugh fails in finding or retracing the places in his memories. His failures can be attributed to some extraordinary functions of memories particular to this novella. This essay focuses on some of these functions and moreover attempts to shed light on the possible weavings of fictions and memories hidden in Nabokov’s works.

MEMORIES TRICK

The reader must agree with David Rampton’s statement that “*Transparent Things* is a tricky novel to come to terms with.”⁴ Among the innumerable tricks we find in this work, here I will be interested in those related to memories. In the early chapters we see a few mnemoptical tricks played on Hugh regarding the colors of the exteriors and interiors of buildings. At the beginning of Chapter 2, arriving at the Ascot Hotel where he stayed eight years ago, Hugh notices that he has misremembered the color of the shutters: “A dreadful building of gray stone and brown wood, it sported cherry-red shutters (not all of them shut) which by some mnemoptical complementary trick he remembered as apple green” (3). One possible reason for his wrong memory is that his memory may have been affected by the scenery he saw on his way to Trux and Witt. Actually, in and around such places as Montreux and Lausanne, most houses are built of gray stone and the wood shutters are mostly painted cherry red or apple green. Another possibility is that he may be instantly confused by the color of the valet’s apron who has come in a hurry to carry his bags. Deliberately, a time-lag trick is added; the reader is not told that the valet’s apron is green

³ V. Nabokov, “The Return of Chorb,” in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 149.

⁴ D. Rampton, *Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 164.

until two pages later: “The apple-green-aproned valet brought the two valises and the cardboard box with ‘Fit’ on its wrapper; after which Person remained alone” (5).

Another mnemoptical trick is reported in Chapter 5 where the narrator describes how Hugh’s father is found dead in a fitting room.

When she [the shop girl] did [make it out], she laughed at her stupidity, swiftly led Hugh to the fitting room and, still laughing heartily, drew the green, not brown, curtain open with what became in retrospect a dramatic gesture. Spatial disarrangement and dislocation have always their droll side, and few things are funnier than three pairs of trousers tangling in a frozen dance on the floor – brown slacks, blue jeans, old pants of gray flannel. (14)

This time the green color of the curtain is mistakenly remembered as brown, probably confused with the brown color of the slacks on the floor. It reminds the reader of Fyodor in *The Gift*, who comically mistakes the wallpaper pattern – pale yellow with blue tulips – as that of the landlady’s dress.⁵ Moreover, the narration here is not clear concerning the question of who is misremembering things: who remembers the green curtain as brown, and who replaces the shop girl’s gesture, which in reality was quite ordinary, with the more dramatic one in retrospect? Maybe Hugh, but we can suppose other possibilities for the memory and the correction, such as the narrator, Mr. R., or Person Senior himself.

⁵ V. Nabokov, *The Gift*, trans. M. Scammell in collaboration with the author (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 8.

The narrator continues: “Awkward Person Senior had been struggling to push a shod foot through the zigzag of a narrow trouser leg when he felt a roaring redness fill his head” (14-15). While Person Senior is struggling in the fitting room, Hugh is outside the shop looking at a roadside booth with a drawn brown curtain, inside of which a lady is taking a picture. At the same time, at the nearby “grade crossing” “a dingdong bell and a blinking red light” (13) are announcing the approach of a train. Probably the brown curtain of the booth synchronizes with that of the fitting room, and “a roaring redness” filling the poor old man synchronizes with the red light outside. As in the case of the shutters, the colors cross the border of things, and this time the colors also cross the border of the memory holders.

We also observe several instances of misrecognition on Hugh’s part. During his second visit to Switzerland he cannot distinguish Armande from the other skiers. The one he was sure to be Armande, shooting down the slope, “agonizingly graceful” (53), abruptly changes into a goggled stranger. On his third trip to Switzerland, Hugh visits Mr. R. at his residence in Diablonnet and finds Julia Moore in the entrance hall, with the same hair and wearing the same blouse as when they had a date in New York, but shortly after he finds her a totally different girl. During his pilgrimage Hugh searches for “a moment of contact with Armande’s essential image in exactly remembered surroundings” (95), but he repeatedly fails to find the exact lanes and paths he has walked with Almande. On the other hand, “his memory ke[eps] following its private path” (89), but even in memory the panting Hugh cannot follow Armande and her athlete boyfriends.

It is rather natural that he cannot exactly recall them after eight years. Exceptionally, Hugh does manage to get to Villa Nastia as he planned with the help of a woman who sells vegetables from a stall.

Hugh hesitated at a street corner. Just beyond it a woman was selling vegetables from a stall. *Est-ce que vous savez, Madame* – Yes, she did, it was up that lane. As she spoke, a large, white, shivering dog crawled from behind a crate and with a shock of futile recognition Hugh remembered that eight years ago he had stopped right here and had noticed that dog, which was pretty old even then and had now braved fabulous age only to serve his blind memory. (87)

This is not an example of a mistaken recognition. The woman is the only person Hugh has met before and sees again in Witt. He asks her for the way to Villa Nastia as he did eight years ago, without recognizing her, and she helps him again. Hugh has completely forgotten her, but noticing her large white dog, which followed him when he was there for the first time, he finally recognizes the dog and then the woman. They are a couple of exceptional characters; there is no other character Hugh remembers and who remembers him in Witt.

However, even this reunion seems rather deceptive. The dog appears shivering and crawling before Hugh, and the narrator talks about its fabulous age, as if it were Argos welcoming Odysseus home, but at their first encounter the dog looks rather young as it over-affectionately frisks around Hugh. Even if we admit that eight years is a long time for a dog, this incident seems to be made too dramatic. Most likely, it is narrated here as a subplot for another incident that is waiting for him close to Villa Nastia, which will be discussed at the end of the next section.

MEMORIES BELONG TO PLACES

In *Transparent Things* the dead, omnipotent narrators are presented as clairvoyants. They claim that they can see through whatever

object they choose; they can watch what is happening inside a person's organs, and they can follow the history of an object. In Chapter 3 the narrator explores the history of a used pencil left and forgotten in a drawer for years, as if it were a documentary or a fake documentary filmed by Luis Buñuel in Mexico.⁶

We also see the representation of memories belonging to a room. In Chapter 6, his first prostitute takes Hugh to a hotel room and there we see a Russian novelist,⁷ who occupied the room almost 90 years ago, sitting at a deal table. His figure and his manuscript are projected over the things of the real time, like a pentimento or double-exposed film. Neither Hugh nor the prostitute know anything about the novelist or the history of the hotel room. What we are told by the narrator can be considered part of the memory of the room itself.

As he sits at that deal table, the very same upon which our Person's whore has plunked her voluminous handbag, there shows through that bag, as it were, the first page of the *Faust* affair with energetic erasures and untidy insertions in purple, black, reptile-green ink. The sight of his handwriting fascinates him; the chaos on the page is to him order, the blots are pictures, the marginal jottings are wings. Instead of sorting his papers, he uncorks his portable ink and moves nearer to the table, pen in hand. (18)

Hugh and the prostitute do not notice anything unusual about the room, but in the case of Julia Moore in Chapter 11, she sees the figure of her late boyfriend Jimmy Major moving around in Hugh's

⁶ *Las Hurdes*, directed by L. Buñuel, produced by Ramón Acín, Spain, 1933.

⁷ According to Karlinsky, the novelist is an amalgam of several Russian writers such as Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Gogol, and Odоеvsky. S. Karlinsky, "Russian Transparencies," 45.

flat, which was once Jimmy's residence. As the Russian writer is packing a valise, indifferent to the invaders from the future, Jimmy casually walks through the flat just as he did as a young man living there. Julia becomes aware that the flat was Jimmy's and is then troubled by his image moving around. We know his image comes out of her memory revived by the embarrassment she feels while making love to Hugh, but the image pays no attention to her and behaves independently from her. Like the image of the Russian writer in the hotel room, his image seems to be emerging from the room's memory rather than from hers.

She had the good taste to say nothing, but the image of that youth, whose death in a remote war had affected her greatly, kept coming out of the bathroom or fussing with things in the fridge, and interfering so oddly with the small business in hand that she refused to be unzipped and bedded. (...) the image of bronzed and white-buttocked Jimmy Major again replaced bony reality. (35-36)

Finally, Julia notices that what she has seen as a bowl of oranges – oranges are Jimmy's favorite fruit and they are used as a symbol of sexual intercourse throughout this work – is actually the folds of her own blouse reflected in the closet mirror. Memory about a dead person is, in a way, a path to the world of the dead, and moreover the folds of space are also connected, in Nabokov's work, with the world beyond.

Another example of a space's memory can be found in Chapter 22. Thanks to the woman's help, Hugh comes close to Villa Nastia and sees a blond little girl with a badminton racket crouch and pick up her shuttlecock from the sidewalk.

The surroundings were unrecognizable – except for the white wall. His heart was beating as after an

arduous climb. A blond little girl with a badminton racket crouched and picked up her shuttlecock from the sidewalk. Farther up he located Villa Nastia, now painted a celestial blue. All its windows were shuttered. (87)

When he visited the villa eight years ago, a shuttlecock dropped before him but he ignored it. What Hugh sees before him now looks like a continuation of the scene from the past; on the other hand, remembering the narrator's remark that the villa was sold to "a childless English couple," the girl seems mysterious. She neither lives in nor is visiting the villa with all its windows shuttered, and unlike before no other children's voices are heard beyond the wall. The little girl may be the one who came from behind the wall to pick up the shuttlecock after Hugh left the place eight years ago or she may be Armande in her childhood appearing before Hugh. This scene, unlike the two scenes discussed above, is not shown layered over the present, but it is also a kind of representation of a place's memory. It is either a sequel of an incident which took place eight years ago or it is another incident that happened more than twenty years ago, in Armande's childhood.

MEMORIES EVOLVE

As is typical in Nabokov's work, in *Transparent Things* there are many references and allusions to other works by the author. Any Nabokov reader would be aware of the allusion to *Lolita* in the episode of Mr. R. seducing young Julia, his stepdaughter. I would like to point out a couple of less conspicuous connections to *Lolita*. One is Hugh's fantasy about tennis. Although he invented a miraculous, unreturnable shot in reality, he never

becomes a top level tennis player. However, by imagining himself winning matches and becoming a champion as a predormitory exercise, he succeeds in falling asleep. It is a modest, but quite significant success for Hugh who is troubled by insomnia like Nabokov.

No sooner had he found a comfortable place for his cheek on a cool soft pillow than the familiar firm thrill would start running through his arm, and he would be slamming his way through one game after another. There were additional trimmings: explaining to a sleepy reporter, “Cut it hard and yet keep it intact”; or winning in a mist of well-being the Davis Cup brimming with the poppy. (58)

This passage reminds the reader of Humbert’s fantasies about tennis. It includes both his bitter recognition, and his and Lolita’s unrealized dreams. Remembering Lolita playing tennis, Humbert recognizes that he has broken something in Lolita and taken away from her the will to win. Still, he continues dreaming of Lolita as a girl champion, and then starring as a tennis champion in a movie, and himself as her old husband and coach. His dream is really selfish: even after realizing that he has broken not only Dolly’s life but also her spirit, he is still at the center of the dream.

She preferred acting to swimming, and swimming to tennis; yet I insist that had not something within her been broken by me – not that I realized it then! – she would have had on the top of her perfect form the will to win, and would have become a real girl champion. Dolores, with two rackets under her arm, in Wimbledon. Dolores endorsing a Dromedary. Dolores turning professional. Dolores acting a girl champion

in a movie. Dolores and her gray, humble, hushed husband-coach, old Humbert.⁸

Hugh, who has succeeded in dropping off to sleep by imagining the magical Person stroke, is much happier than Humbert whose dreams never come true but belatedly make him conscious of his guilt. Hugh's innocent predormitory exercise stimulates our memory of the passage in *Lolita*, shedding light on the optimistic, bright side of it. However, after his marriage Hugh has to give them up because of Armande's criticisms, and he endures insomnia. Finally, he strangles her in a nightmare that he has after a sleepless night; that is, giving up imagining the ingenious tennis stroke indirectly causes the tragedy. Hugh's happy fantasy of tennis has an ominous side that prefigures the tragic end. At first sight, Hugh's fantasy seems to contrast with Humbert's bitter-sweet vision; but they may not be so far from each other after all.

Another example in which the reader sees something related to *Lolita* is found in the scene where Hugh kisses Armande for the first time. After their first, but unhappy and passionless lovemaking, they come down the mountain to the bend in the road from which the whole of Witt – the glint of a brook, a lumberyard, the mown fields and brown cottages – can be seen. There Hugh confesses his despair at everything including himself and dares to kiss her. His desperate challenge seems to fail again, but a sudden, unexpected reaction on her part, “a minor miracle,” changes the relationship between them and they become engaged.

At first she tried to evade his lips but he persisted desperately. All at once she gave in, and the minor miracle happened. A shiver of tenderness rippled her

⁸ V. Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 232.

features, as a breeze does a reflection. Her eyelashes were wet, her shoulders shook in his clasp. That moment of soft agony was never to be repeated – or rather would never be granted the time to come back again after completing the cycle innate in its rhythm; yet that brief vibration in which she dissolved with the sun, the cherry trees, the forgiven landscape, set the tone for his new existence with its sense of “all-is-well” despite her worst moods, her silliest caprices, her harshest demands. That kiss, and not anything preceding it, was the real beginning of their courtship. (55)

This section may remind the reader of the last scene in *Lolita*. At the end of his confession, Humbert describes remembering his experience on a mountain. Viewing a small town below from the mountain trail and hearing the sounds of daily-life – “that vapory vibration of accumulated sounds” – especially children’s voices from “the streets of the transparent town,”⁹ he comes to finally and fatally recognize what he irrevocably did to Lolita: he has deprived her of her innocent childhood, separating her from her fellow children and their happy ordinary lives.

What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic – one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of a bat, or the clatter of a toy wagon, but it was all really too far for the eye to distinguish any

⁹ Nabokov, *Lolita*, 307.

movement in the lightly etched streets. I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not *Lolita's* absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord.¹⁰

The narrator of *Transparent Things* calls Armande's reaction "a minor miracle." Humbert's realization can be another miracle of even greater importance, although it comes too late. In *Transparent Things*, the minor miracle occurs when Armande dissolves in "brief vibration" "with the sun, the cherry trees, the forgiven landscape" around them (55). With a sense of concord, "all is well," Hugh and Armande share the only instance of understanding and sympathy. In *Lolita*, what awakens Humbert's conscience is "the vapory vibration," "the musical vibration of blended voices of children," coming from "the streets of a transparent town," and "the absence of [*Lolita's* voice] from that concord." By remembering this section from *Lolita*, something common between the two works appears to the reader. In concord with the natural environment, a drastic change or a sudden awakening occurs as a climax of the work. We are moved by these epiphanic experiences, even though we know Humbert's confession of his experience conceals something dark. As critics have argued,¹¹ he seems to put the passage at the conclusion of his confession in order to appeal sincere regret to the readers as well as to jury. We are conscious of how deceitfully Humbert describes his epiphanic

¹⁰ Ibid., 308.

¹¹ See, for example, B. Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: His American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 252-54; L. de la Durantaye, *Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 88-95; Rampton, *Vladimir Nabokov* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 99-102; M. Wood, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 139-42.

experience, but at the same time, reading this passage alongside its counterpart in *Transparent Things*, we can feel a slight “minor miracle” also in Humbert’s experience. On the other hand, the couple’s epiphanic scene has nothing deceptive or guilty about it but, as in the case of Hugh’s tennis fantasy, their destiny will be tragic, maybe because it originates in *Lolita*.

It should be noted that the small “transparent town” Humbert finds lying at his feet on the mountain slope is described as being “in a fold of the valley.”¹² In *Transparent Things*, folds of space and time are given a significant role. As we have seen, the source of Julia’s still-life illusion is in the folds of her blouse reflected in a mirror. In Chapter 4, Hugh’s father has difficulty folding an umbrella, and he loses a very small circle within the disarranged folds: “The black laps flipped over untidily and had to be redone, and by the time the eye of the ribbon was ready for use (a tiny tangible circle between finger and thumb), its button had disappeared among the folds and furrows of space” (10). At the beginning of Chapter 26, the narrator observes that “the folds of tenses are badly disarranged in regard to the building under examination” (100). In contrast, the expression “a fold of the valley” used in *Lolita* is an ordinary usage of the word, but it leads Humbert to a kind of other dimension of recognition.¹³ Unlike *Transparent Things*, where the folds of space and time seem to hide some memories or previews, something otherworldly, in *Lolita* the dimension is not necessarily related to the other world.

¹² Nabokov, *Lolita*, 307.

¹³ A similar kind of “folds” appears in the last sentence of *Mary*: “As his train moved off, he [Ganin] fell into a doze, his face buried in the folds of his mackintosh, hanging from a hook above the wooden seats.” V. Nabokov, *Mary* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 114. The folds, though realistic, may be those peculiar to the space-time of Nabokov’s fictional worlds. Ganin falls asleep as he abandons the role of the protagonist after recognizing the existence of the author, who is completing the book. See A. Nakata, “Repetition and Ambiguity: Reconsidering *Mary*,” trans. J. Edmunds and A. Nakata in “Criticism,” *Zembla*, 3.

Here, it presents an idyllic, peaceful world of common people in concord with the natural environment. In a sense, this fold of a valley may be the other world for Humbert,¹⁴ the world of common people, to which he is unable to belong until the end of his life. If we are somehow touched by this passage, even though we suppose a sly calculation hidden in it, it may be because of the function of the fold which makes clear Humbert's absolute isolation, excluded from nature and fellow human beings, that is – from the entire world.

MEMORIES MIX

The “minor miracle” scene may have another origin. As Tatiana Ponomareva indicates, the legend of *Снегурочка*, the Snow Maiden, can be reflected in Armande as she “dissolved with the sun.”¹⁵ Snegurochka is a lovely girl, originally a snow girl made by an old couple who had no children,¹⁶ and is raised by the

¹⁴ Another example of “a fold” of the ordinary usage can be found in *Pnin*: “The heartrending lights of Waindellville, throbbing in a fold of those dusky hills, were putting on their usual magic, though actually, as Pnin well knew, the place, when you got there, was merely a row of brick houses, a service station, a skating rink, a super market.” V. Nabokov, *Pnin* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 79. As with “the transparent town” in *Lolita*, Waindellville looks idyllic and nostalgic in the evening; however, in the daylight, it is mundane and contains nothing heartrending. Waindellville and the town may be analogous: the idyllic town in *Lolita* could also appear too mundane if Humbert looked closely.

¹⁵ I am deeply grateful to Tatiana Ponomareva, who made a helpful comment regarding the Snegurochka legend and opera when I presented the original version of this paper at the Warsaw International Conference, “Nabokov and the Fictions of Memory” held at SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities on September 23, 2016. Regarding the opera, see R. Newmarch, *The Russian Opera* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), 299-303; “Mariinsky Theatre”: available at: https://www.mariinsky.ru/en/playbill/repertoire/opera/sneg_new, last modified May 18, 2017.

¹⁶ This can be seen as another connection with the small blond girl appearing before Hugh with Armande the Snegurochka. The narrator notes that the villa was sold “to a childless English couple” (87).

couple as their beloved daughter. However, when she comes close to a fire while following other girls who have jumped over it, Snegurochka disappears with a cry.¹⁷ The folktale was published in 1869 by Alexander Afanasyev (1826-1871), and it inspired a play under the same title by Alexander Ostrovsky (1823-1886). Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's (1844-1908) opera, *The Snow Maiden*, with the libretto based on Ostrovsky's play premiered at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg in 1882. The opera was so popular that young Nabokov, who was taken to numerous operas during the winters by his parents,¹⁸ was possibly familiar with it as well as with the folktale. The Snow Maiden of the opera is the daughter of King Frost and the Fairy Spring. As foretold by envious Summer, she dies by the first ray of sunlight when she falls in love with a mortal. In *Transparent Things*, Armande is often related with snow: Hugh struggles to climb to the top of glacier slopes to spend time with her, since she enjoys skiing, her favorite sport; she is skiing in powdery snow in pictures in the albums; she discusses with Julia how to say "a big snowdrift" (46) in Russian. Her fatal frigidity can be explained as related to the snow maiden. Her personality is totally different from the simple, small snow girl of the legend, or the naïve and chaste snow maiden of the opera, but Armande seems also doomed to die, not in the spring sun, but while trying to escape a fire, as an amalgam "Giulia Romeo," in Hugh's dream. It is also impossible for her to live on with her husband and, just like the maiden in the opera, she has to die because she loves a mortal youth. Armande as the snow maiden emerges both from the author's old memory and Russian folk memory.

¹⁷ J. T. Naaké, "The Snow Child," *Slavonic Fairy Tales* (London: Henry S. Kings & Co., 1874), 8-16; C. J. Tibbits, "Snyegurka," *Folk-Lore and Legends: Russian and Polish* (London: W. W. Gibbings, 1890), 22-27.

¹⁸ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 35-36. Nabokov confesses his unresponsiveness to music, unlike his parents, especially his father, who were keen on operas.

Hugh, in an interview by a thanatologist, explains what happened when Armande died. The bigger part of this passage is told in the third person by a narrator who describes things from Hugh's perspective.

Flames spurted all around and whatever one saw came through scarlet strips of vitreous plastic. His chance bedmate had flung the window wide open. (...) The window was large and low; it had a broad sill padded and sheeted, as was customary in that country of ice and fire. Such glaciers, such dawns! Giulia, or Julie, wore a Doppler shift over her luminous body and prostrated herself on the sill, with outspread arms still touching the wings of the window. He glanced down across her, and there, far below, in the chasm of the yard or garden, the selfsame flames moved like those tongues of red paper which a concealed ventilator causes to flicker around imitation yule logs in the festive shopwindows of snowbound childhoods. (80)

The narrator describes a dream Hugh was dreaming just before and as he strangled Armande, but in what is narrated here may be something from another person's or other people's memories. "[T]hat country of ice and fire," where the window sills are padded and sheeted, sounds like the country in Hugh's dream, but "the customary" seems to reflect someone else's memory. "[T]hat country of ice and fire" may refer to Zembla of *Pale Fire*, rather than New England where Hugh was raised, though the same custom may be found there too. A similar observation can be made in relation to "[t]he selfsame flames moved like those tongues of red paper (...) in the festive shopwindows of snowbound childhoods." A "snowbound childhood" would not be a strange expression to describe Hugh's childhood in New England, but

the plural “childhoods” seems to include the experience of other people: Mr. R.’s childhood in Germany, Hugh’s parents’, and maybe Nabokov’s own childhood in St. Petersburg. In the last chapter, the “tongues of red paper flickering around imitation yule logs” appear as real, but personified, flames in red: “Now flames were mounting the stairs, in pairs, in trios, in redskin file, hand in hand, tongue after tongue” (103). Similarly, “scarlet strips of vitreous plastic” are actualized as “panes breaking into a torrent of rubies” (103) when Hugh is choking to death in the hotel fire. Here, the reader realizes that some images from the unidentified people’s memories have typologically prefigured Hugh’s death in a fire.

Eight years before, in a nightmare filled with fragments from his own and some others’ lives and dreams, struggling to save “Giulia Romeo,” an amalgam of his first prostitute, Julia Moore and Armande, from a burning house, Hugh strangles his wife without knowing what he is doing. In a sense, the nightmare redeems a bitter humiliation he has experienced when Armande forced him to rehearse a fire escape during their honeymoon. Because of his acrophobia and general ineptness, he fails to support his wife while climbing down from the balcony on the fourth floor, which results in her first act of adultery with a stranger on the third floor. By contrast, in the nightmare Hugh saves a young woman from a fire by flying like Superman with her in a tight embrace; in reality, however, he is strangling Armande. As Don Barton Johnson indicates,¹⁹ fire, falling and asphyxiation – the three lethal motifs related to Hugh’s life and death – are all found here.²⁰ In reality, instead of flying like Superman, he falls off the bed and wakes from

¹⁹ D. B. Johnson, “*Transparent Things*,” in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Garland, 1995), 727.

²⁰ It is obvious that the nightmare is described as a parodic Freudian dream, which liberates Hugh’s sadistic phallic desires repressed in his real life. As Robert Alter suggests, other readings seem more interesting and meaningful than the “psychoanalytic” reading. R. Alter, “Mirrors for Immortality,” *Saturday Review of Books*, November 11, 1972, 74.

the nightmare to find his wife dead on the floor. The somnambulism that he suffered from until late adolescence, when he used to find himself shivering in a night shirt on the roof, seems to return from his childhood to control him again. During the nightmare, Hugh is driven by deformed memories of himself and unknown others. Given that somnambulism is similar to losing memories in waking life, in the fatal nightmare filled with the memories of others, Hugh is doubly deprived of his own memories.²¹

Innumerable novels and short stories have one or more omniscient narrators who reveal the memories of the characters. What is special about *Transparent Things* is that the narrators are spectres, seeing and narrating from another world all of the protagonist's acts and thoughts, as well as those of several characters around him, without boundaries of space and time. Also the memories of Hugh and other living characters are subject to the clairvoyance of the ghosts. These reminiscences are not described as merely the recollection of past occurrences, but as part of the multiple layers of time and space which Nabokov uniquely sets up in this novel. This essay was an attempt to explore how such memories function, sometimes together with the recollections of certain characters from Nabokov's other works, and sometimes with the memories of Nabokov's readers who may be reminded of certain scenes they have read in his earlier novels and are thus inspired to make new interpretations. Still, there must be a great deal of *terra incognita* left to explore in *Transparent Things*.

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²¹ I am sincerely grateful to Leona Toker for asking an insightful question at the Warsaw conference, and drawing my attention to Hugh's sleepwalk.

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**TRANSPARENT THINGS,
VISIBLE SUBJECTS**

What we call a visible is (...) a quality pregnant with
a texture, the surface of a depth.

(Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*)

Time is a fluid medium for the culture of metaphors.

(Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada*)

PROLOGUE

If memory, for some, is a window upon the reality of our
individual or collective past, its glass is irreparably stained.
Unlike the “pictured past,” as Nabokov scornfully called it,¹ the

¹ V. Nabokov, *Transparent Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 1.

remembered past is never drily objective, but can only claim for itself the truth of fiction.

The first part of this article is called “Transparency and souveneer” a *portmanteau* of “souvenir” and “veneer.” “Souvenir” as in: token of memory, a graceless object you brought back from a trip or received as a gift and that, out of politeness, you keep and put on display until you either surrender to the impulse of throwing it away or, in time, grow accustomed to it and let it become part of your life. And is this not what happens to all of our memories? “Veneer” as in: an attractive appearance that covers up or disguises the true nature of something, or someone’s true feelings. And is this not often the function that memories perform in relation to what really happened in our past?

This “souveneer” then names a play of transparency and opacity: half memory – but always incomplete – and half perception – but already more than the simple object to be seen – it mocks our efforts to extricate ourselves from the present as well as those of acting as if we had no past. Life is a tension between the past and its remembrance, between visibility and existence, average reality and artistic fiction, that Nabokov locates, very precisely, on the surface of perceived things.

TRANSPARENCY AND SOUVENEER

Nabokov’s rendering of memory in *Transparent Things* is one that intertwines memory with perception. There is no remembering without perceiving, and no perceiving which is not exposed to the hazards of re-evoking the past: Hugh Person (capital P) – this cruelly, if ironically, depersonalised character – will die of them.

We “sink,” Nabokov writes, with our eyes and minds into the past through things that, because of that, become transparent:

When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntary plunging into the history of that object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want matter to stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines!²

This understanding of remembrance – this shining through of the past in perception – finds a clear parallel in Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory*:

Attentive recognition is a kind of *circuit* in which the external object yields to us deeper and deeper parts of itself, as our memory adopts a correspondingly higher degree of tension in order to project recollections toward it.³

Maci Lattison has linked this aspect of Nabokov's engagement with Bergson to a passage in *Speak, Memory* where the element of *durée* (perceived time) is rendered through a metaphor of the sea:⁴

I felt myself plunged abruptly into a radiant and mobile medium that was none other than the pure element of time. One shared it – just as excited bathers share shining seawater – with creatures that were not oneself but that were joined to one by time's common flow, an environment quite different from the spatial world, which not only man but apes and butterflies can perceive.⁵

² Ibidem.

³ H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 116.

⁴ M. L. Lattison, "Nabokov's Aesthetic Bergsonism: An Intuitive, Reperceptualized Time," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 46, no. 1 (2013): 42.

⁵ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 29.

We can note, however, how the movement of memory and perception in Nabokov does not happen in a circuit but rather (because both perception and memory are involved with fiction)⁶ in a spiral; and that, in contrast with the last passage, *Transparent Things* is less concerned with the sharing of Bergsonian *durée* than with the particular danger of abandoning oneself to the depths of the past.⁷ Remembering and perceiving, for Nabokov, produce a transparency that should never be total: only the inexperienced lose themselves in things entirely and so only for them things become completely transparent.

Nabokov's interest not only in the subjective and creative character of visual perception, but in this dynamic of surface and depth, finds a specific resonance in the posthumous work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Where reference to Bergson may be used to explain the patterning of souvenirs and correspondences in *durée*, Merleau-Ponty could be used to explain the danger of the mutual implication of memory and perception in non-linear time, adding an element to that "French modernism of memory" with which Nabokov had been critically engaging.⁸ In Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, indeed, the seer is physically inside as well as on the other side of every act of perception, so that what you see touches you from within your body and comes back to you from your past.⁹ From this perspective, the

⁶ Patteson stresses the importance of the embedded structure of narration in *Transparent Things*, but arrives at the same conclusion: "to perceive, in short, is to invent." R. F. Patteson, "Nabokov's *Transparent Things*: Narration by the Mind's Eyewitness," *College Literature* 3, no. 2 (1976): 103.

⁷ Mattison stressed that while Nabokov clearly shared some of Bergson's ideas, their views are not the same. Mattison, "Nabokov's Aesthetic Bergsonism," 38.

⁸ See J. B. Foster, *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 16-17.

⁹ "A participation in and kinship with the visible, the vision neither envelops it nor is enveloped by it definitively. The superficial pellicle of the visible is only for my vision and for my body. But the depth beneath this surface contains my body and hence contains my vision. My body as a visible thing is contained within the full spectacle. But my seeing body subtends this visible body, and all the visibles with it. There is

transparency of things could be described as a particular regime of the intertwining of vision and the material world, in which the “flesh” that allows for embodied memory fades, partially, away. We will see how this conception of transparency is further linked by Nabokov with the theme of death and narrative closure and with the fictionality of existence.¹⁰

TRANSPARENCY AND HYPERMNESIA

Besides the often quoted passage on the history of a pencil,¹¹ we find a few pages later another concrete example of the “sinking” into the history of an object which defines *Transparent Things*. Looking through a souvenir shop window, a young Person spots “the green figurine of a female skier made of a substance he could not identify through the show glass.” Initially we find nothing but plain perception: a person looks at an object through a glass. Then: “it was ‘alabastrette’, imitation aragonite” the narrator explains in parentheses, at first just supplementing Person’s excusable lack of knowledge, but adding right after bits of information nobody could have guessed by merely looking at the object, some elements that clearly exceed perception. Suddenly, the past becomes apparent: we read that the little skier figure was “carved and colored in the Grumbel jail by a homosexual convict, rugged Armand Rave, who had strangled his boyfriend’s incestuous sister.”¹²

This précis of an object is prompted by an act of perception, but clearly exceeds what anyone’s senses could yield. It is not

reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other.” M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 138.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Green calls it the “textuality of life.” G. Green, “Visions of a ‘Perfect Past’: Nabokov, Autobiography, Biography, and Fiction,” *Nabokov Studies* 3 (1996): 100.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

a story that shines through the transparency of things, but the past itself in its archival thingness.

Or rather, we are told, this is the past as “they” are able to see it. We still do not know at this point who these “they” could be (ghosts, readers, writers?), and it is less important to identify them now in the diegesis, than to point out that they act as a negation: they are not real subjects – more specifically, they are not subjects of lived experience and embodied memory. The past they see, indeed, is one no human embodied subject could behold – and it is important to note that they “see” the past rather than remember it.

From this phantasmatic perspective, an object is like a time-trap: its physical form wraps up the whole of its history and, unwrapping it, we are warped through material reality and into abysmal time. Nabokov’s text, through the opposition between a transcendently objective knowledge – the knowledge that is only of ghosts and omniscient narrators – and the limited knowledge of Person, produces thus not so much an impression of objectivity (for we, as readers, are perfectly aware that there is no such figurine, made by no rugged Armand Rave), but rather the impression of a transparent past – the purest object of memory, and the most discarnate. It produces, more specifically, the impression of a position, phantasmatic as it would be, which would make possible such an impossible knowledge and presence of the past.

This special relation of memory and matter, in which the former possesses and transcends the latter, can be compared with the kind of hypermnnesia that we find in a short story by Jorge Louis Borges. In “Funes the Memorious” or “Funes, His Memory,” the eponymous peasant Funes, after a bad fall from his horse, becomes suddenly able to remember everything linked with an all-piercing power of perception. He can remember things like the exact shape of the spray lifted by the boats’ oars during the battle of Quebracho Herrado, which took place in 1840, almost fifty years in his past.

Or he can see, while looking at a glass of wine, “every grape that had been pressed into the wine and all the stalks and tendrils of its vineyard.”¹³

Like in the case of the pencil, here we find a kind of memorious gaze that is able to unfurl the storied materiality of an object and perceive detail beyond the present time.

In a sense, then – in a similar sense, in fact, as that which we give to the expression “to overcome death” – Funes has overcome memory: “I recall him,” Borges’s narrator begins his tale, “(though I have no right to speak that sacred verb – only one man on earth did, and that man is dead).”¹⁴ After Funes, Memory herself would have to fall forever silent.

A perfect and complete capacity of perceiving and remembering the material world would indeed, Borges suggested, dematerialise it.¹⁵ Complete transparency, in this sense, implies a kind of blinding: seeing through things, one does not see things anymore and loses at the same time his or her grasp on them.¹⁶ What embodied subjects perceive, on the contrary, is but the opacity of things. At most, when an object is dense with memory, it becomes translucent. For us, the past that shines through the material surface of objects is mediated by that surface but also enmeshed in it, veiled and transformed by it: it is not that we perceive the past despite the opacity of things, really, but it is only through that opacity, on the surface of things, that the past, the human past, can be inscribed.

¹³ J. L. Borges, *Collected Fictions* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 135.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁵ This is congruent with Bergson’s idea of pure memory as entailing the integral survival of the past, but appears to give a negative judgment on its viability which Nabokov seems to be sharing. Cf. M. Glynn, *Vladimir Nabokov: Bergsonian and Russian Formalist Influences in His Novels* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 74-75.

¹⁶ Which is exactly what happens to *Transparent Things*’ ghostly narrators. See H. Grabes, “Nabokov’s Worldmaking: The Marvellous Machinations of McFate,” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 47, no. 3 (2002): 342.

This point has to be connected with the idea, again shared by Nabokov and Bergson,¹⁷ that reality does not come to human beings but is the consequence of a human act of creation: the fictionalisation of memory is part of that process of aesthetic perception and writerly transformation that Nabokov saw as the interface of life and art.¹⁸

As Nabokov very precisely argues, reality requires a balance of transparency and opacity, it is an always problematic equilibrium between the visible surface of objects and the depths of their existence. Embodied memory is located precisely on that surface: like the surface tension of an expanse of water, memory holds the world of objects and subjects suspended over the abyss of their past. This is a view of memory that not only embeds the past in the contingent and subjective present, but conceives remembrance together with perception.

Transcendent memory such as Funes's, on the other hand, pierces through the veneer of material appearances completely – and that can surely be thrilling – but it also strikes us dead with stillness: Funes is overwhelmed by his exceptional gift and he eventually becomes incapable of moving and barely capable of speaking, lost as he is in the coils of his timeless perception. Borges's Funes, then, is in some ways one of Nabokov's novices, who has sunk into the past and drowned: at the beginning of *Transparent Things*, Nabokov advises wannabees to keep themselves afloat, lest they shall drown into the watery depths of remembrance. “A thin veneer of immediate reality,” he writes, “is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now, should please not

¹⁷ Glynn, *Vladimir Nabokov*, 76.

¹⁸ “Average reality begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture.” V. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 222. Also see Geoffrey Green's discussion of this point in Green, “Visions of a ‘Perfect Past’,” 92.

break its tension film. Otherwise the inexperienced miracle-worker will find himself no longer walking on water but descending upright among staring fish.”¹⁹

Nabokov seems to be consciously playing with historicity here in order to make a point about the convergence of memory and fiction, at the same time criticising the idea of historical determinism.²⁰ As he conjures behind the tacky surface of the green skier figurine an exuberant complex of crimes and passions and as he retraces the whole production process of a pencil, Nabokov is evoking historical materialism – a thing is the product of relations between people – only to drag the spectre of its determinism into a luridly insignificant vignette. It is as if Nabokov were saying, ironically: watch out, the kind of determinist materialism that pretends to present you with the absolute truth of things is actually a language of ghosts.

What is stated beyond the irony, then, is how fiction and memory belong to the same ground: a ground which is, in *Transparent Things*, the material surface of perceived objects. The past, in other words, is not a region of time, not even a direction in our apprehension of it, but a tension, a visible trouble in the materiality of things.

MEMORY AS FICTION

In the figurine’s passage that we have recalled, the past is made to appear in the most Real and the most fictional way possible at once. Real (capital R), because the past is constructed as an unknowable supplement to perceptual reality, an indivisible

¹⁹ Nabokov, *Transparent Things*, 2.

²⁰ Nabokov foregrounded history, first of all, as a written text, liable to all kinds of editing. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 254.

remainder of memory, which at the same time constitutes the ultimate support of the phenomenon itself (we can't actually know the full history of the object, but we nevertheless know that the object has a history and that it is only there because of it). The past described in the novel is also fictional, then (and not simply fake), because our knowledge about the object comes about in the shattering of diegesis, that is at the moment where the fictional status of writing becomes most apparent: the history of the object is unknown to the character – the Person – but it is nevertheless shown to the narratee – the subject.

The history of the figurine in *Transparent Things* clearly constitutes a breach of the diegetic universe: the narrator intervenes to provide the reader with a perception of the diegetic world nobody within that world could have had – nobody properly embodied in that world, at least. The information conveyed is objective as for its content (which could be the content of a police file) and as for its form (since the link between the figurine and its history is given in turn as an objective one, it is presented as a fact). However, because of the *dispositif* of its enunciation (the way the giving of this information is situated in the text), the history of the object assumes a quintessentially fictional, literary, status. This knowledge is fictional both because it is a knowledge possessed by no-one in that world, and because it opens up a breach that shows that world as a text, as something, that is, which is read and is thus passable of interpretation and editing.²¹ The history of objects that Nabokov gives us in *Transparent Things* is not just a fiction given in the form of truth, then, but a kind of truth that can only exist in the form of fiction.

²¹ See P. S. Bruss, "The Problem of Text: Nabokov's Last Two Novels," in *Nabokov's Fifth Arc: Nabokov and Other on His Life's Work*, edited by J. E. Rivers and C. Nicol (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 298.

The sinking spiral of memory is thus matched by another spiral which – if we let ourselves fall into linear time – may seem to be oriented toward the future and even suggest some kind of predestination: it is the filigree made by the accumulation of corresponding elements in the fiction. Michael Rosenblum gave an excellent description of the dense texture of textual correspondences that spin off the green skier figurine, of which some of Mr. R's novels are also part.²² *Tralatitons*, in particular, may seem to be an aptly playful name for the very resonances and coincidences that make up this pattern.²³ The only apparently odd title – literally, a change of words, a metaphor – could as well be explained as a combination of Bergsonian intuition and the writerly transposition, the metaphorisation, of the world.²⁴

²² “The figure of the green skier points forward to Armande and the mysterious appearance of the figurine in the box on the night of Hugh's death. The name of the sculptor Armand Rave obviously suggests the first name of Hugh's future wife Armande and perhaps, by a more indirect linkage, her second name as well: Rave, rove, cauchemar, Chamar. The carving of the figurine is related to the activity of the sculptor who lives directly above Hugh and Armande in New York, and who is mentioned on the night of Armande's death. The fact that Rave strangled his boyfriend's incestuous sister is connected with Armande's death and the series of kinky erotic trios throughout the book: Hugh and the mother and sister he wooed unsuccessfully; the onanistic trio of Jacques and the English twins; Christian Pines, Julia, and Mrs. R., a group which Hugh identifies with the representation of lover, mother, and daughter in *Tralatitons*. Hugh also connects meeting Armande and Julia with the three lovers in *Three Tenses*. The mention of the fire in the shop-clerks' apartment points forward to all the other fires in the book: that in the theater to which Hugh and Julia go before they make love and the one on Italian TV; the fire in the doll house in *Figures in a Golden Window* and that depicted on the cover; the fire that Armande fears, and that Hugh dreams; the hotel fire in Stresa, and the final fire that suffocates Hugh.” M. Rosenblum, “Finding What the Sailor Has Hidden: Narrative as Patternmaking in *Transparent Things*,” *Contemporary Literature* 19, no. 2 (1978): 225-226.

²³ *Ibid.*, 231. Another name, more contentious, would be free associations.

²⁴ “The Past is also part of the tissue, part of the present, but it looks somewhat out of focus. The Past is a constant accumulation of images, but our brain is not an ideal organ for constant retrospection and the best we can do is to pick out and try to retain those patches of rainbow light flitting through memory. The act of retention is the act

Nabokov's idea that real reality has to be sustained by a creative effort influences both his treatment of autobiography and his description of the early phases of the creative process in the Alvin Toffler interview. The following of the thematic designs through one's life which for Nabokov is the true purpose of autobiography²⁵ corresponds to that initially senseless collection of "bits of straw and fluff," that not immediately accountable eating of pebbles that will become the wholeness of the nest.²⁶ Coincidences, like souvenirs, have to be made resonant through language and conversely language is part of a universe fundamentally animated by contingency.²⁷

If Nabokov described *Speak, Memory* as a hybrid between an autobiography and a novel²⁸ and grafted the genius of fiction to the autobiographical form, then *Transparent Things* is a similar crossbreed obtained by incorporating the apparatus of autobiography in the structure of fiction. In this way, *Transparent Things* shows the utter arbitrariness of life: even its inexorable coincidences and dire returns are shown to be a matter of the vagaries of literary invention.

of art, artistic selection, artistic blending, artistic re-combination of actual events." Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 332-333.

²⁵ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 27.

²⁶ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 64.

²⁷ See also Merleau-Ponty: "One has to believe, then, that language is not simply the contrary of the truth, of coincidence, that there is or could be a language of coincidence, a manner of making the things themselves speak – and this is what he seeks. It would be a language of which he would not be the organizer, words he would not assemble, that would combine through him by virtue of a natural intertwining of their meaning, through the occult trading of the metaphor – where what counts is no longer the manifest meaning of each word and of each image, but the lateral relations, the kinships that are implicated in their transfers and their exchanges." Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 125.

²⁸ V. Nabokov, *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters 1940-1977* (San Diego: HBJ, 1989), 128.

METAPHYSICS AS METALITERATURE

Ghosts and transcendence in general are in *Transparent Things* a metaphor to explain textuality, not the other way around: if anything, what we witness in the novel is a transcendence to a plane of greater materiality. Nabokov's transcendence is not metaphysical but this does not make it any less portentous: it is a transcendence to the level of narration that retroactively transforms a world into a diegesis and a life into a text.

Those moments in which Nabokov's characters "cross over into another zone of existence" that Michael Wood recalls,²⁹ are not extrafictional but extradiegetic and Nabokov in *Transparent Things* seems indeed to be using the reader's momentary confusion between these two dimensions to suggest not so much a transcendence at the level of the diegesis (from life to afterlife), but one at the level of the text, in which the character gets access to the dimension of the narrators,³⁰ or of narration itself in all its material aspects. After all, in a universe where god is the Great Publisher, beatitude is to be proofread by cherubims and infernal torment is misprint,³¹ the afterlife must be a hardcover edition and life itself a manuscript.

The shift from one world to the next may look like a step into madness or metaphysics, but in fact it is best described as act of subjectivation: in it, the character becomes apparent to himself as a character and this is both a dispossession and, in the fullest sense, a realization. Nabokov's character does not attempt to escape from anything in the diegesis and into a diegetic otherworld, but

²⁹ M. Wood, "Nabokov's Late Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, ed. J. W. Connolly (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), 201.

³⁰ B. Boyd, "Nabokov as Storyteller" in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, 44.

³¹ Nabokov, *Transparent Things*, 136.

from the diegesis itself. There is no beyond death, but a general dissolution into textuality.

It is this understanding that Rainer Werner Fassbinder has captured in his adaptation of *Despair*. The character played by Dirk Bogarde, caught by the police, hazely announces before the freeze-frame on which the film will end that he will soon get away. After all, he is an actor and he has just been playing a role: "I'm a film actor. I'm coming out. 'Don't look at the camera.' I am coming out," he says.³²

In the novel, however, there is no real actor, no Dirk Bogarde who can in fact say "I" and who could support Hermann's claim by acting as his fictional double in a different world (ours). The ambiguity of Hermann's imagined "little speech"³³ is translated in the film into an ambivalence. While still unveiling the medium, the transcendence in the novel has thus to be more radical: it cannot rest in the ambivalence of the regime of representation, but has to be a self-grounding act, completely open-ended. Everything is played at the level of an enunciation which is a textual not a diegetic utterance: Hermann imagines his little speech and it is with this act of imagination alone, as it is written in the text, that the character does (or not, at this point no figurable action can constitute a proper description) "come out" at once of the pension, of his destiny and of the book.

At the threshold of life's end and narrative closure, punishment and absolute freedom, fate and free will is another

³² R. W. Fassbinder, dir. *Despair*, West Germany, 1978.

³³ V. Nabokov, *Despair* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 360. "Frenchmen! This is a rehearsal. Hold those policemen. A famous film actor will presently come running out of this house. He is an arch-criminal but he must escape. You are asked to prevent them from grabbing him. This is part of the plot. French crowd! I want you to make a free passage for him from door to car. Remove its driver! Start the motor! Hold those policemen, knock them down, sit on them – we pay them for it. This is a German company, so excuse my French. *Les preneurs de vues*, my technicians and armed advisers are already among you. Attention! I want a clean getaway. That's all. Thank you. I'm coming out now."

character as well, which can serve us as a contrast to our Person. She is a film character who in many ways refuses to be a person but is, or is trying, to live only as a film character. She is a memorious character in her own way, trapped as she is in her pictured past... It is the closing scene of a film where another scene in a non-existing film is being shot: Norma Desmond is climbing down, acting, the famous staircase in *Sunset Boulevard* into the arms of the police and of the reality she could never face. As long as the scene lasts she believes that she has found again her stage persona and, as her final close-up fades out, she ends up *médusée* by her lifelong performance. Here the past has swallowed the present and Norma's escape is only imaginary: there is no filmmaker at the foot of the stairs, only those journalists and policemen from whose average-reality account of the facts the film's internal narrator – dead himself already, his corpse floating in a pool – had been sheltering us for a while.³⁴ The metafictional gesture in *Sunset Boulevard* is trapped within the diegesis and, in this way, corresponds to Norma's impenetrable delusion.

In *Transparent Things* the almost perfect folding back of time upon pattern which leads to Person's death in a fatal "dire repetition"³⁵ is at the same time an unveiling of the scene of narration. Here the use of narrative closure interacts with the tropes of autobiography and death: the living and the recollection of the patterns of existence is done in the shadow of the final word that sets one's life in print. At the same time, the book becomes a book and the subject is spoken (*fatus est*) once and for all. The momentousness of this realisation of the constructedness and arbitrariness of existence, but also the everyday nature of the

³⁴ *Sunset Boulevard* is a famous cinematographic example of post-mortem narration. See Wood's discussion of Nabokov's use of this trope in "Nabokov's Late Fiction," 203-206.

³⁵ The expression is from *The Defense*. See S. H. Blackwell, "Fated Freedoms: Textual Form and Metaphysical Texture in Nabokov," *Nabokov Studies* 4 (1997): 69-70.

struggle of the subject with this momentousness, is captured by the necessary understatement of the “easy does it” that seals the novel. There is no reason to invoke fate in the sense of a pre-determined outcome of life that would negate human freedom here: if a person’s life is fateful it is, very precisely, because it will have been spoken.³⁶

THE PERSON IN PROCESS

If every version of the self is fundamentally a fictionalisation,³⁷ then transparency also acquires the meaning of a dispossession – that is, of a negation of the subject’s individuality. In his treatment of subjectivation and subjection, we find a connection between Nabokov’s “indeterminism,”³⁸ his whimsical metaphysics and his individualistic hate for authoritarian power. The ghost, more specifically, is not just a trope of the metaphysical, which Nabokov exploits to explore and question textuality, it is also an embodiment, so to speak, of the disembodied subject under the gaze of power. This is Nabokov in *Speak, Memory*:

Somewhere at the back of their glands, the authorities secreted the notion that no matter how bad a State – say, Soviet Russia – might be, any fugitive from it was intrinsically despicable since he existed outside

³⁶ See S. H. Blackwell for a discussion of the relation between fate and text in Nabokov. “Fated Freedoms,” 63-64, 78, 80, 86.

³⁷ Patteson, “Nabokov’s *Transparent Things*,” 107.

³⁸ See S. H. Blackwell, *The Quill and the Scalpel: Nabokov’s Art and the Worlds of Science* (Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2009), 161. Also see M. Glynn, “The word is not a shadow. The word is a Thing: Nabokov as anti-Symbolist,” *European Journal of American Culture* 25, no. 1 (2006): 2. Boyd stresses how Nabokov puts a stronger stress on “the absurd contrast between a possible return in space and an impossible return in time.” B. Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 294.

a national administration; and therefore he was viewed with the preposterous disapproval with which certain religious groups regard a child born out of wedlock. Not all of us consented to be bastards and ghosts.³⁹

Outside of the State's sanction, the subject becomes not just illegitimate, but (in the eyes of the State at least) immaterial. Materiality and individuality come then to be defined in contrast to the gaze of power, as a radical opacity of the subject.

Cincinnatus, the character of Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, is clearly constructed (in some respects, at least) on the prototype of the subject under the gaze of power. Guilty of being naturally resistant to the gaze, he is accused of "gnostical turpitude,"⁴⁰ confined in a panoptical jail,⁴¹ trapped in a terminal state which is no longer life, but memory without a present, not even really waiting for his execution but existing in a pure state of suspension.

Cincinnatus learns to feign transparency from the earliest age, but still loses it as soon as he forgets himself, that is, when he lets himself live, in joy or action or free wandering thought. Whenever discovered, "Cincinnatus would take hold of himself, and, clutching his own self to his breast, would remove that self to a safe place."⁴² Cincinnatus has to make an effort, that is, to make himself seemingly penetrable by the gaze of others, while his natural state is to be impenetrable to it. In this sense, subjectivity here becomes like memory in *Transparent Things*: a troubled equilibrium between an obscure materiality and a lucid visibility.

³⁹ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 210.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁴¹ See Ibid., 24.

⁴² Ibid., 24.

Cincinnatus is also one of those Nabokovian characters, like Person, whose subjective essence, with the very final words of the novel, seems to escape death by making its way toward another dimension inhabited by a different kind of beings.⁴³ The world in which Cincinnatus is born, instead, is a world of people transparent to one another, bathing in the “solicitous sunshine of public concern,”⁴⁴ in the light of an identitarian community in which everyone immediately understands each other. The world of *Invitation to a Beheading* is a perfectly disciplined world in which nothing that transcends language can exist: “that which does not have a name does not exist. Unfortunately, everything had a name.”⁴⁵ Commonplace reality is characterised by transparency, which suggests that “ghosts” here, far from being supernatural entities, are in fact the commonest of people.

Nabokov, again, is very precise: the transparency of the subject is not a form of invisibility (something that can be repurposed as a weapon of subversion, like we may find in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*), but rather a heightened form of visibility, an *exposure* that is intimately linked with authoritarian power as well as with the immediacy of consensus and commonplace. Paradoxically, then, when we are more opaque we are more invisible, in the sense that we are not seen for what we are and thus we are more free – Cincinnatus quite literally spends his life hiding himself by making himself more visible. Subjectivity may be, then, nothing more than a stain in perception, a veil over a transparent universe or the surface of an unfathomable depth. We surely are – when we are in the now, with the now, on the now – a blind spot in the eyes of ghosts.

⁴³ Ibid., 340.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 26.

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**VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S
ONTOLOGICAL AESTHETICISM
FROM THE RENAISSANCE
TO TRANSHUMANISM**

**NABOKOV'S PAST IN THE CONTEXT
OF THE RENAISSANCE**

At a certain point in *The Gift*, the brooding, introspective protagonist suddenly and inexplicably steps off a curb in foreign Berlin and onto the familiar grounds of the lost world of his Russian childhood. Though this revisited world is recreated in studious detail, the novel is not a work of realism. Nabokov does not simply report the necessary realistic detail – he renders details with a religious fervor, not so much evoking landscapes as worshipping the process of memory as a means of creation. And while the novel is not a straightforward work of the fantastic, elements such as the sudden teleportation from one spacetime into

another are not simply formal excuses for descriptive exercises. The protagonist's small step from one world into another is a step in a greater process – a process of the evocation of a state of what may be called *mystical aestheticism*, an aesthetic rendering of the elemental constituents of human inner and outer life that is so thorough, so abnormally acute as to appear fantastic, while *aesthetic* consciousness – memory at the service of what Nabokov calls “aesthetic bliss” defined as curiosity, tenderness, and ecstasy¹ – replaces dungeon-like spacetime as the all-containing medium onto which Nabokov's novels open up like butterfly cocoons at the end of a metamorphosis.

Nabokov's preceding novel, *Invitation to a Beheading*, ends with the “real” world falling away and disintegrating, leaving the memory-haunted protagonist following a ghostly path not in a meaningless void but in a special, liminal space somewhere between the text and the reader's heart, heading confidently towards a merger with “beings akin to him.”² *The Gift*, after several hundred pages of creative trials and tribulations, ends with the protagonist's finding his voice in the confident final paragraphs – in a merger of male and female, protagonist and narrator, prose and metered poetry, of the reality of the novel with its text and with the reality of the reader, when he or she is informed that “no obstruction for the sage exists where I have put The End: the shadows of my world extend beyond the skyline of the page, blue as tomorrow's morning haze – nor does this terminate the phrase.”³

Similar devices and purpose are to be found throughout Nabokov's oeuvre, where memory is consistently associated not merely with nostalgic vistas, nor simply with the passage of time

¹ V. Nabokov, “On A Book Entitled *Lolita*,” in *The Annotated Lolita*. Ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 314-315.

² V. Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading: A Novel*, trans. D. Nabokov (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1960), 208.

³ V. Nabokov, *The Gift*, trans. M. Scammell (New York: Vintage, 1991), 366.

or the traversal of space, but with the *overcoming* of space and time through means unsanctioned by reason, science, and common sense. In *Speak, Memory* a transposition of spacetimes similar to the one in *The Gift* occurs when a butterfly hunt begun in pre-Revolutionary Russia ends in mid-twentieth century America, and is immediately followed by a statement on timelessness and oneness:

I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness – in a landscape selected at random – is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern – to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal.⁴

Closer to the end of the memoir, Nabokov elaborates his views on nature in the context of the natural sciences – once more opposing to them a special kind of consciousness which is aware of more than just the physical functions of things and which is a dimension in its own right, equal, even superior to scientific spacetime:

Innermost in man is the spiritual pleasure derivable from the possibilities of outtugging and outrunning gravity, of overcoming or re-enacting the earth's pull. The miraculous paradox of smooth round objects

⁴ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 139. All further in-text references refer to this edition.

conquering space by simply tumbling over and over, instead of laboriously lifting heavy limbs in order to progress, must have given young mankind a most salutary shock. The bonfire into which the dreamy little savage peered as he squatted on naked haunches, or the unswerving advance of a forest fire – these have also affected, I suppose, a chromosome or two behind Lamarck's back, in the mysterious way which Western geneticists are as disinclined to elucidate as are professional physicists to discuss the outside of the inside, the whereabouts of the curvature; for every dimension presupposes a medium within which it can act, and if, in the spiral unwinding of things, space warps into something akin to time, and time, in its turn, warps into something akin to thought, then, surely, another dimension follows – a special Space. (301)

Nabokov was a respected and published lepidopterologist. Yet outside strictly scientific writing, his opinions are often blatantly unscientific. For the author of *Speak, Memory*, mimicry is not so much a scientific phenomenon to be studied as a mystical wonder and a mystery irresolvable, a species of art which can only be explained or rendered through art:

The mysteries of mimicry had a special attraction for me. Its phenomena showed an artistic perfection usually associated with man-wrought things. (...) "Natural selection," in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behavior, nor could one appeal to the theory of "the struggle for life" when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator's

power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception. (124-125)

A frequent subject in Nabokov, science never goes unchallenged from the beginning of his career to its very end: "I don't believe that any science today has pierced any mystery. (...) We shall never know the origin of life, or the meaning of life, or the nature of space and time, or the nature of nature, or the nature of thought."⁵

With a similar, almost militant, brusqueness, Nabokov challenges progress in physics: "While not having much physics, I reject Einstein's slick formulae; but then one need not know theology to be an atheist."⁶ With anarchist fancifulness, Nabokov accuses the very laws of mathematics in a lack of imagination:

When commonsense is ejected together with its calculating machine, numbers cease to trouble the mind. (...) Two and two no longer make four, because it is no longer necessary for them to make four. If they had done so in the artificial logical world (...) it had been merely a matter of habit.⁷

On the very first pages of his autobiography he dismisses "common sense" and brazenly states his intent to "picket nature" (19-20), towards the end confessing that he does not "believe in time" (139), as if time, together with Einstein's formulas, natural

⁵ V. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 44-45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 116

⁷ V. Nabokov, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" in: *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York and London: Harvest/HBJ, 1982), 374.

mimicry and, later in this article, critical interpretation, were not a scientific and natural fact but a matter of faith or fancy.

This way of challenging the boundaries between the objective and the subjective, the real and the imaginary, lends postmodern characteristics to Nabokov's work, but I would not categorize Nabokov's work as post-modern in the sense of a strictly late-20th-century phenomenon of texts which indulge in nihilist pastiche for its own sake. Nabokov is part of a category of artists who confer on art a special epistemological and ontological status, what I call "ontological aestheticism," explored in my dissertation and previous articles with a focus on what I call "anti-criticism" – the belief that literary criticism, any form of professional commentary, scholarly or academic interpretation, and critical theory at large, is inadequate and even harmful.

In a manner analogous to the scientific aspect of his career, the successful academic career of Nabokov's English-language period is consistently punctuated by forewords, afterwords, interviews, lectures, and academic asides which exhibit anti-critical sentiment, while his fiction, both Russian and English, echoes and elaborates on it. A characteristic passage in *Ada or Ardor* demonstrates that Nabokov's treatment of science and criticism stems from the same underlying philosophy, when a passing anti-critical remark appears in the context of an attempt to suspend natural laws through art. In chapter 30, Van, the youthful male protagonist, performs an eccentric variety-show stunt of his own design. Under an exotic stage name, Van appears before the audience standing on his hands while disguised as an upright figure and, after a while, reverses his position in a feat of illusionist acrobatics, standing – as it were – on his head, while actually landing on his real feet and suddenly doffing the costume:

It was the standing of a metaphor on its head not for the sake of the trick's difficulty, but in order to perceive an

ascending waterfall or a sunrise in reverse: a triumph, in a sense, over the ardis of time. Thus the rapture young Mascodagama derived from overcoming gravity was akin to that of artistic revelation in the sense utterly and naturally unknown to the innocents of critical appraisal, the social-scene commentators, the moralists, the ideamongers and so forth.⁸

A characteristically Nabokovian remark appears just before the description of the act: “the work of a poet, and only a poet (...) could have adequately described a certain macabre quiver that marked Van’s extraordinary act,”⁹ implying that only art can convey the essence of art, with the “macabre quiver” mentioned here echoing Nabokov’s lectures and essays where quivers, tingles, and throbs along the spinal column – sensual, subjective, silent experiences – are repeatedly proclaimed to be the only true means of artistic appreciation.

The beginnings of the sort of modern artistic mentality exhibited by Nabokov – a kind of aesthetic panpsychism – are traceable back to early-Renaissance quarrels between medieval scholastic traditions and the emerging humanist worldview: a period when creative writing was gradually evolving into a self-contained field as early humanists challenged formal opinions and defended non-canonical forms of literature where rhetoric could be used for the sake of rhetoric and subject matter could range freely from the religious to the secular, from the pious to the profane, from didacticism to pure diversion. Writers of fiction were becoming a separate category of *thinkers*, who could break with prevalent traditions, and even with the idea of tradition as such, not infrequently valuing innovation, originality, fancy, inborn creative

⁸ V. Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 146.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

proclivity and subjective experience, above all else. Neither divine madness nor rationalist rigor, but a synthesis of both, a new form of free will – the will to art, as it were – was born.

When humanist values became widespread among all classes of scholars in the 16th and 17th centuries and specialist institutions began to emerge, religious institutions which had previously imposed values on scholar-writers gave way to scholarly institutions which now imposed increasingly secular values on *fiction* writers. Both had common roots in early humanism. The scholars of the time, however, inherited a focus on rationally deduced and professionally applied systems of knowledge, a belief in the existence of prerequisite rules of composition in accordance with preexisting ideals, and in the critic's right and obligation to illuminate and instruct. A category of fictionists, however, inherited primarily the rebelliously autonomous spirit of the amateur encyclopedic enthusiast and the belief in ideals of composition which emphasize spontaneity, inventiveness, genius, and the enjoyment of the purely aesthetic, of the unlearned and the undidactic.

The resulting incompatibility led to a sense of hostile opposition. Fiction writers began to see malice in criticism, accusing it of a cruelly mechanistic dissection and murder. The most inventive fictionists turned the tables on criticism by treating it as *a fictional theme*, rebelling against “excesses of method” and lifting criticism from “the realm of rational categories” in order to *imagine* – through fictional narrative – “new interpretative procedures and investigate other approaches to truth.”¹⁰

Major authors like Miguel de Cervantes responded to neo-Aristotelian scholarly debates regarding the potential of fiction to follow the precepts of verisimilitude, by transforming theory

¹⁰ M. Jeanneret, “Renaissance exegesis,” in G. P. Norton, ed., *The Cambridge History of Literary History*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 41.

into fiction, pointedly violating verisimilitude with temporal inconsistencies and excessive meta-commentary, offering through fiction “a critique of the nature of reality itself” and “gesturing towards the impoverished nature of the critics’ perspectives,”¹¹ seeing fiction as an epistemological and ontological discourse in its own right, free and even superior to literary criticism and theory.

The separate fields of fiction, criticism, and the increasingly empirical natural sciences diverged more and more. Each drew on the other two, but for increasingly unrelated purposes. Breakthroughs in science generated a cult of innovativeness, but did not always result in the acceptance of the scientific worldview, on the contrary, causing some creative writers to associate science with criticism and to treat both with suspicion or outright hostility.

In “The Battle of the Books,” for example, Jonathan Swift associates the “mathematics” of criticism with cobwebs, artificiality and death, while creative genius is associated with flight, freedom, and flowery meadows.¹² While in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, Laurence Sterne describes critics as savages, “hung round and befetish’d with the bobs and trinkets of criticism,” whose heads are “stuck so full of rules and compasses,” which they apply so invariably, “that a work of genius had better go to the devil at once, than stand to be prick’d and tortured to death by ‘em.”¹³ Sterne satirizes not simply pedantry, but the principle of precise rules as such in a manner not unlike Nabokov’s dismissal of mathematics. Not unlike Nabokov himself, Sterne mocks studious reliance on great authorities of philosophy and criticism, from Aristotle to René le Bossu, as well as on learning

¹¹ M. Brownlee, “Cultural commentary in seventeenth-century Spain: literary theory and textual practice,” in Norton, *The Cambridge History of Literary History*, 588.

¹² J. Swift, R. A. Greenberg and W. B. Piper (eds.), *The Writings of Jonathan Swift: Authoritative Texts, Backgrounds, Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 373-396.

¹³ L. Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2009), 122

which serves captious censoriousness. Sterne refers to “the cant of criticism” as “the most tormenting” in the world and professes to prefer those who can enjoy the author’s imagination without requiring professional analysis and explication, for a reader who is “pleased he knows not why, and cares not wherefore,” and appeals to Apollo to “send Mercury, with the rules and compasses ... to – no matter.”¹⁴

The dichotomy between creative writing and criticism solidified in the 19th century, “with, on the one side, the literary masterpiece venerated as an irrational, inimitable, unchanging and almost sacred object and, on the other side, academic knowledge claiming the opposite properties of objectivity, rigour, and dependency.”¹⁵ The closely related Romantic and Decadent movements of the 19th century, and the Modernist and Post-Modernist movements of the 20th further reinforced the separation and elaborated the underlying philosophies.

In his letters and notebooks, Gustave Flaubert viciously attacks critics, reviewers, and professors of literature, saying that “literary criticism (...) good or bad” is first in a list of “the truly stupid things,”¹⁶ comparing it to a parasite living off the genius of artists. In a process of association not unlike Nabokov’s, Flaubert likens scientific analysis to fruitless dissection and in the same breath attacks scholarship as such, the knowledge, as he puts it elsewhere, of “languages, archeology, history, etc.,” claiming that the more the “so-called enlightened people” learn, the less they understand. Obsessed with the glosses to a text, they “care more about crutches than about legs.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ M. Jeanneret, “Renaissance exegesis,” in Norton, *The Cambridge History of Literary History*, 42.

¹⁶ G. Flaubert, *Intimate Notebook 1840-1841*, trans. Francis Steegmuller (London: W. H. Allen, 1967), 40.

¹⁷ G. Flaubert, *Correspondance: Œuvres Complètes de Gustave Flaubert*, vol. 6 (Paris: Louis Conard, 1910), letter to George Sand of January 1st 1869, 3. My translation.

Nabokov knew Cervantes, Sterne, and Flaubert, and shared their aesthetic dispositions, continuing the tradition of fiction as a means of investigating “other approaches to truth,” a special truth that is outside “the realm of rational categories,” the truth of the artist’s genius for whom the freedom of artistic invention and subjective experience supercede the laws of rhetoric, religion, and science. In redefining animal mimicry, Darwinian theory, physics, mathematics, and criticism in accordance with his own fancy, in saying that he refuses “to be guided and controlled by a communion of established views and academic traditions”¹⁸ and that he does not believe “in *any* kind of ‘interpretation’.”¹⁹ Nabokov is not being contrarian, but expresses an alternative wisdom which has existed for centuries.

Because Nabokov confers on art a special epistemological and ontological status, memory in his work is more than a function of the mind. He interprets consciousness, space and time as dimensions of equal magnitude and substance, positioning all three within another, “special,” superior space of artistic scrutiny, a monist dimension where subjective perception, objective reality, and artistic imagination manifest in complex simultaneity, where one does not merely recall the past, but also creates and inhabits it.

Nabokov’s is a very particular ideology which distinguishes between controlled “ontological aestheticism,” as the most humane form of consciousness and communication, and obfuscating artfulness which results in confusion and cruelty. His work exhibits a consistent, often plainly stated set of values and is the 20th-century manifestation of an artistic mentality and philosophy with a centuries-long history.

¹⁸ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 266.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

NABOKOV'S PAST IN THE CONTEXT OF FUTURISM

Nabokov entire oeuvre shows consistent ambivalence about futurist ideology, whether in socio-political or technological fields. "Anyone can create the future but only a wise man can create the past,"²⁰ this casual remark made in one of the opening scenes by the protagonist of *Bend Sinister* illustrates Nabokov's own lifelong position. Though he has written a series of works classifiable as science fiction, they are deliberate reversals of the futurism of traditional sci-fi, deliberately de-emphasizing the interest and importance of technological change.

The 1945 short story, "Time and Ebb," is a succinct demonstration of the way Nabokov employs the tropes and trappings of science-fiction to explore not the implications of possible developments in politics, culture, or technology but his recurrent themes of memory, art, and metaphysics. Told in the first person, the short story is a fictional memoir written in the first decades of the 21st century by an aging scientist who attempts to capture the essence and atmosphere of 1940s America. Nothing in the title or the opening suggests the story's connection to science-fiction, while Nabokov's key themes – metaphysical reinterpretations of time, memory, and art – are established from the outset.

The narrator's account of his past gives us clues to his present, which is obviously futuristic, but this futuristic present never becomes more than a vaguely glimpsed backdrop. One senses that while being perceptive about the shortcomings, affectations and blind spots of mid-20th century society, the narrator is incapable of similar ironic distance and critical insight into his present 21st century culture.

²⁰ V. Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 20.

Looking for ways to describe the strange quality his memory has acquired with age, wherein the distant past becomes more vivid than recent events, the narrator evokes the image of 21st century telescopes so powerful they allow the discovery of microscopic life-forms on Venus but do not allow the observation of more earthly things. He then proceeds to enumerate examples of absurd customs characteristic of the past. He describes the people of the mid 20th century as being waist deep “in (...) prudery and prejudice,” as superficial, careless, shortsighted, and prone to atavisms.²¹

We deduce from his various descriptions that in the narrator’s futuristic 21st century people do not have their meals around large wooden tables, wear clothes consisting of a single monolithic piece, and do not preface their letters with “Dear Sir”; that they are less community oriented, less concerned with economics, less religious; that they have perfected the “denominations of time” to such extent that to a 20th century person they would look like “telephone” numbers (with the word “telephone” given in quotation marks, suggesting that the technology has long gone out of use), and that they now know the true nature of electricity, which is never disclosed to the reader but the discovery of which apparently caused profound shock.²²

Concluding the opening section, the narrator asserts that in spite of all this, the world of his “young days” was a “gallant and tough little world that countered adversity with a bit of dry humor and would calmly set out for remote battlefields in order to suppress the savage vulgarity of Hitler or Alamillo.”²³ But the wording of this praise suggests that the narrator himself is not immune to a certain degree of pride and prejudice, snobbishness, oversimplification, and stodginess, while the 21st-century customs

²¹ V. Nabokov, “Time and Ebb” in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996), 581.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Ibid., 582.

deduced by us from his accounts sound no less ridiculous than the absurdities of the 20th century.

The story is a description, through the eyes of a character from a fictional future, of a past which for Nabokov is, in fact, the present. It is this present which is the focus of the story, the *poetry* of everyday trifles – where poetry is conceived as the deepest form of understanding, the very essence of life, a mystical state of mind and being. In this context, the metaphor of the telescope acquires additional meaning. The vaguely mythic and grotesquely sexual undertones of the description of a gigantic optical apparatus penetrating humid Venusian valleys to observe swarming “hesperozoa”²⁴ becomes a subtly mocking depiction of a culture disproportionately focused on the scientific and the technological at the expense of the purely poetical.

The idea of the essential similarity of science and art, truth and imagination, is ever-present in Nabokov’s fiction and nonfiction and is evoked twice in the story as well: in the opening section, when the narrator says that his narrative resides in a twilight zone between fact and fiction, and in the closing paragraph, when he aphoristically proclaims that when science – defined as “attainment” – and art – defined as “retainment” – meet, nothing else in the world matters,²⁵ suggesting that the purpose of science is not to bring about a technologically perfected society but to complement art – art in the sense of a kind of mystical aestheticism where the right word vividly capturing such simple things as the shimmering of air on a hot day is more important and more profound than the discovery of alien life or a new source of energy.

Significant sections of the story are brilliant exercises in precisely this kind of poetry, a lovingly and liltily composed

²⁴ Ibid., 581.

²⁵ Ibid., 586.

list of mid-20th century peculiarities, poeticized to the point of utter otherworldliness:

Upon reaching New York, travelers in space used to be as much impressed as travelers in time would have been by the old-fashioned ‘skyscrapers’; this was a misnomer, since their association with the sky, especially at the ethereal close of a greenhouse day, far from suggesting any grating contact, was indescribably delicate and serene: to my childish eyes looking across the vast expanse of park land that used to grace the center of the city, they appeared remote and lilac-colored, and strangely aquatic, mingling as they did their first cautious lights with the colors of the sunset and revealing, with a kind of dreamy candor, the pulsating inside of their semitransparent structure.²⁶

Time travel is mentioned in passing as something which, had it actually existed, would have accorded the same, somewhat stale pleasures of any of the already available means of transportation. The physical traversal of either space or time does not impress Nabokov as a technological achievement and has importance only as additional means of accumulating impressions later to serve as fuel for personal mnemonic journeys and poetic ventures. When the narrator evokes *airplanes*, they are significant not as technological conquests of a past civilization, but as memories of the mythic – almost mystical – childhood sensations they produced:

And so I shall tiptoe away, taking leave of my childhood at its most typical point, in its most plastic posture: arrested by a deep drone that vibrates and gathers in

²⁶ Ibid., 582-583.

volume overhead, stock-still, oblivious of the meek bicycle it straddles, one foot on the pedal, the toe of the other touching the asphalted earth, eyes, chin, and ribs lifted to the naked sky where a warplane comes with unearthly speed which only the expanse of its medium renders unhurried as ventral view changes to rear view, and wings and hum dissolve in the distance. Admirable monsters, great flying machines, they have gone, they have vanished like that flock of swans which passed with a mighty swish of multitudinous wings one spring night above Knights Lake in Maine, from the unknown into the unknown: swans of a species never determined by science, never seen before, never seen since – and then nothing but a lone star remained in the sky, like an asterisk leading to an undiscoverable footnote.²⁷

In a manner reminiscent of Nabokov's other endings, the narrator undergoes a subtle but complex transformation at the end. In the course of his reminiscences he becomes a disembodied stream of memories, a Nabokovian poet-spirit revisiting and revising favorite points in the past, and now passes into the next world in more than one sense. Like the plane just described, the narrator "dissolves into the distance," a monster, a mythic creature indeterminable by science, not ceasing to exist, merely passing from one unknown into another.

The evocation in the closing sentence of a star that is "like an asterisk leading to an undiscoverable footnote," as if life were a work of art the critical key to which must remain unknown, prefigures the much later *Pale Fire* – a novel unrelated to science-fiction but with a strong element of fantasy. While such sci-fi elements as alternate history (in the short story, France has

²⁷ Ibid., 586.

a common border with Russia) and mysterious discoveries and disasters which end the use of electricity, prefigure the even later 1969 *Ada or Ardor*.

The novel is a monumental elaboration on the themes of the two sci-fi stories preceding it,²⁸ with a greater emphasis on alternate history and retro-futurism. The story of *Ada or Ardor* takes place in a world where the US comprises all of the Americas where citizens speak English, Russian, and French with equal fluency. It is a world where, due to an unspecified disaster, electricity had to be replaced by water which somehow allows the operation of phones, intercoms, and television, and where helicopters and cars coexist with automated 19th century type carriages in a generally retro atmosphere reminiscent of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenin*.

There is likewise the theme of interplanetary travel with a much more pronounced element of parallel dimensions: at one point in his life, the novel's male protagonist studies a mysterious global phenomenon of people believing that they telepathically communicate with a parallel-dimension variant of their planet. All this is further complicated by a sense that this alternate planet is actually the reader's own planet, and by narrative devices reminiscent of those in the story "Lance" and other of Nabokov's works where multiple narrator-memoirists and various supernatural entities interject and intervene, creating an atmosphere of a kind of metafictional mysticism – the dramatization of the creative process as a mystical, metaphysical basis of reality.

Like in the two short stories, the science-fictional elements in *Ada or Ardor* are never the focus of attention. The manifest, somewhat absurd artificiality of the novel's alternate universe is used, like the future in "Time and Ebb," as a prism through which to observe the author's and reader's real world so that it,

²⁸ The 1952 "Lance" being the second one.

too, appears equally fantastic and phantasmal. The importance of technological progress, futuristic predictions, social custom and natural laws is downplayed and the narrative focuses instead on the transgressive relationship of the romantically-involved protagonists, on their individual inner worlds, the intricacies of their talented but eccentric personalities as they mature and age, on love and cruelty in human relationships in general, on the joy and suffering of the relationship between the individual and the physical world, the thrilling yet crippling dimensions of space and time, their physical traversal and their transcendence through art, and on the poetry of a multitude of everyday minutiae.

Nabokov pointedly consigns science-fiction elements to the background, underscoring their chimerical and incidental nature and implying that no amount of technological transformation will change certain eternal components of human existence, that there is no essential difference, in terms of improvement or knowledge, between a distant future and any period in the past, and that a concern with technological advancement, rather than contributing to progress or revealing the truth, leads society astray, delaying a direct confrontation with what can only be understood through an immaterial imaginative effort, through the pursuit of art as a mystical, metaphysical experience.

NABOKOV AS PAST AND PRESENT ALTERNATIVE TRANSHUMANISM

Nabokov's anti-futurist ontological aestheticism echoes that of two earlier Russian thinkers, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Nikolai Berdyaev, both of them rejecting the idea of technological progress altogether, favoring instead the idea of a purely spiritual development, advocating creativity within the realm of the subjective. In line with Dostoyevsky's thought, Berdyaev sees

scientific development as undermined by a self-destructive dualistic premise: the premise of a final-truth state that is, in reality, unreachable, perpetuating a state of constant affirmation and negation, creation and destruction.

In *Slavery and Freedom*, Berdyaev writes that scientific and technological mastery over nature is illusory, that they grant neither freedom nor control, but merely an alternative form of slavery: “Technical knowledge and the machine have a cosmogonic character and denote the appearance, as it were, of a new nature, in the power of which man finds himself to be.”²⁹ Desiring freedom from natural laws, humanity “objectifies” the subjective, enslaving itself by means of technology, from which, in turn, it attempts to flee, back into a “natural,” primordial existence, entrapping itself over and over again in an endless and self-destructive cycle of alternating slaveries.³⁰

Berdyaev’s alternative to the “vicious circle” of “objectification” and self-enslavement is “an act of the spirit,” a foregrounding of subjectivity as independent of both nature and technology, something that is creative in a way which is irrational and incorporeal: “To the power of the cosmic organic over the human spirit must be opposed not the mechanistic technical, not rationalization, but freedom of the spirit, the principle of personality, which depends neither upon organism nor upon mechanism.”³¹

Of all human activities, art comes closest to being such an “act of the spirit”:

One cannot look for the soul of the world, the inner life of the cosmos, in objectivized nature, because it is not the real world, but the world in a fallen state, an enslaved

²⁹ N. Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, translated by R. M. French (London: G. Bles, 1943), 97.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 100-1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

world, alienated, depersonalized. It is true that we break through into the inward cosmic life, into nature in the existential sense by the way of aesthetic contemplation, which is always a transfiguring creative activity, and by the way of love and compassion, but this always means that we are breaking through beyond the boundaries of objectivized nature and being set free from its necessity.³²

Art in the traditional sense, however, is still part of the “fallen” objectified world of organic and technological slavery. Art as “an act of the spirit” is a conflation of the aesthetic and the spiritual, an “aesthetic contemplation” that is a “transfiguring creativity” of “love and compassion,” art as applied to and taking place entirely in the realm of the subjective. This conception and description of art echoes several key aspects and concepts in Nabokov. As can be seen from any of the passages quoted from Nabokov in this paper, one of the subtlest yet most essential aspects of Nabokov’s work is the recurrent idea that the real or the truer work of art lies beyond the text – in the personal creative experience of the author, in the personal experience of life as such as a creative process, in the personal experience of nature as but an element of some greater work of art. Nabokov deliberately ascribes to art qualities from outside the realm of formal aesthetics in a manner very much akin to Berdyaev’s. He defines art as a special plane of being attainable through “aesthetic bliss” which is in turn defined as “curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy.”³³

As such, art for Nabokov is not limited to the craft of producing an objective aesthetic artifact for public perusal, but is broadened to include any activity involving the above – explicitly subjective and metaphysical – elements. This is precisely what

³² Ibid., 100.

³³ Nabokov, “On A Book Entitled *Lolita*,” 314-315.

takes place in the closing transfigurations of *The Gift*, when varied and even opposing entities merge in a communion that remains pointedly private and leaves the confines of the book, of fiction and language as such, towards some other where – a feat repeated, in one way or another, in many of Nabokov’s other works, including his autobiography, and the science fiction novels and stories discussed above.

The emerging transhumanist future should be seen not solely in terms of the advance of the trans-human, but in terms of the alternatives to it and in this respect Nabokov’s art, as the 20th century culmination of a process that accompanied the evolution of modern Western culture throughout its history, has an important role to play in the 21st century. Further advances in technological culture will require increasing measures to preserve the culture of subjectivity. In *The Philosophy of The Possible*, Mikhail Epstein suggests that the 21st century will be a century of “an ecology of thought”:

But Man is likewise a creature of the mind, and an instrumentalism of the mind holds the same dangers as the instrumentalism of nature. Thought as an instrument of power is ideologized thought, and its destructive consequences in the 20th century have been countless. An Ecology of Thought is a new discipline of the mind, emerging in the period of the mind’s maturity, when, no longer satisfied with pragmatic functions, it reveals itself as an autonomous and self-sufficient entity – itself its own end. (...) So philosophy ensures an ecological protection of thought, parallel to its continued instrumental exploitation in the sciences and ideologies of today.³⁴

³⁴ М. Н. Эпштейн, *Философия Возможного* [Epstein, Mikhail, N. *The Philosophy of the Possible*] (СПб.: Алетейя, 2001), 80-81. My translation.

A need may arise in a practical, legally-based ecology of subjectivity, involving, among other things, the preservation of the knowledge of cultural traditions predicated on subjectivity and the derivation of analogous contemporary practices. Epstein's "philosophy of the possible" is one such practice and his book traces the history of relevant preceding traditions.³⁵ My own research offers the history of anti-criticism and a systematization of its underlying philosophy as an analogous possible practice.

Both traditions find in Nabokov perhaps the most elaborate currently available synthesis. Anti-criticism generally and Nabokov's variant in particular have much in common with Epstein's "philosophy of the possible": a philosophy of thought for thought's-sake, of self-conscious metanarrative fantasy open to all registers of professional and fictional language, making use of fictional narrators, at once accentuating and blurring the distinction between the real and the imaginary, and culminating in a cathartic sense of freedom from mutually exclusive narratives and a sense of communion with a realm of imaginative possibilities that is more than mere fancy.

Set within the context of past and emerging philosophies, Nabokov's vision of memory as the art of *creating* the past can be instrumental in checking the cult of the technologically-generated future. But rather than generating the kind of futile conflict that has existed for so many centuries between literary criticism, with its rationalist underpinnings, and anti-critical fictionists, it would be more constructive to create a paradigm in which the two become a combination, rather than a negation of each other.

The transhumanist aspect of anti-critical philosophy, what I have called "ontological aestheticism," is especially

³⁵ It is noteworthy that within the context of Epstein's book, „instrumentalism" refers not only to technology and ideology, but also to most of literary criticism, theory, and philosophy up to the 21st century.

apparent in Nabokov. It is essentially a parallel – unscientific and nontechnological – form of transhumanism. Insisting on an autonomous plane for the subjective, the aesthetic, and the spiritual, “onto-aesthetic transhumanism” is otherwise in line with the spirit of “technological transhumanism.” Rather than negating the inevitable, the former is capable of complementing the latter, while providing a parallel center of cultural consciousness as a safeguard against the possibility of the technocratic “objectification,” devolution, and even destruction of consciousness as such.

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**REMINISCENCE AND SUBCONSCIOUS
SACRALISATION OF THE KIN
IN *THE GIFT***

The Gift has been a focus of interest for researchers for quite a long time. Some of the first critiques of the novel written by Karlinsky¹ and Rampton² are devoted to the analysis of literary allusions and references. Don Barton Johnson³ interprets the recurring motifs in the novel. *The Gift* has been studied in the connection with literary tradition, imagery system and genre characteristics. Stephen Blackwell offers a substantial analysis of *The Gift* in his

¹ S. Karlinsky, "Nabokov's Novel *Dar* as a Work of Literary Criticism: A Structural Analysis," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 7(1963): 284-290.

² D. Rampton, *Vladimir Nabokov: A Critical Study of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), 64-100.

³ D. B. Johnson, "The Key to Nabokov's *Gift*," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 6 (1982): 190-206.

scientific articles⁴ and the monograph.⁵ Sergei Davydov⁶ undertakes an analysis of the novel's narrative structure. He regards it as a nested text which is constituted of the external part, belonging to the author, and the internal part, written by the protagonist.

Nabokov's novel contains several texts composed by Fyodor. The inner text of the second chapter of *The Gift* is presented as the biography of Konstantin Kirillovich Godunov-Cherdyntsev, a famous entomologist, written by his son, Fyodor. Nabokov submerges the reader in the creative process of writing a biography: starting from the formation of the idea, the collection of materials from different sources and the father's reports and scientific articles, followed by reflection and structuring, and culminating in a refusal to finish the work.

In Nabokov studies much attention was given to the inner text of the second chapter and the issue of the biography's openness and incompleteness. Thus Alexander Dolinin views the biography of Konstantin Kirillovich Godunov-Cherdyntsev as Nabokov's interpretation of the genre of biography in the historical and literary context of the 1930's. Nabokov considered "extracts, fragments, marginal comments, and thorough reading" to be the only biographical method permitted with respect to the heritage of one's father. The life of a creator cannot be subjected to artistic reconstruction; there is always a secret in it that is only known by the creator himself. Therefore the biography of the father cannot be reduced to the fixed model of a description of someone's life similar to the biography of Chernyshevsky, so it has to remain unfinished.⁷

⁴ S. H. Blackwell, "The Poetics of Science in, and around, Nabokov's *The Gift*," *Russian Review* 62.2 (2003), S. H. Blackwell, "Boundaries of art in Nabokov's *The Gift*: Reading as Transcendence," *Slavic Review* 58.3 (1999).

⁵ S. H. Blackwell, *Zina's Paradox: The Figured Reader in Nabokov's Gift* (Zurich: Peter Lang, 2000).

⁶ S. Davydov *Teksty-Matreshki Vladimira Nabokova* (Munich: Otto Sagner, 1982).

⁷ А. Долинин, *Истинная жизнь писателя Сирин: Работы о Набокове* [A. Dolinin, *The Real Life of Sirin the Writer: Essays on Nabkov*] (СПб. Академический проект, 2004), 132-134.

In a chapter devoted to the development of Fyodor's artistic talent, Nassim Winnie Berdijs arrives at the conclusion that the biography of Fyodor's father is a failure owing to Fyodor's inexperience. Assuming that *The Gift* is a *Künstlerroman*, she comments:

In the case of father's biography, the experiment of merging nature, memories, and art fails. Being in an early phase of his development as a writer, feeling too involved emotionally, and lacking specific details, Fyodor cannot integrate his desires and momentary flashes of inspiration into a balanced whole which merges artistic value and scientific accuracy.⁸

Leona Toker, on the contrary, observes that Fyodor's inability to materialise the images in his mind does not mean that he fails as an artist. She states that "something unprecedentedly beautiful" has been indeed created 'of itself': not only the story of a brave naturalist (...) but also, and in tune with the tentative metaphysics of the novel, a model of contact with irrecoverable time."⁹

Indeed the biography of Konstantin Kirillovich Godunov-Cherdyntsev is not completed and Fyodor is at the time in an early phase of his development as a writer. But in the second chapter of *The Gift* Nabokov also creates another book: Fyodor's memoirs about his father whom he views as a teacher and spiritual mentor.

These memoirs subconsciously sacralise the father's image. The sacralisation of Konstantin Kirillovich is of a peculiar kind. It originates from the concept of sanctity and the meaning of the

⁸ N. W. Berdijs, *Imagery in Vladimir Nabokov's Last Russian Novel (Дар), Its English Translation (The Gift), and Other Prose Works of the 1930s* (Zurich: Peter Lang, 1995), 200.

⁹ L. Toker, *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Pr., 1989), 157.

accompanying word, the etymology of which is explained in Toporov's *Sanctity and the sanctified in Russian spiritual literature*: "The origin of the word sacred (*святой*) is the Proto-Slavic element *sventas*, (...) that combines both the modern Russian word sacred (*святой*) and the Indo-European stem *K'uen-to* – which means 'growth, swelling, inflation,' i.e. increase of volume or other physical characteristics. (...) In the pagan times this 'increase' was often interpreted as a result of a special living fertile power or – later, as its symbol."¹⁰ With the introduction of Christianity a notion of a different type of sanctity was formed. Spirituality is understood as a "superhuman' blessed state accompanied by the spiritual increase attained by creative work."¹¹ The concept of sanctity is opposed to the concept of secularity. Gradually, mediation between the secular world and the sacral world becomes the main function of the saint in the genre of biography. That function is fulfilled in the aspiration to share the experience of Knowing God and in the spiritual development of personality.

A similar experience of Konstantin Kirillovich Godunov-Cherdyntsev is connected with entomology which is his way of comprehending the secrets of Creation. As Nabokov describes Fyodor's memories of his father, he applies the principle of the Old Testament poetics *parallelismus membrorum* that is especially common in psalms where each thought is expressed by two or more statements explaining, amending, and extending each other. The principle is represented both syntactically and semantically. Thus, a certain rhythm of biblical poetry is created in Fyodor's text, and it is related to meaning rather than sound. The rhythm is based on phrasal parallelism and synonymy. Here is an example of Fyodor's reminiscence:

¹⁰ В. Н. Топоров, *Святость и святые в русской духовной культуре*, т. 1 [V. N. Toporov, *Sanctity and the sanctified in Russian spiritual literature*, vol. 1] (Москва: Гнозис, 1995), 7.

¹¹ Ibid, 9.

How to describe the bliss of our walks with Father through the woods, the fields, and the peat bogs, or the constant summer thought of him if he was away, the eternal dream of making some discovery and of meeting him with this discovery – *How to describe* the feeling experienced when he showed me all the spots where in his own childhood he had caught this and that (...) And *what fascination there was in his words*, in the kind of special fluency and grace of his style when he spoke about his subject, *what affectionate precision in movements of his fingers* turning the screw of a spreading board or a microscope, what a truly enchanting world was unfolded in his lessons!¹²

In Fyodor's memoirs a model of relations between the Shepherd / Teacher and a guided lamb / child reverently following Him is formed. This model can be figuratively expressed by the following formula: He makes something for me, He gives me something, He is with me. This model is explicitly represented in the Old Testament in the Psalms of David. For example, Psalm 23 (in Greek numbering – Psalm 22):

1. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters.etc.

In Nabokov's novel this model is restored: He makes something for me, He gives me something. Fyodor recalls the lessons his father gave him:

On a warm evening *he would take me* to a certain small pond to watch the aspen hawk moth swing over the very water (...). *He showed me* how to prepare genital

¹² V. Nabokov,

armatures to determine species which were externally indistinguishable. With a special smile *he brought to my attention* the black Ringlet butterflies in our park which with mysterious and elegant unexpectedness appeared only in even years. *He mixed* beer with treacle *for me* on a dreadfully cold, dreadfully rainy autumn night in order to catch at the smeared tree trunks that glistened in the light of a kerosene lamp a multitude of large, banded moths, silently diving and hurrying toward the bait. *He variously* warmed and cooled the golden chrysalids of my tortoiseshells so that *I was able to get from them* Corsican, arctic and entirely unusual forms looking as if they had been dipped in a tar and had silky fuzz sticking to them. (...) My father, wrote Fyodor, recalling that time, not only taught me a great deal but trained my very thoughts, as a voice or hand is trained to the rules of his school. (63, 73)

Nabokov relies on the panegyric (encomiastic) tradition of psalmody that is characteristic of the Psalms of David and, moreover, it serves as a source for the Russian akathists devoted to the holy revered Russian hermits.

Viewing the genre of prayer hymns (psalms) as a source including a sacral system of notions, Nabokov allows the main character Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev to sacralise the history of his father's life as part of the family mythology which eventually turns into biography.

Fragments of the unfinished biography represent different genres and styles, for example "biographical milestones" copied out from an encyclopedia, comments from colleagues, data on trips

The Gift, trans. M. Scammell (New York: Vintage, 1991), 109. Italics are added by the author of the essay. All further in-text references refer to this edition.

with exact places and descriptions of entomological discoveries, folktales about the father. These elements merge with the deep personal memories of the son – memories suffused with the pathos of religious hymns in the tradition of Ancient Hebrew and antique hymnography. It seems that Nabokov might have used antique hymns, namely Homeric hymns, as conceptual and structural guides to create the image of Fyodor's father.

The structure of Homeric hymns devoted to gods is fixed: the main part of the hymn is narrative. The epic narrative is "biographical" in nature and includes some important episodes from the main character's life connected with his or her birth, deeds, love affairs, family issues, adventures and dramatic events. The aretalogic plot (from ancient Greek ἀρετή – virtue) is a characteristic feature of stories devoted to a hero in a hymn. As a rule, the hymn is initially connected with memories about divine deeds. "I remember you," a singer tells a god, "I remember you in my song."¹³ And this song is an echo of the ancient prayer invocation. In a number of cases hymns begin with a traditional address to the Muse, whereas some hymns, for example two famous hymns to Apollo, start with the words: "I will remember!", thus a narrative pattern is introduced to the listener: "I will remember, – I cannot forget, – about Apollo the arrow thrower (I, 1)."¹⁴

Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's memories about his father begin similarly. A panegyric part of a hymn must be preceded by an invocation to the divine protector and followed by a humble request. The hymn is an immediate engagement in an unequal dialogue with the highest interlocutor. The ultimate aim of this dialogue is to receive a sign of God's presence – epiphany. The final part of the hymn is also connected with epiphany which is

¹³ А. А. Тахо-Годи. *Античная гимнография: жанр и стиль* // *Античные гимны* [A. A. Takho-Godi. *Antique hymnography: genre and style* // *Antique Hymns*] (Москва: МГУ, 1988), 14.

¹⁴ Ibid, 15.

revealed with the help of hairetisms (from ancient Greek Χαῖρε – to rejoice), entreaties to rejoice, and a farewell to God accompanied with repetitions of His name.

Fyodor's memories about his father include the main compositional elements of Homeric hymns, which nevertheless are not treated as structural units. From the narratological perspective the aretological part of the hymn addressed to his father is interspersed with numerous panegyric motives and invocations. And eventually Nabokov's character attains epiphany that he was longing for. It occurs during Fyodor's journey inspired by his father's last expedition to Tibet. The essay "'The Amazing Music of Truth': Nabokov's Sources for Godunov's Central Asian Travels in *The Gift*"¹⁵ by Zimmer and Hartmann indicates the exact source for almost every "item" of the journey to Central Asia. Yet, in their analysis the authors conclude that Fyodor's book is of fictional nature. In the context of this essay, it is interesting to interpret this part of the novel as a pilgrimage. The son makes a pilgrimage to the places sacred for him, that is – follows his father's route.

However, Nabokov sends Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev on an unusual journey that is not directly connected with spatial motion and geographic categories. He makes the character similar to the mystics or Hesychasts who were known as protectors of "mental doing" or "mental prayer." The article written by Yuri Lotman, "Geographic Space in Russian Medieval Texts," contains the following remark: "Mystics, such as the trans-Volga startsy, who held to a non-material view of paradise, denied the need to travel. Profound prayer and the ecstatic expectation of the 'light' had nothing to do with travelling."¹⁶

¹⁵ Zimmer, Dieter E. and Hartmann, Sabine "'The Amazing Music of Truth': Nabokov's Sources for Godunov's Central Asian Travels in *The Gift*," *Nabokov Studies* 7.1 (2002): 33-74.

¹⁶ Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. A. Shukman, introduction by U. Eco (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 1990), 173.

Hesychasm as a special type of prayer contemplation might have been one of the sacral sources for Nabokov when he decided to send Fyodor on a pilgrimage following in the footsteps of his father who is equal to God in his mind. The hesychasts believed that their prayers result in immediate communication with God during which a human *sees* Divine light which constitutes the visual expression of divine energy and God's deeds in the human world.

Fyodor begins his trip by transcending the border between the physical, empirical, mental and imagined realities. Memories about a reproduction of the picture "Marco Polo leaves Venice" hanging in his father's study are the source of the Hesychasm (from Greek ἡσυχία – peace, detachment), concentration of spiritual energy which indicates the readiness to begin the journey. Fyodor's trip is characterized by curious dynamics: first, one picture ("Marco Polo leaves Venice") inspires him to create another:

I cannot tear myself away from this mysterious beauty, these ancient colors which swim before the eyes as if seeking new shapes, when I now imagine outfitting of my father's caravan in Przhevalsk where he used to go with post-horses from Tashkent. (66)

But soon Nabokov's character begins to see:

After that I see the caravan, before it gets drawn into the mountains, winding among hills of a paradise and green shade (...) Further I see the mountains: Tyan-Shan range. (...) How the sunlight played! The dryness of the air produced an amazing contrast between light and shadow: in the light there were such flashes, such a wealth of brilliance, that at times it became impossible

to look at a rock, at a stream (...) I can conjure up with particular clarity – in this transparent and changeable setting – my father’s principal and constant occupation, the occupation for whose only sake he undertook those tremendous journeys. I see him leaning down from the saddle amid a clatter of sliding stones to sweep in with a swing of his net on the end of its long handle (...) some royal relative of our Apollos, which had been skimming with ranging flight over the dangerous screes (...). Moving across Tyan-Shan with the caravan I can now see evening approaching, drawing a shadow over the mountain slopes. (67-68)

Nabokov uses the *parallelismus membrorum* principle, phrasal parallelism, and semantic synonymy to create a special rhythm of the pilgrimage which is viewed as a prayerful meditation. Thus, the father’s scientific expedition overcomes the linear perspective of space and geographical locations. Nabokov turns geography into a type of mystic knowledge.

After this, “communication with God” acquires a hesychast character; it becomes direct and immediate. It seems that Fyodor overtakes his father’s expedition and joins it:

After spending the whole summer in the mountains (not one summer but several, in different years, which are superimposed one on another in translucent layers), our caravan moved east through a gulch into a stony desert. There were times when going up the Yellow River and its tributaries, on some splendid September morning, in the lily thickets and hollows on the banks, he and I would take Elwes’ Swallowtail – a black wonder with tails in the shape of hooves. (70)

Finally their togetherness (“our,” “he and I”) turns into unity – as if the son incarnated the father’s spirit:

From a great height I saw a dark marshy depression all trembling from the play of innumerable springs, which recalled the night sky with stars scattered over it – and that is what it was called: the Starry Steppe. (...) Having explored the uplands of Tibet I headed for Lob-Nor in order to return from there to Russia. (71)

Aiming to follow his father and to reach him Fyodor undertakes a prayerful and creative spiritual pilgrimage to Tibet which results in a mystical experience of epiphany, i.e. the merging of the energy of the father, who is equal to God, and the son who is striving to approach him.

The main character, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, subconsciously sacralises his father’s image. He is driven by love, admiration, and gratitude to his father. Nabokov, on the contrary, quite consciously studies models, reasons and mechanisms of consciousness which are used to create family mythologies. They might be considered archetypal models and mechanisms. And they are not only relevant to the creation of family mythologies. Possibly, memories of the people we love are always connected with sacralisation and mythologisation – as it is the only possible way to overcome death.

At a certain stage of the existential path, more often at the beginning, one needs to acquire a sense of rootedness in the heritage of the father and to become conscious of one’s spiritual predecessors. Therefore, we subconsciously turn to ancient models of sacralisation and mythologisation, pagan and Christian genres and their system of sacral meanings, thus creating our own family mythologies.

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Tatiana Ponomareva

ST. PETERSBURG UNIVERSITY, VLADIMIR NABOKOV MUSEUM

Epilogue

THE REALITY OF FICTION IN THE VLADIMIR NABOKOV MUSEUM

The Vladimir Nabokov Museum in St. Petersburg is both the museum of the real-life writer Vladimir Nabokov and the museum of the protagonist of the autobiographical novel *Speak, Memory*. As more and more discoveries, of both biographical and material nature, are made with the passage of time, the duality of the memorial museum becomes even more pronounced, bringing us to the very notion of reality and fiction in Nabokov's art.

In Nabokov's own words "reality is a very subjective affair, (...) an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable."¹ Taking the succession of steps in the Nabokov house is an exciting experience. Sometimes we discover details of the house which for many years

¹ R. Golla, *Conversations with Vladimir Nabokov* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 63.

only existed in the reality of Nabokov's fiction and which, through discovery, make their way into our reality of today. Other findings, however, demonstrate how fictional the autobiography is and, sometimes, suggest why Nabokov felt the need or was forced by circumstances to fictionalize this or that seemingly unimportant biographical detail.

PALE GREEN CLOUDS

Nabokov's description of the family house is strikingly accurate even though he wrote it several decades after leaving it in haste and not having any pictures of it with him (almost all the family pictures that were kept in his archive were taken in the summer months in the villages of Vyra and Rozhdestveno). Speaking of Christmas time Nabokov mentions the tradition of putting up the fir-tree in one of the living rooms of the first floor informally called "The Green Room." In the Russian version of the memoir *Drugie berega* he gives a more detailed description:

гигантская елка касалась своей нежной звездой
высокого, бледно-зелёными облаками расписанного
потолка в одной из нижних зал нашего дома.²

a giant fir-tree touched with its star the high ceiling
painted with pale-green clouds, in one of the ground-
floor rooms of our house.

² В. Набоков, *Другие Берега* в *Собрание сочинений русского периода в 5 томах*, т. 1938-1977 [V. Nabokov, *Other Shores in Collected Works of the Russian Period in 5 vols*, vol. 1938-1977] (Санкт-Петербург, «Симпозиум», 2003), 260.

It took another fifty years to reveal that Nabokov was right: pale-green clouds hidden under several layers of the Soviet-time plaster reappeared on the ceiling of the room after its restoration.

Another memorable feature of the house was the “little hydraulic elevator” going to the upper third floor. It must have been the Nabokovs’ love of technological innovations combined with Elena Nabokova’s concern for the weak and the ageing that prompted their decision to install an elevator in the house. It is only natural that in *Speak, Memory* the elevator is a detail linked to the figure of the governess Mademoiselle Miauton:

If Lenski happened to come tripping downstairs while, with an asthmatic pause every ten steps or so, she was working her way up (for the little hydraulic elevator of our house in St. Petersburg would constantly, and rather insultingly, refuse to function), Mademoiselle maintained that he had viciously bumped into her, pushed her, knocked her down, and we already could see him trampling her prostrate body.³

However, when the museum was first opened there was no trace of the elevator. Only after some search the machine parts of what had once been an elevator were found in the attic of the house looking, fittingly, like the remnants of a time machine.

³ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* in: *Novels and Memoirs 1941-1951* (The Library of America, 1996), 456.

THE “FINAL DACHSHUND”

One of the most poignant items in the museum is a little dog bell made of bronze with the name and address of the Nabokovs etched on it. We know from *Speak, Memory* about several dogs in the household and of Nabokov's mother's love of dachshunds. Speaking about the last of them, named in the royal fashion Box II, Nabokov traces the lineage of the dachshund in detail:

Then somebody gave us another pup, Box II, whose grandparents had been Dr. Anton Chekhov's Quina and Brom. This final dachshund followed us into exile, and as late as 1930, in a suburb of Prague (where my widowed mother spent her last years, on a small pension provided by the Czech government), he could be still seen going for reluctant walks with his mistress, waddling far behind in a huff, tremendously old and furious with his long Czech muzzle of wire—an émigré dog in a patched and ill-fitting coat.⁴

Most probably, the dog bell in the museum's collection once belonged to this “final dachshund.” But how did Box II get to Prague? On the 1918 photograph taken in Crimea he can be seen on the lap of Nabokov's sister Elena. Was he evacuated with the family from Sebastopol in 1919 and then made all the way to London and then to Berlin? It seems improbable since we know that the circumstances of the family's evacuation were far from peaceful. The answer to this question can be found in

⁴ Ibid., 394.

Andrew Field's *The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov*⁵ but for details we can turn to a more "reliable narrator" – Nabokov's sister Elena Sikorskaya. In a little-known interview given in Russian to Lyudmila Bobrovskaya she describes the dog's journey:

С нами еще была наша горничная Адель Кракьяк. Она умудрилась пробраться к нам еще в Берлин из Эстонии. Она осталась в Крыму, когда мы все бежали. Мы ведь без прислуги выехали. И она решила вернуться в Петербург, а потом в Эстонию. И что невероятно, она взяла нашу таксу и провезла ее через всю Россию к нам в Берлин. Этот пес потом дожил до 20 лет. Его звали Бокс второй.⁶

Our maid Adele Krakyak was still with us. She managed to make her way to Berlin from Estonia to be with us. She had stayed in Crimea when we all fled. We left without servants. And she decided to go back to Petersburg and then to Estonia. And, unbelievably, she took our dachshund and brought it all the way across Russia to us in Berlin. This dog then lived until the age of twenty. His name was Box II.

THE "ODD" OSIP

After the Bolshevik regime set in, none of the Nabokovs remained in Russia for long. The last of Nabokov's aunts left Russia in 1924. Almost all of their friends left, too. The only people who had known the family and stayed in Petersburg were those who

⁵ A. Field, *The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1986).

⁶ Л. Бобровская. "В гостях у Елены Владимировны Сикорской" *Континент*, 123 (2005).

had worked for the family. When the museum first opened in the Nabokov house the descendants of these servants were the only thread that connected us to the life long gone. Some of these people also became characters in Nabokov's memoir and one of these is a servant whose name was Osip. He is mentioned for the first time in the description of one of the family travels on the "Nord Express" train to France:

In 1909, the year I now single out, our party consisted of eleven people and one dachshund. Wearing gloves and a traveling cap, my father sat reading a book in the compartment he shared with our tutor. My brother and I were separated from them by a washroom. My mother and her maid Natasha occupied a compartment adjacent to ours. Next came my two small sisters, their English governess, Miss Lavington, and a Russian nurse. The odd one of our party, my father's valet, Osip (whom a decade later, the pedantic Bolsheviks were to shoot, because he appropriated our bicycles instead of turning them over to the nation), had a stranger for companion.⁷

In 1989, when Nabokov became a published author in Russia, Ekaterina Schetinina, Osip's daughter wrote a letter to Elena Sikorsaya, Nabokov's sister and the only one of his siblings who was still alive. Their ensuing correspondence was a mutual clearing up of the mistakes that both women had in their childhood memories and from it we learn about what really happened to the "odd Osip."

⁷ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 480-481.

Я очень хорошо помню Осипа Павловича. Помню даже, что у него была бородка и что он был польского происхождения.⁸

I remember Osip Pavlovich very well. I even remember that he had a little beard, and that he was of Polish origin.

His full name was Iosif Pavlovich Dorzenik and, like many people with this name in Russia, he was called “Osip” in the family. In the years between the two mentions of him in *Другие берега* he was, according to the family’s oral history, promoted to the position of the house manager and was living with his wife and two daughters in the service wing of the house in an apartment adjacent to the first floor living room.

Contrary to Nabokov’s belief, he was not shot in 1919. That year he was arrested by the Cheka while still living in the Nabokov house, taking care of the property and, apparently, expecting the owners to be back soon (1919 was the year of the major military successes of the White Russian armies). He spent some time in prison but was set free. After his arrest he felt it was dangerous to stay in the house and moved with his family to a neighborhood called Murzinka in the distant outskirts of the city where he found work as a caretaker in a local school. The reason for his arrest could be his continuing contacts with his former employer (or there could be no reason at all). His arrest could bring about rumors of his execution (this is how most arrests ended in 1919) which in a distorted way reached the Nabokov family. Iosif Dorzenik and his family kept some small things from the Nabokov house and decades later his granddaughter Lidia Matskevich generously donated all of them to the Nabokov Museum.

⁸ Letter to Ekaterina Dorzenik- Schetinina of 15.04.1989. Nabokov Museum collection, unpublished.

Interestingly, in the passage on Osip's son who "bore a striking resemblance to the Tsarevich, and by a still more striking coincidence suffered from the same tragic disease –hemophilia" in Chapter 8 of *Speak, Memory* Nabokov, apparently, confuses Osip with some other servant since, according to the Dorzenik family members, Osip only had two daughters and no sons.

THE "SIBERIAN PIONEERS"

One of the most enigmatic passages in *Speak, Memory* is the one where Nabokov speaks of his mother's family:

I wish to note that these Rukavishnikovs – Siberian pioneers, gold prospectors and mining engineers – were *not* related, as some biographers have carelessly assumed, to the no less wealthy Moscow merchants of the same name. My Rukavishnikovs belonged (since the eighteenth century) to the landed gentry of Kazan Province. Their mines were situated at Alopaevsk near Nizhni-Tagilsk, Province of Perm, on the Siberian side of the Urals. My father had twice traveled there on the former Siberian Express, a beautiful train of the Nord-Express family, which I planned to take soon, though rather on an entomological than mineralogical trip, but the revolution interfered with that project.⁹

This passage seems to be a playful mixture of sunlit truths and "dusky paths."¹⁰ It is true that the Rukavishnikov family owned mines (and a steel mill) in the town of Alapaevsk in the

⁹ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 411.

¹⁰ "A dusky path" is on a picture that hangs above Martin's bed in *Glory*.

Urals (then the Province of Perm). V. D. Nabokov indeed traveled there twice, to take part in the shareholders' meetings.¹¹ It is also true, though, that the other major shareholder present at the meetings was Konstantin Rukavishnikov of the Moscow family, Elena Nabokova's uncle.

The first "false bottom" that this passage presents is that there were no "biographers" yet when Nabokov wrote this, whether English or Russian. The only biographer that Nabokov could allude to in this passage was Andrew Field whose book *Vladimir Nabokov: His Life in Art*¹² was then in the making. This is corroborated by the fact that in the earlier versions of the autobiography Nabokov did not speak of his mother's roots at such length but only briefly mentioned his great-grandfather Vasily Rukavishnikov as a "fabulously rich Siberian merchant."¹³

In the final version of the memoir, however, Nabokov, on the one hand, deems it important to speak about his mother's family and the origin of the wealth and, on the other hand, he so firmly denies the family ties, that, as a result, not much research has been done on the Rukavishnikov family history. Luckily, through museum research I found the descendants of Konstantin Rukavishnikov who still live in Moscow and whose archive has helped to put together some missing links.

The "Siberian pioneer" was Vasily Nikitich Rukavishnikov of the town of Menzelinsk in the Urals (mentioned in *Speak, Memory* as Elena Nabokova's grandfather whose house in Crimea she used to visit).¹⁴ The Rukavishnikov family indeed lived in Kazan for some time and this is where Nabokov's grandfather was born,

¹¹ Е. Г. Неклюдов, А. Н. Торопов, *Род Яковлевых. У истоков уральского предпринимательства* [E. Neklyudov, A. Toropov, *The Family of Yakovlevy. At the Origins of Ural Entrepreneurship*] (Екатеринбург: ИД Сократ, 2013), 152.

¹² A. Field, *Nabokov, His Life in Art: A Critical Narrative* (New York: Little Brown, 1967).

¹³ V. Nabokov, "Portrait of My Uncle," *The New Yorker* Jan. 3, 1948, 23.

¹⁴ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 412.

before the family moved to Moscow and settled there in 1855. All the three sons of Vasily Rukavishnikov received university education in science and mine engineering. The eldest son Ivan (Nabokov's grandfather) settled in St. Petersburg after graduation and married Olga Kozlova from a family of physicians – her father was the director of the Medical Academy (and an avid art collector) and her sister was one of the first female doctors. Theirs was a highly cultured family of liberal values which, like every rich family in Russia then, donated generously to various causes, one of them being the society for the improvement of prisons which must have been especially close to the scholarly interests of the jurist Vladimir Dmitriyevich Nabokov who married Elena Rukavishnikova in 1897. From the memoir of the Rukavishnikovs' family doctor we learn that Nabokov's parents visited his mother's parents almost every day.¹⁵

Ivan's younger brother Nikolay Rukavishnikov became famous in Moscow as the founder of an institution known as the *Рукавишниковский приют* – an orphanage/boarding school for juvenile delinquents. It was the first correctional institution of the humanistic type in Russia. In the building that Nikolay Rukavishnikov bought for it in central Moscow there were neither guards nor bars on the windows, corporal punishment was forbidden, the boys were taught various arts, apart from general education and apprentice training that secured jobs for the students as soon as they left the school. V. D. Nabokov knew of his in-law's work very well as he gave a paper on Nikolay Rukavishnikov at the conference of the Russian section of the International Criminal Lawyers' Union on April 4, 1901, published in *Право* legal journal in the same year.

¹⁵ М. П. Кончаловский, *Моя жизнь, встречи и впечатления* [M. Konchalovsky, *My Life, Meetings and Impressions*] (Санкт Петербург: Ассоциация АнтЭра, Институт клинической медицины и социальной работы им. М.П. Кончаловского, 2008-2016), <http://celenie.ru/konchalovsky.htm>

After Nikolay's early death (he left no heirs) the orphanage was funded by his brothers Ivan and Konstantin, the latter also being the director for many years. Konstantin Rukavishnikov, the youngest of the brothers, was the mayor of Moscow in 1893-1897, a brother-in-law and a close friend of Pavel Tretyakov of the Tretyakov Gallery and a generous benefactor in his own right. He, too, supported a great number of cultural and charity causes, being was one of the major donors of the Russian Music Society while his wife funded a hospital which she established in their house. Konstantin had five children from his first marriage and two from his second marriage whose descendants live now in Russia and in France. Among them we find scientists, scholars and a young artist of genius Nikolay Dmitriev who died tragically at the age of fifteen in 1948.

In full accordance with the traditions of the 18th-early 20th century Russia, both Ivan and Konstantin Rukavishnikov were awarded nobility status by the Tsar for their generous charity donations, along with high civil ranks and government awards. Technically speaking, by the time Nabokov's parents were married, none of the Rukavishnikovs were members of the merchant class. The term "merchant" (*купеч*) itself is quite deceptive in Russian as it had long lost its original meaning by the late 19th century when individuals belonging to the merchant class on paper could be anything in reality – from industrialists like the Rukavishnikovs or the Tretyakovs to writers like Goncharov or actors like Stanislavsky. In the inner Nabokov circle two of V. D. Nabokov's close friends and party associates – lawyers Iosif Gessen and Avgust Kaminka both came from the merchant class and so did the parents of Nabokov's wife Vera.

So was it class sensitivity that made Nabokov deny the family ties or was there some private reason for this? The living members of the Rukavishnikov family do not know of any quarrel between the families (one of Konstantin's grandchildren even

remembered visiting his aunt in the Nabokov house in 1916 or 1917 when he was a cadet in a St.Petersburg military school). As for Dmitri Nabokov whom I once asked this question he did not know much about his grandmother's family apart from what his father had written in his memoir.

An apparent reason might be that Nabokov, like most other émigré authors, almost never mentioned any connection with the people who remained in the Soviet Russia (most of the Rukavishnikovs stayed in Russia after 1917). He was well aware of the dangers these people faced in their country. It is also true that in this particular case he did not have to hide much as, according to the Rukavishnikovs' archive, the two families were not close.

Besides strictly family reasons there may have been another reason for Nabokov's denial of his family roots and this reason, strangely, is of a literary nature. There was a well-known Rukavishnikov on the Russian literary scene of the early 20th century – the poet and novelist Ivan Rukavishnikov, the author of the autobiographical novel *Проклятый род* (*A Cursed Family*). The novel, published in 1910, was a story of several generations of a family of “wealthy merchants” from the city of Nizhny Novgorod. The novel which combines blunt social criticism with attempts at experimental prose followed the mainstream trend of the time: a condemnation of the corrupting power of money. Its difference from dozens of other works of this genre was that the author wrote about his own family with characters only thinly disguised.

As the Moscow Rukavishnikov family archive proves, the family of Ivan Rukavishnikov the writer was not related to the Rukavishnikov-Nabokov family (Rukavishnikov is a common name). There is no indication that Nabokov ever read this novel but he must have known of it, as Ivan Rukavishnikov was a notable figure in the literary world (whose verse was praised, among others, by Nikolay Gumilyov and Maximilian Voloshin,

both highly respected by Nabokov). Ivan Rukavishnikov left his hometown early and spent most of his life in Moscow and that, too, could create a confusion between the two family names. In the post-revolutionary years, Ivan Rukavishnikov kept a high profile when he was placed by the Bolshevik government in charge of several cultural organisations (and at one point nearly married the sister of Marina Tsvetaeva).¹⁶

The writer Rukavishnikov and his novel are forgotten now but questions of his relation to Nabokov still arise and we sometimes hear them from the visitors to the museum. One can imagine that in Nabokov's refugee years in Europe these questions must have been more persistent as the writer Rukavishnikov was still very well known then (he died in 1930). It seems possible, then, that in *Speak, Memory* Nabokov tried to distance himself not only from his living relatives in Russia but also from the unwanted affinity with a writer of the same name and his story of "wealthy merchants." Paradoxically, the passage created even more confusion as it made some Russian readers believe that by distancing himself from the Moscow Rukavishnikovs Nabokov confirmed his relation to the Rukavishnikovs of Nizhny Novgorod, the writer Ivan among them.

The history of "my Rukavishnikovs," another step in the "infinite succession" towards the "unattainable reality" is yet to be written.

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¹⁶ А. Цветаева, *Неисчерпаемое*. (Москва: Отечество, 1992), 53-67.

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**VLADIMIR NABOKOV
AND THE FICTIONS
OF MEMORY**

