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THE SELF AS MYTH, MASK AND CONSTRUCT IN VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S SPEAK, MEMORY!

Keywords: *autobiography, fiction, identity, Paul de Man, de-facement, specular structure, Philippe Lejeune, memory, self-parody, Hitchcock-effect*

Abstract: *In my paper I study the strategies of constructing the self in Nabokov's revisited autobiography, which constitutes a focal point in the net of his life work. The memoir does not only reconstruct the identity from a temporal and mnemonic perspective and in an intercultural context, but it also offers a self-portrait as a literary construct, worth being remembered by posterity. In my hypothesis, Nabokov's text makes use of the "rhetoric of fiction" at least to the same extent in which he manipulates fiction by considering it a "shelter" for autobiographical elements. Fiction and autobiography become terms reflecting each other in his life work, as a specific sort of "specular structure". Nabokov's fiction as well as his autobiography requires the same type of reading: that of solving puzzles.*

The paper discusses how Nabokov's text slips out of the traditional interpretation of autobiography, and why it can be considered as an illustrative example of Paul de Man's re-interpretation of the term autobiography. There is an inherent contradiction between what the text explicitly asserts and what its rhetoric actually reveals. The illusion of the unified self is created by a game of mirror reflections, showing in fact a puzzle-image, a distorted face. I examine the symbols of revealing and the games of disguising the self, which aim at creating a (post)modernist image of the self. As a conclusion, I suggest breaking the autographical contract in the case of the author and book under discussion, and I propose a reading strategy and understanding unbiased by the opposition autobiography vs. fiction, in which this boundary is dissolved by the rhetoric and games of the text.

To fix correctly, in terms of time, some of my childhood recollections, I have to go by comets and eclipses, as historians do when they tackle the fragments of a saga. (Nabokov 14)

I witness with pleasure the supreme achievement of memory, which is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past. (Nabokov 131-132)

A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life. (Nabokov 214)

The above selection of citations reveals the fact that *Speak, Memory!* undertakes to examine the relationship between life and writing, with high consciousness, striving for a better understanding of the self as well as of the genre of autobiography. Nabokov's autobiographical work holds a key position in his oeuvre, it is related with many threads to the author's novels, similarly to the way the novels are related to one another; and as such, it reveals the background, the knowledge of which may alter the ways we read Nabokov's fiction.

In the present paper I intend to examine Nabokov's strategies of constructing a discourse in which the terms "autobiography", "fiction" and "identity" gain a new dimension within a framework of a poetical puzzle that Nabokov makes up in the net of his life work. I will support my arguments by resorting to Paul de Man's interpretation of the autobiographical writing.

Autobiography is traditionally representational, mimetic. It used to be conceived as a highly referential literary genre, as the written record, product and consequence of life, as a way of

reconstructing the self, the reading of which is influenced by a set of extra-textual elements and confirmed by several biographical data. Philippe Lejeune presents a contractual conception of autobiography, claiming that the author's name serves as the legal signature on the contract concluded between the writer and the reader, the latter accepting by this contract that he/she is engaged in reading an autobiography.

However, these conceptions of autobiography are re-interpreted by Paul de Man, who offers a displaced understanding in terms of "*de-facement*" and "*figuration*". According to him, autobiography should not be restricted to its generic definition, as it is much more ambiguous and whimsical than what this simplifying interpretation affords. Further on, there is the assumption that autobiography is defined either historically or aesthetically; either of the two would exclude some writings: the former classification would not comprise St. Augustine's *Confessions* as the autobiographical manifestation of the modern consciousness; the latter one would exclude Wordsworth's *The Prelude* based on formal criteria. Therefore, de Man suggests "the possible convergence of aesthetics and history" (de Man 68).

Another prejudice related to autobiography is that there is a cause and effect relationship between life and autobiography, the former definitely preceding the latter. In this respect, de Man presents a reversed understanding of this relationship:

[W]e assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life (de Man 69).

This would mean that the autobiographical narrative alters the position of the subject as the source and verifiable reference of the text; it rather becomes a product of the act of writing. The writing "*I*" is necessarily alienated from the written "*I*", which is otherwise specific of any literary text, and this split is due to a process of "*de-facement*", during which the mechanism of the rhetoric of the text reveals something that contradicts the text itself. The writer of the text becomes the reader of his/her own life story.

In this way, Paul de Man asserts the impossibility to decide between autobiography and fiction, between the referential and the figurative character of the text. Moreover, he extends the meaning of the word autobiography, claiming that in fact all texts are autobiographical, in the sense that they have a "*specular structure*": the two – or split – identities read each other in the mirror of the text, as being the same and different at the same time. In this theoretical framework the specular structure of the text is defined as "the manifestation, on the level of referent, of a linguistic structure" (de Man 71). Therefore, autobiography is no longer a restrictive literary genre, but rather considered as the "*allegory of reading*".

In what follows, I will focus on how Nabokov's text slips out of the traditional interpretation of autobiography, and why it can be considered as an illustrative example of the observations sketched above. In my hypothesis, Nabokov's text makes use of the "rhetoric of fiction" at least to the same extent in which he manipulates fiction by considering it a hiding place, a "shelter" for autobiographical elements. In this way, fiction and autobiography become terms reflecting each other in his life work, as a specific sort of "specular structure". Both can be conceived as games of *constructing* rather than *reconstructing* the self. Nabokov's fiction as well as his autobiography requires the same type of reading: that of solving puzzles. Nabokov even formulates this explicitly as an expectation from the reader.

In his autobiography, Nabokov reflects on the first forty years of his life, out of which the first twenty are related to Russia, representing the *mythical* scene of "perfect childhood". The terms "childhood" and "Russia" are closely linked, they become almost interchangeable synonyms: the surplus of values represented by a desirable age in one's life and a favorable social system are fulfilled at the same time, and come to an end at the same time, together with adolescence and communism respectively. The next twenty years are related to the period of "exile from Paradise", to the experiences gained in England, Germany and France. Nabokov conceives these stages of life according to the model of thesis/antithesis, in which the emigration to America would represent the synthesis, however, the book does not comprise this third moment.

The author's intercultural and multilingual position is already present in the genesis of the book. According to Nabokov's confession formulated in the foreword, the essay which can be considered the starting point was written in French, representing one chapter in the later English version. Previously published autobiographical fragments, memoirs are put together and edited in form of an autobiographical writing, which Nabokov publishes in the United States under the title *Conclusive Evidence*. Then he translates his own work into Russian, with the title *Drugie Berega (Other Shores)*, this being the source of the second English version, this time a British publication entitled *Speak, Memory!*. In this way the final version is the result of a process of "over-editing", reflected also in the well-built structure of the text, which is but a "re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place" (Nabokov 6). Nabokov's whole life work is created in form of translations from and into Russian, English and French, he himself translates his early Russian works into English, and out of his later writings he considers it important to translate the English *Conclusive Evidence* and *Lolita* into his native tongue.

However, the question arises: which language provides the basis of the memories collected in this autobiography? It is difficult to find a proper answer to this question as the double – Russian-English – connection is deeply rooted in the early childhood. Thanks to the high social position of the family in St. Petersburg, Nabokov was brought up in a genuine Anglo-Saxon environment. It was not only the use of "the comfortable products of Anglo-Saxon civilization", like the Pear's Soap or the Golden Syrup, or "fruitcakes, smelling salts, playing cards, picture puzzles, striped blazers, talcum-white tennis balls" (Nabokov 57), that this intercultural connection was confined to. According to his confession, Nabokov learnt to write and to read in English earlier than in Russian. His reading experiences, the culture absorbed in the family provided a kind of "second mother tongue" for the child. The recollections reflect on the paradoxes of this ambiguous position: the child addresses his English prayers to a little sun-tanned Greek Catholic icon. It may not be an exaggeration to assert that Nabokov translates his works from his mother tongue into his – second – mother tongue. The English autobiography is interwoven with French and Russian expressions, suggesting that recollection is a multilingual process in Nabokov's case.

Memory is the actual "hero" of this autobiographical narrative. The Prosopopeia of the title¹ is pertained all throughout the text: memory wears "a footman's white glove" (Nabokov 74); it watches vigilantly, it cleans its obscure lenses. It is an ever changing figure, which, together with imagination – another personified figure of the text –, acts against time and has the power to bring back, to recreate a long vanished harmony. The book assumes the task of re-arranging a set of memories connected to the myth of "perfect childhood". At the same time, it reveals a retrospective position: the very act of remembering. This is suggested by the emphatic, self-assertive presence of recurrent expressions like "I like to imagine", "I see myself", "I recall", "I remember", "I witness", "through a tremulous prism I distinguish", "memories come out to meet me", "I do remember with heartbreaking vividness" etc. The intervention of these expressions interrupts the "stereoscopic dreamland" of memories, in this way a permanent split is created between the reflected past and the reflecting present, creating breaks, gaps in the reading of the memoir. Thus, there is a dominant presence of the reflecting consciousness in the text, looking backward and forward in the narrative. The autobiography seems to be just a pretext for presenting a state of mind, an opportunity of mnemonic retrospection. In this way, an unbridgeable distance is created within the game of memories vs. the process of recollection. From the very start there is a duality of the "selves" appearing in the text, reflecting (on) each other.

Time is the other (*anti*-)hero of the text. The recalling consciousness is in a permanent fight with time, just as the recalled young man used to fight with insomnia. Maybe the most famous sentence of *Speak, Memory!* is the following: "I confess I do not believe in time." (Nabokov 106). Another formulation of a similar idea is as follows: "Initially, I was unaware that time, so boundless at first blush, was a prison." (Nabokov 10). The process of recollection is a well-built strategy, a maneuver against time, a mechanism of constraint to fulfill an impossible task: that of preserving one's own identity. In this respect, it becomes clear why Nabokov speaks of the act of remembering as of an "almost pathological

1 Prosopopeia: figure of speech in which an absent or imaginary person is represented as speaking.

keenness of the retrospective faculty” (Nabokov 55), which tries hard to act against time, and endeavors to grab timelessness in form of spots of memories.

Recollection tries to explore the “gaps” of time, the “momentary vacuums”, so within the chapters of the autobiography the significance of the particular moment grows. Hence the richness of sensual impressions and baroque pompousness with which these singular moments are described. Indeed, it is very difficult to distinguish the intensity of the feelings and impressions lived in the past from the gesture of the – Nabokov’s expression – “aesthetic recollection” of the retrospective mind. From time to time, the moments of family reunions, events are recalled as if through a “glass cell” of memory. The retrospective self seems not to have direct access to the reality of the memory, in this way he wanders alone among the cells which possess each a particular unforgettable moment. As if with the help of a butterfly’s nest, the speaker tries to capture the past moments of time and would like to firmly believe that the victim is caught forever.

In examining the rhetoric of the autobiography, its strong strife for direct, vivid visual effects should also be mentioned: “in order to reconstruct, I need to visualize” (Nabokov 167). Nabokov tells his life story as if he were speaking of a collection of photographs; the succession of memories is compared to the soundless pictures of mute films, the text seems to appeal to the reader by imitating the sensational effect of the early film; the narrator invites the reader to a slide projection similar to the one the child used to experience on one boring lesson presented by a tutor: “the images of those tutors appear within memory’s luminous disc as so many magic lantern projections” (Nabokov 117). On the canvas of memory there appear the figures of family members, tutors, childhood loves, friends, then the emigrant fellow writers. The memories sparkling in the dimness of the past seem to surpass the power of verbal expression, hence the strife for an extra expressivity, the allusion to visual media, resorting to their devices. Although he does not believe in time, the speaker apparently believes in the capacity of creating order of the act of recollection, in the magic of imagination. Nabokov’s book preserves something of the archaic, magic function of art. The magic of memory and imagination acts against time. They aim at harmony and timelessness as ideals of “the highest enjoyment” (Nabokov 106). Nabokov’s collection of memories resembles a collection of butterflies: he captures the moments and convinces the readers that the illusion of life can be preserved behind the glass for an unlimited period of time.

Through Mnemosyne’s veil, Nabokov *constructs* rather than *reconstructs* a self-image. At distinct moments of his maturing process the author carefully places those reflections which shape the figure of the future scientist and artist, in memorable poses worth being remembered by posterity. He speaks of “the gift of being remembered”. It is a well-known fact that Nabokov was also a famous lepidopterist, he pursued this scientific passion all throughout his life, he carried out research in the United States for seven years, and even a butterfly species – Nabokov’s Pug, *Eupithecia nabokovi* – was named after him. The butterfly – a recurrent motif of the text – becomes the agent of memory and imagination in the autobiography. What is more, one quoted species is called *Parnassius Mnemosyne*.

I tend to interpret Nabokov’s aphoristic, rhetorical formulations about the relationship between art and life, micro- and macrocosm, life and writing as part of his endeavors of self-mystification:

Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life’s foolscap (Nabokov 14).

There is, it would seem, in the dimensional scale of the world a kind of delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge, a point, arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones, that is intrinsically artistic (Nabokov 128).

In several of his other texts – in his non-fiction, i.e. prefaces, interviews, letters etc. – Nabokov carefully and consciously creates an artificial self-image, that of a public writer, especially in the last two decades of his life, after publishing *Lolita*. In creating his own self/ role as a writer – different from his

private personality –, he is engaged in a delusive game of self-representation and self-parody (see Tompa 66).

Speaking about the self – as literary *construct*, we should also mention Nabokov's personality as a great player. Known also for his composing chess problems, Nabokov considers literature as a playground, a puzzle, and he expects the readers to find the solutions. Chess provides an “exhilarating order of sensation”, it is defined as “the maniacal manipulation of carved figures”, “suggesting new harmonies and new conflicts” (Nabokov 226), and as such, it offers a suitable strategy for writing/reading the text. In his pseudo-review on *Conclusive Evidence*² he suggests solving puzzles as a possible – and proper – reading strategy, by arguing that “The unraveling of a riddle is the purest and most basic act of the human mind” (Nabokov 250).

He likes hiding the figures of his real life within his fiction, and he wonders whether the fictitious context is a proper and safe place to preserve them, or they are “embedded in it like a clean bullet in a flabby flesh” (Nabokov 194). He weighs life vs. fiction, real vs. artificial, and seems to balance the opposition by considering some fictitious contexts more suitable than any autobiographical attempt to describe an event or a character from the life of the past self.

Within the context of his life work several text locations can be found where Nabokov makes use of this procedure; in the present essay I only refer to his novel entitled *Transparent Things*, in which the characters share several of Nabokov's known autobiographical data, these are spread among them, that is, they are assigned to several characters (e.g. Hugh Person, the main hero suffers from insomnia, just like the hero of the autobiography; he used to have extraordinary capacities in the past like multiplying eight-figure numbers, just as Nabokov used to have the capacity of colored hearing, a special case of synaesthesia quoted even in books of psychology; Person's wife, Armande has ancestors in the Russian aristocracy etc.). Moreover, similar rhetorical devices are used in the autobiography and in the mentioned novel: both are conceived as games, puzzles of memory, with similar narrator positions, that of the omniscient, omnipotent narrator who manipulates characters as puppets, whether they are autobiographical or fictitious; and both texts reflect on the problematic relationship between the present and the past, between reality and fiction. This resemblance and relatedness seems to balance the weight of autobiography and fiction, in the sense that no epistemological difference should be made between the two; the same reading strategy is welcomed and expected in the case of both.

The retrospective act in *Speak, Memory!* also provides the opportunity for the self to be disguised in the text, the possibility to play a game with *faces and masks*. Nabokov plays with anagrams of his name: in one chapter he refers to a “friend of his”, to the thinker Vivian Bloodmark. Anagrams like this are present in several of his texts. In the afore-mentioned novel we can find the name Adam von Librikov, another anagram (as well as the remark that human life can be compared to a figure surrounded by masks dancing around); in *Ada* there appears Baron Klim Avidov; in *Lolita* we meet Vivian Darkbloom etc. In the autobiography the author himself is disguised behind an emigrant fellow writer called Sirin (Nabokov published several writings in Russian under the pseudonym Sirin). Throughout his life work, Nabokov entertains himself and the puzzle-solving readers by playing games of placing writer figures in his texts, and at the same time distancing himself from these figures, sustaining and withdrawing the possibility of identification with them. Misguiding the reader by playing such tricks is a recurrent mode of self-reflexivity in the Nabokovian text. Coding the self in the texts creates a sort of “Hitchcock-effect” (Tompa 67).

In the above mentioned pseudo-review Nabokov, speaking of himself in the third person as Mr. Nabokov, argues like this:

It is true that having practically stopped being a Russian writer, he is free to discuss Sirin's work as separate from his own. But one is inclined to think that his true purpose here is to project himself, or at least his most treasured self, into the picture he paints. One is reminded of those problems of ‘objectivity’ that the philosophy of science brings up. An observer makes a detailed picture of the whole

² Under a pseudonym, Nabokov published a review of his own autobiography; this delusion or literary game of his was discovered in 1998.

universe but when he has finished he realizes that it still lacks something: his own self. So he puts himself in it too. But again a 'self' remains outside and so forth, in an endless sequence of projections, like those advertisements which depict a girl holding a picture of herself holding a picture of herself holding a picture that only coarse printing prevents one's eye from making out (Nabokov 254).

Seemingly, Nabokov creates an autobiographical discourse in which everything has found its place in a harmonious order. However, he observably suffers from the inaccessibility of one's former identity or identities. He also reflects on past identity crises, caused by losses of some kind:

Looking into my own eyes, I had the shocking sensation of finding the mere dregs of my usual self, odds and ends of an evaporated identity which it took my reason quite an effort to gather again in the glass (Nabokov 177).

Thus, the "specular structure" of the text can be detected: there is an inherent contradiction between what the text explicitly asserts and what its rhetoric actually reveals. The illusion of the unified self is created by a game of mirror reflections, showing in fact a puzzle-image, a distorted face.

The applied narrative technique, the complex reflexivity, the associative logic and its pervasive visual character make Nabokov's autobiographical narration uniquely modern (see also Foster 203-218). However, the above examined features of the text result in a way of self-representation which can be approached from a different angle as well: namely, as a postmodern game of *writing the self*.

As a conclusion, I suggest breaking the autobiographical contract in the case of the author and book under discussion, and I propose a reading strategy and understanding unbiased by the opposition autobiography vs. fiction, a reading in which this boundary is dissolved by the rhetoric and games of the text revealing and disguising the self. These games can be interpreted as Nabokov's idiosyncrasy, as manifestations of the (*post*)modern consciousness, best reflected in the following pathetic exclamation:

How small the cosmos (a kangaroo's pouch would hold it), how paltry and puny in comparison to human consciousness, to a single individual recollection, and its expression in words! (Nabokov 13)

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